

# **Amongst My Enemies**



**Cold War Trilogy, #1**

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In the spring of 1948, the newly created State of Israel was attacked from three sides by the regular armies of five Arab nations. The Israeli 'army' consisted of ill-trained militia units armed with old rifles and a handful of light machineguns. They had no tanks, no artillery, and no air force. Eight years later, in the Sinai War of 1956, the Israelis were able to field highly effective armored, mechanized infantry, airborne, artillery, and air force units in a lightning attack that crushed the Egyptians and pushed them back to the Suez Canal. How did a little country like that get all that stuff?

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# PART I

**Königsberg, Germany.  
February 1945**

## Chapter 1

Dante had it wrong. Hell wasn't a blazing inferno filled with the mournful cries of the damned; it was the frozen plains of northern Germany, and it could be quiet as a grave.

That day began like all the ones before it, with Stolz, the German Kapo or head guard, pounding his meaty fist on the side of the rusty old truck as he screamed, "Raus! Raus!" Out! Up in the truck's canvas-covered cargo bed, a mound of ragged, emaciated prisoners would shudder and shrink into the shadows; but the sad truth was there was no place to hide and they knew it. They were what was left of a forced labor battalion trapped here in the frozen rubble of Königsberg on the Baltic coast in East Prussia. Remnants of the German Army and the SS still held the old port city, surrounded and hopelessly outnumbered by a vengeful Red Army; and life can't get any more tenuous than that.

Most of the prisoners huddled together in that old truck bed were Russian, with a smattering of Poles, Lithuanians and Czechs, but no one cared. Michael Randall and Eddie Hodge were American, but no one cared about that either, Randall thought, as he rolled over and looked outside through a tear in the ragged canvas. In late winter at this latitude, the light was thin and the days pathetically short; but as he looked, he saw the first pink line of another cold, clear dawn creep over the horizon. Slowly a frozen landscape of broken buildings, bomb craters, and rubble began to emerge in tones of dirty gray on sooty black. It must be morning, he thought. Somehow, he and Eddie had survived another miserable night as they had survived the many long, painful ones that had preceded it. Not that it mattered; they were all going to die here and every poor wretch inside that truck knew it.

Two years before, the Red Army rolled out of the steppes of Central Asia like an angry tidal wave and no force on Earth was going to stop it until it crashed down on Berlin. However, the main Russian thrust had gone much further south, through central Poland. Königsberg and the remaining German enclaves along the Baltic coast had been bypassed and there is no glory in a sideshow— no medals and nothing worth dying for. So Ivan let the cold weather, starvation, and his artillery do the killing. Each morning, he would drink his tea, eat some black bread, and lob a few shells into the rubble, leaving an acrid haze over the city that reeked of burnt wood, burnt brick, and burnt rubber. All it accomplished was to rearrange the bricks, turn the gray snow a bit darker, and kill a few more of the

poor dumb bastards caught inside. Fortunately, spring was still months away. When the thaw came, the ice would slowly give up its dead and the city would really begin to stink.

Randall nudged the pile of rags lying next to him. "Eddie, we gotta get up. Come on," he said, but his friend did not move.

"Mikey, I can't," came the weak reply. "It's the legs, I..."

"You gotta try; you gotta get them moving."

"Moving? Jeez, I can't even feel them anymore."

In the dim light, Randall could barely make out Eddie's pale, sweaty face, but he knew his friend was dying. That would be the ultimate outrage, the one he would never accept. They had been inseparable since their aircrew met at that Army Air Corps field back in West Texas early in 1943. That flight school was the first time either of them had strayed more than a hundred miles from home. Eddie came from a long line of watermen in Rock Creek, South Carolina, who spent twelve hours a day in small boats dredging clams and oysters from the heavy river muck. Mike grew up on a dairy farm in Wisconsin, milking cows at 5:00 AM. He was a muscular six-foot-three, two-hundred-ten-pound tight end for his high school football team while Eddie was a wrestler, maybe five foot five, one hundred thirty-five pounds, and taut as a steel cable. Now, after a year of training, nineteen combat missions over Germany, and four months trapped inside this hell-hole, they had become two halves of a whole, brothers pulling, pushing, and taking turns keeping the other one alive. "Hey, what's a pal for?" one of them would say, because without a buddy, life hung by a very thin thread in a place like that.

Then Eddie got frostbite. First, it was his toes. Michael kept rubbing them, changing the dressings, and forcing Eddie to keep the circulation moving, but it was too damned cold. The frostbite slowly spread from the toes to his foot. Soon, the leg began to swell. Eddie grew feverish and weak, his eyes red-ringed and his skin a waxy pale. It was gangrene and everyone inside that truck knew it.

"We've gotta get them moving," he said as he reached over to rub Eddie's legs again.

"Mikey, stop it!" Eddie moaned and pushed him away. "It hurts too much."

One by one, the other prisoners slipped past them, climbed over the tailgate, and dropped to the ground, leaving the two young Americans alone in the truck bed. "I was having that dream again," Eddie said with a thin smile. "It's November back home, the first day of duck season. The marsh and cane fields lie all flat and brown and there's a thin mist floating on the river, just enough so you can't tell where the land ends and the water begins. You and me, we row my Daddy's old skiff up river to the duck blind. We climb up in there and have a beer and a couple of them ham sandwiches my sister Leslie made us for breakfast—country ham on homemade bread with lots of butter. I can almost taste 'em, Mikey. And when them birds finally do come over, the flock's so thick it fills the sky. We shoot and we shoot until our shoulders ache from the kick of them shotguns. And God, it feels good, Mikey, it feels so damned good!"

"Yeah," Michael sighed, letting Eddie stay in the dream for a few minutes, anyway.

Four months ago, their B-17 took off into a clear, Italian sky for the long leg north to Berlin. They hit their marks and dropped their bombs, but before they

could make the big turn west, the German flak guns found them. A B-17 is a tough bird and Lieutenant Jensen, their pilot, fought hard to keep it in the air as they lumbered north and east, out of control. The smoke and flames got worse and worse inside, until the plane went into a steep dive. Mike and Eddie clawed their way to a side door and bailed out, but they were the only ones who made it. They came down in a muddy wheat field somewhere in East Prussia. Long columns of refugees choked the roads heading west, desperate to stay ahead of the Russians. Discarded furniture, mattresses, pianos, steamer trunks, and suitcases lay strewn along the roadsides. He and Eddie found some civilian clothes and it was easy for them to blend in—not that it mattered. Two days later, they were stopped at a German Military Police roadblock, and the joke was on them. The Germans weren't looking for American airmen. They were looking for strong backs to dig tank traps and clear rubble. Instead of a POW camp or being thrown against the closest wall and shot as spies, they were dragooned into a forced labor battalion headed north to Königsberg.

Michael nudged him again and pleaded, "You gotta get up, Eddie. We've been through too much together. You can't quit on me now."

"Quit?" Eddie moaned. "My legs are all froze up; they won't move."

"Then let me help." Michael tried to rub them again.

"Oh, God!" Eddie moaned, so Michael stopped. He could see the pain was too intense now, and he didn't know what else to do. "Eddie, if you don't get up, they'll kill you and this time, I won't be able to stop them."

"Promise?" the little guy answered with a pleading smile. "You and me, we should've stayed inside that old B-17. We shoulda gone down with Jensen and the rest of them; but no, we were too smart for that, weren't we? We went out that hatch and we thought we were safe, that we could just walk away."

"We still can walk away..."

"No, you can, not me; 'cause I'm not like you, Mikey. They hit you, you bounce back up even higher. They hit me and I hurt. Besides, none of this is real," he said, waving a limp hand toward the frozen landscape outside. "This is Saturday afternoon at the old Orpheum. Remember? Flash Gordon and Doctor Zarkov? That's you and me, and this here is the Planet Mongo. See, it's all pretend, Mikey. It ain't real. It can't be, because nobody can make up anything this crazy mean. Nobody."

That was when Stolz beat his fist on the side of the truck again, and Michael knew Mongo was all too real. "Raus!" Stolz bellowed. "It is a fine morning in the glorious Thousand Year Reich and the Führer wants you two American swine to earn your keep."

"Eddie, I can't just leave you here to die," Michael whispered.

"Then don't! Don't leave me here to die." Eddie grabbed Michael's coat and pulled him closer, pleading. "You'd do it for a lame horse, wouldn't you? You'd do it for a lame horse. Besides, what's a pal for? Huh? What's a pal for?"

Stolz's voice grew louder. "Herr Randall, you know I get cranky in the morning. You too, Hodge. If I have to roust you out, by God, I'll thump the both of you good!"

Michael's stomach was tied in knots, but he knew Eddie was right. So he crawled to the back of the truck and dropped off the tailgate onto the ground. The

big German stood directly in front of him, hands on hips with his usual amused, arrogant smile. Not that Stolz was all bad. He wasn't SS or even Army. He was a civilian, a shipyard worker dressed in a threadbare infantryman's greatcoat, a pair of knee-high Polish cavalry boots, and a knit seaman's cap, pulled down over his ears. He could occasionally be human and he could always be bought.

"All right, Herr Randall, where's your little friend?" he asked, the sarcasm billowing like frozen clouds on the cold morning air. "Is he *sleeping in* today? Waiting up in *Gasthaus Stolz* for some room service?"

"It's his legs, they've swollen up bad."

Stolz shrugged with complete indifference. "So?"

"Let him stay in the truck today, Stolz. I'll do his share of the work. Okay? A little rest and he'll be fine tomorrow."

"You know the rules," Stolz bellowed so all the prisoners would hear. "You all do! If you don't work you go back to the SS, where you won't have old Stolz to wet-nurse you."

Michael edged closer. "The SS will shoot him; you know they will."

"No, no," Stolz corrected him. "Even the SS is running out of bullets, so my guess is they'll just break his legs and toss him off the pier. But no, I don't think they'll shoot him."

"You bastard!"

"I don't make the rules, and I don't argue with the men in black who do."

Michael stared at him. "Will you do it then?"

"Do it? Do what?" Stolz frowned, as if he did not understand the words. "Me? Shoot your friend? Surely, you are joking, Randall."

"He is dying."

Stolz threw a contemptuous glance toward the Russians. "Randall, I'd put a bullet in that lot without a second thought, but shoot an American? Me? I know you Yanks. The stench of a thing like that will stick to a man, and I have no interest in becoming one of Herr Roosevelt's 'war criminals.' So if your friend needs killing, that is something you must do yourself."

Michael looked at him for a long, excruciating moment, and held out his hand. "Give me your gun, then."

"Give you my gun?" Stolz snorted. "You really have lost your mind!"

Michael bent down and pulled off his boot. Reaching up into the toe, he pulled out a dirty American five-dollar bill, the last of the meager hoard he and Eddie had squirreled away for their big escape. At least it would help one of them escape, he thought.

Stolz snatched the American money out of Michael's hand, and jammed it into his pocket. "You're a fool. What makes you think I'll give you a damned thing now?"

Michael stepped closer and locked his black eyes on the big German's, letting them bore in. "Stolz, when the Red Army finally gets here and starts hanging Germans from the street lamps—any German—you're going to need every friend you can get."

Stolz laughed, but he wasn't very convincing. Finally, he reached into the worn leather holster hanging on his hip and pulled out the old Czech revolver the SS had given him. "All right, my young Ami friend," he said as he opened the breach

and let the bullets drop into his hand. "You may have my pistol," he said as he pushed one bullet back into the cylinder and snapped it shut. "One shot, that's all you get. Use it on your friend or use it on yourself, I don't care which you do," Stolz said, motioning toward the Russians. "But I'm the only thing standing between that lot and Herr Himmler's men in black. Use it on me, and they'll tear you to pieces." That said, he handed over the pistol. "So go kill your friend, Randall. The sun is up now, and we have work to do."

Michael looked down at the revolver, remembering the old Greek saying, "When the Gods really want to punish a man, they grant him his wish."

Slowly he climbed back over the tailgate. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he realized how badly the truck stank of dirty men, rotting flesh, and death. "Oh, good," he heard Eddie say as he saw the revolver and held out his hand, but Michael wasn't ready for that yet. "Give it to me, Mikey, we both know you can't do it yourself," Eddie added, as he pulled the pistol from Michael's hand. "Thanks. And I want you to go hunt those ducks for me, you hear? Hunt them for both of us."

"Yeah, the ducks, I'll do that," Michael mumbled.

"You go down to South Carolina, to Rock Creek and see my Daddy. See my little sister Leslie, too. You'll like her. Daddy, he'll understand, but Les won't. She didn't want me to leave, so this is gonna be hard on her, real hard. So you go on down and tell 'em what happened here. See, it's not the knowin' that's hard; it's the not knowin.' "

"Yeah, I'll do that. I'll do that."

"Promise me you will, Mikey, promise me."

"I will, I promise I will."

"Good," he said, sounding pleased. "You'll get out of this mess, Mikey. You'll get out of here for the both of us, 'cause somebody's got to. You can't let them get away with it, not ALL this, not without somebody knowin' what happened. It'll make a difference. It'll make a difference," Eddie said as he slumped back, exhausted. "You can go now, Mikey, you can go."

Michael heard him cock the pistol and turned his head away. He couldn't go and he couldn't stay; all he could do was sit there, frozen to that spot until he heard a muffled Bam! and he jumped as if he had been the one who had been shot. It seemed like an eternity before he could reach over and pry the pistol from Eddie's limp fingers. The blue-steel barrel was already growing cold. Hoping against hope, he opened the breach and looked inside, praying he would find another bullet, but Stolz wasn't that careless or that kind. If there were, he would have used it on himself. If there had been a third he would have shot the big German too, but there was only the one. Damn that Stolz! Damn him to hell, he thought as he put his hand on Eddie's shoulder for the last time and crawled away. He dropped off the tailgate onto the ground and turned his face into the bitter arctic wind. It cut into him like shards of broken glass, but the pain felt good. Damned good! It froze his tears and cleared the fog, allowing him to see things with an amazing clarity.

Stolz stood there looking sheepish, as if he couldn't quite decide how to act. However, like any good German, when in doubt, opt for cruelty. He jammed a meaty paw in Michael's chest. "Where is my pistol!" he demanded. "Or did you

miss?” Michael said nothing. “No stomach for killing a man up close like that, eh, boy? It’s not the same as it is dropping a bomb from one of your fancy airplanes, is it?”

Stolz shoved him again, harder this time, trying to reassert his authority, but Michael shoved back. Stolz was cruel, but he wasn’t stupid. The American’s eyes flared and the German felt the heat wash over him as if the doors to a blast furnace had opened.

“Touch me again and I’ll kill you,” Michael whispered and he was not surprised when Stolz backed away. Michael handed him the pistol and headed toward the other prisoners. Stolz did nothing. He probably figured the young American had gone completely mad like everyone else around there. But the Russians understood. They said if you pound on a man long enough and give him absolutely nothing to live for, he might curl up in a shell and die, or he might explode. He might “grab the Devil by his coattails and hang on for the ride.”

However, Michael wasn’t crazy. He had to get out, out of Königsberg, out of Germany, and out of this stinking war. He had to live, and that would be his revenge. He would remember every hurt, every pain, and every injustice and there would be payback. He would get the bastards who did this to Eddie and to him, and to the long, long line of poor dumb bastards who came before them. He would live, and he would have his revenge.

## Chapter 2

### The Eastern Baltic

Kapitanleutnant Eric Bruckner bent over the chart table in the U-boat’s control room, his pencil tapping a worried staccato on a pile of maps. He knew they must be close to Königsberg, but a winter gale was blowing itself out on the surface. Finding the narrow harbor entrance in these conditions would be as much luck as skill. Wiping his sweaty palms down the front of his black-wool shirt, Bruckner turned to his First Officer. “Let’s take her up and have a look, Karl,” he said with all the confidence he could muster. “Perhaps we can find a marker buoy and sneak in before it gets any lighter.”

Confidence? Over the long months at sea his voice had grown reed-thin and tired and that was a trap he couldn’t allow himself to fall into, because forty-two men depended upon him for their lives. When they sailed from Kiel just seven weeks before, his crew was half veterans and half raw recruits. Boys mostly, they were flush with the terrified excitement of their first combat patrol. As the days wore on, they became pale, unshaven ghosts with greasy black hair and sunken, blood-shot eyes. And their captain? Only thirty-one years old and already they called him “der Alte,” the Old Man.

Lookouts to the conning tower,” he ordered. “Tell them to be careful, Karl. With ice and a quartering sea, it’ll be rough up there.” And no time to lose a man, he thought. Bruckner’s plan had been to make a run into the port before first light, but the sun was already over the horizon and he would have to risk the harbor in



broad daylight. In better times, he'd have given the helm to a junior officer; but not now. Enemy aircraft circled like eager hunting hawks, and even a routine port call was a deadly gamble.

"Damn this war," he cursed. The once "glorious" Third Reich had become an insane asylum run by the inmates, and every German officer had been forced to swear a personal oath of loyalty to the head lunatic in charge. That cruel dilemma ate at Bruckner like a cancer. He shook his head and cursed his orders once again. Why? Why send one of Germany's few remaining combat-ready U-boats racing four hundred miles to the eastern end of the Baltic, when the only targets worth firing his precious torpedoes at were far to the west in the North Atlantic? Königsberg and the rest of the Eastern Baltic ports were lost causes. Everyone with a map knew that except those fools in Berlin.

Bruckner climbed the narrow steel ladder to the conning tower. Four seamen and a young watch officer stood pressed against the bulkhead in their heavy foul-weather gear waiting for him as he stepped to the periscope. "Raise it up," he said calmly as he bent over and gripped the handles. He rode it up, pressing an anxious eye to the lens as the periscope broke the surface. He walked the handles around in a quick, tight circle. The surface was empty, so was the sky. Thank God for small favors, he thought, as he searched the fog-shrouded horizon for a hint of the harbor, but he saw nothing.

"Surface," he ordered, and the boat filled with the squeal of metal grinding on metal, the clanking of pipes, and the loud Whoosh! of the ballast tanks being blown dry. The deck tilted sharply upward and Bruckner wrapped an arm around the periscope to keep his footing on the slippery deck. As quickly as it all began, the boat leveled off and they were back on the surface. Hands spun the locking wheel in the hatch above his head. Strong arms pushed it open, and he stepped back as a torrent of ice-cold water poured down into the conning tower. With a heavy oilskin over his own shoulders and his Schirmmutze, the distinctive white hat only a German U-boat Kapitän was permitted to wear, pulled down tight on his head, he followed his men racing up the ladder and onto the bridge.

The sea was rough indeed. Bruckner raised his binoculars to his eyes as a large wave broke over the U-boat's bow, sending a wall of spray skyward. It hung there, freezing in mid-air, until the gale-force wind flung it at the bridge. "Verdammt!" he swore. He was born and raised on the Island of Rugen not a hundred miles west of this very spot, the last in a long line of Bruckners to go to sea in ships. When the north wind howled, any sensible islander would be home sitting in front of a roaring fire, not on the open sea spitting at the gods. The polite Lutheran God of tenderness and mercy might be fine for a sunny Easter morning in Frankfurt; but when the winter gales raged, it was Thor and Neptune who ruled the open sea.

Some said it was a dirty business he had gotten himself involved with: sneaking up on an unsuspecting ship, firing a steel tube packed with eight hundred pounds of TNT into its hull, and sending the ship and its crew to the bottom. Whether they were British, American, or Russian, watching other sailors drown was not something Bruckner took pride in; but starving Great Britain into submission was Germany's last hope and that was what submarine warfare came down to. He would prefer to stand on the bridge of a cruiser or battleship on the high seas,

hull-to-hull, gun-to-gun, and man-to-man; but without her submarine fleet, Germany would have lost the war long ago.

“Full speed ahead,” he shouted down the open hatch over the roar of the sea.

“Mind the port engine, Herr Kapitan,” his Chief Engineer shouted back. “She won’t take much more strain.”

Bruckner nodded, but he didn’t change his order. Once they were safely inside the submarine pen, with its blast doors rolled down and twenty feet of reinforced concrete over their heads, he’d worry about the port engine; but not before.

Their last combat patrol had been the worst. When the U-582 reached the North Sea, it was his one battered submarine against an endless armada of Allied warships. Bravery? Gallantry? More like suicide. After a week of hide-and-seek, he found a small convoy bound for Murmansk and put two torpedoes into a freighter. A third torpedo set a heavily laden gasoline tanker ablaze. It drew the Allied destroyers like an old maid screaming, “Rape!” For the next five hours, the U-boat paid a heavy price, twisting and turning deeper and deeper as rack after rack of depth charges pounded it with horrific body blows. In the end, time and luck won out. With their convoy safely over the horizon, the destroyers were forced to move on, leaving the U-582 cowering on the bottom with leaking pipes, sprung plates, a bent rudder, shattered nerves, and their lives.

“Karl,” Bruckner nudged the young watch officer standing next to him. “Pull the old Imperial battle flag out of the locker, the big one, and run it up the mast. We may be the last of the dinosaurs limping home to die; but let’s do it in style, eh!”

As he watched, two seamen ran the black and white Imperial Navy flag up the U-boat’s radio mast behind the conning tower. It sent a chill down his spine as it unfurled and snapped in the wind. This was no red and black Nazi swastika, not on his boat, because Eric Bruckner was a naval officer, not some political hack. The black cross and eagle on a field of white took him back to better days—1941, 1942, and even 1943 when Germany’s U-boat fleet spanned the North Atlantic like a steel net waiting for a run of mackerel, sending over 3,000 Allied ships to the bottom. They almost drove England to the bottom too, almost; but not quite. The enemy countered with radar, sonar, better airplanes, and new depth bombs, and it was the U-boat’s turn to bleed. The bleeding became a hemorrhage as the German U-boat fleet suffered the highest casualty rate of any service in any war, ever. Ninety percent were lost, all of his classmates and friends, leaving Bruckner wracked with guilt. He had survived, but he was no better than the others, just luckier and long overdue.

He raised his binoculars and scanned the horizon again. There! A small red and white marker buoy bobbed up and down in the gray mist. Straining, he could dimly make out the headland beyond and the thin line of surf on the breakwater. Königsberg! He hadn’t seen the old city since he was an ensign seven years before, but the momentary thrill quickly waned as he saw the rusting hulks of three freighters, a capsized tugboat, and a destroyer lying near the channel mouth, their hulls punched full of holes.

Through the thinning mist, he caught glimpses of the once-modern port complex beyond. Its piers and warehouses had been stomped flat and lay beneath a shroud of dirty ice and snow. Along the once-busy piers and quays, the cargo cranes stood black and twisted against a leaden sky. Thick concrete slabs had

been thrown up at jagged angles, and in the water below lay broken crates, rusted sheet metal, and garbage, trapped in the ice, coated with oil like the ring around an old bathtub. He had seen it all before in Danzig, Kiel, Brest, and every other U-boat base from southern France to Norway.

“Kapitan!” a nervous voice called to him from the control room. “I have the Harbormaster on the radio. He says we must heave-to and wait for the pilot boat.”

“Heave-to? Out here?” Bruckner shouted over the wind. “They must be mad! Tell them the signal broke up and that they should transmit again. By God, I wouldn’t wait out here for Adolf Hitler himself!”

In minutes, the thin black hull of the submarine sliced around the breakwater and into the main harbor, as Bruckner drew a bead on the U-boat pens at the far end. The rest of the harbor may have been flattened, but he knew the pens would still be intact. Their tall concrete walls and thick ceilings were built to take a pounding. Most of the steel outer doors had been rolled down to keep out the worst of the winter weather, but the two at the far end stood wide open.

“We’ll try those.” He pointed, hoping they would provide the U-582 with a little safety for the first time in weeks.

The distance closed rapidly as the Kapitan handled the helm with skill. They knifed across the harbor and into the narrow opening, reversing the diesel engines at the very last moment and bringing the boat to a stop a few feet from the deserted concrete pier. While the deck party jumped down and tied the boat off, other crewmen ran back to the entrance and cranked down the thick overhead doors.

Bruckner slumped back against the cold steel of the periscope housing and closed his eyes. His hair and beard were caked with ice. His face was raw from the bitter wind and the sleet. He was utterly exhausted, but for the first time in weeks he felt as if a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

Königsberg! They made it. But why?

## **Chapter 3**

### **Berlin**

Heinz Kruger was many things, but he was no fool. The last place he wanted to be on that bitterly cold February night was the center of Berlin under the cross hairs of a hundred B-17 bombers, but Kruger had no choice. He was ordered to Berlin by no less than Martin Bormann, the secretive head of the Nazi Party and the second most powerful man in Germany. His office was next to Adolf Hitler’s on the bottom level of the Führer Bunker, far below the courtyard of the Reich Chancellery, and Kruger knew not to cross him. While Hitler might be a hollow shell of his former self, Bormann was still at the top of his game, guarding his master’s door like a good Doberman.

Only twenty-five years old, Kruger was the youngest Sturmabteilungsführer or Major in the Waffen SS, Heinrich Himmler’s Praetorian Guard. His dress uniform was decked with medals and battle ribbons on the rare occasion he chose to wear it,

and he didn't get them by being a staff flunky, a policeman in a black leather coat, or a jack-booted concentration camp guard. Kruger was a combat infantry officer, one of the very best, and one of the most feared men on the Eastern Front. Tall and muscular, he had the blond hair, riveting blue eyes, and high cheekbones that belonged on an SS recruiting poster. But he had no time for that nonsense. The sadistic SS training schools and the Russian front had beaten that super-patriot crap out of him long ago. That wasn't why he fought. The medals, the rank, and the war propaganda meant nothing to him. He was a stone-cold killer and a textbook psychopath who couldn't live without the thrill of combat and the intense physical rush he got from killing other men. That was what made war so very convenient for him. He received the medals, the praise, and the rewards for doing nothing more than satisfying his own intense cravings and compulsions— things that would have put him on the executioner's block at any other time and place.

Yes, it was a wonderful war; but all good things must end. Anyone who bothered to look could see the war was lost, and that created a unique problem for Kruger. Across the Elbe, drooling hordes of Mongolian infantry were sharpening their bayonets and waiting to take their revenge; and there were fewer than a million battered, exhausted German troops left to stop them. Old men and boys for the most part, they'd be lambs to the slaughter. That was reality, and reality was the only thing Heinz Kruger still believed in; except for Martin Bormann's gold and a ticket to get out of this madhouse with him.

Kruger hated Berlin and hadn't been in the capital in nine months. As he trudged through the piles of rubble and dead husks of buildings, he was shocked to see how little of it was still standing now. A hellish dark-orange pall lit the night sky and every step he took was accompanied by the dull Crump! Crump! Crump! and the bright flashes of Allied bombs falling on Potsdam, Bernau, Schonefeld, or one of the city's other industrial suburbs. Not that the bombing mattered anymore. The real threat to Germany and its capital was from the Red Army pouring west through Poland. They were getting closer every day, and it would not be long now.

Ahead, through the smoke and haze, Kruger saw the blackened Corinthian columns of what was left of the Reich Chancellery, the seat of power of the Nazi regime. In its rear courtyard sat the sandbagged entrance to the Führer Bunker, Hitler's underground command post. It was guarded by a company of the elite SS Leibstandarte, Hitler's personal bodyguards. Everyone had to pass their muster and the Leibstandarte were uniformly arrogant to them all. Three checkpoints later, Kruger found himself at the bunker itself. Bent against the bitter arctic wind, Kruger handed his pay book and orders to the final sentry. He wore gleaming black-leather boots, an immaculate, freshly brushed, jet-black dress coat, white gloves, and white belts crossed on his chest, while Kruger stood there in a dirt-stained, infantryman's greatcoat. Unshaven, with muddy combat boots and a soft wool campaign hat on his head, Kruger must have looked like a derelict street cleaner to these tin soldiers, but Kruger had come straight from the front. As his cold blue eyes studied the man, a cold, cynical smile crossed Kruger's lips. What would this boy with his clean face and fingernails think when Ivan came knocking, Kruger wondered. He'd crap in those pretty black pants.

When the sentry finished his methodical examination of Kruger's papers, he shoved them back in Kruger's chest and pointed to the Luger pistol riding in the well-worn leather holster on Kruger's hip. "That stays here!" the sentry demanded.

"Of course it does," Kruger answered as he slowly straightened his tall, powerful frame and expanded his chest until he loomed over the sentry. As he did, the neck of Kruger's greatcoat fell open and his Knight's Cross with Swords and Diamonds flashed in the sentry's eyes. It was the highest combat medal a German soldier could earn, the only medal Kruger ever wore, and the only one that was necessary. Kruger leaned forward, his cruel blue eyes boring in like a butcher appraising a fresh side of beef. That medal, the blond hair, and those blue eyes? The sentry had read the SS magazines and seen photographs of this legendary blue-eyed Sturmbannführer, and he broke into a cold sweat. This was no street sweeper. It was Kruger.

"It's... it's my orders, Sir," the man stammered. "No... no weapons."

Kruger nodded. He drew the Luger from its holster and jammed it in the guard's white waist belt. "See that it's here when I return, won't you, Corporal? Because you wouldn't want me to come looking for it."

Without waiting for a reply, Kruger grabbed the handle of the heavy steel door, jerked it open, and stepped inside. Behind him, the door slammed with an ominous boom, and Kruger felt icy fingers running down his spine. He paused and stared down the long, steep flight of stairs that led down, as a warm, sour stench rose up around him and made him gag. Could this be their Holy Sanctuary? This cesspool? Supermen? More like super-moles, Kruger thought as he forced himself down one stair at a time. When he reached the bottom, he followed the narrow corridors until he reached the Party Secretary's office. Inside, he came face to face with a plump, brown-shirted clerk sitting behind a small desk. It was piled high with papers, and the man sat behind them cleaning his fingernails with a letter opener. Kruger wanted to rip it out of his fat pink fingers, but the door to Bormann's inner office stood wide open and Bormann saw him. "Ah, Kruger!" the Reichsleiter called out. "So good of you to drop by."

Drop by? Drop by! If he still had the Luger, Kruger would have shot both of them on the spot. Instead, he snatched the letter opener from the clerk's hand and drove it a full inch into the stack of papers. With the thin, knowing smile of a mortician, Kruger turned and stormed into Bormann's office without saying a word.

Bormann closed the heavy oak door behind them. "Was that necessary?" he asked. "Klaus is one of Himmler's spies. While he may be as useless as last week's mutton, it doesn't pay to antagonize him. That will only draw attention to us."

"Attention?" Kruger snorted. "Do you seriously think Herr Himmler doesn't know what you've been up to?"

"Perhaps, but he doesn't know all of it... and you are late."

"Late? Do you have any idea what I went through to get here?"

"I'm sure it was child's play for a man of your abilities, Heinz."

Child's play? Kruger held his tongue and turned away. Glancing around the tiny subterranean office, he saw how far the mighty had fallen. It was a broom closet compared to Bormann's cavernous office in the gutted Chancellery upstairs. Still, Bormann had squeezed his most important props in with him: the gaudy, blood-

stained “Horst Wessel” flag standing in the corner and a wall of framed photographs. They captured the brief history of the Thousand-Year Reich in grainy black and white. Hitler stood at the center of each, but Bormann’s round fat face was always hovering in the background. He saw the Austrian corporal with his arm raised, taking the oath as Chancellor of all Germany. Another of a massive torch-lit parade in the big stadium in Nuremberg. There, the Führer at a podium, chin out, face flushed, his voice holding a huge crowd spellbound. And Hitler riding triumphantly through Vienna, the city that once scorned him as a country bumpkin. Relaxing on the balcony at Berchtesgaden, smiling and laughing with a circle of old friends as they look out on the Alps in springtime. Hitler strutting past the railway car at Compiègne, humiliating the French and avenging his own generation’s shame. The Führer on the coast of France, staring through long binoculars at the white cliffs of Dover he could see, but never reach. And Hitler surrounded by his generals, leaning forward, jabbing an angry finger at a map. In the next one, he stands in a thick overcoat, watching his big guns blast holes in the drifting snow of the Eastern Front. Like the holes and the army that created them, they would all soon disappear. Finally, a thin old man with dead eyes and trembling fingers pins medals on schoolboys. And in each photo, Bormann is standing there, quietly watching and waiting.

But the Reichsleiter was no fool. He wasn’t waiting for an old man to die. He had seen the inevitable and set his own plans in motion years before. Yes, he might look like a rosy-faced Bavarian barkeep, but of all the old guard, the “Alte Kämpfer” from Hitler’s beer hall days in Munich, Bormann was the only one who hadn’t been swept into the corner and forgotten long ago. Always more clever than smart, he’d bested the bankers, the bureaucrats, the generals, and even the secret police through his slavish loyalty to Hitler and his control of the party machinery. That was the boring little job no one else wanted, but control of the party machinery was the true key to power. That was how he crushed Goring, Ribbentrop, Goebbels, and even the great Heinrich Himmler, by deft maneuvering and never leaving the Führer’s side. In the end, after all the others failed him, Hitler would return to his roots, to the Party, and to Martin Bormann as surely as a compass needle would return to north.

“So tell me, Heinz,” Bormann sat back and asked in a self-satisfied tone. “How did the last shipment go? Flawlessly as usual?”

Kruger’s eyes flashed. “Is that why you brought me here? For a damned trip report?” He paused to take a deep breath, then another, forcing himself to tolerate the man’s stupid questions, because Bormann was his ticket out. “No, there were no problems, Herr Reichsleiter, as I’m sure your spies already told you. The striped suits at the Dresden Bank couldn’t have been happier for us to take those embarrassing little *problems* off their hands. We drove the crates to the airfield and they were in Portugal two days ago,” Kruger answered as he locked his angry eyes on Bormann’s. “So why did you order me here? Here, under Hitler’s very nose, for God’s sake!”

“It’s amazing how you see right to the heart of the problem, Heinz.” Bormann clapped his hands in mock relief. “The Führer never leaves the bunker now, and I can’t leave him alone with the others. So there was no choice; you had to come here.”

Kruger slumped back in the chair and shook his head. "All right, what is it this time?" he asked wearily. "What special corner of hell are you sending me to now?"

"To East Prussia, to Königsberg."

"Königsberg?" Kruger looked up. "The Russians have it surrounded. Do you think they'll let me walk in on your say so?"

"A relief column broke through this morning," Bormann answered with a coy smile. "They're holding the road open, if you move quickly."

"And why would I want to do that?"

"Because I found us a U-boat." Bormann grinned like a large cat with bird feathers still stuck to his chin.

A submarine! With that one word, all the other pieces suddenly fell into place and Kruger found himself smiling along with Bormann, knowing it never paid to underestimate the man. "I assume Admiral Donitz doesn't know about this?"

"Heinz, Heinz, the Great Admiral has an entire Navy to run. One old fleet boat would hardly be worth his time, would it?"

Kruger nodded, because he did understand. It was all about the gold. Everything Bormann did these days was about his new empire and about the gold.

"Here are your orders," Bormann said as his short fat fingers pushed an envelope across the desk.

It looked thicker and heavier than usual, Kruger thought, as he picked it up and weighed it in his hand. "You are anticipating some problems?"

"Problems?" Bormann mused as he ticked them off on his fingers. "Well, you have this beastly winter weather to deal with — the worst in a generation. And one cannot forget the Red Army; you're very high on their *Most Wanted List* now, you know. And of course, there's our own Navy. I doubt they'll appreciate a young SS officer commandeering one of their precious U-boats, no matter whose orders he flashes around. Neither will Erich Koch, my Gauleiter for East Prussia. That filthy bastard would steal his grandmother's purse if he thought he could get away with it. So I suggest you slip in and slip out before Koch learns you're in town and why you're there."

"And if I'm not that fortunate?"

"Then kill him. Just don't let him get anywhere near that U-boat."

Kruger's eyes flashed at the pleasant prospect.

"And I'm giving you a platoon from the SS Leibstandarte to keep you company. Everyone knows who they work for, and the sight of those black coats and white belts should stifle any awkward questions. If they don't, I'm also giving you one of my 'special letters'," he said, knowing there was nothing this side of hell that Heinz Kruger, a platoon of the Leibstandarte SS, and one of his masterful forgeries couldn't handle.

Finally, Bormann reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a small, gift-wrapped box. "This is for you, Heinz," he said with a smile as he pushed it across the desk toward the young major. "A token of my very sincere appreciation."

Kruger stared suspiciously at the box.

"It's not a bomb, Heinz," Bormann laughed. "Open it."

Kruger remained leery, but he did as he was told and slowly unwrapped the box. Inside lay an elegant silver cigarette case. He picked it up, pushed the hasp, and opened the top. He saw an engraved, wreathed Nazi swastika and the words:

To My Strong Right Arm  
Heinz Kruger  
From His Grateful Admirer  
Martin Bormann  
February 9, 1945

For the first time in a long time, Heinz Kruger was truly speechless. "This is... most generous of you, Herr Reichsleiter," he finally replied, surprised and flattered by the gesture. "It is very... elegant."

"Consider it your diplomatic passport through the German bureaucracy," Bormann laughed. "All you need do is open the top and offer a cigarette to any little toad who gives you a hard time, and I guarantee it will strike terror in his heart. But I doubt very many men dare challenge my young steel-eyed Siegfried, do they?"

## **Chapter 4**

### **Königsberg**

With the U-582 resting safely beneath the thick concrete roof of the submarine pen, Eric Bruckner finally went below. His orders were clear; he was to report to the Port Commander the moment he arrived, and that meant looking presentable. Easier said than done, he lamented as he bent over a tiny washbasin in the U-boat's last functioning head and attacked weeks of grime with cold saltwater and a bar of harsh lye soap. As he looked into the mirror, a gaunt, unfamiliar face stared back at him. The corners of his nose and mouth were white with caked salt, and his pale skin sagged on his bones. Inside the submarine, the ever-present diesel fumes irritated everyone's eyes and their skin had the sheen of a well-oiled corpse. With his short, crudely cropped hair, he could pass for a bum, if bums hadn't been outlawed in the "New Germany," along with warmth, compassion, humanity, and all those other decadent social vices.

Bruckner donned the cleaner of his two black-wool shirts, a leather sea jacket, and his distinctive white U-boat Kapitän's hat. Soft and floppy, it had a gold insignia in front and a ring of gold braid above a jet-black brim. Clothes rarely made the man, but that white hat truly did. Most of the men who wore them were now entombed in their broken boats on the bottom of the North Atlantic. Leaving his compartment, he made a quick check through the boat, making sure the work parties had their assignments before he jumped down onto the concrete pier. Land never felt as hard as it did after a long trip at sea, knees bent against the pitch and roll of the boat, hour after hour, day after day. He flexed his legs as he walked to the end of the pier and stepped out the door into the once-proud Navy yard.

He had visited Königsberg several times before the war but he wasn't prepared for the devastation he saw. Instead of busy construction gangs readying ships for



sea, the yard lay deserted. Its workshops and warehouses had been flattened, and the concrete lay-down areas were cratered with shell holes and strewn with piles of rusting scrap metal. What a waste, he thought as he turned his collar to the wind and set off toward the Port Headquarters. Slipping and sliding through frozen mud and ice, he heard the rumble of a large truck coming up behind him. Turning to look back, he gave his friendliest smile and a wave of his hand until the rusting cargo truck ground to a halt next to him.

"Need a ride, Herr Kapitan?" the driver asked, leaning out the cracked window. "This here's no Navy staff car, but if you don't mind the ripped upholstery and a few loose springs, you're welcome to the other half of my front seat." He was a burly fellow dressed in a hodge-podge of old clothing but Bruckner didn't care as he quickly climbed inside, glad to be out of the wind. "The name's Stolz," the driver said reading Bruckner's mind. "Don't mind the clothes. Around here, it's catch as catch can."

"No problem," Bruckner laughed. "I'm just a tourist."

"A tourist!" The driver roared, his laughter billowing out in thick, white clouds. "Me, too. I'll tell the Russians I'm a goddamned tourist!"

Bruckner found himself laughing along with the man, laughing for the first time in a long time. "Stolz, you wouldn't be going near the Port Headquarters, would you?"

"Or what is left of it? That's not on my one-mark tour, but you sit back and I'll see if I can get over there." The big truck drove slowly away, bouncing through the deep, rock-hard ruts of ice. "By the way," Stolz asked. "Was that your U-boat that came in this morning, Sir? The one with the old Imperial battle flag flying on the mast?"

"You noticed?"

"I'll wager there's some red faces over at Headquarters but, lord, it looked good, snapping and popping in the wind as your boat plowed through the waves. Brought back some real memories, I tell you," he sighed. "Some real memories."

The truck bounced along from one pothole to another. After a particularly fierce jolt, Bruckner was startled to hear shouts and pounding on the rear window of the cab behind him. He turned and saw a wreath of filthy, matted hair and two angry black eyes glaring at him from the other side of the small pane of glass. When they saw Bruckner's, they didn't flinch or back down.

"My God, Stolz! What've you got back there?" Bruckner demanded to know.

Stolz laughed. "That's what Herr Goebbels calls *volunteer labor*. Makes you wonder what they volunteered to get away from, don't it. For the most part, they're Russians, with bits and pieces of about everything else tossed in, like a bad hunter's stew. I guess it was volunteer and be fed or sit in some stinking POW camp and starve."

Bruckner looked back through the small window again, but the angry black eyes had disappeared. "How many have you got back there?"

"Fourteen at last count, but we get a bit of shrinkage from time to time, if you get my meaning. Here, watch this." Stolz banged his fist on the wall of the cab and shouted, "You be quiet back there. This officer in the white hat is an SS general, a Commissar!"

Bruckner looked into the dark shadows and saw the dim shapes shrink away. He couldn't see their eyes or faces, but he felt the fear and the hatred radiating out at him. It made him feel dirty and ashamed, wondering what it took to terrorize a man like that.

"Don't take it personal, Kapitan. That lot wouldn't know your white hat from my grandmother's bonnet, but you saw what happened when I mentioned the SS. Must have been bad back there in Russia. Real bad. And as much as they hate the SS, they hate those Red secret police even worse. Stalin told them any Russian who surrenders instead of dying for his country is a traitor to be shot on sight, no questions and no excuses."

"That has a familiar ring," Bruckner quipped under his breath.

"Yeah, the NKVD will have a real problem when they finally take this place. They won't know who to shoot first." Stolz threw a thumb over his shoulder. "Them or us."

"It's refreshing to find a man who hasn't lost his sense of humor."

"Humor? When you're swirling around the toilet bowl waiting to go down for the third time, a lot of things look funny, Kapitan," Stolz said with a sad laugh. "By the way, I've worked in this shipyard since '34, and I've had a wrench on everything that floats from a cruiser to a U-boat. You wouldn't be needing a good mechanic, would you?"

"You have no idea what you're asking for, Stolz. You'll be one hell of a lot safer right here with the Red Army than out at sea with me."

"That's not the way I see it, Sir. And don't let these clothes fool you. I'm a top-notch wrench jockey and I'd take my chances on the open sea."

They reached the front of a battered warehouse and the truck ground to a halt. "I can't promise anything, Stolz," Bruckner relented, knowing a boat can never have too many mechanics. "Stop by and see my chief engineer. If you can convince that old bird you know which end of a wrench is which, I'll see what I can do when the time comes."

"Fair enough!" Stolz beamed. "And you won't need to come looking, I'll be there."

Bruckner jumped to the ground. As the big truck drove away, his eyes were drawn to the tattered sheet of canvas draped over the rear cargo bed. It was too dark to see inside but he could feel angry eyes staring out, their hatred washing over him in waves. Yes, this would be a hard peace, he thought. Out there beyond the glow of the watch fires, millions of men with eyes just like these were sharpening their knives, waiting to take their revenge.

When the truck finally disappeared around the corner, Bruckner turned and stepped through the door of what was left of the Port Headquarters. Inside, he saw a jumble of empty desks and filing cabinets and a handful of thin, pale bureaucrats trying to look busy. Like the cockroach, they'll outlive us all, he lamented. In the near corner, he saw a door marked "Adjutant." Bruckner stuck his head inside and saw a short, bald Navy Commander in full dress uniform hunkered down behind a metal desk. On its surface lay a pile of forms, a dictionary, a pad of paper, and a row of carefully arranged pencils, all neat as a pin. On his chest, the Adjutant's uniform bore two thin Nazi Party service ribbons and nothing else. They spoke volumes. The only deck this fellow had seen was in a box of playing cards.

Bruckner tucked his white hat beneath his arm. "Kapitanleutnant Bruckner of the U-582 reporting as ordered, Sir," he said as he rendered a passable military salute.

"Heil Hitler!" the Adjutant replied with a rigid Nazi salute. With those two greetings in that time and place, the two men had defined the totality of their differences. The Adjutant looked down at a piece of paper in front of him. "Ah, yes, Bruckner of the U-582," he said as his beady little eyes quickly turned hostile. "The one with that impertinent old flag this morning."

"Impertinent?" Bruckner bristled.

"Impertinent, insubordinate, and utterly lacking in proper party spirit." The man held the paper up and waved it over his head. "And from this report, it would appear you also disobeyed a direct order and entered my port without waiting for the pilot."

"Your port?"

"We have rules, at least since I've been here, and the reckless endangerment of a naval vessel is *not* something we take lightly."

Bruckner could not believe what he was hearing. This talking egg had the gall to lecture him about seamanship. The Kapitan clenched his teeth and glared at him. "I'm afraid we received no such order. Our radio is..."

"Of no concern to me!" The Adjutant dismissed the excuse with a sweep of his hand. "Well, the Admiral left strict instructions that you were to be brought to him the instant you arrived, so I'm sure you haven't heard the last of this sordid matter. No, indeed!"

The Adjutant rose in a huff, his precious report clutched in his fingers as he led Bruckner down the hallway to the rear offices. When they reached the last door, he rapped his knuckles on the frame as Bruckner straightened his shabby uniform. They entered the Admiral's office and both men came to rigid attention the prescribed three paces from the Admiral's desk. Instead of fear and anxiety, Bruckner could not help but smile as he recognized the gray-haired officer in the chair in front of him.

"Eric, my boy! God, but it's good to see you," came the familiar voice of Admiral Georg Schwanger. "It has been too many years since the bridge of the old Gneisenau, eh?"

Bruckner nodded. To a young ensign, Schwanger was one of those rare men who could fill a room whenever he stepped inside. Still, it had been seven years since he had seen the 'Old Man' and Schwanger looked thin and tired, a pale shadow of the dynamo who could enthral a bridge full of young officers.

"That will be all, Bosch." The Admiral dismissed his startled Adjutant with a contemptuous flip of his hand.

"But my report, sir?" Bosch fumbled. "I thought..."

"You? You 'thought'?" The Admiral's angry eyes raked the poor man. "You haven't had an original thought since you opened the cover of *Mein Kampf*. Now get out, or you'll spend the night painting channel buoys in a dinghy."

Bosch's bald head turned crimson as he scurried from the room as fast as his feet would carry him. Once they were alone, the Admiral slumped heavily in his chair. "Not much of a victory, was it?" His voice faded to a whisper. "Oh, I could

fire him or send him off to the trenches, but they'd only send another one to take his place."

"Another one?" Bruckner asked, confused.

Schwanger looked at him with a sad, understanding smile. "You've been out at sea, Eric. There's no way you could know what we've been forced to put up with. You see, Bosch is my personal spy, sent from Berlin to watch me. All the senior officers have them, so I guess I should be flattered. Like the gold braid and the gray hair, they come with the rank now."

Bruckner was shocked. "Our Navy? They are spying on *you*?"

"It isn't *our* Navy anymore, Eric, at least not the one you and I knew. It is *their* Navy, and *their* Army, and *their* Air Force too, no doubt. Not that it matters. Bosch is a sniveling little shit, but he keeps the files straight and makes a passable cup of coffee. That's a damned sight better than the one before him."

"That is an outrage, Sir!"

"An outrage?" Schwanger paused and reflected. "Eric, there are outrages and then again there are outrages. Some are petty, like Bosch; but some are so monstrous that even calling them an outrage is inadequate. But no more of that," he said with a sweep of his hand. "I refuse to let them ruin the joy of seeing you again, my boy. Real officers are as rare as a warm summer day here, and I'm so pleased to see you." Finally, the old man reached for his intercom. "Bosch, go to Sturmbannführer Kruger's quarters. Tell him the U-582 has arrived and Kapitan Bruckner is here in my office, and be quick about it."

Bruckner was puzzled. "An SS Major? What on earth does he want with me?"

Schwanger shrugged helplessly. "I don't know, Eric. Truly, I don't."

"Is that why they brought me here? Because of this Kruger fellow?"

"I would assume so, but they no longer tell me anything," Schwanger said as he leaned forward. "This SS Major came here from Berlin, from Hitler himself, for God's sake; and he has a platoon of the Leibstandarte to prove the point. Unfortunately, you and your U-boat belong to him now."

Bruckner was speechless.

"You cannot possibly know what they are like, and I pray you never will." He shook his head. "If only that poor wretch Stauffenberg had placed his bomb a little closer."

Bruckner couldn't believe what he was hearing. Admiral Schwanger personified the old Prussian officer's code of duty, honor, and country. For him to sympathize with the men who tried to assassinate Hitler the previous July was incredible.

"Promise me one thing, Eric," the Admiral's eyes pleaded. "Don't argue with the man. Tell him what he wants to hear, do what he tells you to do, but don't argue with him. You might think he's a brother officer, but he isn't. He's gutter trash, a hired killer, and no gentleman. One look in his eyes will tell you he is not to be trusted. So do what he says. Do whatever you must. Just get your boat and your crew out of this hell-hole and back at sea where you'll be out of their grasp."

"But, Admiral, I..."

"No buts, my boy. The war is lost; everyone knows that. Let your conscience be your guide and no one whose opinion you value will ever criticize you for anything you must do. But remember, you're a commissioned naval officer, first, last, and

forever." Schwanger paused, his lips trembling. "That is the one thing they can never take away from you; that, and your honor."

## Chapter 5

When the tall, blond SS officer strode into the room wearing that mud-spattered great coat and an all-knowing smirk, Admiral Schwanger mumbled an awkward excuse about a staff meeting and quickly left. They all knew it was a lie, but it went unchallenged. As his hand touched the doorknob, he glanced back at Bruckner as if he wanted to say more but couldn't find the words—couldn't, or didn't dare. So he quietly slipped out the door and left the two young officers alone.

Bruckner glared at Kruger. "The Admiral is a good man," he felt compelled to say.

"I'm sure he was, but I can buy 'good' men on any street corner in Berlin," Kruger answered with those cold blue eyes. "So tell me you aren't one of those useless antiques, Kapitan. That would make things more difficult for both of us, and it will change nothing." As Kruger pulled off his heavy, mud-stained greatcoat and tossed it on a side chair, his scarf fell open to reveal the Knight's Cross First Class with Swords and Diamonds hanging around his neck. Bruckner had never seen one before. It was a true soldier's medal given by the Führer's own hand and the Kaiser's before him for repeated acts of extreme bravery. With the soiled uniform, scuffed boots, and that medal, it was clear this fellow wasn't some political hack who did his fighting behind a desk. To a civilian, Bruckner's white hat and Kruger's SS death's-head insignia were roughly equal; but throw in that medal and the arrogant smirk, and it was no contest.

"Oh, relax, Kapitan," he said as he plopped his weary frame in the Admiral's chair and propped his long legs on the corner of the Admiral's desk. "I rarely dine on naval officers, at least not this early in the day." Bruckner stared across at him, but he didn't rise to the bait. Kruger smiled. "Well, now that we've circled each other and finished our sniffing, let's get down to business, eh? You don't like me dropping in on your naval operations any more than I like being here, but we are officers, you and I. We do our jobs and we follow orders, whether we like them or not. That said, you need to know I'm here on a top-secret mission. It comes from the highest authority in the Reich, and I know I'll have your full cooperation in carrying it out, won't I?"

"I didn't think I had a choice," Bruckner finally responded.

"No, you don't," Kruger seemed amused by the challenge. "And to be absolutely certain that you understand me, perhaps you should read this." Kruger reached inside his tunic, pulled out the sheet of heavy bond paper Bormann had given him, and pushed it across the desk. Bruckner calmly looked down. At the top, he saw the most feared letterhead in all of Nazi Germany: an embossed black and red swastika surrounded by a garland of gold. Beneath that were typed the words:

Office of the Reichsführer – SS

Reich Ministry of the Interior  
February 9, 1945  
MOST SECRET

SS Sturmbannführer Heinz Kruger is acting on my personal orders regarding a matter of utmost importance. He is to be obeyed in all matters, regardless of rank or other orders to the contrary, under penalty of high treason.

Heinrich Himmler

Bruckner sat stunned staring at the simple, scrawled signature. He read the short letter again, and then a third time as his mouth turned dry. He knew he was doomed.

Kruger chuckled to himself. Himmler? Bormann's fiercest rival? Who said he didn't have a sense of humor. "Like a bucket of ice water on a cold morning, that signature does get one's blood flowing, doesn't it," Kruger said as he retrieved the letter and slipped it into his pocket. "You were brought here for a very important reason, Kapitän. Your mission is absolutely vital to the war effort, and you are now under my personal orders and no one else's. Clear?"

Bruckner nodded woodenly.

"Excellent," Kruger said with a broad, friendly smile. "You'll find I'm a very easy fellow to get along with—a pussy cat, really—provided you follow orders. I can't tell you what they are or what your mission is, not yet anyway; but it should be a milk run compared to what you've been doing," he said. "So tell me, how soon can you have your ship ready to leave?"

"In the first place, Sturmbannführer Kruger, the U-582 is a boat, not a ship—an old, badly battered rust-bucket of a boat, I'm embarrassed to say. And when can we have it ready for sea? Maybe a week? Maybe never."

Kruger's smile faded. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"We've been out at sea on a combat patrol for seven straight weeks and she's had the hell kicked out of her for most of the winter. Then you ordered us to turn east and race the whole length of the Baltic to get here. That's one hell of a lot of wear and tear for any boat that hasn't had its normal maintenance stops, particularly a submarine."

Kruger listened intently to every word, not interrupting, but clearly, the young, blond superman didn't like what he had just heard.

"That's the truth, Sturmbannführer Kruger. We were extremely fortunate to make it here at all." Bruckner knew his life and his crew's depended on his ability to make this infantry officer understand. "A U-boat is not a destroyer, or a battleship, or one of your tanks. It's not enough to say that some of the machinery is working right or even that most of it is working right. If every piece and part isn't working right, if a pipe bursts, or a battery fails, or one of a thousand other things go wrong when you're down at three hundred feet, she'll go to the bottom and she won't come back up."

Kruger began to argue, but Bruckner cut him off. "Have you ever been inside a U-boat? Not tied to the dock, but out on the high seas?" From Kruger's expression, it was obvious he had not. "Then you cannot possibly imagine what it's like to be inside a cold, sweating steel coffin as depth charges explode all around you. You

feel it in your guts as the boat shakes and trembles. The metal plates shriek and groan like banshees from hell as you stand there freezing and sweating, waiting for the hull to crack open like a hot walnut and for ice-cold water to rush inside. Can you imagine what that's like, hour after hour? Waiting to drown and knowing there's nothing you can do to prevent it?"

Kruger's tough-guy expression didn't change, but his eyes flickered as the words sank home. Out on the Russian steppes this SS Major could go hand-to-hand with the Devil, but the open, storm-tossed sea was a different matter. He couldn't shoot it, he couldn't threaten it, and he couldn't even begin to understand it. That was Bruckner's edge.

"Major, my U-boat is worn out. I have one engine on its last legs, chattering and belching smoke. Several hull plates are sprung and I have cracked pipes, jammed valves, one dead battery cell, two torpedo tubes I don't dare open, and God only knows what else wrong. In a word, she needs a complete overhaul; so if your mission is that important, I suggest you find yourself another boat."

Kruger nodded as he considered Bruckner's words. "I appreciate your candor, Bruckner, but there are no other boats available. None. The U-582 is it. There are, however, other captains available to take her out if you won't. Is that what you want?" Kruger had done his homework, and Bruckner knew he'd just called his bluff. "I didn't think so. Rest assured though, we have no more interest in seeing your boat go to the bottom than you do. So, if you need repairs, they'll be made. Everything that's wrong will be fixed to your satisfaction. Is that good enough? The entire shipyard is now yours for the next three days—every man, every tool, and every spare part—because that's how much time we have to get the U-582 back to sea. Three days and not one minute longer."

That said, Kruger picked up a pencil and a pad of paper from the Admiral's desk and leaned forward, ready to take dictation. "Tell me what you need, Kapitan, I'm all ears."

Three days. It took every hour working around the clock, but Kruger did what he said he would do. Within an hour of their meeting, the deserted submarine pen became a beehive of activity, filled with floodlights, a small army of mechanics with hoists, cables, pipes, hoses, and crates full of parts. By late afternoon, the young SS officer and his magic letter had produced a new engine, valves, batteries, rubber seals, sheet metal, and steel tubing. Gangs of shipyard workers put in hard twelve-hour shifts overhauling the U-boat from one end to the other. Not that it was perfect, but Bruckner had to admit his boat was in better shape than she'd been in many months.

But not everything was the way he wanted it. From his high perch in the conning tower, he watched as welding torches sent sparks cascading off the hull of the aft deck, building a steel frame of angle irons to hold a double row of fuel oil drums. This was another of Kruger's "modifications." Bruckner fumed. He had no idea what the blond bastard wanted with his submarine, but he could count. With fifty extra drums of fuel, the U-582 could travel more than ten thousand miles. To where? A combat patrol to North America? South Africa? Japan? They were all within reach now.

Bruckner had never paid any attention to rumors that swirl around naval bases. Still, he'd heard things. A boat and its crew would suddenly be shrouded in secrecy, outfitted and stuffed with food and fuel, then disappear. A secret mission? A long range patrol? A special target? Hard to say. Had the U-582 had been chosen to deliver one of the Führer's new wonder weapons? Maybe to drop secret agents in New York or Boston? Or to take a new jet engine prototype to Japan? Or the plans for a new rocket? Could that be the answer? But if it was, why did Kruger remove the submarine's deck gun? Its carriage was badly bent, but even a half-accurate eighty-eight millimeter cannon was better than no gun at all. Bruckner argued his case to no avail; the deck gun was gone. Worse, Kruger ordered the U-boat's torpedo tubes welded shut and the torpedoes, racks, and hydraulic gear taken apart and carted away. Both compartments were now empty. Like a big underwater barge, the U-582 now had nothing to defend herself, no weapons at all.

"You won't need them," Kruger ruled. "Your orders are to avoid contact with any ships whatsoever until you reach your destination. The mission is THAT secret, Bruckner. Besides, we need the room."

The room? For what? Bruckner fumed, feeling betrayed.

"Relax," Kruger tried to reassure him. "This will be a milk run. No enemy ships. No depth bombs. No shooting. In the end that's going to SAVE your boat and your crew, and that's something you care about, don't you, Herr Kapitan?"

Bruckner knew the arrogant bastard had him, and he remembered what Admiral Schwanger told him. "Tell him what he wants to hear, don't argue with him. Tell him what he wants to hear." The quicker the repairs are completed, the quicker he could get out of here, away from Kruger and away from Königsberg.

It wasn't until late afternoon on the third day that Kruger showed his real hand. The repair work was finished. Exhausted from their long shifts, the dockworkers packed their tools and shuffled out the doors into the darkness of the shipyard. Minutes later, the rear door of the submarine pen opened; five canvas-covered trucks rolled down the narrow pier and stopped beside the U-boat. Each had an SS guard on the running board and the first and last truck carried more heavily armed storm troopers with the black greatcoats and crossed white belts of the Leibstandarte. They quickly dismounted and spread out in defensive positions around the submarine pen, quietly and professionally.

The middle truck looked out of place and vaguely familiar. It was older, dented and mud spattered, with a piece of torn, faded canvas draped over the cargo bed. Its driver's side door opened and Bruckner recognized his old friend Stolz. The truck driver waved to the bridge and went around to the rear of the truck to roust his ragged band of prisoners. Like a line of ants, they began unloading dozens and dozens of wooden crates from the other trucks. Some crates were small, others long and flat, and all of them very heavy. With two or even four men to a crate, they carried them up the gangway, and placed them in stacks on the fore and aft decks of the U-boat—up and back in an unending procession.

Bruckner took a closer look at the crates. None had any labels or markings except a black Nazi Party emblem hastily stenciled on the top and no clue as to what lay inside. The long, flat ones were awkward for the prisoners to carry; but



the small rectangular ones were heaviest. The prisoners struggled to keep their balance as they lugged them up the gangway and laid them on the deck. When the decks were covered, half the work party was sent below while the others began lowering the crates through the hatches into the fore and aft torpedo rooms. Well, Bruckner thought, at least he knew why Kruger gutted them, why he got rid of the deck gun, off-loaded the torpedoes, and why he ripped out the racks and loading gear. He needed room for all those damned crates!

As the cruel charade unfolded, Bruckner knew there was nothing he could do to stop it. Pity the poor Russians. They might be ignorant Slavs, but they were human beings and it was wrong to treat anyone this way. Eyes down, heads bowed, they never looked up, because they were terrified to be anywhere near the SS. Their stooped shuffle conserved energy and avoided attracting the attention of the guards. That was their secret. To be noticed or stand out was to be singled out and that could be fatal. But somewhere among them was that pair of black, angry eyes that scorched him through the truck window three days before. Where were they, he wondered?

Bruckner had enough. He was a sailor, a naval officer; but this was different. Kruger had reduced his once-proud submarine to little more than a tramp steamer. Where was the honor or dignity in that? Disgusted, he went below, but there was no escaping the young SS officer's handiwork inside the boat either. Food and supplies were jammed into every nook and cranny, and that sealed Stolz's fate.

"I'm truly sorry," Bruckner told Stolz. "I haven't half-enough room for my own men, so there's no way I can take a new man aboard."

"I understand, Herr Kapitan," the slovenly truck driver answered, his eyes dropping to the deck in disappointment. "But don't expect me to stop hoping, not until I see you and your boat disappear over the horizon."

"Fair enough." He seemed to be a decent-enough fellow, Bruckner thought, and that made it all the harder. But the Kapitan had more important things on his mind, like the trim and balance of the boat. With all those heavy crates crammed in the torpedo rooms and fifty drums of diesel fuel riding high on the aft deck, he had no idea how she would fare in heavy seas. She could corkscrew and turn turtle and that would spell disaster for everyone. Even so, he couldn't wait to leave. He'd put to sea in a charwoman's mop bucket if that was what it took to be at the helm of his boat, where he could control his own destiny.

## Chapter 6

Bruckner watched as Stolz's prisoners lashed and braced the last of the wooden crates in place in the forward torpedo room. "Kapitan," the intercom speaker above his head crackled. "Sturmbannführer Kruger requests you join him in the control room."

"Tell him I'll be there shortly," Bruckner answered, hoping this might be the last time he would have to deal with the blond bastard. When Bruckner reached the control room, Kruger appeared to be studying the many maritime charts strewn

across the chart table, toying with a pencil, a ruler, and the stainless-steel map compass lying there.

“The three days are up, Kapitan. Is the boat ready as promised?”

“I think so,” Bruckner grudgingly conceded. “And you have my compliments. I never thought anyone could get that much work done in such a short period of time.”

Kruger seemed mildly amused. “It is always amazing to see what a man can accomplish with the proper motivation. That’s an important lesson for an officer to learn.”

“My motivation is my men, Sturmbannführer, no more and no less, so let’s stop fencing. The tide will soon turn, and I intend to go out with it. May I have my orders?”

Kruger reached inside his jacket pocket and pulled out a silver cigarette case and a thick, white envelope. He laid them side by side on the table, opening the cigarette case first. “You don’t mind, do you?” he finally thought to ask.

Bruckner shrugged, willing to tolerate almost anything at this point. “I’m curious, Sturmbannführer Kruger, where do they find men like you?”

“Men like me?” Kruger put a cigarette between his lips, lit it, and took a slow, deep drag. “Actually, I was in a Jesuit seminary when I first heard the Führer speak.”

“A Jesuit seminary? You are jesting!”

“Not at all. I discovered a new god who was much more fun to work for.”

“Had you chosen to go to sea in a U-boat instead of marching with the SS, you’d have discovered the old one is more than enough for most men.”

Kruger laughed. “Bruckner, I shall miss you. You aren’t another slavish toad like most of the Navy types I’ve had the misfortune of dealing with. You have a brain and some backbone; you might actually make it.”

Bruckner looked down at the white envelope and frowned. Over the years, he had received more than his share of orders from the Kriegsmarine Headquarters. They always came in a blue envelope with a large, official wax seal over the flap. Kruger’s were in a white envelope with no seal. Where they had originated was anyone’s guess.

“They are from the Reich Chancellery for you personally and they supersede any other orders you have or any you may get,” Kruger told him. “They contain your destination, maps, radio frequencies, call signs, your contacts at the other end, the whole lot. Naturally, you shouldn’t open them until you’re well out to sea. Also, you’re not to have any contact with anyone—their ships, our ships, or your headquarters—until you get there. None. Strict radio silence. It’s for your own protection, I assure you.”

More lies, Bruckner knew. And that was exactly what he would have told this arrogant SS Major, if the crackling of the intercom hadn’t interrupted. “Kapitan?” the watch officer called down from the bridge. “A large limousine has pulled onto the pier carrying a man who says he is Gauleiter Koch. He insists on coming aboard and searching the boat.”

“Scheisse!” Kruger flung the envelope on the chart table and ground his cigarette out beneath the heel of his boot. “I told that fat buffoon to stay away from

here!” he raged as he strode quickly away and climbed the ladder two rungs at a time.

Bruckner followed him up and when he reached the bridge, he saw a dangerous game unfolding on the pier below. Every eye in the submarine pen was riveted on a long black limousine parked at the foot of the gangway, as clean and shiny as the day it rolled off the production line in Stuttgart. It was a classic pre-war Mercedes, with a chrome spotlight mounted on each fender; and standing around it in a tight, nervous circle were a half-dozen Nazi Party SA Brown Shirts with brightly polished jackboots and machine pistols at the ready. They were the Party street thugs in the 1930s, whose specialty was beating up old men when the odds were four or five to one. Looking down on them from the corners and catwalks of the submarine pen was their new nemesis—young, heavily armed SS storm troopers. This time, it was the Brown Shirts who were outnumbered. They glanced anxiously at their leader, hoping he wouldn’t do anything stupid, but that wasn’t a particularly good bet. He was a squat, bull-necked lout with the bent nose of a bar-room brawler. He stood at the foot of the gangway, hands on hips, chin held high, in an oversized, military-style hat and a camel hair greatcoat draped over his shoulders like a movie star. “Kruger, you can’t get away from me that easily,” he said as he tapped his nose. “I am a bloodhound!” He took in the U-boat from one end to the other, and then raised his eyes to the bridge. “And you are the brave Kapitan Bruckner. Excellent, excellent. I am Koch!” he announced proudly, drawing it out like the flushing of a toilet.

Bruckner immediately recognized the name. He was the Gauleiter or Party boss here in Königsberg and the former Military Governor of the Ukraine. If the stories were even half-true, Koch was a brutal political hack who was capable of anything.

“Congratulations, Kruger. I see my dear *friend* Martin has purloined another of Donitz’s U-boats, eh?” Koch grinned. “A rare find, indeed, and I know he wouldn’t waste it on anything trivial, now would he?” Bruckner’s heart sank. Kruger, Koch, and now Martin Bormann. What had they dragged him into?

Koch turned his attention to the ring of SS troops surrounding him and his men. “Such a waste of fine infantry,” his shrill voice rang out. “There’s a war going on, you know; I’d have thought these men would have better things to do with their time.”

“The Reichsleiter is a very careful man,” Kruger smiled.

“And for good reason, Kruger!” Koch sputtered. “It seems some thieves broke into one of my warehouses last night, right here in Königsberg, and walked off with some very valuable personal property of mine—trinkets, keepsakes, and a few souvenirs I brought with me from the East,” he glared menacingly up at the bridge. “Naturally, I’ve ordered a search of the city and the harbor—every ship and every boat—and to avoid the slightest hint of favoritism, I’m sure you’ll agree that the proper thing is to begin right here,” Koch said as he put his foot on the gangway.”

“No!” Bruckner screamed. “There’s a thousand gallons of fuel oil on the aft deck. One stray bullet could set it all off, so you two take your argument outside.”

Koch looked up at the bridge and smiled, believing he had finally outmaneuvered the young SS Major.

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that, Kapitan,” Kruger said as he drew his Luger, extended his arm, and took dead aim on the fat Gauleiter’s nose. “If you know my reputation with a handgun, you know there won’t be any stray shots. This boat is leaving, Herr Koch. If you or your men try to interfere, I’ll drop you where you stand.”

Koch glared up at him, but he finally removed his foot from the gangway.

“The tide is running, Herr Koch, and you can’t stop it,” Kruger continued. “Take it up with Bormann or take it up with the Führer for all I care, but this U-boat is leaving.”

“The Führer? Don’t insult my intelligence, boy. The Führer hasn’t the slightest idea what you or his Party Secretary are up to, does he?”

“Why don’t you ask him, Herr Koch. I’m sure he would love to hear about the fine job you are doing defending Königsberg and about all those ‘personal possessions, keepsakes, and souvenirs’ you stockpiled in your warehouse.”

Koch sneered, but everyone knew he had lost. He took another step back and made a grand, operatic bow to the bridge. “You have the advantage today, Kruger. So *auf Wiedersehen*, until the next time we meet. And there *will* be a next time, for you, for my dear friend Bormann, and for the Kapitan too; because the fellow doesn’t look all that stupid to me. Are you, Bruckner? Are you that stupid?” Bruckner looked at Koch and at Kruger, but he said nothing. “No, the Kapitan knows exactly what this little cat fight is about; and he knows he’ll pay a very heavy price if he gets lost or has a little ‘accident’ with MY possessions on his long journey.”

With a theatrical sweep, Koch spun on his heels and headed for his waiting limousine. Halfway there, one of the Russian prisoners had the misfortune to cross his path as he scurried back to the truck. “Russians? Russians!” Koch screamed as he turned to face Kruger again. “Whose idea was it to bring them in here? They have seen... everything!”

“My mistake, Herr Koch,” Kruger seemed amused. “We should have asked your Brown Shirts to unload the trucks. They look like they could use the exercise.”

Koch’s expression turned sinister. “Russians! They’re animals and should never have been permitted to foul our sacred German soil. If I only had more time, to finish the job in the Ukraine...” His hand trembled as he pointed an accusing finger at Kruger. “If they talk, it’s on your head.” In three short strides, Koch reached the rear door of the Mercedes and disappeared inside. His bodyguards quickly joined him, only too eager to get out from under the guns of the SS. The car doors slammed shut, but the big car didn’t move. It continued to sit on the pier like a hungry predator, watching and waiting.

Kruger spotted Stolz standing near his truck and shouted at him. “You! Get that rabble of yours out of here. Now!” he ordered, anxious to put an end to this deadly sideshow before the angry Gauleiter tried his luck a second time.

Stolz grabbed the stragglers and pushed them toward the truck. They climbed inside; he slammed the tailgate and ran around to the cab. The old diesel engine cranked and filled the concrete cavern with a blue cloud of exhaust. Stolz looked up at the bridge. “Maybe next time, Herr Kapitan,” he waved and dropped the truck into gear, but they both knew there would be no next time. As the truck

backed out the door, Koch's staff car sprang to life and followed Stolz out and into the dark shipyard beyond.

Only then did Kruger seem to relax. He turned toward the Kapitan and said, "You have your orders, Bruckner. Now, get the hell out of here before that maniac comes back. There is no telling what he might try next time."

"We shall be underway in ten minutes," Bruckner replied, anxious to rid himself of Koch, Kruger, and all the rest of this nightmare.

"Excellent. With luck, you and I shall be seeing each other at your destination."

"I can hardly wait," Bruckner answered.

"I'm sure you can't," Kruger laughed at the man's nerve. "So bon voyage, eh?"

Bon voyage! Bruckner bit his tongue as the young SS Major climbed down the ladder and crossed the deck to the gangway. Bon voyage? The world had gone completely mad.

The deck hands switched off the overhead lights inside the submarine pen, and the concrete cavern went dark. The steel outer door was ratcheted up and a blast of arctic air blew inside, reminding the crew of the brutal world they were about to re-enter. "Lookouts to the bridge. Single-up the lines," the Kapitan ordered as he looked down from the bridge. The diesel engines kicked over with a basso Thrumpf, sending a blue-gray cloud rolling along the ceiling.

"Cast off. Reverse engines one-third," he ordered, determined not to waste a single minute putting Königsberg behind him. The U-boat crept backwards, gaining speed as it arced backward into the dark harbor. As the conning tower passed through the open door, Bruckner exulted knowing he was back in command, of his boat and his life, doing the one thing in the world he could do best. He was an officer in the Kriegsmarine; and by God, he would act like one.

"Kapitan!" an anxious lookout called down to him, pointing back into the darkened submarine pen. "Look!"

Bruckner turned and saw the dim figure of a man running toward them down the long pier. He wore a long overcoat that flapped behind him as he waved his arms at them. Bruckner squinted. The shape? That ragged overcoat? It was Stolz! Bruckner slammed his fist on the cold, wet steel of the conning tower. Damn the man! In the Navy, a ship captain's order was law. He told Stolz there was no room on board. If the slovenly truck driver thought he could steal a ride, he was sadly mistaken. But even in the dark U-boat pen, Bruckner saw something was wrong, something was very wrong. Stolz was sprinting, faster than the Kapitan ever thought possible, looking back over his shoulder as if the hounds of hell were snapping at his heels. Maybe they were. Stolz tore off the overcoat and tossed it aside, his feet pounding even faster on the bare concrete, not that it mattered. The U-boat was picking up speed and Stolz was running out of pier. Soon, the bow of the U-boat would be out of his reach.

"Run, man! Faster!" one of the lookouts shouted.

"Mind your watch!" Bruckner snapped. As much as he hated to admit it, he found himself cheering for the damned fool too; but there was no chance. If Stolz had any sense, he'd pull up before he ended up in the icy black water; but the fool refused to stop. He flew across those last few yards of concrete and leaped off the end of the pier, his arms and legs flailing as he reached for the U-boat's bow plate.

What a desperate gamble! If he came up short or lost his grip on the wet steel, he'd be gone in seconds, but he didn't. He landed hard on the round edge of the bow plate. He bounced and began to slip backward, but his right arm found a mooring cleat. He wrapped both arms around it and hung on for dear life, the toes of his old Polish cavalry boots raking the U-boat's pitted steel hull. He searched in vain for a toehold; but there was none. Exhausted, he finally stopped his desperate struggling and turned his plaintive eyes up toward the bridge.

Bruckner glared down at him. Stolz had willfully disobeyed his order. If this were any time other than the dead of winter, he would let him hang there until he got a good dunking in the harbor, but in this weather that would be a death sentence. "Ah, pull the damned fool in!" Bruckner growled, knowing he was trapped. There was no time to return to the pen and toss Stolz back on the pier. Well, if Bruckner was stuck with Stolz; then, by God, the man would rue the day he stole a free ride on this U-boat.

"Reverse engines, full speed ahead," Bruckner roared, as the twin screws bit the water and kicked up a frothy wake. The U-582's stern dug in and propelled the boat forward, arcing toward the harbor entrance. Two seamen pulled the badly shaken truck driver off the bow cleat and rolled him up on deck. They gave him a moment to catch his breath, before they picked him up and dragged him limp-legged to the bridge.

"Damn it, Stolz! I should chuck you overboard," Bruckner roared.

"Kapitan," the truck driver gasped, pale and shaken. "You don't understand. They'd have killed me if I didn't..."

"Killed you? Who'd have killed you?"

"Koch... Gauleiter Koch and his men. My God, it was a blood bath," he sobbed. "They pushed those poor Russians up against the wall and shot them down like dogs."

"Shot them down? Koch?" Bruckner lost his temper. "How dare you accuse..."

"I swear it!" Stolz dropped to his knees. "They forced my truck off the road just outside the gate and those Brown Shirts of his herded all of them inside an old warehouse. It was horrible — dark and cold with nothing but the headlights and spotlights of that damned Mercedes of his to light the place up. Koch began to beat them and kick them, screaming and hitting them with that riding crop of his. But it wasn't until that SS Major and some of his men showed up that the shooting started."

"That SS Major?" Bruckner stammered, shocked by what he was hearing. "You mean Sturmbannführer Kruger? He was there, too? And he didn't try to stop them?"

"Stop them? He was the one who started the shooting!" Bruckner heard the words, but he still didn't believe them. "I swear it, Kapitan! That look in his eyes — all cold and lifeless. He grabbed a submachine gun from one of his SS troopers and began firing, and he didn't stop until he ran out of bullets."

Bruckner reached back and slapped Stolz across the face with a powerful backhand, knocking him flat on the deck. Kruger might be a hard case, but he was an officer and Bruckner refused to listen to wild accusations like these from a filthy truck driver.

“It’s God’s truth, Kapitan,” Stolz rose to his knees and begged. “I couldn’t believe it either, not until I saw the bodies falling, then I believed. I believed, and I ran outside into the night as fast as these old legs would carry me. You were the only chance I had.”

“The only chance? What are you saying, man?”

“Kruger would have killed me, if I’d stayed there. I’d have been next. I could see it in his eyes. It’s all about those crates, the ones we stowed below deck. That’s why he killed those Russians. He killed them to shut them up, so no one would know what’s inside this U-boat. It’s their secret—their big, bloody secret—and they’ll do anything to keep it quiet.”

Bruckner raised his arm to strike Stolz again, but the truck driver screamed, “There!” and pointed back inside the dark submarine pen. “See? See what I told you? They’re looking for me; they aren’t finished killing yet.”

Bruckner’s eyes followed Stolz’s arm back into the submarine pen and froze in mid-swing. He saw a set of high-beam headlights and the dim outline of an automobile, a large one, coming slowly down the pier toward them. Above the headlights, a pair of spotlights swung back and forth probing the dark corners of the submarine pen. They sent an icy chill down the Kapitan’s spine. There was only one car like that in all of Königsberg, maybe all of Germany, and it belonged to Gauleiter Eric Koch. It continued rolling slowly forward until it reached the end of the pier and stopped. The headlights and spotlights were switched off and the car sat there looking like a big cat whose dinner had just slipped away.

The Kapitan’s arm fell limp to his side. His mind told him the truck driver’s story was utterly absurd, but in the pit of his stomach he knew every word was true. That left him deeply ashamed for himself and for Germany.

## Chapter 7

Hours later, with Königsberg far below the horizon, Bruckner finally left the bridge and went below. He was frozen to the bone, but his anger continued to burn white-hot. Grabbing the side rails of the ladder, he dropped down to the conning tower, then to the control room below, ignoring everything and everyone. He tossed his white hat on the chart table, slid wearily onto the stool, and picked up the thick packet of orders Kruger had left for him. Those damned orders, he thought. That was when he saw Kruger’s silver cigarette case. Bruckner remembered Kruger took it out and laid it on the table just before Koch showed up and Kruger made his mad rush to the bridge. Bruckner picked it up and ran his fingers across the engraved surface. Nice workmanship, he thought as he opened the clasp and saw the ornate swastika and the engraved inscription inside. “My strong right arm?” “From a grateful Martin Bormann?” Oh, for God’s sake! Bruckner swore as he flung it against the bulkhead only to watch it bounce off the painted steel and fall back onto the table exactly where it began, taunting him even more. You really stepped in it this time, didn’t you, Eric. Now how the hell are you going to get yourself out of it?

Finally, he picked up the envelope and ripped it open. Like it or not, it held his destiny, so he spread the neatly typed pages out and read them one at a time.

Argentina!

It was all so painfully clear, he realized as the last sheet dropped from his fingers. This is no combat patrol. There were no “wonder weapons” in the forward torpedo room and he would deliver no crippling blow against London or New York. He was an errand boy delivering Bormann’s war booty to some backwater jungle coast in Argentina. What did Kruger call it? A “milk run,” that would “save the lives of you and your crew.” But at what price, Bruckner wondered, cursing these new orders and the devious hands that wrote them. Yes, they had painted him into a tight little corner, cutting off all his options one by one until he had no choice but to do their bloody bidding. Clever, but this time they picked the wrong man. Eric Bruckner was no shop clerk, no delivery boy. By God, as Admiral Schwanger said, he was a naval officer, first and foremost.

“Karl!” he shouted into the intercom. “Meet me in the control room and bring that fool Stolz and a couple of crowbars with you.”

We’ll see who has painted whom into a corner.

The three men stood at the round, watertight door of the bow torpedo room as Bruckner grabbed the locking wheel and gave it a turn, then another, until it spun free. He pressed his shoulder against the thick steel door, pushed it open on its well-oiled hinges, and stepped inside. After the other two men joined him, he closed it behind them. There were too many curious eyes on a small boat, and not nearly enough secrets to go around.

They found themselves in a narrow aisle that ran between dozens of wooden crates of every conceivable size and shape that were braced and lashed to the bulkheads. Some of the wood still had a raw, green hue and the boxes looked crudely made, showing hurried saw marks and hammer blows. The taller ones were lashed and braced against the bulkhead near the bow and the longer ones along the side. By far the most numerous were dozens of small ones, perhaps one foot square and six inches deep, lying in two parallel rows down the center aisle. Bruckner remembered how the Russian prisoners struggled with them, usually two men to each box, as they carried them up the gangplank, set them on deck, and lowered them down through the hatch. Even up close, the only visible marking on them was a black Nazi Party eagle and swastika stenciled on the top, but there was nothing else to indicate where they came from or what was inside.

“Start with that one, Stolz,” he said, pointing at one of the smaller crates. “Use the crowbar and pop off the top. Let’s see what got those men killed.” Stolz jammed the tip of the bar into a narrow crack beneath the lid. As he pressed down with more and more weight, the long carpenter nails squealed in protest as they came out of the green wood. With a final grunt, Stolz dropped all his weight on the bar and the board popped off.

They say you can always tell the real thing, and they were right, Bruckner realized. The box contained two layers of freshly minted gold bars, gleaming like liquid sunshine. “*Gott im Himmel!*” Stolz exclaimed as he picked one up and cradled it in his arms like a newborn child. “It is gold, Herr Kapitan, pure gold,”



Stolz said as he raised the bar to his nose and sniffed at it, almost giddy. "It even smells rich!"

Bruckner knelt and examined the box more carefully. There were three bars in the top row and three more lying beneath them. Looking at the parallel rows of boxes that ran the length of the compartment, there must be at least a hundred more just like this one and probably as many in the aft torpedo room. Doing the quick math in his head, he realized there were perhaps twelve hundred gold bars between the two compartments. No wonder the U-boat was wallowing like an overloaded barge. Those idiots.

He took the gold bar from Stolz's reluctant hands and turned it over. "Look at the surfaces, Karl. There's no mint mark, no weight stamp, and no bank symbol. The edges are rough, almost homemade, as if someone was in a big hurry to pour it and pop it out of the mold." Someone? He could guess who.

"Thieves used to do that," Stolz offered. "Gold, jewelry, things they don't want identified later; they would melt it all down."

Bruckner nodded. "Well, we know what's in the small ones. Let's see what's in the rest of them." Bruckner picked up a crowbar and turned his anger on one of the tall crates near the bow. He jammed the steel tip under its top edge, and with a quick twist and a pull, the board broke and popped off in pieces.

"Well, we'll never get that one back together," Karl laughed.

Bruckner smiled too, as he dug his hand inside. Beneath a thick layer of excelsior, he found bound rolls of canvas. They were oil paintings, a thick roll, and there were dozens more like it. Under the rolls of paintings, he saw a tangle of jewelry—gold crucifixes and icons, mixed with necklaces, tiaras, bracelets, and strings of pearls. Karl popped open another crate and pulled out jeweled menorahs, antique vases, and several large tapestries. They were old, with that musty smell of museums, wealthy homes and royal palaces, and every piece looked like a collector's item. Many of them still had small tags attached, hand lettered in what looked to be Russian or Polish. Whatever the language, it sure as hell wasn't German.

"Kapitan," Karl said as he looked inside the crate. "This is unbelievable. You could outfit half the fleet with this jewelry."

The gold bars? A fortune in art? And all this jewelry? It was a king's ransom. No, it was enough to buy a dozen kings. Better still, it was enough to buy a dozen countries where Martin Bormann, Heinz Kruger, and their ilk could be kings. Bruckner felt ill just looking at it. He had always been proud to be a German and a German officer, but it would be a permanent stain on his nation's soul. Admiral Schwanger was right; these people were the traitors, not Stauffenberg.

On the far sides of the compartment lay stacks of long, thin crates, which Bruckner remembered the Russians having a particularly difficult time fitting through the hatch. He pointed to the top one and said, "That one, Karl. Open it." The young officer wedged his bar under the board and began working it around the edge. With the nails finally loose, it took all three of them to pry the top up. Underneath, he saw gray, army issue blankets. Pushing them aside, the three men were stunned to see an iridescent, honey-colored panel, inlaid with gemstones. Brown and gold, they looked like molten honey, highlighted by carved red, green, and blue stones. Bruckner ran his fingers across the surface. The pieces of amber

had been carved and glued together to form a flat, wall panel. In this crate lay two more panels, and there were twenty more crates like it.

“What is it, Kapitan? I’ve never seen anything like it,” Karl asked.

“I remember this, from school,” he said. “They’re Russian, from a room in one of the Czar’s palaces outside St. Petersburg. They’re old, from the early eighteenth century, a gift from the Prussians to the Czar, I think, and they’re priceless.”

“From Russia? Koch probably grabbed it as he was leaving,” Stolz said.

Bruckner nodded as he stared down at the panel. “I suspect the gold, the art and jewelry, and these amber panels are what he and Kruger were arguing about this afternoon. What did he call it? The trinkets and souvenirs he brought with him?”

“More like thieves falling out,” Karl added.

It all made perfect sense now, a sick and very perverted sense, Bruckner thought. They knew Königsberg would soon fall, so they diverted an operational fleet submarine from the North Atlantic and their black-garbed palace guard from Berlin to make sure their loot got safely away ahead of the Russians. No wonder they were willing to kill anyone and anything that got in their way to keep it secret.

Karl pointed to a row of sealed metal boxes lying along the side bulkhead. “What do you make of those, Kapitan?” he asked. They were about one foot wide by three feet long and one foot deep, with metal handles.

“Looks like an ammunition box,” Stolz said.

“No, I don’t think so.” Bruckner knelt next to one and pulled up on the handles. The top popped off. Inside lay file folders and official documents, most with a Nazi Party emblem at the top. He pulled the top off another and found stacks of five by eight index cards. “These are party records from Berlin—personnel cards and financial records. It is ammunition, all right, ammunition for those maniacs to start the next Reich.”

Kruger! The oil drums on the aft deck. The gold, jewels, and party records. And Argentina! That cold-eyed blond bastard knew exactly what he was doing. The U-582 faced at least eight weeks of hell skulking across the North Atlantic in the dead of winter, where they would no doubt be greeted by more of Bormann’s henchmen. Then what? Eight more weeks fighting their way back home? By that time, all the north German ports would be overrun and there will be no more U-boat bases. Besides, there would be no return trip; that was never part of the plan. They had enough fuel oil to make the long voyage to South America, but a return trip would be impossible without an equally large cache at the other end, and it wouldn’t be there. Kruger never intended for the U-582 to return to Germany, now or ever. This time, it wouldn’t be the SS. Some pleasant diplomat with a gray homburg hat and a cold banker’s smile would pull him aside and give him the bad news. “Terribly sorry, my boy, but petrol is rationed here. We’ve been working day and night, but there is simply no hope of getting any now, none at all.” After the cargo was unloaded, he’d be told that the only choice was to scuttle the U-boat. “You and your men will be well taken care of here. You have our word.” Taken care of? Their word? No need for the rear wall of a storage shed like the Russians got back in Königsberg. With no money and no papers, he and his men would be stranded there under Bormann’s thumb until long after it no longer mattered. Dead men tell no tales, but neither do hostages.

Bruckner's thoughts suddenly returned to the forward torpedo room as he swore he heard a faint scraping sound up near the bow between the last crates and the bulkhead. Stolz heard it, too, because the burly truck driver raised his finger to his lips and crept slowly forward. With a final rush, he reached into the shadows, hands out and fingers spread. To Bruckner's astonishment, Stolz came back out dragging a tall, ragged man with a full head of shaggy hair and a filthy beard, wearing a filthy gray overcoat. It was one of his prisoners.

"You sneaky bastard!" the truck driver screamed as he slammed the poor wretch up against the bulkhead. Stolz raised an angry fist to hit him, but the prisoner's arm was faster and as strong as spring steel. He caught Stolz's fist in mid-swing and hit him flush on the chin with a straight right. Stolz's knees buckled and he sat down hard on the deck. The prisoner stood over Stolz, daring him to get back up, as Karl stepped forward with a steel prying bar in his hand.

"That is enough!" Bruckner snapped. The prisoner turned and glared at Bruckner, but the Kapitan didn't flinch as he realized these were the eyes that looked at him through the rear window of Stolz's truck that morning. The truck driver got back up, his face flush. "Randall, you bastard, you hid out down here when the rest of them went back to the truck, didn't you, you weasel?" Stolz went for the man's throat again, but with a desperate, animal-like growl, the prisoner grabbed Stolz's shirt, lifted him off the deck, and bounced him off the bulkhead.

"I said that is enough!" Bruckner interceded.

"But, Kapitan, he has been hiding back there, spying on us the whole time. He saw everything; and he isn't one of those ignorant Russians... he's an American."

"An American?" Bruckner asked as he eyed the man with new interest. "Is that true?" The man said nothing, but he didn't need to. It was obvious from Stolz's reaction that there was more going on between them than the truck driver had let on.

"He is a spy, I tell you. An American spy!" Stolz argued.

"A spy?" Bruckner laughed as he looked at the threadbare overcoat and filthy hair. "Well, if he is, they don't pay very well. Besides, if he hadn't hidden out here, he would be lying on the floor of that storage shed back in Königsberg with the rest of them." The prisoner's eyes flashed when he heard the words. "Ah, you understand some German, my friend," the Kapitan said.

"Some," the man answered as he pushed his shoulders back, shedding the rest of his half-wit prisoner pose.

"He understands more than that!" Stolz threatened.

"Enough!" Bruckner cut Stolz off. "Now what's your name?" Bruckner asked. He saw the deep lines around the man's mouth and eyes, but the fellow wasn't nearly as old as he looked. He couldn't be much more than in his early twenties.

"Randall," the man finally answered. "Sergeant Michael Randall, US Army Air Corps."

"See! A spy, like I told you," Stolz shouted.

"Go to hell, Stolz," the prisoner shot back.

"Why else would he be in Königsberg?" Stolz argued.

"Trying to stay alive... and away from bastards like you."

"Don't make me laugh, Randall," Stolz shot back. "You're an American spy. I knew it all along."

"I was a waist gunner on a B-17 bomber." Randall turned and looked at Bruckner again. "We got shot up over Berlin and came down somewhere north and east of there."

"If you were caught, why didn't they put you in a Luftstalag, a proper POW camp?"

"I guess you'll have to ask the SS. The next thing Eddie and I knew, we were in a penal battalion here in Königsberg digging tank traps."

"Who is Eddie?" Bruckner asked.

Randall's eyes turned on Stolz again. "My friend. He's dead now."

Bruckner looked at Stolz. "And you knew about all of this?"

"They had no papers, no identification." Stolz turned his eyes away. "And the SS didn't ask what I thought, Herr Kapitan."

Bruckner scratched his head. "Well, like it or not, the man's here now, isn't he, Stolz?" He took another long, hard look at the American, at the ragged clothing he was wearing, at that weathered face, and Bruckner began to understand. He could understand the pain, the anguish, and the sheer hell the poor fellow had been through.

"Well, Sergeant Randall, I can think of better places for a man to stow away than inside my U-boat," Bruckner mused. "Surely you knew you would be caught?"

Randall's eyes looked around the torpedo room. "Oh, I've stayed in worse," he answered with a tired, indifferent shrug. "And I didn't have many other choices."

Bruckner couldn't deny the logic in it. Crush a man's spirit day after brutal day, deny him any hope, and the poor bastard might take a flying leap into the unknown. But it must have been hell for the fellow, locked inside this black hole these last half-dozen hours, cold, hungry, and lonely, with nothing but the terrifying creaks and groans of a submarine to keep him company.

"All right, Sergeant," Bruckner offered a thin smile. "I'm not quite sure what to do with you, but there's been enough bloodshed today, and I won't have yours on my conscience. You'll just have to believe me on that. You may stay here in the torpedo room. I'll have some food and blankets sent in. If you behave yourself and do what you're told, I'll see that you are not harmed; however, if you cause me or my men any trouble, I will have you shot without a second's hesitation. Is that absolutely clear?"

Randall looked deep into the U-boat Kapitan's eyes, wanting desperately to believe the man. "Yes, I understand," he finally answered.

"Very good." Bruckner looked him straight in the eyes and gave a curt nod sealing the deal before he turned away to head aft. What a mess, he thought. There had to be a way out of Bormann's carefully constructed trap, Bruckner swore, there must be. Then, from the murky depths of his depression, the hazy outline of a plan crept into his mind. Slowly, it slipped out of the shadows, spread its wings wide, and he could see it in all its wondrous glory. Bruckner tipped his head back and began to laugh. The others watched him, probably thinking the Kapitan had gone mad; yet it was all too obvious, he thought, all too deliciously obvious and perfect. He turned toward his young ensign and said, "Karl, plot a course for the Kattegat Strait. I'll be in my cabin; I have some thinking to do."

## Chapter 8

The Kattegat Strait runs between the coasts of Denmark and Sweden. Approximately two hundred miles long, it connects the Baltic to the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean beyond. There may not be a lovelier spot in the world under a warm summer sun, but when the gales of winter blow, the fast currents and sharp rocks turn the narrow channels into meat grinders with sharp granite teeth. Any sensible U-boat commander would run the Strait at night on the surface, making it a favorite haunt of RAF hunter-killer bombers. Bruckner knew they'd be up there circling like vultures, waiting to pounce on any German ship foolish enough to try to slip through into the Atlantic. So he put the U-582 on the bottom in a hundred and fifty feet of water near the south coast of Sweden and waited for dark.

The quickest way through was a straightforward run up the main channel near Copenhagen. The winter night was long. With luck, they'd reach the North Sea by dawn. The other choice was to swing south and run up one of the many smaller channels closer to the German coast, but that would take two nights to make it through, hiding on the bottom during the day, and burn a lot of his precious diesel fuel. A year ago or even six months ago, they could depend on air cover from the Luftwaffe to chase the Brits away. Not now. The few remaining German patrol planes had been pulled away to more critical sectors, and none of the passages were safe.

Left or right, those were the choices. But after hours of thought and debate, Bruckner conceived a far more simple and daring plan. He was captain and had absolute authority over both men and boat, but for this to work he had to have his First Officer with him. Karl was too smart and Bruckner could never proceed without him. He also needed Stolz. The slovenly truck driver knew the boat's mechanics every bit as well as his Chief Engineer did but the Chief was a loyal Party man from Bavaria and he'd never go along with treason. Stolz, on the other hand, had appeared to have no such qualms. He had no friends on board and he owed the Kapitan his life. That would be crucial. It was the reason he asked the other two men to join him in the relative privacy of the conning tower, where they could close the hatch and be alone.

"A ship's captain doesn't usually take votes, at least not in the German Navy, but I have a proposal I need to put to you two."

"Kapitan," Karl protested, "you know we'll do whatever you wish."

"No, not like that, there's too much at stake for all of us now. You know what's in those crates. It's loot, plain and simple, stolen from a dozen countries across Eastern Europe." He held up his sheaf of orders. "These people are no better than a street gang that smashes the window of a jewelry store on Friedrichstrasse, grabs some necklaces, and runs off down the street. They are criminals, and now they've dragged us into their little conspiracy. You know that, but what you don't know is that our destination is Argentina. And I suspect it's going to be a one-way trip."

"Argentina? God help us," Karl groaned.

"Well, I can't say much for the company, but at least we will be alive." Stolz forced a laugh. "Even the back side of hell would be an improvement over Königsberg."

"If we get there. And if we do, they'll never let us leave," Bruckner said as he leaned back against the periscope housing. "But this is immoral. It's evil, and it's not worth risking the lives of forty-two good men."

"More of that Sturmbannführer Kruger's handiwork?" Stolz asked.

"Him, Koch, Martin Bormann, and the rest of them—they think they have us in a tight corner and we can't get out. Well, I have a plan too, and in order for it to work, you two must do some things that some might call treason if word ever got out. I suppose we could take the boat back to Kiel, but they'd call us cowards and have us shot for disobeying orders, and they'd be right. But I have another idea. We're lying on the bottom in Swedish waters. Sweden is neutral, isn't it, Karl? So if the boat were to develop a serious mechanical problem that would prevent us from going on through the Strait or turning around and going back to port, we'd have to scuttle the boat, right?"

"Maybe something with one of those new parts they put in back in the shipyard," Stolz suggested. "Something we couldn't possibly fix out here?"

"The General Orders are quite clear on that point." The young ensign frowned. "We cannot allow her to be captured."

"Precisely. We'd have no choice but to put the crew ashore, open the valves, and put her on the bottom."

"You mean here? Off Sweden?" Karl asked.

Stolz grunted. "Well, the Swedes are a proper-enough lot, much more civilized than them greaser tango dancers down in South America, and we'll be a whole lot closer to home."

"We'd be interned until the war is over, but that won't be long now," Bruckner said. "Then the men can return to their families in Germany, where they will be sorely needed."

"You always told them you would bring them home," Karl said.

"Yes, but this isn't exactly what I had in mind."

"After things quiet down, I'll tell the Swedes what's really inside this old tub," Bruckner said. "They can salvage her and send all that loot back where it belongs. The war will be over, there will be a new government in Germany, and no one will ever be the wiser."

"Except us," Karl added glumly.

"And that bastard Kruger." Stolz shivered.

"Let me worry about Kruger," Bruckner answered. "He has a lot to answer for and I intend to see that he does, legally, in an open court."

"Still, we would be scuttling a fleet boat in time of war." Karl shook his head sadly.

"It's the only choice they left us, the only moral one, so which law do you want to break? Which order do you chose to disobey?" The Kapitan watched as the other two men nodded in agreement. "Good. And whatever we do, it must be tonight."

Bruckner turned toward Stolz and said, "I will be blunt with you, Stolz. I don't know you very well, but I invited you to our little party because the Chief Engineer

will never go along and I need a good mechanic to pull it off. You are handy with a wrench. Make it a good one.”

“Jawohl, Herr Kapitan.” Stolz nodded. “But you’re forgetting something. The three of us know what is in those crates, and so does the American.” Bruckner looked down at the deck, thinking. “You can’t expect him to keep his mouth shut about all that gold, can you?”

The question had sinister overtones, and they all knew it. “Never mind the American,” Bruckner finally answered. “You figure out what to do with the boat; I’ll figure out what to do with him.”

The other two men exchanged wary glances, but they didn’t dare ask.

Except for bringing him some blankets and food every six hours, the Germans did exactly what the captain said they would; they left Michael alone. For the first time in months, no one was beating on him, starving him, or trying to kill him. So he ate, he slept, and he used the long hours to explore the compartment. As the captain and the other two Germans had done, he peeked inside most of the wooden crates and boxes. From their reactions, it was clear they hadn’t known what was inside them until they popped the tops off. Not that it made any difference to him. He was trapped inside the cold, sweating hull of a German U-boat heading God only knew where, and all the gold and jewels in the world weren’t going to buy him out of this one.

Who could figure these damned Germans anyway, he wondered. Take that U-boat Kapitan; he might be the only Kraut in the whole damned war with a conscience, but one good apple doesn’t make a rotten barrel any better. Besides, how many Allied sailors had he sent to the bottom without a twinge of conscience? Men drowning by the hundreds, the thousands? One day, he is blowing unarmed merchant ships out of the water; the next day he gets religion and decides to save a lone American? Did he think that evened the scales? Then there was that bastard Stolz. Michael still owed him for Eddie and that bitter memory wasn’t going to fade for a long, long time. Stolz may not have Eddie’s blood on his own hands, but he didn’t do anything to help him or lessen his suffering either.

Michael had curled up on a crate, wrapped himself in the blanket, and slept as if he were dead. How long had it been since he’d slept like this, not some fitful nap filled with bad dreams but a real night’s sleep? It had to have been before the B-17 began its runs into Germany, long before that final run to Berlin. He couldn’t remember. Everything since then had been one sick, perverted nightmare. Well, Hodge had part of it right. They really had landed on the Planet Mongo.

Mike Randall had fallen into another deep, bottomless sleep when he heard the hatch open and two very anxious German sailors stick their heads inside. “*Kommen sie, bitte.*” One of them motioned awkwardly for Michael to follow. “*Ja, kommen sie.*” They seemed polite, almost afraid of him, as they led him aft, one in front and one behind, stooping and bending through a series of round hatches and cramped compartments. But he had seen that trick before. The SS could be polite too. They’d let some poor schlub think the worst was over to keep him quiet until one of them pressed the barrel of a gun to the back of his neck and pulled the trigger. Well, Randall wasn’t nearly that gullible. When his time came, he’d take a

few of these shits with him, and maybe the whole boat if they gave him half a chance.

They reached what must be the control room, he realized, and deposited him in a corner behind the chart table. "*Warten sie hier. Hier,*" the sailor said, pointing to a spot on the floor, as if Randall was supposed to stay put like a well-trained spaniel. Then they walked away and went about their work, seemingly forgetting all about him. He looked around. As impossible as it was to believe at the time, there he was, his back pressed against the cold bulkhead of the control room inside a German submarine, scared silly and hardly daring to move or breathe.

His anxious eyes swept back and forth across the small compartment as he tried to figure out their game. He needed something, an edge. Frantic, his eyes dropped to the chart table. It was littered with maps and papers. As casually as he could, he let his fingers pass over them, then through the sheets, desperate to find something, anything he could use for a weapon. Then he saw it, the glint of steel lying between the layers of paper. It was a drafting compass. He squeezed its pointed legs together and tucked it up his sleeve. Not that a compass was much, but it was sharp and that was a start. Under another stack, he spied a wooden pencil and slipped that up his other sleeve, beginning to feel positively dangerous. A compass or pencil might not be a 50-caliber door gun in a B-17, but in close quarters like this, he could defend himself and that made him feel like a whole man for the first time in months. He had hope now, and a shred of dignity.

Then, at the far corner of the chart table up against the bulkhead, he saw another glint of silver. It was a cigarette case, half-covered by the charts. Silver! Say no more. He palmed it and dropped it into his pocket. A man could eat for a week on what it would have been worth back in Königsberg. Too bad he hadn't thought to pocket some of those jewels in the torpedo room. When they took him back, he'd pick out a few gemstones and stick them in the lining of his coat or swallow a few, just in case.

As he glanced around the compartment, he realized something was happening. The German sailors were very busy now, preoccupied with all the myriad of valves and switches on their control panels. Pale and drawn, they had fear written all over their faces. Randall knew the look. His aircrew had it every time their B-17 crossed into enemy air space. Soon, a half-dozen other sailors dressed in heavy coats and hooded oil slickers converged on the control room from the fore and aft compartments. One by one, they climbed the narrow ladder to the conning tower above.

Randall knew absolutely nothing about how a submarine worked or what all the machinery in the control room did, but he knew what men were like under pressure. A staccato of orders were shouted down from the conning tower. Suddenly, the bright overhead lights in the boat were switched off, replaced by a hellish red. There was a terrifying series of clangs and whooshes and the deck tilted up. He pressed his palms against the steel bulkhead behind him, steadying himself and praying that his frayed nerves would find something half as solid to hang onto. Then, as suddenly as the deck had tilted upward, it leveled off. He heard feet moving about in the compartment above, more orders and clanging, then a torrent of water came splashing down through the open hatch into the control room. My God! Had the boat split open? Was it sinking? he wondered. But



the crew looked unconcerned as the small compartment filled with the unmistakably pungent salty smell of the open sea.

Someone shouted something through the open hatch and a different sailor stepped over and grabbed his arm. He pulled, but Randall pulled back—afraid. The sharp steel points of the compass were right there in the palm of his hand and he was ready to go for the man's eyes, but the sailor shoved a heavy oilskin rain slicker into his chest. "*Bitte, gehen sie hinauf...* You go up, *bitte*," the man said, pointing at the ladder.

Michael was still not sure whether to start climbing or fight but the other sailors were going about their duties as if nothing was amiss. He pulled the stiff oilskin on over his tattered coat and did what the man told him to do. He climbed the wet, slippery rungs to the tiny conning tower, only to be pushed up yet another ladder to the open bridge.

When he stepped out on deck after being locked away in that dank torpedo room, the sharp, bitterly cold tang of the open sea was overwhelming. He grabbed the periscope housing and hung on, trying to take it all in. He looked up and saw a dim quarter moon and the shimmering veil of the aurora borealis dancing along the horizon, which he figured must be north. To his right, a jagged line of cliffs rose from the sea, and straight ahead, the shoreline flattened out into a wide, sandy beach. They were in a broad bay and the coastline couldn't be more than a mile away. It was land, but whose? Poland? Germany? Denmark? He tried to make sense of it, but he couldn't; it was coming at him too fast, crashing down around him in an avalanche of emotions and questions. Why did they bring him up here, anyway? To put a bullet in his head and toss him overboard like yesterday's garbage? No muss, no fuss, no bloody deck to clean up below? If so, he'd played right into their hands.

"The life raft is in the water, Kapitan," he heard an anxious sailor yell to the bridge from the deck below.

Suddenly that captain was standing next to him in his badly worn white hat, holding out a large canvas sack. "Here, Sergeant Randall," Bruckner said with a friendly smile. "There is some food and dry clothes, for when you get ashore."

Ashore? Michael stared at him, struck dumb.

The Kapitan raised his arm and pointed toward the coastline. "That is Sweden," he said in halting English. "You will be safe there. But please remember, you have no dog tags, no papers, and no passport. And the Swedes won't like that. So go inland, as far away from here as you can and hide there until the war is over. Understand? It shouldn't take much longer now, then you can go to Stockholm, to the American Embassy. Tell them your bomber crashed and you were washed ashore. Say you've been wandering around lost and you can't remember anything. How do you say it? Amnesia? Tell them anything, but don't say you got off a German submarine. If you do, the Swedes will think you are a spy and send you back to Germany or have you shot. Understand?" Michael looked up at him, looking deep into the man's eyes for what seemed an eternity, and then he nodded.

"And don't tell them about the gold bars and all the other things you saw in the forward torpedo room either," the Kapitan went on. "No one would believe you, anyway. Would you? No, they would toss you into a lunatic asylum and throw

away the key. Your own government would do the same. So it must remain our secret, Sergeant Randall, if you ever hope to make it home alive.”

“The sea is running faster, Sir,” his other officer said to him. “We can’t hold the boat here much longer.”

Randall was too numb to speak. He looked down at the black rubber raft bobbing up and down in the rough water next to the submarine, at the dark shoreline, at the canvas bag the Kapitan was holding out to him, and finally at Bruckner’s smiling face. As Michael reached for the bag, the steel map compass fell out of his sleeve and clattered on the deck. He looked down, terrified, but the captain merely smiled. “You appear to be a resourceful fellow, don’t you, Randall? But tonight, I suspect I shall need my map compass more than you will.” He bent down and picked it up, rubbing his finger across the sharp points as he looked at the young American. “Yes, I believe you will make it. I believe you will make it just fine, but the hour is late and you must go now. Please. And so must we.”

As Bruckner turned and motioned toward the ladder, for some reason Randall could never explain, he reached out and touched the Kapitan’s shoulder. He turned and looked back, and Randall found himself staring straight into the German officer’s eyes. He’d been so intent on finding a way to escape, so convinced the Germans were going to kill him, that it never occurred to him he had found a decent and honorable man who would actually set him free. Their eyes were no more than a foot or two apart that cold, windswept night, but it was a face Mike Randall would never forget. “What is your name?” he asked in a hoarse whisper. “At least tell me that much.”

“I am Bruckner, Kapitanleutnant Eric Bruckner.”

“Thank you” was all Randall could think of in return for everything this man was doing for him. “I... I owe you.” More words would not come.

“You owe me nothing, Sergeant. Now, please, go.” The German smiled as he pointed to the raft, obviously embarrassed. “The sea is rough tonight, but the headland will shelter you from the worst of it. We must hurry, please.”

Unseen hands guided Randall down the ladder, across the rolling deck, and into a small, black-rubber raft bobbing alongside the submarine. He sat in the bottom as they pushed it away. In that instant he found himself alone, floating on the cold, dark sea, and free for the first time in six long, pain-filled months. It was too much. He looked up at the bridge, at the man in the white hat, and he felt the long-forgotten sensation of tears running down his cheeks.

“Kapitan, are you really going to let him go like this?” Karl dared ask as he watched the rubber raft floating away.

“What would you have done?”

“Well...”

“No, Karl,” Bruckner answered with a soft smile. “You wouldn’t. If we kill that man to hide our own secrets, we would be no better than Koch or that bastard Kruger.”

“But what if he talks about us, about the boat, about all that gold?”

Bruckner smiled. “It will be a long, hard peace, Karl, and I won’t have that man’s blood on my conscience.”

Reluctantly, the younger officer nodded in agreement.

“Besides, after everything he’s been through—alone, cold, and scared like that—he will do exactly what I told him to do. He’ll run, he’ll hide, and he’ll keep his mouth shut, especially to anyone with a uniform or a badge, because who would ever believe a story like that? Would you?”

As the U-boat continued to turn and pick up speed, making its way back to the open sea, Bruckner looked back over his shoulder and saw the rubber raft disappearing in the dark swells behind them. “Whatever, it is done,” he said. “Now let’s get the hell out of here. Shallow water makes an old submariner like me very nervous.”

## Chapter 9

Mike Randall sat upright in the bottom of the rubber raft. Over the roar of the wind and the waves, he heard the throaty rumble of the submarine’s big diesel engines as it began to arc away from him. There was only a quarter moon, but even in its thin light Michael could clearly see the white numerals “582” painted on the side of the conning tower. Soon waves broke over the U-boat’s bow and it began to submerge. One by one, the deck hands disappeared through the hatch, until the only one left on the bridge was the tall man in the white hat. As the Kapitän turned and looked back at the small rubber raft, Michael swore he saw him raise his arm and wave farewell. He rose to his knees and waved back with both arms, but he couldn’t tell if Bruckner saw him before he too disappeared down the hatch. In seconds, the U-boat’s nose slipped beneath the surface and waves broke against the base of the conning tower. But as it picked up speed, the submarine left a bright, trailing wake behind it, like a gently curving white “V” in the black water. Even in the pale moonlight, it was like a neon arrow pointing directly at the U-boat’s stern.

That was when Michael first heard the sound. It began as a faint whine, much higher in pitch than the bass rumble of the U-boat’s big diesels; but it was there, and it was coming in fast and straight at him. He cocked his head, straining to hear and praying he was wrong; but if Mike Randall knew anything, he knew the sound of an airplane engine. No, he suddenly realized, there were two of them—a pair of turbo-charged Merlins—and when they dive straight at you with their throttles wide-open, they make a terrifying sound a man hears in his gut, not in his ears.

Michael looked up and saw the outline of a twin-engine light bomber silhouetted against the dark gray sky as it dove down on him. In that split second, an image was seared into his brain of flames shooting around its engine cowlings and an intense young face lit by the glow of the bomber’s instrument panel. From the red, white, and blue circles on the fuselage, it was a British bomber, one of their long-range anti-submarine hunter-killers, like the ones he’d seen flying from the air base they shared in Italy. It roared right over him and the powerful downdraft from its engines slammed him to the bottom of the raft. He lay there, wanting to reach up and pluck it out of the sky, but he couldn’t. And he couldn’t stop the awful tragedy now unfolding in front of him.

The U-boat continued to submerge, unaware of its impending doom. Its foredeck was completely under water now. Waves broke halfway up the side of the conning tower, and the aft deck was awash as the bomber came in directly over its stern. Michael watched in horror as two black objects separated from the bottom of the bomber's wings. They hung in the air for a long, cruel second before they began their slow, downward arcs toward the submarine. The range was point blank and he had no doubt of the outcome.

"No!" Michael screamed in agony, as he watched the first bomb punch through the steel plates at the base of the conning tower where it met the rear deck and exploded inside the boat's hull. His voice died in his throat as a muffled explosion ripped the dark night at the very spot in the control room where he had been standing only minutes before. In his mind's eye, Randall pictured the bomb exploding and ripping the small compartment apart, instantly killing everyone inside.

The second bomb struck further aft on the rear deck, dead center on the long rack of fuel oil drums, sending them flying like tenpins before it punched through the thick steel and exploded. The force drove the stern down and lifted the submarine's bow out of the water like a breaching whale. It rose and then crashed back down with a huge splash. The blast had cracked the hull and ignited the diesel fuel spewing from the tumbling oil drums, turning the water around the U-boat into a blazing orange and black inferno. It settled down into the flames like a large, wounded animal, but water and burning oil were already pouring in through the two gaping holes in the hull. It went down fast, stern first as the sleek hull slid backward, faster and faster. As it did, the bow rose higher until the boat was nearly vertical. The bow hung high above the water for an impossibly long moment, fighting the inevitable; it slid backward and completely disappeared in the roiling orange flames and thick oily smoke. When it was gone, large pockets of air broke the surface from the ruptured hull, as if they were the U-boat's last gasps. Then, it was gone forever.

The British bomber made a quick turn and came around for a second pass, but there was no need. Her victory had been swift and complete. Victory? More like an assassination, Randall thought. It flashed overhead again, and then slowly banked and headed out to sea, the drone of its engines fading as it vanished into the Baltic night to find another target. Fortunately, the pilot's eyes had been entirely fixed on the U-boat; he never saw the small, black raft bobbing up and down closer to shore. Michael tried to stand in the small rubber raft and look into the roiling flames and black smoke for any sign of life, but it was hopeless. There were no survivors. With that brutal realization, Michael dropped to his knees and collapsed in the bottom of the raft.

Kapitanleutnant Eric Bruckner was the first decent German Mike Randall had ever met. Now, Bruckner and his entire crew were dead because they tried to do the honorable thing and give him his freedom. It was all his fault. First, the crew of the B-17, then Eddie Hodge, and now, Bruckner and his U-boat, all because he stowed away and presented a good man with an impossible choice. Bruckner could have had Randall shot or tossed overboard that very first night but he didn't do that. Instead, he did the decent thing; and by doing that, fate took his life and forty others. Slowly the dead weight of that fact crashed down on Mike Randall

and began squeezing the life out of him. Like an old boxer who had taken one too many hard shots to the head, he went numb. He slumped to the bottom of the raft and lay there as his mind went blank and stayed that way for a long, long time.

It was Jan Lundquist, the neighbor's boy, who saw him first. Fortunately, the sixteen-year-old deckhand had good eyesight or they would have missed the raft entirely, because it was barely visible in the large, gray swells. The BRUNNHILDE had left port long before dawn. Daylight was more rumor than fact at that time of year, but there were fish to catch nonetheless. Einar Person was the Captain of the small Swedish fishing trawler. If he hoped to return to port with even a half-decent catch, they had to be well out to sea and halfway to the fishing grounds long before first light. The BRUNNHILDE was an old converted whaler built before the last war. Short and stout with a steel hull and solid oak deck, she was built to handle anything the winter could throw at a ship. Unfortunately, this was one of those winters. A fierce gale had been lashing the southeast coast of Sweden and it had been four days since any of the town's small fishing fleet dared put out from the small harbor of Trelleborg. But rough seas or not, Person knew the cod and the skate wouldn't wait. There were simply too many bills to be paid and too much easy money to be made to keep a boat anchored in the harbor for long.

Like Switzerland, the economy of neutral Sweden had been booming ever since the shooting war down south began six years before. The German, Polish, Latvian, Lithuanian, Estonian, and Russian fishing fleets, which the Swedes normally competed with, had been destroyed. Their boats were now on the bottom or rotting in port, leaving the Swedes with a monopoly on the entire catch in the western and central Baltic. Almost any old scow that could lay a net would put out to sea on the good days but it was cold, dangerous work. There were thousands of warm, dry, better-paying industrial jobs in the steel industry, metal fabricating, and armaments industries around Stockholm, Göteborg, and even nearby Malmö. Now, the only way a fishing boat could fill out its crew was to call on grandfathers, young boys, and even wives and daughters to lend a hand.

But when you're an old salt descended from Viking raiders like Einar Person, fishing is in the blood. He was at the wheel, fighting the eight-foot swells as they ran south and east, heading to an area where the cod had been running thick the week before. Jan hoisted a big net onto the portside boom so it would be ready when Person told him to drop it in the water. As Jan told it later, he was slowly untangling a particularly bad snarl in one of the lines when he glanced out to sea and thought he saw something. He cocked his head and stared harder. There! He knew his eyes weren't playing tricks on him. Something small and black was riding the crest of a steep, choppy wave to his right. Jan lost it again, so he dropped the rope and climbed a half-dozen rungs up the mast for a better look, then a half-dozen more.

"Captain Person!" He waved and shouted to the wheelhouse.

"Jan! What on earth are you doing up there, boy? Your mama will brain me with a pot if you fall. Now get down from there."

"But, Captain, I see something. Look! Off to port. It's a life raft!"

## **PART II**

**Trelleborg, Sweden**  
**June 1948**

### **Chapter 10**

Trelleborg is a small fishing port on the far southeast coast of Sweden. It's where Einar Person lived and where the small fleet of fishing boats he built was based. From Stockholm, you got there by heading straight south past Norrköping, Kalmar, Åhus, Ystad, and Malmö. The harbor was small, with a concrete quay and three piers that jutted out into the water and the same number of cargo cranes standing tall against the bright-blue summer sky. The main business here was fishing and behind the quay sat two rows of fish processing plants and warehouses. Person's was one of perhaps a dozen.

Early summer in Sweden was always a delight after a long, cold winter and 1948 was more lovely than most. The wildflowers and sugar beet fields were a vivid yellow, red, and green under the bright sun. In the dark corners of Mike Randall's mind, however, it would always be February 1945, a terrifying time of ice and snow, a fog-shrouded coast, crashing waves, bone-chilling water, brooding evergreen forests, and an endless palette of gray upon darker gray upon black. He remembered very little of the first desperate year that followed. He was still trapped in a head full of bad memories that kept repeating themselves over and over again, of Königsberg, shell holes, rubble, bombed-out buildings, Eddie Hodge, the truck, Stolz's old Czech revolver, black-shirted SS storm troopers, and Kapitan Eric Bruckner and his U-boat going down in a sea of orange and black flames. People say memories fade, but they're wrong. The worst ones stay as fresh and sharp as a razor blade.

In the first weeks after they hauled him aboard the trawler, no one was sure if he would live or die. They put him in a spare bedroom in Einar Person's house in Trelleborg, where he was constantly tended by the gentle hands of Person's wife, Emma. They summoned doctors from Stockholm who poked, prodded, and examined him. They said the fellow was suffering from a deep depression from a brain that had been overloaded with more shock and pain than one person can process. Until his mind finally came to grips with his past and his new reality, it would continue to turn inward, held prisoner by too many painful memories.

Still pale and thin, in April he forced himself out of bed and began walking around the house. After that, he took long walks outside, where the townspeople would see him around the harbor, walking back and forth along the quay, down the beach, and up along the coastal road, with hollow eyes and a vacant stare. In August, he moved out of the house and took up residence in a small, second-floor

storeroom in Person's warehouse. He slept on a burlap mat on the floor. He rarely spoke that first year or the second, and then only to Emma and Einar Person. The people of the small town knew pain and suffering when they saw it, and they gave this quiet stranger the room he needed to heal. No one asked him to do anything, certainly not Einar Person or any of his crew. By autumn, he was getting his physical strength back, and he began to put weight back on his emaciated body. One afternoon in late autumn he appeared at Person's warehouse and helped the men load a truck. As the days passed, he returned and began straightening fishing nets, carrying sacks, shoveling salt and ice, sorting and packing fish, and cleaning the trawler's holds. In early spring, Einar Person smiled when Michael joined the crew of a trawler as it headed out to sea. It was obvious the fellow knew little about boats, but he learned fast. Soon, he was putting in a full day, but he still spoke very little and he never discussed what had happened to him, not to Person or to any of the crew.

By the end of that first year, he put back half of the weight he had lost. By the end of the second, he put back the rest. The muscles and strength came naturally, as he worked in the warehouse or on one of the boats, hauling and lifting. Tanned and chiseled after two years, he developed strong forearms and powerful, callused hands. While he soon worked on each of Einar's boats, his sentimental favorite would always be the BRUNNHILDE. A solid, steel-hulled whaler, she had been converted to an in-shore fishing trawler in the mid-1930s. She was eighty feet long and almost twenty-five feet wide, with a high prow and wide beam. One look at her scarred decks and the battered walls of her holds and it was obvious she had seen more than her share of hard use. But she held a lot of fish, and it would take one hell of a blow to capsize that old washtub.

That early summer morning, he stepped out of the warehouse's front door and took a deep breath as he looked out to sea. The flowers were in full bloom, and the morning air was full of the pungent aroma of the town's small fish processing plants. As the old salts say, the fish don't smell when the price of haddock is up. As he looked along the bright quay, his mind suddenly flashed back again to a heavy, gray sky; to dirty snow and cracked sheets of ice piled up against other piers; to shell holes, smashed buildings, and hob-nailed boots. That war was long ago and far away now, and memories are never rational. One kept surfacing, particularly at night, when he was on that fragile edge of sleep. It even had a face and a name. It was Eddie Hodge, and it kept looking at him, reminding him he'd made a solemn promise.

He promised Eddie he'd go see his father and kid sister, Leslie, talk to them, and try to explain everything. But how? How could anyone possibly comprehend what happened back there; much less explain it to someone who hadn't been there? The mere thought of trying made Michael physically ill, but he'd promised Eddie he would go. For the first two years, he knew he wasn't ready. He was still mending, and as fragile as fine crystal. Dredging it all up would only rip open those old wounds, but it was a solemn promise. If he didn't go, he knew he'd never finish healing. So, painfully and reluctantly, he wrote them. He spent months thinking and drafting each word before he put it on paper; but he did, and he sent it. Three weeks later, he got Earl Hodge's reply. Of course, Earl knew who Michael was. He insisted he come, and now Michael was really trapped.

Einar Person stepped out of his office door and stretched his stiff back. He saw Michael sitting on a capstan on the foredeck of the BRUNNHILDE splicing a cable, and smiled. He loved the young American like a son now, and he was glad to see he had finally regained his health. "Michael!" he called out as he clenched his big meerschaum pipe between his teeth and began walking toward the boat. His voice must have registered, because Michael looked up. Their eyes met and Michael smiled. He could picture Person at the tiller of a Viking longboat a thousand years ago, with a horned helmet, a bearskin draped over his shoulders and a sword and shield in his hands. Like his ancestors, those piercing blue eyes looked ready for anything that providence might throw at them as the old Captain walked across the quay, up the gangplank, and joined him.

Einar placed one of his meaty paws on Michael's shoulder. The young American looked up with an embarrassed smile, but it was Person who spoke first. "Emma tells me something is wrong with you."

"Wrong with me?"

"Yes, she says you received a letter yesterday and looked all depressed. You didn't eat dinner or breakfast and you are all moody now. Emma is never wrong about such things, you know." Michael looked away and started to say something, but Person cut him off. "You owe me no explanation, boy. We just want to be of help if we can."

Michael pulled a small, wrinkled envelope out of his shirt pocket and looked at it.

"Bad news from home? I didn't think anyone knew you were here."

"No, it's from someone else, from the father of my best friend, Eddie. I wrote him a few weeks ago."

Person frowned. "And now you have to leave, don't you?"

Michael looked up at him, surprised, but not really.

"No, this is good," Person said. "Emma will hate to see you leave — I will too — but it shows you are healing. You know you will always be welcome here, my boy, but it is time you went home."

Home? Michael thought. Even the word sounded strange. And healing? Not really; and he doubted he ever would. There had been too much damage deep inside for that to happen any time soon. It left him hollow, like a burned-out husk. "You've been unbelievable to me since the day you pulled me in," he said. "But I have to go back to the States, for a while anyway, to talk to Eddie's family."

Person turned his eyes away, sad and shaken. "Emma will miss you."

Michael looked up at him and smiled. "Emma will, huh?" he said, continuing the old man's game. "I don't want to go, but I promised Eddie I would go back, see his father and his sister, and tell them what happened. I've been putting it off, but..."

"Well, if you give the man your word, then that's what you must do."

"I finally wrote his father. They want me to come."

Person looked out across the harbor for a moment, thinking. "You never said a word about what happened out there, what happened before we found you."

"I didn't want to get you involved."

"Maybe not, but you have no papers, no passport."



Michael looked away, realizing the dilemma he was in now.

"I saw how you would look up at the sky whenever an airplane flew over, and how you would flinch when you heard an engine backfire. Emma guessed you were in the Navy, maybe from a boat that sank, but I always thought that was wrong. Your Navy never got up here into the Baltic, not that I know of. You are a sailor now, but not when we found you. No, I always thought you were a flier, maybe from one of those big bombers. After a raid on Hamburg or Wilhelmshaven, I guess anything could have happened, eh?"

"It was Berlin. I was a waist gunner on a B-17."

"And you lost your friend from South Carolina and the rest of your crew?"

A dark cloud crossed Michael's face. "Dead, all of them."

Person looked down at him. "But they weren't killed that night, were they?" he asked, but Michael didn't answer. "That liferaft did not come from an American airplane. The markings were in German, from a ship, or a U-boat, I think. And your clothes, your hair and beard, and the state you were in—your B-17 came down months before, didn't it?"

Michael sat quietly, afraid to look at Einar for fear it would all pour out.

"We saw a big explosion further out to sea that night—me, little Jan, Sven, and all the rest of them—we all saw it. Even in town, they saw a flash and a dark orange glow. And there were oil drums floating up on shore for days after, all black and burnt..."

"Einar, I don't want to talk about it."

"You don't have to, boy. Not now, not ever. We don't care what happened."

Randall sat there thinking.

"Look, Trelleborg is a small town. The Mayor, the local government people, even the police, they all left you alone because you worked for me and I vouched for you. But if you want to go back to the States, you must go to Stockholm to the American Embassy and talk to them, or they will never let you in."

"Yeah, I was afraid of that."

"All you have to say is that your plane was shot down and we pulled you out of the water. You were hurt bad, in shock, and no one knows what happened. I'll testify to that. So will Jan and Emma, and I can get the doctors to write something. Tell them you don't remember a damned thing and you want to go back home; that will be the end of it."

"Yeah, but there's one little problem, Einar. My plane took off from Italy in October, 1944, and I didn't show up here until five months later. They're going to want to hear more than that."

"Tell them your plane crashed and you were hurt. Tell them you don't remember much, but you managed to escape and make it to the coast. Say you stole a boat and headed north. By God's mercy, somehow you made it across to Sweden."

"Who's going to believe a story like that?"

"They will, because they'll want to. The war's been over for three years now, and you are an open file they will be very happy to see closed. Besides, I am not letting you go to Stockholm alone. I will take you. I have friends there. Those clerks at your Embassy might argue with you, but they will not argue with me."

Michael looked up at the old trawler captain with a puzzled expression.

“Do not look surprised. I spent a few years in our Navy and this is a small country. I should be able to cut a little red tape for you.”

“I don’t know how to thank you for all you’ve done, Einar, you and Emma.”

“No need. We always hoped you would stay, but we understand.”

“I’d like to come back.”

“You are always welcome, but don’t make promises you cannot keep.”

“No, no, I’ll never do that,” he answered. “Once we get to Stockholm, I figure I can get a job on a freighter, maybe work my way across to New York.”

“A freighter? You can book a stateroom on the QUEEN MARY if you like.”

Michael laughed. “The QUEEN MARY? I have no money, Einar.”

“Oh, yes, you do. More than enough.”

“Einar, I’m not taking yours. You’ve done enough for me already.”

Person smiled and shook his head. “Michael, other than a few Kroner for a beer or to buy a book, you’ve never asked me for anything, no pay, no nothing. Hell, boy, you’ve been living on a cot in my warehouse and I never even had to pay for a night watchman.”

“You saved my life. You brought me here and took me in, a complete stranger; you gave me a job...”

“And you’re the best worker I’ve ever had. Look at you. You must have put on fifty, maybe sixty pounds since we fished you out that night, and they are all solid muscle. It’s all those long hours you spent fighting the nets and the fish, that’s what gave you back your strength. All those fish you helped me catch earned me a lot of money, and you are entitled to your share like all the rest of the men who crew out for me.”

“You don’t owe me a thing.”

“Maybe not, but the union says I had to pay you anyway; and the good Lord knows I always do what the union tells me.”

“You?” Michael laughed. “When did you start listening to the union? Besides, I never joined; I don’t have a union card.”

“Oh, yes, you do. Rules are rules, and you’ve been a member in good standing for two and a half years now, ever since the first day you went out with me on the BRUNNHILDE. You got the same wages everyone else got, plus the bonuses and your shares of the catch.”

“What are you talking about, Einar?”

“Those Kroner I gave you for the beer? That was your own money. Emma opened an account for you at the bank. It’s all sitting there, over \$7,000 now, so you don’t need to borrow anything from me. That money should take you a long way, and back again if you have a mind to.”

“Einar, I don’t know what to say.”

“Then don’t say anything.”

“But \$7,000?”

“You earned it, every cent, so don’t thank me. It’s yours. Look, boy, Emma and I never had the good fortune to have a son, but as time passed, we hoped you would think of yourself that way.” Michael looked up at him. “You must go back to America now. That is only right. But after you’ve slain all of your demons, we hope you will come back.” Person looked around and motioned toward the harbor with the sweep of his hand. “We have three boats now and you know how to run them

every bit as well as I do. So, they are yours if you want them. I see no point in selling it all off or leaving it to the tax collectors.”

## **PART III**

**Rock Creek, South Carolina  
October 1948**

### **Chapter 11**

It was with a deep sense of foreboding that Mike Randall stepped off the Greyhound bus in Beaufort, South Carolina, and began walking south and east with his thumb out and a leather suitcase in his hand. The Hodges lived on Rural Route 3. The waitress in a small coffee shop gave him directions out a dusty country lane that wound east along the water. After that winter in Königsberg and three years on the Baltic coast, palm trees, Spanish moss, and humidity thick enough to cut left him feeling even more out of place. Despite the seven thousand dollars in a Swedish bank, he chose to work his way across the Atlantic on a merchantman from Stockholm to London, and another from London to Baltimore; knowing he had to keep his mind and his hands busy. He caught a train to Charleston and hitched the rest of the way.

While the States had their obvious attractions, after being abroad for all those years, it didn't feel like home anymore. Everything seemed disjointed and oddly out of focus, especially the thought of seeing Eddie's father and sister. That would be gut-wrenching. No matter how hard he fought it, he continued to feel guilty, and he knew he shouldn't. Millions of soldiers, sailors, and airmen had gone off to that war and tens of thousands never returned. That was the luck of the draw—wrong place, wrong time—as it was in every war. But being here in the States, walking around the hometowns of the men who came back and the men who didn't, was more than Michael could take. Why had he survived? He was no better, no quicker, and no smarter, just luckier. It wasn't just that Eddie had died, it was how he died, and it was Michael's role in that death that ate at him like a cancer. From Earl's letter, Michael could tell they thought he was some kind of hero, when all the time he had Eddie's blood on his hands. What would they think when they learned the truth?

It was Indian summer in South Carolina. Beaufort lay limp as a wet towel in a coastal low country that was known for rice, indigo, crayfish, clams, and oysters. Half river and half tidal marsh, the river looked more brown than blue as it ambled down to the sea, only a few miles away. Walking down the narrow road, he saw small wooden piers jutting out into the river behind every house. The water was everything, Michael could see.

On the freighters coming across, Michael chose to work long shifts down in the hold or the engine room and he spent his free time running around the deck or exercising. The rest of the crew were Poles, Greeks, and Turks; and they thought

he was certifiably crazy. Maybe he was, but running was the best way he knew to control a mind that refused to behave. It was something he had done in high school when he wasn't playing football, in those long Air Corps training schools in Texas, and at the bomber base in Italy. He took it up again in Sweden, and he always found a long run cleared his mind. There was something magical in the rhythmic pounding of feet on pavement. After a few miles, the deep breathing and piston-like movement of his arms and legs put him in a place where he could get away from himself and his head full of painful memories. Rhythm was the key. Synchronize the breathing; measure each stride; pump the arms like pistons—feel it—lose yourself in the rhythm. Run. Breathe. And forget. Forget. Forget.

He was about a mile south and east of Beaufort's downtown with his thumb out and a smile on his face when a dented green pick-up truck pulled over and stopped. An old, toothless man in bib overalls and a tattered John Deere baseball cap looked out at him and asked, "Where ya goin', son?"

He pulled out Eddie's father's badly wrinkled envelope and showed him the return address. "Rural Route 3 in Rock Creek, the Hodges' place? I think they live down on the water somewhere?"

"Old Earl? I'd say he does," the old man chuckled as he looked Michael over, head to toe. "But I don't think he's lookin' to hire anybody right now."

"No, no, nothing like that. I was in the Air Corps with his son."

"You wuz with little Eddie? Oh, Lord, but that was a tragedy. A real tragedy, losin' him like that. Here, you hop right in. I'll give you a ride," the old man said as he pushed the passenger door open. "Come on."

The narrow road took them through fields of leafy, yellowing tobacco plants and big gnarly oaks covered with Spanish moss that overhung the narrow road. "A lot of folks around here lost kin in that war. You know how us Southerners are, always the first to jump into a good fight. Well, enough of our boys volunteered, that's for sure, from Pearl Harbor right on through."

"That was Eddie and me. We went in together, in 1942."

"Then you wuz in bombers, same as him?"

"The same plane."

The old man looked over at him, studying him for a long moment. "I heard tell he got shot down over Germany."

Michael did not answer. He turned and looked out the window.

"That why you're here? To see old Earl?" Michael offered no reply. "You don't have to tell me jack, son, I can see it all over your face. In fact, I seen it on a lot a faces these past couple a years, so you ain't got no explainin' to do. Weren't your fault. Weren't nobody's fault, 'cept them damned Krauts, but I don't think nobody took it hard as old Earl. Maybe Leslie, I guess she did. 'Cause they ain't been the same since that letter came that his airplane was missing. That's why you came down here? To talk to them?"

"Yeah," Michael answered again.

"Well, God bless ya, son. I know how hard that must be. I know'd Earl since I was your age, so you sit back. I'll take you down there."

Three miles further down several flat county roads, the green pick-up turned in a long gravel driveway that ended at a small, low-slung white clapboard house nestled in a grove of pines down on the water. It had a rusting standing-seam tin

roof and a wide screened porch that wrapped around all four sides. The temperature that day was quite pleasant, but as he got out of the truck, the heavy damp air wrapped itself around him.

The house's front door swung open. "Michael?" a man's raspy voice called out to him from the porch.

"Mr. Hodge?" Michael asked as he pulled his suitcase out, turned, and saw a small, weathered man in bib overalls with a tall, teen-aged girl standing next to him on the porch. He looked like Eddie, aged about a hundred years, and the girl had to be Leslie, Eddie's sister. In Italy, Eddie had shown him a photo of a much younger girl in pigtails. She couldn't have been more than 12 or 13, but that had been taken in 1942. Clearly, Leslie had grown up. She was a young woman now, at least a head taller than her father, and "all filled out," as they say. God, he thought to himself, this is going to be horrible!

The old man turned the green truck around, stuck his head out the window, and waved. "You need anything, Earl, you let me know."

"Thanks, Homer." He waved back as Homer drove away. Finally, he turned back and looked at Michael, looking equally awkward and unsure. "Got your letter. And we had the pictures of you and Eddie he sent from Texas. Thought you might be here last week. Been lookin' for ya."

"So did I, but boats don't always do what you want."

Earl turned toward the girl. "This here's Leslie, Eddie's little sister. Guess she ain't so little anymore, but you know what I mean. Anyway, come on in," he said as he held the screen door open. "Lord, we sure are glad you came. Yes we are." He and Mister Hodge shook hands, although he felt very awkward doing it. The old man held on, continuing to shake Michael's hand as if he needed the contact while he held up an old photo. "See, here's you and Eddie standing in front of that old B-17. Knew I'd recognize you."

Michael looked at Leslie. Tanned and fit from working on an oyster dredge, she wore bib overalls like her father's and the same wiry frame as Eddie; but she was taller, softer, and one hell of a lot better looking. Her hair was blond and she wore it short and well above her collar, which was probably very practical down here, he thought, as their eyes met. Hers were an iridescent green; and when they locked onto his, they grabbed him by the throat and drew him on in. "Uh, hi," he tried to say as his voice cracked. "Sorry." He coughed and tried to look away but he couldn't. "You know, all that dust out on the road." He coughed again, but he knew it wasn't. In that tiny fraction of an instant, it was all over. He was utterly doomed. He knew it and he saw she knew it, too.

"Uh, yeah, it gets that way sometimes," she said with a smile and a twinkle in her eye as she kept looking at him, as if she couldn't look away, either.

"No need to stand out here on the porch," Mister Hodge said as he held the door open, breaking the awkward spell. "Come on inside." Leslie reached her hand out to take his suitcase. "Here, I got that," she said, as their fingers touched and they bumped together in the narrow doorway. Two clumsy people? Maybe. However, when their fingers touched it was as if an electric shock passed between them. He felt it. From her expression, she felt it too.

"Careful, you'll knock the man over, Les!" Mister Hodge said, laughing.

If he only knew, Michael thought. "Sorry," she laughed and he laughed too, but this was a complication he had not bargained for. It wasn't something he needed; it wasn't something he wanted; but it wasn't something he had any control over, either, and that left him flustered and confused. Not that he hadn't had girlfriends in high school. Plenty, but work, football, and the war put the thought of a normal life on the back burner; that is, until he stepped up to Earl Hodge's screen door and looked into those green eyes.

As Earl Hodge went inside, Michael noticed the old man walked with a bad limp. "Fell on the boat last year, and it ain't been right since," he said. Leslie took his suitcase and carried it down the hall. "We figure you'll stay here with us for a while, Michael, so Les is puttin' your stuff in Eddie's old room. Hope that's okay." He pointed to the small, threadbare couch. "Take a seat. Les'll bring us out some sweet tea in a minute."

Michael never had much of a family life. His parents lost their dairy farm in the late 1930s and the family quickly drifted apart. But after the long months he and Eddie spent together in Texas and in Italy, he came to know the Hodges better than his own. Eddie read him all their letters, which usually centered on oysters and clams, problems with the boat, duck hunting, and the things his kid sister Leslie was doing. By the same token, Eddie had been good about writing home. As he sat on the couch, he saw an old cigar box on the coffee table. Inside was a stack of letters in envelopes. The paper was the tissue-thin stuff they issued to the military overseas.

"Those are Eddie's, the ones he sent us from Texas and Italy," Mister Hodge began. "Les here saved every one of 'em." Since Michael and Eddie had been inseparable, he knew the other half of Eddie's letters would have been about him. "Nobody told us very much about what happened, just that he was gone. That's why we were so happy to hear you made it out, and that you could come down here and see us."

"I promised him I would, but I stayed in Sweden for a while."

"Sweden, ain't that somethin'. And Eddie said I'm supposed to take you out duck huntin'? Well, the season's a tad early; but I got the boat out. We'll go do that tomorrow, early, if you've got a mind to. Give us a chance to talk."

"Yeah, that'd be great!" Michael lied, knowing what lay ahead.

The next morning, the two men set out in the small skiff at dawn, just them and three dogs. It had a small gas-powered motor and rode low in the water as they motored about a mile upstream to the Hodges' small duck blind. It stood where the marsh and the small islands blended into the reeds, the cattails, and the soft morning mist.

They tied the boat off and Michael helped Mister Hodge up into the blind. Leslie had made them a hamper full of sandwiches and a big thermos of coffee. They sat side by side on the floor with their backs to the wall, eating and drinking, waiting quietly for the first birds to come over. Mister Hodge looked over at the two shotguns leaning against the wall. "I never asked you if you liked huntin'," he said. "You know how to use one of them?"

Michael smiled. "We didn't do a lot of bird hunting back home in Wisconsin. Some, but mostly we hunted deer and rabbits, with rifles."

“Deer, they’re real hard to sneak up on, aren’t they?” Hodge smiled back. “And them damned rabbits, they take a good eye and a real steady hand.”

Michael smiled. “I usually hit what I was aiming at, with a rifle anyway.”

“Eddie said that’s why they made you machine gunners, waist gunners, he called it.”

“Yeah, but it’s easier to hit something that isn’t shooting back.”

“Still, he says he got a FW and a 109, and you got three of ’em. I guess the both of you figured it out.”

“We figured some of it out,” Michael looked at the other man with a sad smile. “But they got as many of us as we got of them.”

Shortly after dawn, they heard the first V-shaped flock come over and they alternated shots for the next half hour or so, giving the dogs time to go out and retrieve the half-dozen birds they’d hit. Michael got his shots in and pretended he was enjoying himself, but his heart really wasn’t in it. He didn’t think Mister Hodge’s was either. Finally, they set the shotguns against the wall and sat down once more.

“Well, I reckon’ we got that out of the way,” Mister Hodge said with a sad smile as he sat back down on the floor and leaned against the rear wall. “Least wise, we got enough to claim we wuz shootin’ at ’em with a purpose.” He pulled a pint of Wild Turkey from his hip pocket, took a swig, and handed it to Michael. “Son, I might be mistaken, but you look like you got some things you need to tell me about.”

Michael took a drink, too, and not just to be polite. “This was Eddie’s idea. He made me promise I’d come here and tell you what happened out there, all of it. He said it would be good for both of us.”

“Well, I don’t know if he wuz right or wrong about that, but I figured it was bad. That’s why I didn’t ask you no questions in front of Les.”

Michael took a second long pull from the bottle. There was no good place to start, so he closed his eyes, leaned his head back against the wall, and just started talking. He told him about Italy, what he remembered about the first sixteen missions they flew, and about that last one. He told him about the B-17 being shot down, about being on the run in East Prussia, and about those long, painful months they spent in Königsberg. Finally, he told him how Eddie got sick, about the frostbite and the gangrene, and how there was nothing anyone could do. Then he told him about the old truck, about Eddie’s last morning, and about how he gave Stolz his last five dollars to borrow his pistol.

Hodge’s old man sat there quietly and didn’t speak for a long, long time. They passed the bottle back and forth again, then he said, “Thank you, Michael. I know how hard it was for you to tell me all that.” He coughed and wiped his eyes, then said, “And I can’t imagine how hard it must have been for you to fetch that pistol and give it to my boy, knowing what he was going to do with it and all. As horrible as it was, only a real friend would do something like that. Only a brother would, and we thank you.”

That was when Michael knew he had done the right thing by coming to South Carolina and telling him, the right thing for them and for him. He felt as if a huge load had been lifted off his shoulders.



“One thing, though,” Mister Hodge said. “Don’t tell Les about that last morning or the gun, not yet anyway. She was only twelve when he left, and Lord, she worshiped that boy. Maybe later, but for now, it’s enough for her to know he just got sick and died.”

Michael knew he was right, but the truth was he doubted he could have told her anyway. He convinced himself that he could tell her later, when the time was right. But all that did was build a wall, higher and higher, so high that neither of them could ever climb over it. They sat there a while longer passing the bottle and eating another sandwich until Mister Hodge looked over at him and said, “You look like you got more to say, boy. If you’re goin’ to get it out, then get it all out.”

So Michael continued. He told him about those final weeks he spent alone in Königsberg, about the U-boat, about the SS, the crates and boxes of gold, Kapitan Bruckner, and that last night off Sweden when the U-boat was sunk. “I haven’t told anybody the rest of that. Not Einar or Emma Person or the other guys I worked with back in Sweden, not the people at the Embassy. It’s our secret, mine and Kapitan Bruckner’s, but with all the rest, I thought you should know. Can you understand that, Mister Hodge?”

“Yeah, I can, Michael. The man saved your life and it cost him his, his boat, his crew, and everything else. I guess I can.”

“But you’re right. It feels better to have gotten it off my chest, all of it.”

They sat there a while longer, ignoring the ducks flying overhead. Finally, Mister Hodge said, “Michael, I’d like you to stay with us a while, if you’ve a mind. It would give all of us a chance to get to know each other a little better. After what we’ve all been through, I think we could use that. Maybe it’ll give us all a chance to heal.”

“I think I’d like that too,” he said, realizing Eddie may have been right after all.

“Good, but if you’re gonna stay, you need to start calling me Earl,” he said. “After all you been through, I can’t abide you callin’ me *Mister Hodge* no more.”

When they got back to the house, Leslie had already unpacked his suitcase and put his things in Eddie’s old room. She had cleaned out Eddie’s dresser and his closet, carefully packing it all away in boxes and carrying them up to the attic. Earl told her Michael would be staying with them for a while, but it was obvious from her smile that she knew that without being told, and she wouldn’t have it any other way.

## PART IV

**Rock Creek, South Carolina  
July 1951**

### Chapter 12

Sometimes you don't decide things. Sometimes things decide for you.

The easy answer was guilt. Michael stayed because Earl needed help, but the reason he kept staying was Leslie. The day after they went duck hunting, Michael began going out with them on the oyster boat to help work the dredge. It was what Eddie would be doing if he had come back, and Michael felt useful filling the role a son and older brother would have filled. Useful, but no less guilty. Had Eddie been that clever back in Königsberg? Michael wondered. Is this what he had in mind all along? Hard to tell.

As the weeks passed, they settled into a routine. When Earl's leg would act up, which was becoming more and more frequent, Michael and Leslie would take the boat out alone. At first, she seemed nervous and reserved when she was alone with him; then she seemed more nervous and reserved when Earl came along. That autumn and winter, as the air and water cooled, Earl's leg and his back went from bad to worse. By early spring, he stopped going out on the boat altogether, leaving Michael and Leslie to take it out alone every day. That was when Michael's relationship with her, or the lack of one, grew more and more awkward; because he had fallen hopelessly in love with her, and that made things even worse. He knew he shouldn't stay but he couldn't leave. He was trapped.

By early summer, when it grew really hot and humid in the Carolina lowlands, the sweat would pour off them and soak through their thin clothes by mid-morning. He'd strip down to shorts and she'd wear shorts and a thin shirt rolled up and tied in back like a halter-top. It was practical, but it left very little to the imagination. He knew it, she knew it, and it was obvious she didn't care. By noon, one of them would push or pull the other into the water to cool off. There would always be a lot of laughing, giggling, and close contact, but he wouldn't let it go any further. From the looks she gave him, he knew she wouldn't have stopped him, but she was Eddie's little sister and he could never get beyond that basic fact and the guilt that went with it.

She seemed to understand, and was willing to put up with his non-responsiveness as long as he was there where she could see him, talk to him, and occasionally touch him, knowing he wouldn't leave. That worked well enough out on the boat, but at night, it was infinitely worse. It was a small house. Her room was next to his. He would lie awake on those hot, steamy nights all too aware that she was on the other side of that thin sheet of plasterboard, soaked in sweat,

probably thinking the same thing he was, and there was nothing either of them was going to do about it.

One particularly sweltering night, he got out of bed and went to the kitchen for a drink of water and saw her sitting alone in the dark on the screened-in back porch. He stood in the doorway and they stared at each other for long minutes without saying anything. Finally, she got up, walked over and stood next to him. He was wearing an old pair of boxer shorts and she was wearing a thin tee shirt and panties. There were tears running down her face as she reached out and put her hand on his chest. "It's okay," she whispered as she leaned forward and kissed him lightly on the cheek. "It's okay. Just don't leave me. Don't you dare leave me." Then she turned and walked back to her room.

Finally, he asked Earl. They were working on a net down on the dock and Leslie was in the house cooking dinner. "Why don't I see any guys coming around to see her? Doesn't Les have a boyfriend?"

A thin smile crossed Earl's lips. "I suspect there's two reasons, Mike—me and you. She won't take up with some boy and leave me alone here. I talked to her about it a bunch of times before you came, but it didn't do any good. She won't do what she don't want to do. Then there's the second problem, and that's you."

"Yeah, I was afraid of that," Michael answered. "It's not that I'm not interested, Earl, but I'm too old for her."

"You ain't either. She's twenty-one now and you're what? Twenty-seven? Believe me, boy, that ain't too old."

"It's not that kind of old, Earl. I wouldn't be any good for her. I'm burned out, and she deserves someone who isn't carrying all this guilt and anger around inside."

"Why don't you let her worry about that, Mike?"

"I can't, Earl. Aren't there some guys in town?"

"Used to be, but she chased 'em away a long time ago."

Michael looked at him. "Earl, she fell in love with an old picture, with those stories Eddie wrote about in his letters."

"Maybe that was true five years ago, but she's a grown woman now."

"You don't need to tell me that."

"I expect not. The two of you workin' on that boat by yourselves out in the hot sun, you got a lot more willpower than I ever had, boy."

"Earl, you know I'd never let that happen."

"Oh, I know." The old man put his hand on Michael's shoulder. "She's my baby girl, Mike, but sometimes I wish you would. Oh, I know you'll do the right thing. But you two are nuts about each other, and you won't hear no objections from me."

"You don't think it's just me taking Eddie's place in her mind?"

Earl sat back, shook his head, and chuckled. "I seen that look in her eye, Mike, and she ain't thinkin' of you as no brother. You two need each other and it would make an old man very happy."

"But Königsberg. The pistol. I helped kill him as sure as if I pulled the trigger. Do you know how that feels? How could I make love to her when I can't even get up the nerve to tell her how her brother died?"

“You didn’t kill him, boy; you need to get that out of your head. It was them Germans. All you did was what Eddie wanted you to do, and what you knew you had to do.”

His head told him that Earl was right. Getting the pistol from Stolz was the right thing to do, and he had nothing to feel guilty about. Eddie was suffering and dying a horrible death. Still, after that first night when he didn’t have the courage to tell Leslie, the absence of truth grew and grew, and became a lie.

Leslie leaned her head out the kitchen door and called them to dinner. Earl looked at her. “Michael, whether you like it or not, Les knows what she wants and what she doesn’t want. I just hope you change your mind before it’s too late, for her and for you.”

As the months wore on, he and Leslie fell into a comfortable but silent relationship, silent on anything that mattered, like each other. Most of the time, that seemed okay with her too, but there were days on the boat when the sexual tension was so strong that if they had accidentally bumped or touched, the spark would have lit up half the eastern seaboard. But, somehow, they got through it.

That tense status quo lasted until the morning Michael saw the story in the Charleston newspaper about Admiral Eric Bruckner’s trip to New York City. It was a hot Sunday in July, the one day they never took the boat out. They were sitting in the living room. The windows were open and there was a breeze off the ocean that helped cool the house. Earl was in his armchair, reading the newspaper from the front section on back. Leslie and Michael sat on the couch. He was reading the sports section, trying to ignore her while she lay lengthwise with her back propped up on a cushion and her bare feet in his lap. She was darning a pair of his socks but her eyes were on him, not the needle. Like a little kid, she would occasionally shift her feet to jostle the newspaper and distract him or dig her toes into him to annoy him even more. It was one of the innocent, but playful things she did that drove him crazy. He knew she was watching him, trying to get a reaction, and he was trying his best to ignore her. He learned months ago that glaring at her, complaining, or even retaliating accomplished nothing. The only way to get her to stop was to put a hand on her foot or her ankle and gently caress it with his fingers. That always worked. She’d stop annoying him, content to sit like that for hours if he’d let her. So would he. He loved touching her. He loved her, and that was the hopeless trap he had fallen into.

The lead stories in the sports section were about Jersey Joe Walcott knocking out Ezzard Charles for the heavyweight boxing title, and some guy named Randy Turpin beating Sugar Ray Robinson. In baseball, the Yankees were once again atop the American League and the Dodgers and Phillies were battling it out in the National League. Earl had finished the stories about the stalemate in Korea and one about Moslem fanatics assassinating Jordan’s King Abdullah while he was praying in a mosque. He turned a few more pages and said, “Michael, here’s a story here you might want to look at. There’s a Kraut Admiral comin’ to New York. He was a skipper on a U-boat that got sunk in the Baltic, just like the one you were on. What was the name of your Kapitan? This fella’s name is Bruckner.”

Michael jumped off the couch, dumping Leslie on the floor, and grabbed the newspaper from Earl’s hand:

## GERMAN ADMIRAL VISITS NEW YORK

***Newly appointed West German Rear Admiral Eric Bruckner begins a seven-day visit to the US Tuesday with a tour of the ports of Boston, New York, New Jersey, and several US Navy bases. This is the first such official visit by a top ranking German naval officer since the early 1930s. Bruckner is widely hailed as an outspoken anti-Nazi and anti-Communist. The one-time U-boat captain and German war hero spent four years in a brutal Soviet labor camp after his U-boat was sunk in the Baltic, and has frequently called on the Russians to dismantle them. Untainted by any ties to the Nazi Party, Bruckner will soon head a key NATO naval intelligence and war planning staff section upon the retirement of...***

Michael read the story a second time, and a third, with Leslie standing on her toes, reading it over his shoulder. "This can't be!" he said. "Bruckner? An Admiral? I saw that boat go down, him with it. He's dead. They're all dead!"

"Well, maybe he figures you are, too," Earl speculated.

"I've got to go to New York," Michael said, still staring at the newspaper story. "I've got to see him."

"I'm going with you," Leslie said.

"I'll only be a day or two and your daddy needs you here, Les."

"I don't need nobody here," Earl interjected.

"No, it's something I have to do myself," he told them, putting his hands on her shoulders. "I'll be back in a couple of days, Les. Honest."

Earl looked at them. "There's an afternoon train comes through Beaufort that'll get you up there tomorrow morning."

While he packed, Leslie made him some sandwiches, then drove him to the train station in their old truck. Before he could get out of the car, she leaned across the seat, put both hands on his face, and kissed him hard on the lips. He did nothing to fight her off.

"I wish you hadn't done that, Les," he told her.

"And I wish I'd done it a long time ago."

"We'll talk about it when I get back."

"I guess we will! I don't know what you and Daddy have been talking about. I expect it was me, but I'm not a child. When you get back, we're going to talk about this whether you want to talk about it or not."

# PART V

**New York City, New York**  
**July 1951**

## Chapter 13

In 1951, New York was a gray-flannel, button down town. Everything had its place, especially in a world-renowned hotel like The Plaza. She was the queen of 59th Street, a gray granite fortress that took up most of a city block on 5th Avenue directly across from Central Park in one of the city's most fashionable areas. Like the Waldorf Astoria and the St. Regis, she reeked of class, order, and pampered care. When you climbed those front steps and passed through her tall revolving doors, you entered an impeccable world of brass, marble, overstuffed leather, polished wood, and money.

That morning, everything in the Plaza's ornate lobby was in its proper place except for Mike Randall. He sat in a tall, oversized armchair directly across from the hotel's gleaming brass elevator doors. He wore a plaid flannel shirt, green and blue, and it clashed badly with the chair's plush red brocade, as did his well-worn blue jeans with the chair's gilt legs. To the hotel staff, what he looked like was a big hick from the Great Outback, which was somewhere south and west of New Jersey. He definitely didn't belong in the lobby of the Plaza Hotel.

Michael didn't care about the red brocade or the gilt paint. To him, any chair was a marked improvement over the hard seat on the train from South Carolina where he'd spent the previous night. For the past hour, he'd ignored the harsh looks from the hotel staff. His shirt hadn't been ironed but, like the blue jeans, it was clean. He was freshly shaven. And from the expression on his face, it was clear he wasn't loitering or panhandling. He was there for a reason.

Michael arrived in the city before dawn. He had shaved in the restroom of Pennsylvania Station and left his suitcase in a rental locker. After scouring the New York newspapers for any stories about the Admiral and his schedule, he started walking up Broadway around 7:00 AM. The newspapers didn't add much to what he already knew but the Times article had a photo of a thin man in uniform whom they identified as Admiral Bruckner coming through the revolving door of what the caption said was the Plaza Hotel. He wore a dark blue naval officer's hat and was surrounded by a knot of uniformed Navy officers. Michael stared at the photo, but it was grainy and he couldn't tell if it was him or not. Well, at least he knew where the Admiral was staying.

It was a long walk from Penn Station to 59th Street, but not even a New York City mugger was dumb enough to go after a big "lumberjack" with something in his hands. With that determined stride, the scars on his face, and his grim,

purposeful expression, everything about him said, "Don't screw with this one." When he reached the Plaza, he saw the same revolving doors he saw in the newspaper story. Unfortunately, he also saw a cordon of uniformed doormen, bellmen, parking valets, and hotel security standing at the top of the stairs. The odds of his getting past them and into the hotel lobby without being stopped were about zero.

Michael backed away, found a pay phone in a small coffee shop around the corner, and dialed the Plaza's front desk. It was only 7:25 AM, but he knew his best chance to get an appointment was to catch Bruckner early, before he went out. "Can you put me through to Kapitan Bruckner's room, please, I mean Admiral Bruckner's room," he asked.

"I'm sorry. The Admiral is in meetings all day. If you wish to speak to him or one of his aides, you'll have to go through the Navy's press office."

"I'm not a reporter."

"Of course you're not, honey."

"Really, I'm not; and I really need to talk to him."

"Then leave a message."

"All right, all right. Would you please tell him Sergeant Randall called, Sergeant Randall from the U-boat. I'll call back. He'll know who I am."

"Randall, right. Thanks." Click.

He waited in the coffee shop for fifteen minutes before he called again, and then fifteen minutes after that, but he could quickly see this was getting him nowhere so he went back to the hotel. After circling the block twice, he saw a tiny chink in their impressive armor. The service door on the rear alley was propped open for the fast-moving queue of morning deliverymen and he was able to walk right in. The hotel's service wing was a maze, but he knew if you walk quickly and appear to have a purpose, you can go almost anywhere and get away with anything.

That was how he snuck inside and how he found himself in that brocade armchair in front of the elevator doors. He had hoped for something more discreet, but the lobby was already filling with people and the chair was the only one that put him near the elevators. So he opened the newspaper and sat as quietly as he could, hoping to blend into the woodwork.

These were good years to be a cop in New York City. Manny Eismer had put in twenty-seven years as a Detective Sergeant in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and some of the city's other "garden spots." In all those years, he never had to pay for a meal or a doughnut. One look at Manny, and you knew he never passed one by, either. The cops were the good guys back then. Anybody who didn't think so got his head busted, and the big boys downtown never looked over a detective's shoulder or second-guessed why he cracked some mope's head to make a point.

Manny had paid his dues and he had the scars from two bullets and a knife to prove it. The previous year, Manny had retired. He was building a little cabin on a clear blue lake up in the Catskills, where he could fish, lie in a hammock, and do a whole lot of nothing. Retirement pay was okay, but to finish the cabin the way he wanted, he needed a few extra bucks. Bad cops got it put in their pockets by pimps, bookies, or some Gumbah who wanted a cop who would look the other way. Good cops, like Manny, did it the old-fashioned way; they moonlighted and

did some high-dollar, "off the books," all-cash, private security work. That was why Manny was in the lobby of the Plaza that morning, because a few days' work were all he needed to add a dock and a bass boat up on the lake.

Friends counted. So did blood. For the past year, it was Manny's rabbi who came up with easy money, asking him to run an errand or two for the Israeli Consulate downtown. It was always something harmless and discreet, followed by a plain white envelope. Not that the Israelis couldn't get all the "official" help they wanted if they just phoned City Hall. But the State of Israel was barely three years old, and after a bloody war and a million threats, who could blame them for wanting to have "one of their own" to check on the checkers. So, when they wanted an extra set of eyes and maybe an extra fist, Manny got the call. At five foot eight and two hundred sixty pounds, every cop in town knew him. More to the point for the Consulate, he was Jewish, albeit non-practicing, and very loyal to the new State. He'd seen enough tattoos on extermination camp survivors on 47th Street to know that if his own people didn't deserve a homeland, who did?

This was the third day Manny had camped out in the lobby. The hotel was hosting a delegation of West German naval officers headed by a tall, distinguished admiral named Bruckner. Not that Manny gave a crap about a Kraut, but the Nazis didn't kill too many Jews with a U-boat. As Manny watched Bruckner come and go the past few days, he concluded the good Admiral didn't look too happy to be here. Why should he? New York was home to a million Jews, Greeks, Poles, and Ukrainians, and none of them were keen to see some Kraut bastard strolling down 5th Avenue, whether he used to goose-step or not. No, there were still too many old grudges and open wounds for that. Too many men had sailed out of New York harbor on merchant ships that were now on the bottom of the North Atlantic, so the Israeli Consul asked Manny to keep an extra set of eyes on him. If anybody took a shot at the Kraut, the Israelis didn't want to be blamed.

So far, it had been a piece of cake, if you liked reporters, which Manny didn't. Freakin' big mouths, troublemakers, and slobs! It was a nice hotel, and the lobby was filled with dozens of reporters arguing, lying around with their feet on the chairs and tables, and littering the place with newspapers, coffee cups, and cigarette butts. And it was still early. Bruckner and his entourage remained closeted in a closely-guarded fifth-floor conference room, leaving the reporters in the lobby below with deadlines and empty note pads. As the morning wore on, they grew more and more desperate for a story, any story, even if it was only a rumor or a little tidbit, anything they could twist and stretch into a column or two and get their editors off their backs for one more day. Manny smiled. Serves the bastards right; they'd all crapped out.

Manny yawned and took another slow look around the lobby. Everything looked normal, predictable, and boring. Everything except that big hick in the plaid shirt sitting near the elevators. Funny, Manny got here early, but he couldn't remember seeing him arrive. One minute the chair was empty; the next, he was sitting there behind a newspaper. Well, at least he didn't look Jewish, Manny snorted. Jews didn't wear flannel and denim. The head desk clerk also noticed the guy and strolled over to ask Manny, "Whatdaya think? Should we shoo the big goober out the door?" Normally, the hotel would have done that without asking, but with all



those damned reporters milling around, nobody wanted an incident—not today. Manny gave the big hick another long look.

“Nah, leave him be. I’ll keep an eye on him.” Besides, the hick didn’t look like he’d be all that easy to shoo without a fuss, not if he didn’t want to be shooed.

Manny took another look. Hard to tell how old he was. Thirty? Maybe older. Tall and rough-hewn, he was perched on the edge of the wingback chair as if he was waiting for something. Waiting? Expecting? Or intending? A man’s hands often said volumes about him. This guy’s were big and gnarled, wrapped around a rolled-up section of newspaper, twisting it back and forth, like it was the neck of the Sunday chicken on Saturday night. And his eyes. They were dark and haunted, with more than a few white scars on his eyebrows and cheeks. Construction? Boxing? Whatever, he’d been somewhere doing things he shouldn’t have been doing. Maybe, but the eyes themselves were sharp, alert, and they never stopped moving. First, they’d glance at the big clock on the far wall, then they’d swing to the hotel’s revolving doors, and finally back to the gleaming brass elevator doors again. Like two radar dishes, they circled back and forth, not missing a beat. Manny waited for the hick to do something, but he sat there like a rock with those dark eyes and those big freakin’ hands.

Ah, shit, Manny grumbled. Why couldn’t he go someplace else, like back to the farm, or the north woods, or wherever the hell he came from. Besides, who gave a crap about some damned Kraut admiral? That war was over a long time ago. So Manny scrunched his 260 pounds deeper into the overstuffed chair and opened the morning’s *Racing Form*, figuring nothing was going to happen today anyway.

Unfortunately, on the stroke of 10:00, something did.

The center elevator door opened and the lean, handsome figure of West German Rear Admiral Eric Bruckner strode confidently into the hotel lobby. Behind him marched a tight queue of blue-jacketed German and American naval officers. Dressed in blue and gold with close-cropped gray hair and the eyes of a hunting hawk, the Admiral looked the part. That was, until the “good” Admiral turned the corner and ran into a solid wall of American reporters and photographers who had been lying in ambush in the lobby. Manny chuckled. The poor bastard! He might have faced down every destroyer in the North Atlantic, swatting aside bombs and bullets with his bare hands, but he’d never met an enemy as savage or bent on his total destruction as the American press corps.

The mob leaped over couches and tipped over chairs as they deftly cut him off from the lobby doors. Next came a barrage of popping flashbulbs and a hundred screaming questions. Finally, the wall formed and surged forward in a direct frontal assault. Wide-eyed, Bruckner looked longingly at the hotel’s front doors, but they might as well be a hundred miles away. “Admiral! Admiral!” the reporters screamed as he stopped and took a step back. Too late, the elevator doors had already closed behind him. He was trapped.

“Goddamnit!” Manny grumbled. “There goes the morning, shot in the ass.” He pried himself out of the velvet grip of the over-stuffed armchair, threw his *Racing Form* on the end table, and lumbered to the rescue. Why couldn’t those dumb Navy schmucks take him down the back stairs like they were supposed to? He grabbed the two closest reporters by the seats of their pants, pulled, and opened a hole in the solid wall of flesh. The Admiral had steadily given ground until he was

now pinned against the gleaming elevator doors, surrounded by a pack of hungry reporters shouting questions at him. Serves him right! The dumb putz never should have come down the elevator to begin with!

Then, just when it looked like it would become a total fiasco, the Kraut rallied. He threw his chin in the air and forced a game smile, regaining at least a modicum of confidence as he took his first tentative step forward and waved the reporters aside. He almost pulled it off, too, until a loud, desperate voice called to him over the din of the crowd, stopping him dead in his tracks.

Randall looked up, saw the elevator door open, and saw Bruckner's uniformed entourage step out into the lobby. "Kapitan!" he called out, but no one heard him. Before he could step closer, the horde of reporters had surged forward and blocked his way. "Kapitan Bruckner," he pleaded, louder. "It's me, Randall, Sergeant Randall, the American who stowed away on your U-boat. Don't you remember?"

There was a wall of screaming reporters three deep between Michael and Bruckner. The closer ones turned their heads, curious at first, then they fell silent as they understood the odd words the guy in the plaid shirt was saying.

"Kapitan!" he tried again. "Remember, the night your boat sank? I left you some messages but the hotel wouldn't put me through." Bruckner's head turned. The Admiral had heard him all right, and he had seen him. He stopped, frozen to the spot as this big maniac tried to push through the crowd and get closer, but the reporters had the path blocked. Then Bruckner's eyes locked on his.

Michael raised the rolled-up section of newspaper and waved. "You put me in the life raft, just before the bombs hit. My God! I thought you were dead. All the explosions, the flames, and the smoke—I thought you were dead." Michael's emotions got the best of him. His voice cracked and his eyes filled with tears, but from the Admiral's expression of surprise and confusion, it was obvious he had no idea what Michael was talking about.

"I'm the American you found in the torpedo room with all those crates. Don't you remember, Kapitan?" he screamed in desperation. He couldn't have been more than a few feet away now, staring straight into the man's eyes. "The night the U-boat sank, when you put me ashore off Sweden."

The Admiral's eyes suddenly grew wide. He heard him all right, so Michael reached out even farther, stretching his arm until his fingertips touched the Admiral's shoulder.

That did it! The Admiral jumped back as if he'd brushed a high-power line. "Get away! Get away from me," he screamed as his expression changed from surprise and confusion to outright fear. That was when Michael knew. The face, the expression and most importantly the eyes; this man was not Eric Bruckner!

"Who are you?" Michael demanded. "You aren't the Kapitan. You aren't Kapitan Bruckner! Who are you?"

The next thing Michael knew, a short, round, bull-necked man in a badly wrinkled blue suit yelled, "That's close enough, big guy." Manny plowed through the last reporters like an angry bowling ball, bouncing them aside with his meaty forearms until he locked his arms around Michael's waist. He lifted him up and

over, and slammed him down hard on the carpeted floor as if he were a store mannequin.

“Let me up.” Michael struggled. “Don’t you understand? That’s not him! That’s not Kapitan Bruckner! Can’t you see it’s not him?”

Bruckner never heard any of it. As the reporters turned to watch the struggle on the floor, the cordon of US and German Navy officers pushed him through the crowd and out the hotel’s front doors before he had to answer any of Michael’s questions.

## Chapter 14

Twenty minutes later, Manny squeezed into the front seat of an unmarked police car parked in the alley behind the hotel. “Nice work, guys,” he said as he looked into the back seat. “Who organized the freakin’ Chinese fire drill in there? You two?” A bulky NYPD Detective named Larry Pedralski sat on the left side of the back seat while another of Manny’s old pals, Wally Hennessey, sat on the right. In the middle sat the big hick Manny had wrestled to the floor in the lobby. “And next time, get a car with a bigger back seat.”

“Gee, thanks, Manny. We’ll have to remember that,” Hennessey said.

Manny chuckled. Pedralski and Hennessey were part of the NYPD’s VIP Protection Squad. That was usually the softest duty in town, but not today. “Whose idea was it to bring the Kraut down the goddamned elevator,” Manny pressed. “You two chuckle-heads or the freakin’ Washington Gestapo?”

Pedralski looked at his partner. “Am I missing something, Wally? Who invited him to the goddamn party?”

“Me? Hey, I’m just a simple, old retiree doing his civic duty, trying to help out the local constabulary. You got a problem with that, Larry, take it up with the Mayor’s office.”

“No, no,” Hennessey sighed. “We’ve got enough problems already.”

“I’ll bet you do!” Manny said as he looked at the big guy. The fight seemed to have drained out of him now. Good thing, too. When Manny took him down, he felt the hard muscle in the guy’s arms and shoulders; he was built like a rock. Lying in Pedralski’s lap on the crumpled newspaper was the stuff they took off him—a badly worn, black leather wallet; thirty-two dollars in cash; a silver cigarette case, a railroad ticket from Charleston to New York City; and a key to a locker at Penn Station. Manny picked up the wallet. Inside, he saw a South Carolina driver’s license with the name Michael T. Randall and an address of Rural Route 3, Rock Creek.

“Rock Creek,” Manny quipped. “A hick from Hicksville. So what’s in the locker? A gun? A bomb? Your freakin’ cardboard suitcase?”

The big guy finally looked up at him, but he said nothing. Manny tossed the wallet back in Pedralski’s lap, and picked up the cigarette case. Manny had worked Burglary. He ran his fingers over the surface. Real silver, beautifully made, but scratched and badly tarnished. Flipping the top open, he saw an inscription engraved in German, an ornate Nazi eagle and wreathed swastika, and the names:

To My Strong Right Arm:  
Heinz Kruger,  
From His Grateful Admirer:  
Martin Bormann  
February 9, 1945

"Martin freakin' Bormann!" Manny bellowed as he twisted around and glared at Randall. "All right, goddamn it! Who the hell are you?"

Two hours later, Manny was sitting on a hard wooden bench outside the third floor interrogation room at Police Headquarters. Pedralski, Hennessey, and a succession of other NYPD detectives had taken turns grilling Randall; giving Manny plenty of time to make a few phone calls to people who might actually know something. When the last two detectives came out, it was obvious they hadn't gotten anywhere with the big guy.

"Mind if I talk to him?" Manny asked.

"Why not?" Hennessey shrugged. "We worked on him good, but he just sat there like a stump and hasn't said a damned thing. Not that it makes any difference. We ain't got nuthin' to hold him on, anyway. What? Bad taste in clothes? Abuse of newspaper?"

"Not giving Eismar a soft place to land?" Pedralski threw in. "You fat shit, you know you coulda crushed the poor bastard."

Hennessey laughed. "Yeah, but did you see the look on Manny's face when he opened that cigarette case! He looked like he'd just caught Adolf Hitler!"

"He's dead," Manny answered.

"So's Martin Bormann."

"If you say so," Manny countered. "Me? I don't believe a freakin' thing those Krauts say. So what now? You gonna kick Randall?"

"Yeah, we just wanted to rap his knuckles and make sure he cools down."

"You want to talk to him, go ahead," Hennessey said. "Just tell the dumb ass to stay the hell away from that Admiral or we'll book him good next time."

"I'll tell him." Manny entered the interrogation room. It was oddly reassuring to see that so little had changed from his days down here, knowing it never would. The room was like a broom closet with two cheap folding chairs and a small table; all painted the same dingy, institutional green.

Manny closed the door and plopped his large frame into the chair across from Randall. The battered newspaper from South Carolina, the black wallet, the railroad ticket, and the silver cigarette case were lying on the table between them. He leaned forward and gave the guy his best hard-ass-cop look, but it bounced right off. Manny had interrogated lots of tough guys, and he could always tell how it was going to go in the first five seconds. It was in the eyes. Hard-ass wasn't going to work, not this time, not with this guy. Besides, that was the way Hennessey and Pedralski played it, and it got them nowhere.

Using a stubby index finger, Manny flipped the wallet open and pointed to the driver's license. "Randall, Michael T., born in 1924. That makes you what? Twenty-seven? Up here from Rock Creek, South Carolina, wherever the hell that

is. Well, Randall, Michael T., you got one strange way of taking a vacation in the big city."

Nothing. Their eyes were maybe eighteen inches apart and Manny couldn't even get a flicker. "Look, kid, I'm not nearly as smart as those other guys. I was at the bottom of the class and they were at least two or three warm bodies above me, so instead of winging it, I did my homework before I stepped in here." Manny reached into his jacket and pulled out a ratty spiral-bound notebook, licked his thumb, and slowly flipped back a few pages. "Rock Creek — as I remember, that's down below Charleston." Still nothing, so Manny nudged the newspaper. "And you rode the train up here last night, got in this morning, checked your bag, and went straight to the Plaza. Well, at least you got good taste in hotels."

"I'm not staying there," Randall said, finally saying something.

"Ah, he speaks! You had me worried. I thought maybe Hennessey and Pedralski were right; maybe I landed on you so hard you can't talk no more."

"I've been hit a lot harder than that."

Manny looked at the scars above Randall's eyes, on his cheeks, and at his rough hands. "Yeah, I guess you have. Anyway, I went to Penn Station and picked up your suitcase. They got it downstairs at the desk. Turns out it ain't cardboard after all; it's leather, hand-made in Sweden. Very nice. Very expensive. So, where'd a guy like you get something like that? Steal it?"

"No, I bought it."

"A Swedish suitcase? You bought it down in South Carolina?"

"No, in Stockholm, down the street from the Embassy. I got it before I left."

"Stockholm, huh. In Sweden. Before you left." Manny studied Randall's face, but there was nothing there. "You eat anything this morning?" Manny asked.

"I had some sandwiches. Leslie made me some for the train."

"Who's Leslie?"

"None of your business," Michael quickly reacted. "Nobody."

"Nobody, huh?" Manny pried, but Michael clammed up again. "Okay, so you rode up here with your expensive Swedish suitcase, eating sandwiches nobody made for you. You check your bag and run right over to the Plaza, and then sit in front of the elevators so you can go after that Kraut admiral when he comes down. Is that about right?"

"Yes... No, no!" Randall quickly shook his head. "Look, I didn't come here to go after him; I came here to talk to him, that's all."

"Why? You got some grudge against him, maybe some old score to settle?"

"No, it's nothing like that. I had to see him... to thank him."

"Thank him?" Manny snorted. "Now that's a new one. You wanted to thank some freakin' Kraut admiral? What the hell for?"

"For saving my life," he finally said. "Look, I know you're not going to believe me, but he saved my life."

"A Kraut U-boat captain? How? By not killing you?"

"No, no, it wasn't like that. He took his U-boat into shallow water near the Swedish coast, so he could put me ashore."

"Put you ashore? Why? Were you some kinda Nazi spy?"

"No! I was a prisoner, a POW. Look," Randall said as he leaned forward, realizing he had to open up to someone, if he wanted to get out of here. "I stowed away in

his U-boat, and got caught. Instead of killing me or tossing me overboard, he put me in a raft and let me go. They had just put about and were heading back out to sea when a British bomber caught them on the surface. I saw the bombs drop, two of them. They blew big holes in that U-boat and there were flames and black, oily smoke everywhere. Nobody could have survived. Nobody. It went straight to the bottom with him in it. He's dead. I knew it then, and I'm positive now."

Manny leaned forward, their faces only inches apart as he tried to read the guy. "You're sure about that, huh? You're sure it was Bruckner's U-boat?"

"Yes, I was on it for the better part of a week. I saw the number on the conning tower. It was the U-582 and Eric Bruckner was its captain. I met him. I talked to him."

"You did, huh. And you were a POW? How'd you end up in his U-boat?"

"A lot of bad luck," Michael tried to explain. "I was a waist gunner on a B-17. We got shot down over Berlin and I ended up in a forced labor battalion in Königsberg, on the Baltic coast. One day, they had us load a bunch of stuff into the U-582, Bruckner's boat, and I was able to hide away and they didn't find me until we were well out to sea. Some of the men wanted to kill me, but Bruckner wouldn't allow it. Look, I know this sounds a little crazy, but it's all true. I saw that submarine go down and Bruckner and his whole crew went down with it. Nobody got out. Nobody! So when I saw that story in the Charleston newspaper that he was coming here to New York, that he was alive, I couldn't believe it. That's why I had to come here and see him. I had to! Can't you understand that?"

One thing for sure, Manny thought, real or imagined, the guy believed what he was saying. "Okay, you had to see him, but you could've picked up the house phone and given him a call. You didn't have to jump him in the lobby."

"I didn't jump him! And I did try to call, all morning, but they wouldn't put me through. So I snuck into the lobby and waited by the elevators. No matter what that newspaper said, I saw that U-boat blow up. That's why I had to see him with my own eyes."

"Okay, you saw him. He's alive. You satisfied now?"

"No, because that isn't him! That Admiral isn't Eric Bruckner!"

"Well, if it ain't, you got one hell of a scoop, kid," Manny shook his head, wondering why he was wasting his day on a nut case like this. Nevertheless, as he kept staring into those dark, angry eyes, he saw the kid was dead serious. Manny had a finely tuned bullshit meter. He could read people's eyes, and when a story didn't add up, he had a healthy respect for his own first impressions. Slowly, he felt that old queasy 'cop' feeling in the pit of his stomach. Bruckner? Soon to be one of the top officials in NATO intelligence? Yeah, maybe you do have one hell of a scoop, kid.

Manny opened the silver cigarette case. "Heinz Kruger... and Martin Bormann? You know, I made a couple of calls while I was waiting for the Marx Brothers to finish with you. Seems your pal Bruckner is one thing, but Kruger and Bormann are the real showstoppers. They're big time war criminals, kid, the biggest!" And at the very top of Israel's most wanted list, Manny thought to himself; but didn't say. "Bormann's supposedly dead, got shot trying to escape from Berlin after Hitler killed himself. They had a body, dental records, all that stuff. You ever see him?"

"Bormann? No."

"Nobody knows what happened to this guy Kruger. He was a real nasty son-of-a-bitch. Ever see him?"

"There was a blond SS officer in the U-boat pen that last day in Königsberg, up on the bridge with Bruckner. I had my head down, trying not to attract any attention, so I never got a good look at him: but he was the only SS officer I saw around there, so who knows?"

"And you got his cigarette case."

"It was under some papers on the map table in the control room. I palmed it and slipped it into my pocket."

"You palmed it?" Manny laughed. "In the control room of a Kraut U-boat? You got balls, kid."

"No, I was desperate. It's silver; and where I'd been, a thing like that was worth a man's life. Now, it's my good luck charm."

"Good luck? Well, I hope you never run into any bad." Manny picked up his spiral notebook again and flipped it open to another page. "I put in a call to the Army and the VA. They say you flew nineteen missions in a B-17 and that you really were shot down over Germany in October '44. Tough break, really tough; but they don't know a goddamned thing about you ever being on a U-boat, or being in a prisoner in Germany."

"No, they don't," he answered quietly.

"Okay, I'll play. How come?"

"Because I never told them. Who would ever believe a story like that? You don't. And that's exactly what the Kapitan told me that night. He said I should keep my mouth shut, because no one would ever believe me, and he was right."

Manny stared at him. "The Army thought you were killed with the rest of your crew when the plane was shot down. In fact, they had you listed as 'Killed in Action' until you knocked on the door of the Embassy in Stockholm. How come you never came home?"

"I... I couldn't."

"Look kid, you think you're the only one who came back from the war with battle fatigue and shock? Hell, there must be a million GIs who lost a lot of friends."

"It isn't that simple."

"It never is, kid, but I'm listening," Manny said, but Randall just sat there, the pressure building like a bomb ready to explode. "Kid, you gotta let it out." Manny could see the wheels turning around inside. "Look at yourself, at what they done to you. How much more crap are you gonna take from them?"

Slowly, words began to come out. It was only a trickle at first, but the trickle grew to a stream and then into a flood. It was if a dam had burst, and there was nothing Michael, or Manny, or anyone else could do to stop it until it was all out and he was empty.

## Chapter 15

After Michael told him everything there was to tell, he slumped back in the metal chair. He felt like a balloon that had shot across the small room only to run out of air and finally drop dead on the floor. How much time had passed since Manny got him to start talking? An hour? Two? Maybe three? He had no idea, but the fat cop sitting across from him looked exhausted too.

“Okay... Okay,” Manny said. “So you decided to stay in Sweden?”

“I didn’t decide anything; it just happened. Like I said, I went numb, maybe I blacked out. I don’t know; I really don’t. They thought I was dead when they found me in the bottom of that rubber raft—wet, limp, half frozen.”

“You don’t need to be ashamed about it, Mike. The shrinks call it battle fatigue, a nervous breakdown, emotional exhaustion, and a lot of other things. It happens.”

“I’d been in that raft five, maybe six hours, I don’t know. Einar said the current was pushing me further out to sea, and I wouldn’t have lasted much longer.”

“Who’s Einar?” Detective Eismer asked.

“Einar Person. He owns the BRUNNHILDE. It’s an old fishing trawler based in Trelleborg, on the south coast of Sweden. They went out for cod, and found me instead.”

“You ain’t the only one who came home with some dings and dents upstairs.”

“No, I was the one who didn’t come home at all.”

“True, but in the end, you did. It took a while, but you did.”

“I knew I had to. I promised Eddie I’d go see his father and his sister and explain what happened. That’s why Einar took me to Stockholm.”

“To buy the suitcase?” Manny joked.

“No. I had no papers, no passport, so I had to go to the American Embassy.”

“But you didn’t tell them everything, did you?”

“Everything? I’m not sure I know what that means anymore. But, no. I told them our B-17 was shot-up bad over Berlin and we came down in the Baltic. I was hurt bad, and just got my memory back. It was what they wanted to hear, and they could close their file on a missing bomber crew. I figure it really came down in what’s now East Germany or Poland; but nobody’s wasting their time digging through old crash sites over there.”

“And you never told them about Königsberg or escaping on the U-boat?” Manny asked, but Michael just stared. “Why not? What were you afraid of?”

“I wanted it all to go away. Everybody was dead—my friends on the bomber, Eddie, Bruckner and his whole U-boat crew—all dead. If I told the truth, I knew what would happen. They’d hunt for that submarine until they found it; then they’d cut it open and go inside. I couldn’t let that happen. Too many good men are buried down there, Manny, men who died saving my life, and it would be a sacrilege.”

“But all that gold...” Manny pressed.

“I don’t care about any of it. Besides, I don’t know where it is.”

“You don’t?”

“No, but I know what it feels like to have forty dead men on my conscience, and they’re all dead because of me. That’s why Eric Bruckner’s a hero—the real Eric Bruckner. He tried to save my life, and it cost him everything.”

“Hey, I thought that British bomber had something to do with it?”



“No, he’d have never been caught on the surface in shallow water, if he hadn’t been trying to put me ashore.”

“Mike, you can’t carry that whole load. It’s going to crush you. It’s survivor’s guilt. That’s when you live, for some crazy reason, and everybody around you gets killed.”

They sat quietly for a few moments, each of them gathering his thoughts. “Going down to South Carolina and seeing his old man like that, I bet it was tough.”

“I promised Eddie I would. I told Earl about Bruckner and the U-boat, but I didn’t say much about what was inside.”

“And his sister?”

“No, I couldn’t do that. Eddie was her hero. I told her all the rest, and that I was with Eddie when he died; but I couldn’t tell her about the gun. I couldn’t.”

“No, I guess you couldn’t,” Manny nodded, understanding completely. “But look, you spent three years in Sweden working on that trawler, fishing those same waters. You must know them pretty good.”

“Do I know where the U-boat is? No, I don’t, Manny. Oh, maybe the general area, but there’s a lot of coves up there, a lot of water.”

Manny picked up the mangled copy of the Charleston newspaper Michael was carrying in the hotel. He pointed to the top left-hand column on page three about Admiral Bruckner’s visit to New York. “This is what got your juices going?” he asked. “And you hopped the midnight flyer and came all the way up here to see him?”

“What else could I do? I had to see him, to thank him. All those years I had been blaming myself, and to read now that he got out...” Michael leaned closer, so their faces were only a foot apart. “On the U-boat, I was this close to the Kapitan. I looked him in the eyes, and we talked, a couple of times, face to face, man to man. His eyes, the way he laughed and moved; I’m telling you, Manny, the man in that hotel lobby this morning is not Eric Bruckner. Oh, he looks a little like him, I’ll give him that. It’s close; but when I looked into his eyes, I knew it wasn’t him.”

“It’s been six years, Mike. Time does strange things. You sure? I mean really sure?”

“I’m telling you, it’s not him!” Randall slammed his fist on the table. “When I said something to him about his boat being sunk off Sweden, he didn’t have a clue what I was talking about, but he sure turned scared. You saw his face, his eyes; he was scared. Why, Manny? What scared him?”

“I don’t know. But his own people think he’s Bruckner. The West Germans, our State Department, our own Navy, even the goddamned FBI, they all thinks that’s Bruckner; and the FBI never believes anything.”

“Well, they’re wrong, all of them. That guy’s a phony.”

“Whoa! You got any idea what you’re saying? What you’re *really* saying? A West German Admiral? NATO? A phony?” Manny shifted uncomfortably in his seat and leaned forward. “Mike, I wasn’t just sitting out in the hall killing time until Hennessey and Pedralski finished pounding on you in here. I made a couple of phone calls to Washington and there’s one real big freakin’ hole in your story. Bruckner’s U-boat wasn’t sunk off Sweden. They say it went down off Poland, hundreds of miles to the east.”

“Poland? That’s impossible,” Michael answered. “We went west from Königsberg for five, maybe six days, before he put me ashore on the south coast of Sweden. That’s where Person’s trawler found me. Off Sweden, not off Poland. How do you explain that?”

“Explain it? I can’t explain a goddamned thing about you! But while you say you were in Sweden, Bruckner was in a Russian POW camp. That’s what he says, and that’s what the Russians say too. So, if his U-boat didn’t sink off Poland, how the hell did he get back there and get himself caught by the Russians?”

Michael leaned forward, his black eyes blazing, trying to think. “What about the British? It was one of their bombers that sank his U-boat. Don’t they have records?”

Manny smiled. “Sure. Did they sink any U-boats in the Baltic about that time? You bet they did. But the Brits don’t know the U-boat numbers, and you don’t know the day it happened, much less where. So it comes down to, *you said, he said*, and you ain’t gonna win that one.”

Michael stared across the table, angry at Manny and his answer. “Manny, you saw that guy. Did he look like a battle-hardened U-boat commander to you? Christ, he almost wet his pants when I said *Sweden* and touched his shoulder.”

“He almost did at that,” Manny chuckled. “So what’re you gonna do now? Go after him again?”

“Go after him?” Michael reflected for a moment. “I don’t know. I didn’t get very far the last time, but I’ve got to do something.”

“They won’t let you within a mile of him now, Sport. Even if you did, what would it prove?”

“Prove? Well, at least you believe me now, don’t you?”

“Me? Yeah, Mike, I guess I do.”

“Then what are YOU going to do?”

“Me? You mean Manny Eismer or the New York City Police Department?”

“Is there a difference?”

“Fortunately for you, there is. Nobody wants to screw with a war hero, but nobody wants a big international incident either, especially our Navy and the State Department, so they’ll land on you hard if they hear you’re going after him. So stay away from him. If you can agree with that, then you can walk out the door. If not, a lot of people are going to be forced to take sides; and you’ll lose. Your choice, you got that?”

“Yeah, okay,” Michael reluctantly had to agree as he picked up the silver cigarette case. “But if I made this whole thing up, how do you explain this? And how do you explain me? Sweden? How could I have even gotten out of Germany?”

“I don’t know, Mike, I don’t know. Bruckner’s a German war hero. They haven’t got very many they can brag about, much less even talk about, so he’s big stuff over there. He’s also a big anti-Communist. McCarthy and J. Edgar Hoover love him and you know how that sells in Washington these days. That’s why the FBI won’t touch him. If I ask them again, they’ll start calling ME a communist. We even made a few backdoor contacts with the CIA. They talked to State and to the West Germans, but that’s all they’ll do. They don’t think much of your story, and neither does State, Defense, and for sure not the freakin’ West Germans.”

“I’m not nuts, Manny, and you know it.”

“No, I don’t think you are. But if he isn’t Bruckner, then he’s working for somebody, and I need a little time to figure out the who and the why. You got that? And we don’t need somebody rolling around the deck like a freakin’ loose cannon until we do.”

“Who says I’m rolling anywhere?”

“I’m not stupid. I’ve listened to you dance around this thing all morning and we both know you aren’t finished with it. You’re gonna go out and prove you are right, aren’t you?” Manny asked, but Michael said nothing. “Of course, you are; but he’s not going to tell you a damned thing. The only way you can prove you’re right and prove that U-boat is lying off Sweden is to go back there and find it.”

“Go back to Sweden?” Michael stared at him as he thought it over.

“Look, give me a little time; there’s some people I need to talk to. Maybe they can figure something out.”

“I thought you said the government wasn’t going to help me.”

“Well, maybe not *our* government,” Manny shrugged innocently. “So give me the rest of the day to see what I can learn.”

“Then you *do* believe me.”

“It’s like this,” Manny pushed his big gut up against the table. “If you’re wrong, who gives a shit? But if you’re right... Well, a whole lot of people will have a big problem on their hands. So stick around, kid. It can’t hurt, can it?”

“You aren’t charging me with anything?”

“Me? Nah. Neither are Hennessey or Pedralski. I don’t think they ever were.” Manny put his notebook away.

“Then, I can go?”

“Yeah. Besides, there’s somebody waiting for you downstairs.”

“Waiting for me?”

“Yeah, a really cute little thing named Leslie Hodge from Rock Creek, South Carolina. I spent some time talking to her before I came up here.”

“Leslie’s here? I told her...”

“Yeah, she said that’s what you’d say. And you, Michael Randall, are missing a few screws. She’s a sweetheart and she is very concerned about you.”

“I told her not to come up here.” He shook his head.

“Doesn’t look like she listens any better than my wife. So, here,” he said as he put a ten-dollar bill on top of the blue slip of paper. “I’m releasing you in her custody. Take her out for a late lunch on me. Go walk around the city. You’ll probably hate it; but meet me back here in front of the building at five, and we’ll talk some more. Okay?”

“Okay,” Michael answered with a thin smile. “I guess there’s no harm in staying long enough to have lunch.”

“No harm at all. And I’m looking forward to spending more time with Leslie, even if you aren’t.”

## Chapter 16

**Sucre, Bolivia**

It was nearly midnight. Señor Martin Perez, as he was now called, sat alone in the cavernous study of his grand chalet listening to a treasured pre-war recording of Lohengrin playing softly on the phonograph. The air was thin and crystal clear at this altitude, the moon full and bright, and the view magnificent. From his red-leather armchair, he could look through the tall, floor-to-ceiling windows and see the flickering lights of the old mining town of Sucre and the snow-capped peaks of the Andes beyond.

Wagner's music always put him in the proper mood to think and plot. What ever happened to that odd fellow Martin Bormann, he wondered. The Führer's secretary? He was a decent enough clerk, quiet and reclusive, but little more than a footnote to the historic events that swirled around him. They say he died in the flames and rubble of Berlin, running across the Weidenhammer Bridge ahead of the Russians. That was what everyone said. There were witnesses. They found bones and checked his dental records, so it must be true. A neat, clean ending to that sordid business. Finis. In the end, Hitler, Himmler, Goebbels, Bormann... all of them were dead. That was what everyone said.

He loved his new home with its high beamed ceilings, dark paneling, and crackling fires in its massive stone fireplaces. He had picked the spot himself almost twenty years before, on a Party trip to South America. It was on a steep slope where the Andes were their highest and most rugged. To make it perfect, he imported the finest German craftsmen to graft it onto the side of the mountain like a classic Swiss chalet, perched above the deep valley with views in three directions. Hundreds of acres of rocks, deep ravines, and impenetrable forest surrounded it; and there were only three ways anyone could get up to the house. One was via a narrow, dusty one-lane road that wound its way up the mountainside through dozens of switchbacks in full view of the keen eyes of his men at the top. The second was by the private airstrip carved onto the top of the hill behind the house. Only an expert pilot or a fool would dare a landing there; and anyone who came uninvited would be blown out of the air before his wheels touched down. The third was to climb hand over hand up the rugged mountainside from the valley below. Only the most venturesome would even try, because the penalty for being caught was a painful death.

Bolivia wasn't his first choice, but it was a good location from which to control his expanding international operations. The arid upland plateaus and unpaved roads made life hard for the native Indians who worked in the silver and copper mines that dotted the lower hills. Still, the country was incredibly beautiful. Wildflowers filled the high mountain meadows and the rushing waters reminded him of his own beloved Bavarian Alps, which he knew he would never see again. No amount of wishful thinking could ever turn Bolivia into Bavaria, or Sucre into Salzburg, but Bolivia had its advantages. The poor had no power or influence, and the wealthy—wealthy foreigners in particular—could buy all the power and influence they wanted from the revolving gang of Army colonels who controlled the place. Strangers stood out, and nosey strangers asking unwelcome questions found only silence and open hostility.

Yes, given where he started in late April 1945, no one could say Martin Bormann had done badly these past six years. His thin black hair was noticeably

thinner and grayer now, his round, rosy face was more wrinkled, but his determination was undiminished. It was by force of his will alone that the capital of his new empire had been carved from these crude South American peaks. From this red-leather chair, he could reach halfway around the globe and touch anyone. But he had no guns or tanks. His soldiers didn't wear black uniforms, death's-head insignias, or gaudy medals. They wore custom-tailored British suits, Italian shoes, and the finest Swiss watches. They could pass for prosperous Frankfurt bankers, lawyers, industrialists, and international money managers, which is precisely what they were; because his was a war of whispers where his battles were won or lost with gold marks, political influence, and thin, polite smiles. Intimidation? Violence? Murder? Not when he could use the convenient corporate tentacles of Thyssen, BASF, Bayer, Dresden Bank, Krupp, Hoechst, Zeiss, Mercedes, Siemens, Deutsche Bank, and many, many more where he had placed his money and key people years before.

Yes, Martin Bormann was still the undefeated master of the game. One by one, he had outmaneuvered each of his old rivals: Ribbentrop, Kaltenbrunner, Goebbels, Göring, even Himmler, but none of that gave him any satisfaction. They were the old guard. Strip away the bravado, the garish uniforms, and the jackboots, and all one found underneath were street thugs with no vision or focus. In time, even the Führer himself had become a liability. Other than official martyr, his only lasting contribution was his own death, which Bormann had so easily arranged. That allowed him to make a fresh start and bring up a new cadre of far better men. They were fierce, able adventurers like his personal aide, Heinz Kruger—smart, instinctive, and decisive. Like seeds, he planted them one by one and carefully nurtured them. Now the harvest was drawing nigh and it looked like it would be a bumper crop. Nothing could stop him now—nothing and no one.

Bormann picked up the small yellow slip of paper lying in his lap, and read it again from beginning to end. It was a radiogram from Seidlitz, his man in Bonn, who was quoting one of his agents. The man was a reporter traveling in America on special assignment; and he told a puzzling story about an incident in a hotel lobby in New York that very morning. Bormann read it word by careful word; but his eyes kept returning to the name in the subject line, Rear Admiral Eric Bruckner. Even after all these years, after all his many triumphs, that one name galled him — Eric Bruckner, and the U-582!

Like a worm in an apple, that damned submarine Kapitan had burrowed deep into Bormann's skull, and he wouldn't go away. Bruckner! The Reichsleiter stared at the paper, but he no longer needed to read the words. He knew them by heart, *"I'm with the Admiral on his trip to America... in New York City... in the hotel lobby a man yelled out from the crowd claiming he had been there the night the U-boat was sunk off Sweden... an American named Randall... will try to learn more."*

Try to learn more? Try? Bormann's eyes focused on that one word, Sweden. Sweden? Sweden! Indeed, we shall learn more, my good man. Indeed, Bormann vowed as he pressed the button on his intercom. "Lupe," he called to his Indian housekeeper. "Ask Señor Kruger if he would join me in my study, por favor."

Moments later, he sensed a powerful presence enter the room behind him, something raw and elemental like an icy draft on the back of one's neck on a cold winter's night. Without bothering to look up, Bormann knew it was Kruger. No

longer the bright-eyed boy, Kruger had aged like fine vintage wine, growing mellow and more subtle. Tanned and even more powerfully built now, he still had his distinctive blond hair and high Nordic cheekbones. The first hints of crow's feet might be showing at the corners of his eyes and mouth, yet Kruger could still cross a hardwood floor with the silent grace of a big cat.

Kruger took his usual position at the right side of Bormann's chair.

"You read the message, Heinz?"

"*Jawohl*, Herr Reichsleiter."

"Strange, isn't it? The words this fellow shouted at our old friend Bruckner. *Sweden*, the fellow said, *When the U-boat was sunk off Sweden*. And coming from the mouth of an American."

"Someone is toying with us, Herr Reichsleiter," Kruger answered. "Perhaps I should go see the Admiral and find out why?"

"You mean, pay him a *final* visit?" Bormann chuckled as he saw the hungry glint in Kruger's eyes. "Always the impatient one, Heinz; always the impatient one. Yes, you shall visit our old friend Bruckner, but not quite yet, not until I get some answers."

Kruger smiled. "You remember I have some unfinished business with him."

"Yes, from that trip you took to Königsberg, as I recall," Bormann snorted. "You may indulge yourself later, Heinz, *after* I get my U-boat back."

Bormann rose and walked over to the tall bank of windows that looked out across the valley to the snow-capped mountains. "In those last few months, I sent eight submarines across the Atlantic. They all made it, all except one. That one! Oh, don't misunderstand me, Heinz. This is not about the gold—well, not entirely, anyway. We've managed well enough over the years without that one shipment, but there is a principle involved. It's mine, and I want it back!"

He turned and glared at Kruger for emphasis, his face dark and sinister in the red glow of the fireplace. "When the U-582 never arrived, I assumed Bruckner and that gold were lost forever. I pictured it lying on the bottom of the North Atlantic after a desperate battle with an American destroyer, pounded to pieces by depth charges. Then in 1948, as if by a miracle, who should come strolling out of a Russian prisoner-of-war camp but our long-lost friend, Kapitanleutnant Eric Bruckner, risen from his watery grave."

"I would have loved to talk to him about that, Herr Reichsleiter."

"I'm sure, but all that fool would tell our people was that he was on a routine combat patrol in the Baltic when the Russians sank his submarine, nothing more, not even when the Navy questioned him. He claimed it was a Russian airplane, off the coast of Poland, near Danzig, not a day's sailing west of Königsberg. Damn the man! Off Poland, under the noses of the Russian Navy, where we cannot touch it. He says he was the only one got out, and never budged from the story we gave him that he was carrying nothing unusual and there was nothing in the torpedo rooms except torpedoes."

"What would you expect him to say?" Kruger shrugged. "He could hardly admit what he was really carrying, could he? The Americans would have called him a war criminal, the Russians would have thrown him in the Lubyanka, and we would have put a bullet in him."

“Indeed, Heinz. Indeed. But we have a serious inconsistency here,” Bormann turned his malevolent gaze on Kruger. “Was he sunk off Poland or off Sweden? Whom are we to believe? Bruckner, the Russians, or this American provocateur? Even the good Admiral could not be in two places at once.”

“As I said, Herr Reichsleiter, someone is toying with us.”

“Yes,” Bormann’s eyes turned hard. “But who? Bruckner is a West German Admiral now, a very powerful one. You know how I abhor waste. A man in his position in NATO and Bonn could be of great value to us, so I don’t want him killed, not yet.” Bormann looked Kruger over as he would a champion hunting dog, critically, but fondly. “Send a message to our people in Washington. I want to know everything there is to know about this American, Randall. Everything. Then, I want you to take a trip to New York.”

“*Jawohl*, Herr Reichsleiter,” Kruger made a slight bow, his eyes flashing in eager anticipation. “And then?”

“Find him, and make him talk. Learn who he works for, what he knows, and why he is saying these things about Bruckner. After that, you are free to amuse yourself, Heinz. After, but not before.”

## Chapter 17

### New York City

Sneaking out of a big hotel without being noticed is not particularly difficult, especially if it’s a large hotel like the Plaza, with a half-dozen exits and little security. It is even easier if you’ve been trained to do things like that. Still, even the simplest of espionage tasks has risks. After the fiasco that morning, there were many more police and FBI agents in the lobby and down on the street; and his face had been all over the New York City newspapers, greatly increasing his risk of being recognized. The guards would be looking for people sneaking in, however, not out. Without the uniform and the gold braid, no one should notice a gray, stoop-shouldered old man shuffling out the back door; or so he hoped.

This trip to America wasn’t something he wanted to make to begin with, and his nerves had been on edge ever since he left Germany. He was a coward and he hated to take risks, particularly unnecessary ones. When those reporters came at him in the lobby, it nearly destroyed what little confidence he had left. Moments later, when that American provocateur began shouting at him, asking about the U-boat and Sweden of all places, saying he was there, it pushed him over the edge. He panicked, and he couldn’t let that happen again. If he did, Varentsov would have him shot without a second thought.

So, who was this American? CIA? FBI? Another damned Israeli? Whichever, it was clear that someone was watching him. They were out to trick him, to catch him in a false step, and to trip him up over his legend. That was why he had to go out. He couldn’t sit in his hotel room and simply hope for the best. No, he had to find Radetsky and talk to him. Radetsky was his case officer, his handler, and he would know what to do.

All evening he sat alone in the hotel room with that damned American's words ringing in his ears. He tried to ignore them, but it was no use. Over the past three years, the pressure had taken its toll. He was out of shape, out of practice, and too damned scared to hope to get it right anymore. Not that he was ever very good at it. From that very first day in 1933, he told them he had no stomach for fieldwork. He begged and pleaded, but they wouldn't listen. His real name was Rudolph Friesemann, a simple bookkeeper and the son of a minor Communist official in Leipzig who fled to the Soviet Union before the war. All he wanted was a life of quiet anonymity, a simple staff job in Moscow where he could translate Nazi documents and make radio broadcasts. He was no spy, so how could those fools at the Center expect him to impersonate a dashing German U-boat captain? Bruckner had been a leader of men, a combat veteran with nerves of steel who had hunted the enemy on the high seas. Impersonate a man like that? The very idea was ludicrous.

Unfortunately, the MVD spymasters in Moscow never asked his opinion about that, or about anything else; especially that bald-headed bastard Varentsov, Deputy Chief of Foreign Intelligence. Friesemann had always been a good Party member in Leipzig. He paid his Party dues every month. He attended all the rallies. He marched in the streets on the holidays and knew the words to all the songs. He had even been beaten up by the Brown Shirts when he was a teenager. Moreover, Friesemann was a true believer. His father had grabbed the family and fled to Moscow in 1933 with Ulbrecht and what was left of the German Communist Party Central Committee when the Nazis came to power. They made themselves useful in Moscow and the Russians should have been satisfied. He wasn't cut out for field work. They should have left him at his desk job. When the war ended, Varentsov hatched a plan to flood Western Europe with agents, and he had other plans for even a mouse like Rudolph Friesemann.

Varentsov had his choice of tens of thousands of sailors, airmen, and German infantry troops who had been lost at sea, in the ice and drifting snow of the Eastern Front, or in the bottomless pits of the Gulag. They had seized the German Navy records when Berlin fell, records of real men who did not need to be invented. Soon, Varentsov found precisely what he had been looking for—a German U-boat that had gone down with all hands in the Baltic. Hundreds of German submarines had been lost in the war and precisely where didn't matter, since he had the only records and there was no one left to question them. The U-582 fit the bill perfectly. Its Kapitan had been apolitical and a highly decorated war hero. Few of his family had survived the war, and those who did were in the Eastern Zone, under the watchful eyes of the MVD. Friesemann was the right height and build. His head was the right size, and the plastic surgeons said his facial structure was almost a perfect match. So, on that day in 1948 when he stepped off the train in Vienna, Rudolph Friesemann, the mousey bookkeeper from Leipzig, ceased to exist, and Kapitan Eric Bruckner rose from the grave like the great god Neptune rising from the sea.

Neptune! It was the name that fat pig Varentsov gave him when he was stupid enough to argue with him one too many times. Still, Friesemann was right. A house mouse like him masquerading as a great war hero? No one who knew him in Moscow would ever believe it. But he was only one small part of Varentsov's



grand plan to infiltrate dozens of agents into the military and governmental structure of West Germany, and the Russian could not be dissuaded. A few successes were well worth any price, and the failures would leave the West Germans and their American masters believing Bonn was riddled with spies. That was why Varentsov wouldn't listen to Friesemann's arguments. This was the opportunity of a lifetime for an ambitious Russian spymaster determined to make his mark, no matter whom he killed in the process. If he succeeded, anything was in reach for him—Director of the Division, Chairman of the Committee, even a seat on the Politburo. For a prize like that, he'd risk a bookkeeper like Friesemann and a hundred like him. To ensure that Friesemann fully appreciated his position, the Russian took him on a personal tour of the torture cells of the Lubyanka. They were on the bottom level of MVD Headquarters in Moscow and reserved for only the most "special" cases. Friesemann would never forget the man's cruel laughter as it echoed through that cold, damp hell-hole.

"It is very simple," Varentsov told him. "You shall do exactly what I tell you and you shall keep doing it, or you will find yourself down here as my guest, Friesemann. When they have finally finished with you, it is off to a labor camp at Vorkuta, where you can die a slow, cold death chipping uranium ore from the permafrost with a dull pickaxe. Do you understand me, *Neptune?*"

It was 10:00 PM. Night had finally fallen and Friesemann staggered to the sink to splash cold water on his face. "Oh, God," he groaned when he saw the pale, haggard figure in the mirror before him. He had to grip the side of the sink to stop his hands from shaking. Not yet forty years old, he looked like an old man. Well, at least he wouldn't need any makeup to complete his disguise, not tonight; but he had no choice. He had to talk to his case officer, Dimitri Radetsky. That sly old fox Dimitri, he would understand and pull him out. The spotlight was on him now, and the holes in his legend would soon begin to show, no thanks to that damned American. Friesemann felt a sense of relief wash over him. This trip to the United States had been a horrible miscalculation, but that was Varentsov's fault. He would heap the blame on Friesemann, but it wasn't anything the German did. The hole was in the background story. Still, as Radetsky once told him with that soft, bittersweet smile of his, "Shit flows downhill, my dear Neptune. See to it that you aren't the only one at the bottom without a bucket." But Friesemann didn't care anymore; he was finished as an agent, and that was all that mattered. They'd be forced to pull him out and finally put an end to this hopeless charade. First, he had to find Radetsky.

The MVD had spent years creating this elaborate deception, adding layer upon layer like the thin veneer on a delicate Russian lacquered box, only to see it shatter into a million pieces by one shrill voice calling out to him in the hotel lobby. In his plaid shirt and blue jeans, the American looked ridiculous, like a pig farmer with mud on his boots. Ridiculous! Who would ever dress an agent like that? But could his story be true? Sweden. What had Moscow Center overlooked? Was it that simple? Sloppy, arrogant staff work? Or, had he blundered into a very clever American trap?

Friesemann stumbled around the hotel suite, knowing he had to keep moving. He slipped into an old pair of brown slacks, a cheap sweater, and the wrinkled

civilian raincoat he carried in the bottom of his suitcase. They were his escape clothes. He hid them there for the unthinkable of unthinkables—in case he had to cut and run and needed an improvised disguise. “Keep moving!” his brain screamed. If he paused for even an instant, he’d have a complete breakdown. He stumbled to the door and listened for footsteps in the hallway. Nothing. Slowly, he turned the knob and pulled the door open, a crack, no more, to peek outside. Still nothing, so he took the plunge. He pulled the raincoat around him and went out, heading straight for the fire stairs without daring to glance left or right. In five seconds, he was through the fire door and out of sight.

Friesemann flew down the stairs so fast he had to grab the banister with both hands to keep from falling. Flight after flight, he fought back waves of nausea until he ran headlong into a concrete wall. “My God!” he cried out. He had reached the bottom and he hadn’t even realized it. “Get control of yourself, man,” his brain screamed. “Stay calm!” But it did no good. Sweat rolled down his face as he yanked the fire door open and ran outside into the dark alley, fighting back the urge to bend over and throw up. No, that would be a dead giveaway, so he paused to take several deep breaths to clear his head. Finally, he began walking, one step at a time, until he reached the corner and turned up a side street. He quickened his pace and took a series of twists and turns, around one corner, then another, steadily heading south and west through the dark city streets. At each turn, he glanced back over his shoulder, terrified that he might actually see someone following him. If he had, Friesemann knew he’d fall over dead on the spot.

Ten agonizing minutes later, he saw an empty telephone booth on a deserted side street. Stepping inside, he dropped a few coins in the slot and his trembling finger dialed the number Radetsky had given him only a week before; confident he would never, ever need to use it. He let the telephone ring the prescribed three times, then hung up. Sixty seconds later, he dialed the same number again. When someone picked up at the other end, Friesemann’s voice cracked as he asked, “Is this Seventh Avenue Appliances? When can I pick up the order for...?” He paused as he read the sign on the dark storefront across the street. “Mid-State Imports,” he said slowly and clearly. “Yes, yes, the order for Mid-State Imports, the one over on Third Avenue.” He cringed, realizing how badly he had fumbled his way through the pick-up convention.

“What?” a man’s confused, accented voice replied. “Seventh Avenue Appliances? This is no store. You have wrong number,” he said as he slammed the phone down.

A sense of relief washed over him. He had done his part, lamely perhaps, but it was done and now he could wait for Radetsky to pick him up. Good old Dimitri! Safe, reliable, Dimitri, the father confessor of wayward spies. He’d make everything right, if he would only hurry. With Friesemann’s luck, a new Code Clerk Second Class was on duty, some clod who slept through his ciphers class and hadn’t even bothered to read the orders of the day. The vaunted MVD? The German knew better; he’d seen the slow-footed Soviet spy apparatus close-up and knew better. But as he glanced nervously up and down the street, he realized that in his haste he’d picked a bad spot. The street was too dark, too deserted; there was very little traffic; and there were no pedestrians. A car picking up a man on foot would stand out, and Radetsky would mark him down for that.

“Oh, my God,” he began to tremble when he saw a large dark automobile turn the corner two blocks away and come slowly up the street with its headlights pointed straight at him. He held his breath as the car swung to the curb and stopped in front of the phone booth. It was a dark blue Buick, the right color and model. Its rear door opened and Friesemann darted out of the phone booth, leaped into the back seat, and burrowed into the corner where the seat met the door. The car quickly drove away, and a sense of physical relief washed over him in wave after calming wave. He closed his eyes, wishing he could melt into the leather seat cushions, forgetting even the most basic things. Quickly, he sat up and looked back through the rear window to see if he’d been followed.

“Do not worry, Neptune. You weren’t,” he heard an all-too-familiar voice lash at him from the other side of the car. “No thanks to your monumental stupidity!”

Friesemann’s heart stopped. It was Varentsov, not Radetsky, and the German’s sense of relief turned instantly to stark terror. Without looking, he saw the round face, the beady little eyes, and the sharp teeth that had taunted him since his first days of training. “I... I was supposed to be meeting Radetsky, where is he?” Friesemann whispered, his voice breaking. “Radetsky is my case officer, not you. I demand to see Radetsky.”

“Demand? You *demand*?”

“I... I mean, he’s my handler... he was supposed to come for me.”

“Yes, I’m sure he was. But you would have a very one-sided conversation. You see, poor Dimitri’s ‘health’ took a sudden turn for the worse over the weekend. You know how that can happen in our line of work. Life is so unpredictable, so... unforgiving. That’s why I had to come here myself to wet nurse our daring Neptune through an operation once again.” The man was the devil himself and the German knew he could never match wits with Varentsov. The man could read minds. He could smell fear. He would pick Friesemann apart, one tiny lie and blunder at a time.

“I’m confident you have a good reason for calling me out in the middle of the night, Neptune. In addition to ruining a fine dinner, you put yourself in the gravest of danger, begging the FBI to follow you. Is that what you wanted? To leave a trail of breadcrumbs for them to follow, so they can catch you, then catch me and roll up our entire network here in New York. Is that what you wanted, to ruin me and bring me down?”

“No, no, didn’t you hear what happened at the hotel this morning?”

“Of course I heard; I heard how you mumbled and stumbled and fell to pieces.”

“That American, he said the U-boat was sunk off Sweden. Sweden! You realize what that means, don’t you, comrade Varentsov?”

“No, tell me, Neptune. Tell me what it means,” the Russian said, sounding like a pedantic schoolteacher at the end of a long, hot day.

“They are onto me. That business about Sweden? There must be a hole in the Neptune legend. You must pull me out. Can’t you see my cover is blown?”

Varentsov stared at him. If Friesemann hoped to find any help there, he was sadly mistaken. “Neptune, Neptune,” he answered quietly. “You should be honored. Someone went to a great deal of trouble to stage that marvelous performance for you this morning. The whole thing was for your benefit, and such a clever twist. Total nonsense of course, but a very clever twist.”

"The man saw right through me. He *knew* I wasn't Bruckner," Friesemann begged. "The way he looked at me. He knew; he knew!"

"You still don't get it, do you?" Varentsov shook his head. "It was the way you looked at *him*, you fool! You played right into his hands; you panicked, and you ran. If they really knew you weren't Bruckner or if the Americans had the slightest shred of proof you are one of my agents, they would have grabbed you by the balls and hauled you away. You'd be in one of the FBI's prison cells right now, singing your lungs out."

"No, I swear I wouldn't!" the German pleaded.

"Stop your blubbing. Even a fool like you can see that the Americans aren't the ones behind this provocation. It is the Jews. They jabbed you with a sharp stick to see if your right arm would snap up with a loud *Sieg Heil*, and you were stupid enough to fall right into their trap. The Zionists are incensed that any German would be given a top NATO post and they are out to destroy you. The Americans are nothing. It's the Zionists you should be concerned about... and, of course, you should be concerned about me."

"But Comrade..."

"But nothing. I created the Bruckner legend, and there are no holes in it. None! He was as pure as driven snow, a war hero with no Nazi ties. His U-boat vanished somewhere in the Baltic shortly after it left Königsberg and no one knows where it is. No one! So what can they prove? Nothing!"

The German began to tremble. "You must pull me out, Comrade Varentsov. I'm not cut out for this kind of work. I try; I try, but my nerves... I just can't take it, I can't take it anymore. You must pull me out."

"Out? You mean out, like old Radetsky went out?"

Friesemann saw it was hopeless. Varentsov would never let go now that he had his hooks in him. "But Comrade," he begged. "Surely you see they will keep probing, digging and picking at me, asking more and more questions that I cannot answer. You must stop them. You must stop that American."

"Stop him? Stop him?" Varentsov sounded amused as he toyed with him. "There are many ways to *stop* a man, Neptune. Do you want me to kill him? Is that what you're asking? Maybe something subtle, like poison in his food? Or a quick whiff from a poison gas pen? No, like a good German, you want me to walk up and put a bullet in the back of his head. After all, this is New York, and I am sure no one would notice." Varentsov's eyes raked him. "Well, if that's what you want, you're a bigger fool than I thought. The man is undoubtedly an Israeli agent and he'll be guarded."

"But what am I to do?" Friesemann pleaded.

"Do? You'll do precisely what you always do—nothing! If you get questions, brush them aside. You are Rear Admiral Eric Bruckner of the German Navy. So act like it, with typical German arrogance. As long as you do, and as long as you believe it, everyone around you will believe it too. If you stop believing it, if you stop playing the part for even a second, your lies will be as transparent as window glass."

"But the American knew! He looked me in the eyes and..."

"Enough! Tomorrow you'll leave here for Washington and on Saturday, you'll get on your airplane and return to Germany as if nothing happened. But this is

precisely the opportunity I've been waiting for. When you get home, I want you to contact your 'other' friends, the ones who wore silver death's-head insignias on their uniforms."

"The SS?" Friesemann stammered in disbelief. "That is insane! You want me to get mixed up with the SS? Think of the risks..."

Varentsov's eyes narrowed and Friesemann knew he had made another mistake. "Neptune, if you dare question my orders again, you will make another visit to the basement of the Lubyanka, and this time you won't be coming back up. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, yes, you are correct, of course, Comrade Varentsov," he stammered. "One of my other tasks was to observe the Fascists and infiltrate their network if I could. You are absolutely correct. The hour is late, and I was wrong in my reaction."

Varentsov let him sweat a bit longer before he said, "That first year, after you returned to Germany, I always felt the Nazis kept an unusually close watch on you, but I never understood why. They asked numerous questions about your submarine and how it was sunk, but they never made any serious attempt to recruit you. That never made sense to me. Now we have the perfect opportunity to find out why."

"Yes, Comrade Varentsov. I see what you mean now."

"I'm sure you do," Varentsov shot him a look of withering contempt. "Tell them that this American is blackmailing you with some horrible tales about war crimes. That's a story they'll accept easily enough. Better still, sound worried, as if it might actually be true. You can be embarrassed and circumspect, but hint that you sank a hospital ship, maybe a passenger liner, or you machine-gunned sailors in the water. They'll like that even more. Then you can ask them to 'stop' this American for you. That will put you in their debt, so they'll jump at the chance, I guarantee it."

"Yes, of course," Friesemann nodded woodenly. "I'll make the call."

"Good," Varentsov dismissed him with a disgusted wave of his hand. "Now, scurry back to your hotel, 'Herr Admiral.' And you take care, take very good care; because if you make one more mistake, one more false step, it will be your last."

## Chapter 18

The early morning breeze in Central Park cooled their hot skins as Michael and Leslie jogged along the broad, winding footpath that ran around the lake. This was the third morning they had gone for a run in Central Park, mostly because there wasn't much else for them to do. Manny said he would be back with some answers; but the late lunch that day ended up with the fat cop putting them up in a small mid-town hotel for a night, then for another night, and then a third. There had been that awkward moment when Manny called the hotel and asked for a room for two, and Michael had to correct him and insist on two rooms; but Manny's concerns were over security, while Michael's ran deeper. Leslie just thought it was funny. "You and me, this is getting awkward, isn't it?" she

whispered when Manny was at the desk. But that was how they ended up in a two-bedroom suite in a nondescript hotel on the upper west side with a quickly arranged security guard in the lobby.

Awkward? That wasn't exactly how he would have put it. Frustrating was more like it. Sharing a hotel suite wasn't much different from the two bedrooms in her father's small house in South Carolina, except this one had air conditioning. That didn't make it any easier when he lay in bed thinking about her, unable to fall asleep. So Michael channeled his frustrations into long runs in Central Park and the Upper East Side; and Leslie came along, probably to make sure he came back.

The winding walkways, patches of grass, shrubs, trees, and flowers helped him forget and pound out some of the anger that kept flaring up inside. Rhythm—that had always been the key. Synchronize the breathing. Measure each stride. Pump the arms like pistons. Feel it. Lose yourself in the rhythm... and forget. Forget the phony admiral in the hotel lobby. Forget the U-boat. Forget Königsberg. Forget Bruckner. Forget Eddie Hodge. Forget the anger. And forget the guilt. Sometimes it worked. Not today, though. Today, the anger and guilt were too damned strong for him to forget anything. All he saw was the fear hiding behind the eyes of that imposter in the hotel lobby. The "Admiral" looked like a cockroach caught on the kitchen floor when the lights came on, and that made Michael even angrier. Were Manny and the Washington brass protecting the German? Was that what was really going on here? All Michael needed was five minutes alone with him—five minutes and a pair of pliers—and he'd rip the truth out.

Unfortunately, the "Admiral" had left New York two days before and moved on to Washington for more meetings, tours, and dinners, and he would be flying back to Bonn that evening. There was a photo in the Times of him standing in front of the US Capitol looking cool and calm, as if nothing had happened.

"They're letting that bastard slip away without making him explain a damned thing, aren't they?" Michael shouted at Manny. "I knew it!" The fat ex-cop had stopped by to see them and found Michael packing. "We are wasting our time here," Michael announced as he pointed at the newspaper story open on the bed. "There's a train to DC in an hour. If I hurry, I can still catch him at the airport."

"No you can't. He's taking a military flight out of Andrews. They'll never let you through the gate."

Michael stopped and glared at him, then threw his last shirt in the bag. "Okay, fine, you've kept me here long enough so he can get away. I guess that was the plan all along, wasn't it?"

"That isn't what I was doing, Mike. Look..."

"Fine! I'll go by myself. My fault. I never should have let you keep me here; I should have gone after him two days ago."

"Then what? End up in a DC jail? Patience, my friend, a little patience."

"Patience? What about those 'friends' you told me about?"

"They're working on it. Gimme another day or two, huh?" Manny argued. "You won't regret it."

That was the most Manny would offer, but what choice did Michael really have? None. So he stayed for another day and went running with Leslie in the park. Still, the more he thought about the problem, all he got were more questions—questions, frustration, and more anger.

“Hey, slow down!” Leslie’s pained voice called out from behind him as she labored to catch up. “Remember me? I’m the blonde with the short legs.”

“I’m sorry, Les. My mind was somewhere else and I forgot,” he answered as he slowed to a walk.

“Yeah, you forgot; nothing new about that. You’re sprinting again, damn it!”

“Such language,” he turned to face her. “Do you kiss your father with that mouth?”

Her eyes narrowed as she stopped next to him and gave him a look that could peel paint. “Kiss my father?” She stepped closer and poked him hard in the chest. “Kiss my father? You’re really looking for trouble, aren’t you?”

She had the same eyes her older brother had, but she was taller, more filled out, and one hell of a lot better looking, especially standing there in a sweaty tee shirt and shorts. Finally, he put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her closer. “Sorry, Les. Sorry,” he said. She put her arm around his waist and her hand on his chest, and they walked up the path for a while like that.

“We need to do this more often,” she told him, but he offered no reply.

He felt as if he was falling off a cliff and there was absolutely nothing he could do to stop it. He was hopelessly in love with her. “If Manny doesn’t come up with something soon, we’re taking the train back south tomorrow.”

“Anywhere you want, as long as you take me with you.”

“I thought we were going to talk about that later,” he grumbled.

“Okay. I can wait as long as you can, but don’t go running off and forget about me again, okay? I can put up with a lot of things, but not your forgetting about me. And by the way,” she stopped and made him look at her. “I’ve decided I’m not sleeping alone anymore; so plan on moving over tonight, because I’m coming in.”

“That’s not a good idea, Les.”

“It is to me. But we don’t actually have to DO anything, if you don’t want to.”

“Don’t worry, we won’t!”

“You know I never have, but I don’t care anymore,” she looked away, embarrassed. “I need to have you close. Can you understand that?”

“And how long do you think that’s going to last?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care. I’m not going to spend another night in the same house or some hotel suite with a wall between us anymore. And you don’t need to worry, Daddy knows all about it; I told him we’re sleeping together.”

“You did? And what did he say?”

“Daddy? He laughed and asked whether you knew about it. So, if you don’t want anything to happen, you’ll just have to control yourself.”

“It isn’t controlling *me* that I’m worried about,” he mumbled.

“Michael, just shut up. Do you have any idea how hard it is for me to say things like this? But it isn’t your decision anymore. I don’t know what happened to you or why. It probably has to do with the war and with Eddie; but you can’t seem to decide, so you’ve lost your chance. It’s my decision now.”

“Leslie,” he said in frustration. “You don’t want me. I’m damaged goods.”

“No, you’re not. I had plenty of boyfriends back home, the pick of the County, and I think I know a whole lot more about guys than you know about girls. Having you all to myself in the house and out in the boat every day, both of us on good behavior; well, that was good enough down there, but it’s not good enough

anymore, and it has nothing to do with Eddie. I'm a grown woman, Michael, and I know what I want. I know what you want, too; so stop trying to talk both of us out of it."

"Leslie, it's dangerous here. You should go back home 'til it's over."

"No! I can take care of myself, and I'm not leaving you." She took his hand and they set off running again but at a slower pace and side by side this time. It was the same path they took the two previous days, through the trees and open fields next to one of the main roads that looped through Central Park. Eventually, it brought them back to Fifth Avenue, where they sprinted across the street, dodging between the fast-moving cabs and buses, and then turned up a tree-lined street with brownstones on each side. Two blocks up, the street ended at a small neighborhood park, where they would turn and head back south to the hotel. There was a short-cut down a narrow alley that passed behind a row of restaurants and butcher shops. It was cool and dark. The old brick walls trapped the rich aromas from the previous night's cooking, and the long lines of trashcans and dumpsters drew every cat in the neighborhood. These weren't small house tabbies, either. They were big, raw-boned alley cats who defended their turf with loud hisses and flashing claws. Maybe they weren't so different from the humans who shared the city, Michael laughed. It wasn't always the big ones that got the best pieces; it was the hard, lean ones who saw what they wanted and took it. The others had to settle for leftovers.

But as Michael and Leslie neared the alley that morning, someone had parked a blue delivery van across the entrance, nearly blocking their way. Michael slowed and let Leslie go on ahead as they dodged around the van's rear bumper. As he did, he nearly collided with a man standing in the shadows. He looked to be an artist, a painter, holding a brush in his hand as he bent over an easel. The man had his back to them and a wide-brimmed straw hat on his head. Other than a fringe of blond hair beneath the hat, Michael never got a look at him as he ran past and entered the alley. Odd, Michael wondered, ignoring the faint peal of an alarm bell going off in his head; why would anyone paint back here in the shadows? But the thought quickly passed.

Heinz Kruger remained bent over his easel, allowing the two joggers to pass before he took a quick glance up and down the street. Nothing. No police cars. Better still, no unmarked government cars and no watchers or minders; nothing but the morning honks and roars of a big city going to work. Perfect. He tossed the easel through the van's open side door and fixed a hard stare on the Spaniard behind the steering wheel. His name was Esteban. He was fidgeting and sweating, clearly coming apart at the seams. Another goddamned amateur, Kruger swore to himself, and not to be trusted.

"Stay here!" the German threatened as he pulled a 7.65 Walther PP automatic from the bottom of his paint box. It had a long, well-used silencer screwed to the end of the barrel. Even with the silencer, the Walther made a noticeable bark when fired, but it was unlikely that anyone would hear it in the alley. Still, the silencer looked positively wicked and that was its main purpose— to intimidate. "I'll be back with Sanchez and the American in a minute or two, and you had better be here, ready to go, when I do!"



“Damn that Steinhuber!” Kruger cursed under his breath. He was supposed to be Bormann’s top man in America. The Reichsführer ordered him to send two of his best operatives to meet Kruger on the docks in Philadelphia, where they took crew billets on an old tramp steamer making a quick trip up to New York to unload some cargo. His best men? They were Spaniards, supposedly combat veterans from Franco’s army in Spain. Combat veterans? This one, Esteban, had his fingers wrapped so tightly around the steering wheel that his knuckles were white. The other one was a fat lout named Sanchez. He was even worse. Old and slow, the only good thing about him was he was too stupid to be afraid.

The hired help aside, Kruger had a bad feeling about this operation from the very beginning. It was slapped together without adequate planning, but Bormann refused to wait. Call it an infantryman’s sixth sense, but Kruger knew in the pit of his stomach that the smart play was to back off. They should watch the American for another day and wait for a better opportunity; but Bormann wouldn’t hear of a delay. Besides, an SS officer never retreats once he has committed, especially from two unarmed joggers in a back alley.

As soon as Randall and the blonde woman entered the alley, Kruger realized he had made a serious mistake. He should have placed himself at the far end of the alley, instead of relying on that idiot Sanchez to stop them. But if Kruger had done that, he would be leaving the two Spaniards back here with the van and his only means of escape. That would have been infinitely more stupid. Damn that Sanchez! How difficult could it be to stop the American, he kept asking himself. Kruger had given him a second Walther with a silencer. Randall had a woman with him and all Sanchez had to do was point his pistol at her, make Randall stop, and hold them there until Kruger arrived. Thirty seconds was all it should take. Kruger told Sanchez that Randall was not to be harmed, not yet anyway, not until he got him inside the van and had the chance to ask him a few pointed questions. Yes, he grinned, he would pry the secrets out of that cursed American’s head, slowly, one by one, while the Spaniards amused themselves with the girl. Sanchez would love that.

So, Kruger turned and began jogging up the alley behind them, his Walther dangling casually at his side. It would be so simple, he thought, until he heard the unmistakable Pop! Pop! of a silenced automatic up ahead and a bullet grazed the wall next to him.

“That fool!” Kruger swore as he took cover in a doorway.

Leslie and Michael jogged side by side up the center of the alley, exchanging wary glances with the gang of big cats perched on the trashcans. The cats arched their backs and hissed, but it was all bluff. Puff yourself up. Show some teeth and claws. Cats or people, that was all it usually took; but the smile froze on Michael’s face when a thick stump of a man stepped into the alley not twenty feet ahead of them. The man’s skin was dark, and he had a thick mat of oily salt-and-pepper hair. Arab? Greek? Mexican? Hard to tell in that light, not that it mattered. The gunman held a semi-automatic pistol in his hand. That ruled out the Welcome Wagon, and the silencer at the end of the barrel ruled out a simple mugging.

As the guy raised the automatic toward them, Michael wrapped his arms around Leslie, picked her up, and dove over the row of trashcans next to them,

and not a second too soon. He twisted in the air, and landed behind a small flip-top dumpster as he heard a muffled Pop! Pop! as bricks shattered in the wall behind him. They exploded in a cloud of red dust and sharp shards of cracked clay. He twisted in the air and landed hard on his back on the asphalt with Leslie on top. He continued rolling until he had her pressed up against the wall, where she couldn't get up, but all he got for his efforts was a sharp elbow in the ribs.

Maybe he had had too many guns pointed at him for too many years during the war, but something inside him snapped and he was determined to hit back. Leslie kept trying to wiggle free, but that was something he wasn't going to let happen. "Stay down!" he whispered sharply, hoping she would listen, but that had always been a long-shot at best. Still, as long as they were screened by the dumpster, the fat gunman couldn't see them. They were out of his line of fire for the moment at least, but they were trapped back there with no way out. Maybe he could make a run for it and draw the fat guy's attention away from Leslie, but in the end, what good would that do? If the fat guy was any kind of shot at all, Michael would end up dead and the gunman would come back and shoot Leslie just as quickly. No, like it or not, the only way out was through the guy.

There was a gap between the dumpster and a trashcan. Michael saw that the big oaf appeared nervous. Maybe he was as new at this ambush thing as they were. He tried scaring them and shooting at them; but that didn't work. He dropped into a crouch and took a first uncertain step forward, then another, waving that big cannon back and forth, blustering and threatening as he came. "*Sal de ahi! Sal de ahi!*" "Come out of there," he said in Spanish, not in Arabic or Greek, forcing a toothy smile as he tried to sound friendly.

Michael saw the Spaniard raise the automatic again and fire another round. The bullet cut a deep gouge in the bricks above Michael's shoulder, dusting him with even more red clay. Good, Michael thought, he's getting frustrated. That made three misses, but it wasn't likely he'd miss with all six. Michael heard a shuffling of feet on the other side of the dumpster and the gunman edged even closer, trying to see over the top. Clearly, the clown wasn't very smart. He could end it in a heartbeat if he circled around the cans and came in from behind, but he didn't. That gave Michael a thin sliver of hope.

Leslie jabbed an elbow into his ribs as she tried to get up, but Michael shoved her back down on the muddy ground and leaned on her. "Michael! What are you..." she mumbled into the wall, furious at him; but he kept her pinned there anyway. Quickly and quietly, his hands skimmed across the rough pavement searching for a weapon, something, anything! But all he found was a rotten head of lettuce and a bent soup ladle.

"Come out, my friend. And bring that little *Put*a out here with you," the fat gunman called to him in heavily accented English. "I'll be nice, honest."

"*Put*a? Did you hear what he called me? I know what that means," Leslie mumbled as she got one arm free, grabbed the head of rotten lettuce from the pavement and threw it over the trashcan at the gunman. She wasn't even close, but the head of lettuce banged into a trashcan on the other side of the alley, and that was all it took to stampede the cats. They'd ignored the diving bodies, the muffled gunshots, and even the shattering bricks; but assaulting one of their trashcans was another thing altogether. They howled and took off running,

determined to put as much distance between themselves and these crazy humans as they could. The pack dashed around the Spaniard, screeching and howling with their sharp teeth bared and claws flailing. A particularly large one ran right between the fat guy's legs, and that really spooked him. He turned the gun on the cats and began firing, screaming at them in rapid-fire Spanish.

Michael knew this might be his last chance. He drew his legs underneath him and jammed his shoulder into the side of the dumpster as if it were a tackling sled in high-school football. With a loud scraping noise, the rusty dumpster powered about three feet into the alley and then began to tip over. The Spaniard stood not more than two feet away, his head turned, yelling at the cats, and with that first quick look, Michael knew he had him. The gunman heard the loud scrape, but too late. His eyes turned as big as saucers as the dumpster began tipping over on him. If he had the presence of mind to ignore it, turn the gun on Michael, and pull the trigger, the American would be dead, but he was too stupid and too slow to do that. Instead, the gunman reached his hands out to stop the dumpster from coming down on him; and that sealed his fate.

The dumpster knocked the guy down and Michael jumped over the top, throwing himself on the Spaniard. After years of pent-up rage, it was no contest. Michael hit him with a straight right, dead on the button, with his shoulder behind it. That first punch should have been enough to put him down for the count, but it did not. The gun dropped from his hand and clattered harmlessly on the pavement, the guy's knees buckled, and he wobbled backward, but somehow the fat guy continued standing there. Michael hit him again, even harder, catching him high on the cheekbone this time, and staggered him backward. His eyes glazed over, but he still didn't go down. He shook his head and his eyes cleared, then he came lumbering forward toward Michael, intent on killing him with his bare hands if he had to.

That was just fine with Michael, too. They were four feet apart when he motioned to the fat gunman, "Come on!" he said, looking for another opening. That was when he heard the muffled *Pop!* of another silenced gun shot. This time, it was coming from behind them at the far end of the alley. This new bullet zipped past Michael's shoulder and put a neat red hole in the center of the Spaniard's forehead. A headshot? The fat Spaniard's eyes rolled up in his head and he toppled over backward like a felled tree. But before he even hit the pavement, Michael heard the quick *Pop! Pop!* of two more silenced gunshots.

Leslie had rolled over and was starting to get up. Michael jumped back behind the trashcans, pushed her back down, and shielded her with his body. It had to be that bastard with the blue van, the painter, Michael realized as his fingertips skimmed across the rough concrete trying to find the Spaniard's pistol. It had fallen on the pavement in the middle of the alley and had been kicked this way, so it had to be back here somewhere, he knew. Finally, his fingers touched the long gun barrel. He grabbed it, pointed the automatic in the general direction of the alley entrance, and pulled the trigger. Once, then a second time, and a third until it clicked empty. He did not aim, he did not count, and he had no idea who or what he was shooting at; but doing it felt damned good anyway.

## Chapter 19

After the two bullets the Spaniard had fired whizzed past him, Kruger watched in total disbelief as the struggle unfolded down the alley. “That damned fool, Sanchez!” he swore as he ducked into a doorway. An unarmed man and a woman in exercise clothes? The whole thing should have been over in seconds. Instead, the fat Spaniard was in trouble, and Kruger was too far away to help. Then Kruger heard a third gunshot and another bullet ricocheted off the soft brick nearby. That fool! He was supposed to take the American alive, not kill him, and now Kruger could only watch in disgust as his plan spiraled out of control. He did not hesitate. He took three long strides down the alley to close the distance, dropped to one knee, extended his pistol with both hands, took careful aim, and squeezed off a single shot. Unlike Sanchez, Kruger did not miss. His bullet went exactly where he aimed it—dead center in the bloated cow’s forehead. Kruger felt no pity. Sanchez had been a minimally useful ally and an increasing liability. Now, he was a corpse.

Kruger could have easily shot the American if he wanted to, but Bormann wanted answers, not revenge. That stupid Sanchez! If he had only followed orders, it would have been easy to grab them both; but now, the opportunity was lost. Worse still, the element of surprise was gone. Those were all good reasons to pull the trigger, but Kruger took the shot because he was addicted to the high he got from taking another life, from snuffing it out. It started early in the war when he saw his first combat. That was his coming of age, his awakening. What was it that fool Bruckner asked him in Königsberg? “Where do they get people like you?” Well, he chuckled, “they” did not “get” him, they forged him in the awful blast furnace they called the Eastern Front.

Before the Walther even finished its recoil, he tracked the barrel across until it was dead center on Randall’s back, right between his shoulder blades. He knew he was not allowed to squeeze the trigger, but for that one split second, he dreamed about putting a bullet into that meddlesome American’s spine. Instead, he raised the barrel a hair and whistled two rounds past the meddling American’s ear, content for the moment to watch him roll on the pavement in the garbage and dirt. Partially satisfied, Kruger turned and sprinted back toward the van. That was when he heard the cough of a silencer behind him. A bullet creased the brick wall less than a foot from his head, and he felt a searing pain across his cheek. Raising his hand to the side of his face, he felt something warm and wet. Blood! A shard of brick had sliced across his left cheek. When Kruger saw his own blood, red and wet on his fingers, the world around him flashed white-hot. It was that damned American again! He had actually shot at him and drawn blood! Kruger had never been wounded, even during the long months on the Eastern Front. Over time, the young SS officer had come to believe he really was bulletproof. So seeing his own blood on his fingers left him shaken.

Without thinking, Kruger spun around and pointed his automatic back down the alley and found Randall. His hand shaking with rage, Kruger tightened his finger on the trigger. He wanted to kill the American right there and then, Bormann be damned; but at the last instant, he stopped. He couldn’t do that, not

yet; so he fired two more shots down the center of the alley aiming just high enough to miss but low enough to keep their heads down. Kruger let his gun hand drop to his side. He would permit the American to live this time, but he owed him two now, and Heinz Kruger always paid his debts.

Long after those last two bullets zipped overhead, Michael continued to lie on top of Leslie. The dead gunman's body was only a few feet away in the center of the alley facing Michael, his cheek in the dirt, his mouth hanging open, with a neat hole in the center of his forehead. Michael tried to get up, but Leslie wrapped her arms around his waist and held him there. "Leslie!" He tried to get up again, but she would not let go.

"Are you crazy?" she said, looking at the dead gunman. "You see his forehead? That guy's a crack shot, and you aren't going anywhere!"

"If I didn't know better, I'd think you planned this."

"No, too much dirt, too much noise, and no privacy... and a dead body," she told him, as they heard fresh gunshots out in the street followed by the squeal of automobile tires, the shattering of glass, and the loud crash of metal.

"Sounds like the party's just begun," he said as she released her death grip on him and he got to his feet. Well, whoever it is, they weren't using silencers, he thought, as he looked down the alley and saw the blue van speed away

Leslie held out her arms. "Are you going to help me up?"

"Depends. You gonna behave?" he asked, looking down at her, their eyes meeting.

"I never make promises I have no intention of keeping," she answered, still holding her arms out, still looking up at him. Finally, he caved in and reached down, taking her hands and pulling her up to her feet. She started brushing the mud and garbage off her shirt and shorts, but it was all over her hands. "Oh, yuck!" she said as she turned her head and looked over her shoulder at her backside where it was even worse.

Michael tried to help, not quite knowing where to brush. Her tee shirt and shorts were wet, and her skin was hot and sweaty from running. He fumbled around, avoiding the softer parts, but he couldn't even do that right.

"You're only making it worse."

"Well, I'm kind of handicapped here."

"You've got that right!" she laughed. "But I guess you haven't touched too many girls lately, have you?"

"I've been a little busy."

"Daddy's right; you've got a lot of catching up to do, Michael Randall." She grabbed his hand and they began jogging back up the alley toward the street. They were almost to the entrance when Michael saw a trail of dark, wet drops on the asphalt. He stopped and bent down, wiping some of it up with his finger for a closer look. "What is it?" Leslie asked.

"Blood, and it's fresh."

"Maybe you hit him."

"Maybe, but there isn't enough here for any serious damage."

They ran the rest of the way back to the street and turned the corner, only to run bump into the front grill of a gray sedan. It sat half on the sidewalk with its

front end angled in against the building, and half sticking out into traffic. Its front doors hung open and there were three bullet holes punched through the windshield. The driver sat on the sidewalk, still hiding behind the fender. His face was cut by flying glass and his shirt was spattered with blood as he leaned over and threw up on the tire. On the passenger side, Manny Eisner knelt behind the other front door reloading his snub-nosed police special. In the middle of the street sat a pair of NYPD squad cars that had crashed head-on, leaving a fender, bits of broken plastic, and shattered glass strewn across the street.

"Here, Gino," Manny said as he tossed his handkerchief across the car hood to the driver. "It's a damned good thing that thirty-eight of yours only has six shots, or you'd have missed him a couple of more times." Disgusted, Manny reached inside the car and grabbed the radio handset. "This is Eisner, the prick got away in a blue van heading west. Be careful, he's armed to the teeth, and the son-of-a-bitch can shoot."

Manny dropped the handset on the front seat and looked over at Michael and then at Leslie, eyeing them both from head to foot. "Amazing! As bad as we screwed this thing up, I figured we'd find you two belly-up in the alley," he said, frowning as he saw the dirt and garbage. "You okay, cutie pie?"

"We're fine," Michael answered for them. "Just tell us you got him."

"Got him?" Manny snorted, "I hardly saw him."

"But he was right here! Did you at least get a look at him?"

"You were in the freakin' alley with him. Did you?" Michael shook his head no. "All I saw was a flash of blond hair. After that, I was praying to the door handle." Manny slammed his fist on the car. "It's all my fault. That freakin' van blocking the alley shoulda been a dead giveaway. *No big deal*, I told Gino; but as soon as we pulled over to check it out, that bastard came around the corner blasting. Next thing I know, Gino and I are on the pavement; and that blue van is long gone around the corner."

Michael looked at Leslie and felt the anger building inside. "You were using us for bait, weren't you? That's why you didn't want me to leave, isn't it?"

"You're the one who wanted answers. We couldn't go after them, but we figured somebody might make a move and come after you."

"And you didn't tell me?"

"You had to act natural, and we thought we had you covered."

"Me, yes, but Leslie was there with me. You had no right..."

"Hey, you're the one who brought her along," Manny answered.

"I brought myself along!" Leslie countered. "And I'm here because I want to be."

Manny looked at both of them in turn and finally shook his head. "Look, I'm sorry, Mike. You too, Leslie. We screwed up, big time."

Michael shook his head, furious with Manny but tempering his anger with the sure knowledge that Manny was right, and people actually believed him now — Manny and the painter in the blue van. That wasn't much, but it was a start.

Esteban drove fast, clutching the steering wheel tightly with both hands. He was still shaking from the hail of gunshots, convinced that damned German could hear his knees knocking over the engine roar, but he did as he was told. He pushed the van down the side streets, twisting, turning, taking the corners hard,

but always returning to a southwesterly course, praying he would see the Hudson River and the docks soon. He knew they were up ahead somewhere; but in all the excitement, he had gotten himself horribly turned around. So, Esteban prayed to every Catholic saint he could remember that the German wouldn't notice. He was the devil incarnate, and Esteban knew the man would kill him for sure if he got them lost. On the freighter on the way up from Philadelphia, Kruger made him study a New York map until he could draw the streets and see them in his sleep. But Esteban couldn't read English very well. As the signs flashed by it became all too confusing; the skinny Spaniard had no idea where they were.

"Slow down!" Kruger yelled from the back of the van. "We've attracted enough attention for one day, no thanks to you and that fat buffoon Sanchez."

The Spaniard jerked his foot off the gas pedal, realizing he was far more afraid of this cold-eyed German than he could ever be of the American police. Esteban took a deep breath. Relax! Relax, he told himself. After all, you're only the driver; you haven't killed anyone; you haven't fired a single shot. True, Esteban had an old revolver of his own tucked in his belt; and the cops would nail him good if they found it on him; but it had not been fired, not even once. At the first opportunity, when the German's attention was elsewhere, the revolver would go out the window. Even if the police sent him to jail, he knew they treat you right in an American jail. There was always the chance of parole, but there would be no parole from this crazy German. You could see it in his icy-blue eyes and in that cruel sneer on his lips. The man was a death sentence.

Esteban knew this job in New York City had gone wrong. The American was supposed to be alone, but he had that girl with him. There weren't supposed to be any police cars around, either. There wasn't supposed to be any shooting, and that fool Sanchez wasn't supposed to be shot. An "easy job." That was what that oily bastard Steinhuber told them. "It's a soft target, my friends, very soft. One man. You grab him and the German will do the rest," he said with that broad, toothy smile of his and an envelope full of money. "You'll be in and out in a day."

Well, the instant they met that blond-haired devil, Esteban knew he should have turned the work down or held out for more money—a lot more money. When he heard those first muffled gunshots in the alley, Esteban nearly died. Then that gray sedan swung in behind them and he knew they were police. It was the way the car nosed into the curb and the way the two men inside eyed the van. They were police all right, but all Esteban could do was sit there and break into a cold sweat. Then that maniac Kruger came running out of the alley, blood on his cheek, and all hell broke loose. Esteban never bargained for any shooting. Not with the police. Steinhuber wasn't paying them half enough for that.

"Go!" Kruger screamed, as he jumped in through the side door.

"What about Sanchez?" Esteban looked anxiously toward the alley.

"Go! I'm not telling you again," the German hissed as he turned his Walther on him. Esteban knew he would have used it too, if he didn't need a driver. Esteban tromped on the gas pedal and held on for dear life, cursing his own monumental stupidity and greed.

"What happened to Sanchez?" he dared ask again, not that he really missed the big oaf; but Sanchez was a countryman.

"He had an accident," Kruger finally answered, mocking him. "His forehead ran into a bullet. Now shut up and drive or you'll run into one, too!"

Esteban did what he was told. He had met more than his share of mean hombres growing up on the streets of Madrid. And there was that jail guard in Toledo who would kick a man with his steel-toed boots, trying to cripple him just for fun. Or, some Basques who would slit a man's throat for a bottle of cheap red wine. None of them came close to this German, however. You could see it in his eyes. He was loco. Esteban swore he'd be out the door the first chance he got, running as fast as his lanky legs would carry him. Screw the German. Screw the freighter. And screw Steinhuber's money.

That was when Esteban looked in the rear-view mirror and saw a police car closing on them. The police! One second, nothing was there. The next, that damned police car was right up on his bumper with their blue lights flashing and siren screaming. "Dios Mio!" he mumbled as he put the accelerator to the floor. He'd never see Spain again. He'd be lucky if he saw another morning.

"Relax," Kruger told him. "I saw it." His voice sounded bored, even half-asleep; but that was a trick he learned on the long march back from Kiev. Stay calm no matter how bad things got, stay calm; because it kept everyone around you calm. He touched his cheek again. The cut had almost stopped bleeding, almost, but it wasn't something he'd forget soon. Calmly, he reached across the easel and opened the leather satchel he'd stashed in the rear of the van. Looking into the rear-view mirror, he saw Esteban's eyes. He was a house of cards, ready to collapse, so Kruger pulled out the short, stockless, Schmeisser submachine gun and held it up where Esteban could see it.

"A submachine gun?" the Spaniard said, his voice quaking.

"Keep your eyes on the road," Kruger warned.

"That's the police back there, are you crazy, man?" Esteban screamed, twisting around in the seat. "They'll..."

"Be quiet and do what I told you," Kruger's voice lashed out. "Let them get up close, just don't miss our turn-off."

That should hold the Spaniard for a few minutes, Kruger thought, and that was all the time he would need. He crawled to the rear door of the van, jammed a full magazine in the submachine gun and pulled back the bolt with a loud "Snick!" Through the rear window, he watched as the police cruiser closed in. It came within fifty feet of their rear bumper, then twenty, then ten, trying to intimidate him. What fools, Kruger thought as his hand closed around the door handle. He counted to three and gave it a quick twist and a push. The door flew open and Kruger smiled. There! Right below him in the bright morning sun sat two police officers in the front seat of the cop car, only a few feet away. They looked up at him, wide-eyed, mouths gaping, until they saw the sadistic grin on Kruger's face, and their expressions turned to shock and finally horror as he pointed the muzzle of the Schmeisser submachine gun at them.

What a lovely tableau, Kruger thought. After all those years of intense training and combat, he could evaluate any tactical situation and assess its threats and opportunities in a split second. The cop in the passenger seat was the immediate danger, so Kruger pointed the barrel of the Schmeisser at him and touched the



trigger. The gun leaped in his hands with a loud metallic chatter as the old rhythms flowed through his hands, up his arms, and through his whole body, chattering, clattering, and lifting him higher and higher.

The first burst of nine-millimeter slugs punched a line of holes through the windshield, creating a lacy spider web until the glass disintegrated and blew inward, filling the front seat with shards of glass. The cop in the passenger seat took three hits to the chest, but Kruger wasn't done. He pulled the trigger again, watching the man's body dance under the hammer blows of more soft-nosed bullets. The driver was no fool. He saw all-too-well what was coming his way. He swung the steering wheel hard left, desperate to avoid the bullets, but all he did was throw the big cruiser directly into the lane of oncoming cars.

That was the moment, the moment of death, and it was what Kruger craved—the noise, the jarring recoil of the gun in his hands, the staccato hammering of the bullets, the stench of burnt gunpowder, the screams, the kaleidoscope of glass splintering in the bright sunlight, and the terrible crash of metal on metal. Those images exploded inside the German's head and lifted him to a new high!

And just as suddenly, it was over.

Kruger reached out and pulled the rear door shut, then collapsed on the floor, too drained to pay the slightest attention to the squeal of brakes and the loud crash as the police cruiser plowed into the cars in the other lane. Finally, he smiled. He had painted another masterpiece of death and destruction, one he would frame and hang in a very special place he kept in his mind's eye. It was his private gallery, where he hung all of his unique images and he could go and enjoy them anytime he wanted.

## Chapter 20

Michael and Leslie sat side by side in the back seat of Manny's unmarked police car as it raced through the mid-morning traffic of Midtown Manhattan. Manny slapped a portable red emergency light on the front dashboard, as if that would help. The rhythmic flashing drove Michael nuts, but it did nothing to loosen the thick knot of cars around them. New York! Block after block, Michael felt the anger rising inside. Still, he held it in and said nothing. No one could ever accuse him of learning nothing during those long months in Königsberg with the Russian prisoners. Over the centuries, they had developed a cynical fatalism that enabled them to blend in, to adapt, and to wait for their chance at revenge. That was what Michael would do, too; because time was on his side. He could be patient too. He would use whatever help he could get; but soon, he would get his fingers around the throat of that painter. That phony Admiral in Bonn would come next. Finally, he would deal with whoever sent them; and no one was going to stop him.

Michael began listening to the rapid chatter on the police radio. As far as he could tell, they were racing south and west through a maze of city streets, chasing the blue van. An armada of other police cars had now joined the hunt, drawing the noose tighter and tighter around the docks on the city's lower west side. They all wanted a piece of the guy now, and it was hard to see how he could escape this

time. It was an island! Dozens and dozens of angry cops against one man; it could only be a matter of minutes before they had the bastard cornered, or so Michael thought. Thinking back on what the painter did back in the alley, the cynical yet precise way he put a bullet in his fat accomplice's head, and casually shot up Manny's gray sedan, the long odds didn't seem unfair at all.

When the reports began to flow in about a police car being shot-up near 22nd Street, followed by a five-car smash-up, all hell broke loose on the radio. The cops wanted the painter even worse now; but in the confusion, the blue van vanished once again. Michael focused hard on the radio as one full minute passed, then two, and five. That was when he realized odds did not matter, not with this guy. Maybe they never did, because the painter was very, very good at this and Michael would guess he was long gone.

"I knew the two guys in that cruiser—Lazarev and Johnson," Manny said. "The dumb schmucks never had a chance. I want that guy, I want him bad!"

Welcome to the party, Michael thought, but he didn't need to say it. Eismer and his cronies in the NYPD had screwed this thing up ever since that morning in the hotel lobby. Now they were paying the price, but they didn't need him to tell them that. He saw it in Manny's eyes as the fat cop glanced back at them in the rear-view mirror and tried to make amends. "That Walther automatic you picked up in the alley had a silencer on it—very professional. You don't owe money to some guy in Jersey named Guido, do you?" Manny joked, but Michael just sat there stone-faced. That didn't stop Manny. "That guy layin' in the alley looked pretty big. How'd you get it away from him that easy?"

"That easy?" Leslie answered for him. "Michael didn't give him a choice."

"Okay, okay. Still, a head-shot like that—it was a nice shot you made," Manny said with a new tone of respect. "I'm impressed."

"That wasn't me," Michael finally answered. "It was the painter."

"Jeez! From way back there at the street? With a freakin' handgun?" Manny whistled. "You sure he wasn't aiming at you?"

"Oh, no, he hit exactly the man he was aiming at, right in the middle of the forehead," Michael said. "If it had been me he wanted, I'd be the one lying back there, not the Spaniard." He stared at Manny's eyes in the rear-view mirror. "You still don't get it, do you? The painter was tying up a few loose ends before he left, that's all—cool, calm, and very professional."

Michael's fingers went to the silver cigarette case in his pants pocket. He couldn't prove it yet, but he knew the guy in the alley was only the most recent in a long line of corpses that stretched back to Königsberg, to Hodge, Eric Bruckner, and the U-boat, and if his suspicions were right, to Heinz Kruger and Martin Bormann.

"Damn it, Manny," he finally exploded. "You set us up, Leslie and me, and you had no right to do that. Not without asking."

"Ask you? How were we supposed to know he'd try something like that?"

"How? You were following us!" Leslie said as she leaned forward and smacked Manny on the back of the head. "You knew something was going on or you wouldn't have been watching; and you wouldn't have had all those police cars around either, so stop trying to con us. We aren't idiots, you know."

“We thought they might tail you or something, but nobody thought they’d come at you like that. You’re freakin’ civilians!”

“I’ve been called a lot of things, but *civilian* isn’t one of them,” Michael said. “And you had no right, Manny, not with Leslie around, not without asking.”

“Mike, be fair. How could we expect somebody to pull something like that, huh?”

“Certainly not you!” Leslie smacked him on the back of the head again. “You went trolling, and used us for bait.”

“It worked, didn’t it?” Manny snapped back. “You’re the one who wanted some action. Well, you got it.”

Michael glared at him, but Manny was right. He got exactly what he wanted. “Okay. The fat one in the alley was dark-skinned, speaking Spanish. But we both saw blond hair on the painter. What do you think he is? American? German? Maybe Russian?”

Manny shrugged. “We’re still working on that.”

“Still working? You haven’t got a clue, do you?”

“We’ll catch him, you’ll see. He can’t get away.”

“Can’t get away? I was a fool to even talk to you. None of this would have happened if I’d gone after that phony *Admiral* like I wanted to.”

“That wasn’t going to happen, Mike.”

“No? You don’t know me very well, Manny; one way or the other, I’d have caught up to him and pried the truth out of him.” Venting his anger on the fat cop made Michael feel marginally better, until he realized neither Manny nor Leslie was listening to him. Their attention had suddenly shifted to the police radio.

“They found the blue van!” Manny said. “He’s headed for the docks and this time the son-of-a-bitch ain’t getting away. We’ve got the whole area surrounded.”

Michael leaned back and shook his head. Surrounded? We’ll see, he thought.

Manny took a dizzying number of quick lefts and rights through long blocks of old brick and metal warehouses that ringed the cargo piers on the lower west side. Finally, the unmarked police car turned down a narrow lane between two long rows of buildings. At the far end, they saw a roadblock with a half-dozen NYPD squad cars and a gaggle of blue uniforms.

“I suppose they just happened to be in the neighborhood?” Leslie asked, but Manny did not reply.

A hundred yards beyond the roadblock, they saw the painter’s blue van partially hidden behind a tall stack of wooden shipping pallets. Manny parked well short of the roadblock, and they all got out. The other cops were crouched behind their squad cars, guns drawn; but Michael remained standing, leaning against the fender of the gray sedan, refusing to take cover. He couldn’t do that any longer. He counted the seconds, hoping to hear a fusillade of gunshots; but he knew in his gut that wasn’t going to happen. Even from this far away, the blue van looked stone cold and abandoned. He couldn’t explain it; he just knew. The van had been dumped here and the painter was long gone. That was why Michael continued to stand, leaning against the police car, fully exposed, while all the others cowered behind their parked cars. He just knew.

The minutes passed in slow motion, as a ring of cops slowly closed in on the van from both ends of the street, pistols and shotguns at the ready. Their leader crept

to the rear door and dropped a rope around the door handle. He backed off and yanked it open, rolling off to the side, but still, nothing happened. Slowly, he crept back to the van and looked inside. He turned and shook his head. The van was empty and quiet as a tomb.

Michael stepped around the front of the police car and began walking toward the van, but Manny stopped him. "Take it easy, Sport," he warned, pointing toward two men in visored crash helmets and thick padded jackets approaching the van from the far end of the alley. "That's the bomb squad."

Michael looked at him, rolled his eyes, then started toward the van again.

And Manny stopped him again. "Smarten up, kid. It never pays to get between a dog and a fire hydrant, not until you're sure the dog's done doing what he went there to do."

Michael frowned, but he stopped and watched as two men from the Bomb Squad inched their way inside the van. After five long, painful minutes, one of them came back out the door, gingerly cradling a small box in his hands. An old black Army jeep with a boxy red trailer quickly pulled up next to him. While his partner opened the trailer's top hatch, the man carefully set the box inside the trailer, carefully, almost reverently. With the top hatch securely back in place, the jeep slowly drove off, leaving the blue van standing alone in the bright sunlight.

Then it was over. No shots, no explosions, nothing but a deadly calm hanging in the air, but it was over. They had just got their butts kicked by an expert and there was a brief pause now, but Michael knew it was far from over.

Exhausted, the two men from the bomb squad pulled off their helmets and gloves and sat in a patch of shade at the side of the van. Even from this distance, Michael could see the sweat rolling off both of them. In a matter of seconds, Manny was halfway there, moving with surprising quickness for a big man.

"There's a dead guy in the driver's seat, slumped over the steering wheel. Dark, skinny, somebody put a bullet in his ear. Real messy," the first officer said.

"Yeah, and they left a little surprise in there just for you, Manny," his partner chuckled. "Somebody rigged a charge underneath the stiff, if you can believe it."

"Jeez," Manny shook his head. "Two dozen cop cars looking for him, and the guy takes the time to rig a freakin' booby trap."

"He ain't no slouch with explosives either," the first bomb squad officer quipped. "It was well hidden, and the charge was big enough to blow even your fat ass through the roof if you'd gotten here first."

"That's why I called you in, Joe," Manny gave him an affectionate slap on the shoulder. "Because Mama Eismar wants her baby boy's fat ass to stay right here on the ground where it belongs."

Manny climbed inside the van and Michael quickly followed. What could he say? Even the sight of a body with half its face blown away no longer affected him. It had not since the war. What did the Russians POWs call it back in Königsberg? Calluses? Calluses on a man's soul? Yeah, a long war can do that, but it never kept him from being able to tell a dead good guy from a dead bad one, and in the end, that was all that mattered. Michael stepped closer and saw the guy had black hair and dark skin. "Just like the other one. Mexican? Turkish? An Arab? They were hired help. Disposable."

"You're right," Manny answered. "Both of them."

Michael looked around. The floor of the van was littered with the abandoned easel and the tubes of paint the guy had at the mouth of the alley. None had been opened. They had been tossed inside like the stage props they were. In the corner lay the painter's broad-brimmed hat. Around Michael's feet lay dozens of bright, brass shell casings, nine millimeter, Michael guessed, and a smashed tape recorder. In the other corner, he saw a black leather doctor's bag. The bag lay on its side, and its contents of vials and syringes had spilled out across the floor. Michael picked one up and read the label. Sodium pentothal, "truth serum."

Manny saw it, too. "You said if you had five minutes alone with him, you'd make him talk? Looks like he had the same idea, Mike. He wasn't trying to kill you or grab you. He wanted to make you talk."

Michael guessed the same thing, but why? What did they think he knew?

"There's no ID on the body. I didn't think there would be, clean as that guy works," Manny mumbled. "But we'll dust the van for prints and run the two stiffs through our files anyway. Who knows? Maybe we'll get lucky."

"Is that blood?" he heard Leslie ask. She was standing in the doorway, pointing to a dark spot on the carpet near the rear door. "Just like in the alley."

Michael leaned over and saw the small, dark spots plus a reddish-brown streak on the door handle. He touched the biggest one with his finger. It was still wet. There were only a few drops, but this far back in the van they could only be from the painter. "I got off a couple of shots at him in the alley. Must have clipped him—nothing very serious, or there'd be a lot more; but it's a start."

Michael had seen enough. He turned and jumped down onto the pavement, feeling a desperate need for sunshine and a big gulp of fresh air. It was like that bitterly cold February morning in Königsberg. An ancient evil had crept out of its dark lair and was on the prowl again. Michael knew it would keep coming out and keep killing and maiming until someone took a bright light, crawled in after it, and made certain it never came out again. Hodge understood that, so did Eric Bruckner, the real one, and so did Mike Randall. They had all seen it first hand, and that was the thin golden thread that stretched out across the years to bind the three men together.

"We'll get him," Manny boasted confidently. "He couldn't have gotten far, not on foot. We got the freakin' city buttoned up tight now and we'll get him."

Michael looked at Manny and shook his head. "You're wasting your time. He had the angles figured long before you got out of bed this morning, and he's long gone." Michael paused, sniffing the air. "Can't you smell it?" he asked. "That's the stink of raw arrogance and that guy's got a terminal case of it."

A half-mile south, at the end of a small backwater pier, the Captain of an old Greek freighter paced back and forth across the bridge, listening to the wail of police sirens to the north and east. He had been around, and he was not stupid. He looked down at the pier, then at his wristwatch and began to pace even faster. The tide was running, and he should have cast off fifteen minutes ago. He was sorely tempted to do precisely that and leave that insufferable German and the two Spaniards behind, but the Captain did not have quite enough nerve to do that, not yet. The ship's owners in Berne had paid him to drop the three men off in New York and to wait to bring them back out again—paid him handsomely, he had to

admit—and they expected him to follow orders and keep his mouth shut. The telegram was specific on that point. So he swallowed his pride and continued pacing, listening to the police sirens as they circled the area. But there was no question in the Captain's mind. That damned German had done something bad. He knew what the Germans were like. He had seen them during the war, and this arrogant blond pig stunk of the SS.

Two more minutes. The telegram be damned; by God, that was all the time he would give him. Finally, just as the Captain had screwed up enough courage to tell his deck hands to cast off, a taxi bounced down the pier and rolled to a stop at the foot of the gangplank. The rear door opened and that damned German stepped out. The man stood there on the pier slowly stretching, as if he were waking from a nap. He tossed some folding money into the driver's lap and looked up at the ship's railing where his eyes met the Captain's angry glare head on. That cheeky bastard, the Greek thought. If the man had the slightest remorse or trepidation, he didn't show it. He threw a leather satchel across his shoulder and sauntered up the gangway as if he owned it.

"You are late!" the Captain seethed, his hands gripping the rail. The German stopped at the top of the ramp and cocked his head, looking at the Captain with an expression of mild amusement; but he offered no excuse.

"You are late, I said!" the captain repeated, desperate to reassert his authority.

The German smiled innocently. "Then I suppose we should leave, shouldn't we," he answered, as if he had solved the Captain's grand dilemma for him with a single stroke.

The Captain turned scarlet, but he held his tongue. If any of his regular crew dared talk to him like that, he'd toss the fellow overboard. Unfortunately, the German was different. It was not merely the cable from Berne or the man's twisted smile or even those chilling blue eyes. It was the streak of crazy-mean the Captain saw lurking behind them. There was no sense in tempting fate. He valued this comfortable billet, with all its bribes and side payments, far too much to do something that stupid; so he turned away, avoiding both the humiliation and the danger that this evil-eyed German represented.

Glancing down at the empty pier the Captain asked, "Where are the others? Those two grease-balls who came aboard with you? Aren't they coming?"

The German stopped and looked back down the gangplank to the pier, seemingly surprised by the question. "You mean they aren't here already?" he asked, feigning innocence.

"No, they aren't here!" the Captain exploded. "They went ashore with you, man! Don't you know if they're coming back or not?"

"Me? No, I can't say as I do," the German shrugged nonchalantly. Then he turned and walked past the Captain, leaving the Greek to figure it out himself.

## Chapter 21

### Moscow

Sergei Varentsov was not a happy man.

He spent his entire career working hard, kissing more asses than he could count, and carefully choosing the right coattails to hang onto. It had taken him years, but he had climbed the Ministry of State Security's tall ladder, one slippery rung at a time. Finally, good things were coming his way. He had become one of the party's "nachalstvo," or "fat cats," a minor one perhaps; but he now had his own shiny Volga sedan, a large apartment on one of Moscow's nicer boulevards, and a cozy dacha on a lake in a birch forest in the country, where he spent quiet afternoons giving very personal dictation to his young, buxom secretary. The exclusive foreign currency shops were open to him and he had his pick of the finest imported clothes and whiskey. Best of all, he could be as rude as he wished to old friends.

Tough, confident, and supremely arrogant, Varentsov had risen to be the Head of Section S of the MVD's ultra-secret First Directorate. True, it was one of the smaller of the MVD's sections and it was equally true that he was only the temporary head; but Sergei Varentsov wasn't some damned file clerk. He had arrived, and he was finally ready to get his due. He could feel it in his bones, until this business in New York blew up in his face. Why? Why now, just as he was finally getting ahead? It was not fair!

Bad luck or not, Varentsov was no fool. He knew he was in serious trouble the instant he read the cable ordering him to report immediately to Yuri Serov in Moscow. Serov was the Chief of the First Directorate, by far the most powerful of Lavrenti Beria's immediate subordinates, and the vultures would be circling high above Dzerzhinsky Square screeching for all to hear, "Failure! Failure!" They would be swooping in at this very moment, waiting for their opening. Their sharp claws would be out and their beaks open, ready to rip a bloody hunk of meat from his dead ass.

Ever since Varentsov left New York, he had been trying to figure out who had brought this catastrophe crashing down on his head. His brain raced. It must be that fool Neptune. Obviously, that stupid German botched his meeting with the Nazis when he returned to Bonn. He must have said something or done something to tip off the Americans or the German police. Where was the mistake? What could it possibly have been? A slip of the tongue? A glance? A wrong look? Despite the years of training, he was an incompetent amateur. Or, could there be more to it? Varentsov's thoughts turned dark and sinister. Could Neptune be a double agent? Is he working for the Americans? Or for Varentsov's own enemies inside the MVD? Could he be a mole, planted in Leipzig by the Nazis decades ago? But how should he play it with Serov? The more he looked at the problem, the more Varentsov knew his best chance was to convince Serov that Neptune had been a clever double agent all along. His best chance? It was probably his only chance. While he was away, his own ambitious assistants would have drawn their long knives and sliced and diced him into little pieces every chance they got. Whispers, insinuations, accusations.

Inevitably, the whispers would have risen up the back stairwells of the Kremlin, all the way to the fifth floor where they would have found a warm welcome in Serov's ear. "Yuri Vladimirovich," they would start. "This business in New York is most embarrassing. It was unfortunate we did not have a more experienced hand

at the tiller, eh; someone in charge, with the experience to supervise such a critical operation. The time and money he squandered? Some are calling it criminal.” Then they would drive the knives in deep, up to the hilt. “What has Comrade Beria said of this fiasco, eh?”

Unfortunately, every word of it was true, Varentsov sighed. He made the worst mistake of his career—not the one back in New York when he relied on that incompetent fool, Neptune. No, he had botched things far worse than that a dozen times before, and gotten away with every one of them. This time, his mistake was the one he made right here in Moscow before he left for New York. This was his plan, his operation, and he kept it entirely to himself. He was the one who fired Radetsky, and then flew off to New York to supervise Neptune’s visit, personally. In fact, he insisted on it. He went for all the credit, all the glory, and refused to let anyone else near it. So when it blew up, Varentsov had no one else to blame. What a fool he’d been, and all because he wanted to prove he could handle a big operation without any help or interference. What a stupid, egotistical blunder that was. He wanted all the credit, and now he would be slathered with all the blame. For an experienced Kremlin bureaucrat, that was a mortal sin and always fatal.

In the past, Varentsov always enjoyed the long drive from the airport to MVD Headquarters on Dzerzhinsky Square in the center of Moscow. With his own limousine and driver, he loved to lean back in the plush leather seats and remember the bad old days, when he rode a crowded tram to work with the rest of the great proletarian unwashed. His memories were still vivid of the tiny, walk-up flats where he used to live. He remembered queuing-up at the side door of MVD Headquarters with the rest of the “Little Fish,” being forced to show his ID card to some slant-eyed guard who could not even read the Russian Cyrillic letters. Fortunately, those days were long gone, and Varentsov would burn in hell before he would ever let them return. Why should he? He’d spent years doing Beria’s and Serov’s dirty work in the Ukraine and in the Crimea. He had gladly taken on all their “*wet work*,” rounding up traitors, liquidating collaborators, sending their rivals off to the work camps in the Gulag, doing anything and everything Beria or Serov wanted without ever questioning or flinching. Surely, Serov wouldn’t chuck him out because of this one little miscalculation. Would he? Varentsov felt a cold chill run down his spine as he realized that to protect himself from Beria, Serov would do precisely that and much, much more.

The limousine rolled to a halt before the imposing iron gates of MVD headquarters, and Varentsov felt his knees go weak. Get a grip on yourself, he ordered. If Serov smelled even a whiff of fear or guilt, Varentsov knew he was doomed. Confidence, confidence, he reminded himself as he forced himself out of the car. He stood up tall, thrust his shoulders back and marched directly up to the guard at the front door, handing the man his papers with a quick, arrogant sneer. The guard snapped to attention and Varentsov smiled, knowing he still had it. Yes, the more he thought about it, the less he was inclined to take this crap lying down. He was Varentsov, Head of Section S, and he would show them all!

Varentsov blew through the outer door in two long strides, but his bravado began to fade before he strode halfway across the lobby floor. By the time he stepped inside the elevator and took that agonizingly slow ride up to the fifth floor, his legs were shaking again. The elevator doors opened and at the far end of the



long, carpeted hallway, he saw two beefy uniformed guards, one on each side of the polished double doors to the Director's office. They stared holes through Varentsov as if he were not even there. They knew; they had seen it a thousand times before. They smelled the stench of failure and fear on him, and they knew he was finished. It was all because of that idiot Neptune. Who could have figured the New York Police would save that cursed American from those Nazi gunmen? The vaunted SS! Trained killers! Crack shots! How times had changed, he moaned. How times had changed.

Varentsov prayed the guards would make him stand and wait in the hallway for a few minutes longer until he gathered his wits, but no such luck. They immediately opened the doors and ushered him into Serov's cavernous office, escorted him across the thick oriental carpets, and left him standing in front of Serov's desk like the class dunce who had been called to the headmaster's office. Varentsov waited, barely breathing. From outward appearances, the bald, thick-necked man in the dumpy blue suit sitting behind the desk could be a truck driver or a plumber; but he was none of those things. He was Ivan Alexandrovich Serov, Chief of the First Directorate of the Committee for State security, the MVD, the spymaster himself. Smart, ruthless, and efficient, if Serov pushed the red button hidden under the edge of his desk, Varentsov would disappear forever.

Serov let Varentsov stand there for at least five excruciatingly painful minutes before he even acknowledged his presence. "Varentsov," the Chief pronounced his name as if he had found something disagreeable stuck to the bottom of his shoe. "Tell me," he finally looked up, "how does a fool like you rise to a position of such immense responsibility in our organization? Can you explain that to me?" he asked, daring Varentsov to attempt an answer. "We can blame your limited intelligence on your parents. That's a common enough fault among the Russian peasantry; but if we punished them all, who would be left to plow the fields and dig the potatoes, eh?"

The Chief's eyes were as cold as a gravedigger's as they bore into him. "Unfortunately, you are not some harmless corporal or supply clerk, are you? We can tolerate almost any peccadillo in the lower ranks, but you are a Colonel in the MVD, one of the elite of the elite. So where was the failure? Was it the system? Is that it? A massive case of collective stupidity? Or could there be more to it? Are you a foreign agent, a treacherous mole sent here to gnaw at us from the inside? Which is it, Varentsov? Are you a congenital idiot, or part of a monstrous conspiracy hatched right here in the Kremlin to bring me down?" Serov glared at him. "I must know the truth. Your miserable little life no longer matters to me, but I must explain to Comrade Beria why I allowed a cretin like you within a mile of the most sensitive intelligence operation we have run in a decade."

"Well, uh... as you know, Comrade Serov," Varentsov stammered, wringing his hands. "This seemed like the perfect opportunity to draw the Fascists into our plan..."

"Into *our* plan?"

"Well, into *my* plan, Comrade. You see, I thought we could..."

"You *thought*?"

"Yes, Comrade, the plan was to use the Fascists to kill the American for us. Perhaps I miscalculated a bit, but..."

"Miscalculated a bit? No, no, no, Varentsov, you are an imbecile, and imbeciles cannot calculate at all!"

"But Ivan Alexandrovich, my standing orders, the ones you yourself approved, were to use Neptune to infiltrate the SS and the Nazi brotherhood in order to observe the Fascists from the inside and draw them in."

"Draw them in?" Serov's voice lashed out like a Cossack's whip. "You certainly accomplished that, didn't you? You drew them in so well that they almost snatched this fellow Randall from under your very nose. They weren't there to kill him, you fool; they were there to kidnap him and ply him with drugs. Now, why do you think they would do that, Varentsov? Why?"

Varentsov stammered helplessly, "I... I don't know... It makes no sense to me, Comrade Serov, absolutely no sense."

The Chief cocked his head and stared at Varentsov, studying him for a long moment. Varentsov knew this was the moment of truth, when Serov was deciding what he would do with him. "You are an idiot. You truly are an idiot, are you not?"

"I... they... they... they did a very stupid thing. I..."

"No, Varentsov!" Serov cut him off with an angry sweep of his hand. "You may be certain the SS did it for a good reason, a VERY good reason, because they think the American knows something. That much should be obvious even to an utter incompetent like you. They tried to grab the man and make him talk, because they want answers, Varentsov. Answers! While you did not even know there were any questions."

Varentsov stood before him like a whipped dog.

Serov glared. "Now, we shall have the devil to pay before we learn a blasted thing about their plans. You are the one who should have grabbed this fellow Randall and questioned him. Can't you see that? You should have made him tell his tale. All you accomplished was to draw further attention to Neptune. Now, we have the Americans involved, the West Germans, the Nazis, and probably those damned Israelis as well. They will all be asking questions, digging through the files and the records, probing, questioning, and that will ruin everything."

Varentsov dared not reply. He hung his head, thanking a merciful God that Serov was still talking and that he was still standing here, not being dragged out the door.

"So *you* were going to observe the SS? *You* were going to infiltrate them and draw them into your clever web?" Serov glared at him. "Varentsov, they were in and out of New York before you even knew they were there. Observe them? Infiltrate them? I fought the SS in the Great Patriotic War, and they ate incompetents like you for breakfast."

"But what could they want, Comrade Serov? The American's story is utterly preposterous. Sweden? No one is going to believe that."

"Obviously, the Nazis did, and the Americans did. What do you think those dead policemen were all about?"

"But Comrade Serov," Varentsov pleaded. "Frieemann's cover is perfect. We have the Berlin archives, so what can they prove?" he asked, offering a hopeful smile. "Neptune is safely back in Germany now and the U-boat is on the bottom where no one can touch it. So let them ask their stupid questions," he asserted proudly. "They have nothing."

Serov slowly shook his head, as if he were the Headmaster talking to the class dunce. "Varentsov, you have wrapped yourself up so tightly in your little intrigues that you have completely lost sight of reality. That was *our* story, you fool! We don't know where that damned U-boat is any more than they do. Poland? Sweden? Perhaps the duck pond in Gorky Park. I do not know and neither do you. We created that story out of thin air because it fit our needs and provided a very convenient explanation as to why Bruckner ended up in one of our prisoner-of-war camps." Serov leaned forward, his voice fading to a cruel whisper. "But what if the American is right? What if he really was there? What if that submarine really is lying off the south coast of Sweden, and he knows where it is? That would be the end of Neptune, and it would be the end of you and me. But I promise you, before Comrade Beria puts his hand on my shoulder, you shall already be dead."

Varentsov felt hot and sweaty, as if the floor beneath his feet had become a frying pan on high heat. He was roasting, but Serov did not ease up. He leaned even closer. "The Fascists were thinking three moves ahead of you each step of the way. Why else do you think they sent an elite SS operations team to New York to grab the American?"

Varentsov stuttered. "I... Yes, I can see that now, Comrade Serov, I..."

"Silence!" the Chief's angry voice silenced him. "This is what you will do, Varentsov. First, forget the Fascists; you'll never catch up with them anyway. Concentrate on the Americans. They'll go for the U-boat, them and the Israelis. Follow them. It is somewhere in the Baltic, and I have a feeling in my gut it's lying off Sweden, where the American says it is. Follow them, find it, and destroy it. I do not care how. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Comrade Serov, I see it all clearly now."

Serov leaned forward, his eyes narrowing to unforgiving little slits. "The U-boat is the key, Varentsov. It forces everyone's hand, because it is the only tangible proof that can destroy Neptune and destroy us. That is why they shall come looking for it."

"Then, let me kill the American and put an end to the whole business now," Varentsov said without thinking. "If he is the only link they have..."

"Varentsov, *you* and that phony Admiral of yours are the ones who gave the American credibility to begin with. After the Fascists failed, you will never get near him now." Finally, Serov seemed to soften. He leaned back and actually smiled. "Oh, do not fret, Varentsov. This is the 1950s, not the 1930s, and I am a modern man. Fail me, and I will not have you hanging from a meat hook in the basement. No, no, we do not do that anymore."

Varentsov felt a wave of relief washing over him.

"I am a scientist, a student of human nature and justice, now," Serov went on. "There is a perfect punishment for each crime, and a *perfect* hell for every criminal. If you fail me, yours will be a posting back here to Moscow, to MVD Headquarters, where you shall serve out your remaining years as an ordinary private guarding the employee entrance at the rear of the building, right there, right below my window." Serov pointed a stubby finger toward the tall bank of windows along the sidewall. "This way, I will have the pleasure of seeing you in the sweltering heat of August, in the cold, cheerless rains of November, and in the icy

blasts of January that cut a man to the bone. I will see you every day, year in and year out, until you are a wrinkled, shriveled-up old man.”

Serov smiled the cruel, toothy smile of a crocodile. “I can picture you snapping to attention and saluting all the pretty young secretaries as they come to work, the humorless file clerks, and the Ministry’s minor officers as they trudge in and out of the building. And what of your lovely wife and daughters, you ask? Well, they shall be under strict orders to leave your new, dreary little cold-water flat by the rail yards at noon each day and ride the tram here to bring you your lunch pail, bitching all the way about the abject misery you have brought crashing down on their heads.” Serov clucked contentedly, picturing it in his mind. “Yes, that is the ‘perfect’ punishment for a man like you. You shall serve the state by being a constant reminder that a dull, below-average man should control his ambitions and never dare reach higher than his ability. You see, I know you, Varentsov; and now I know you won’t fail me. Will you, Varentsov?”

“No, no, Comrade Serov,” Varentsov whispered, already feeling the flames of hell licking at his pants legs.

“Excellent! Now get out of my sight.” Serov’s voice roared. “And do not come back until you have destroyed that cursed submarine and ended this business once and for all.”

Varentsov turned and headed for the door as fast as his feet could carry him. He walked quickly across the thick carpet and out the door, cursing Neptune and cursing that damned American every step of the way. Safely out in the hallway and around the corner, he began to run, but the flames were rising up all around him now, higher and higher, chasing after him, blistering the skin on his backside as if he were on fire.

## Chapter 22

### New York

At 7:30 the next morning, Michael heard a knock on his hotel room door. It was Leslie, dressed in her running shoes and shorts, ready to hit the streets of Midtown Manhattan again, undeterred by the previous day’s excitement. “You weren’t downstairs,” she started to explain, until she saw he was wearing those old blue jeans and that plaid shirt again. “What gives?” she asked, with a puzzled expression. “Where are the Keds and the old track shorts?”

“I’m not running today,” he said tersely without inviting her in, but she pushed past him and into the room anyway. There was no hiding his suitcase lying on the bed or the dark blue Pan Am ticket folder on the nightstand next to it.

“What? You’re leaving, and you weren’t even going to say good-bye? You were just going to go?” she asked with hurt written all over her face. “Not that you owe me anything...”

“I was going to stop by your room on the way out,” he lied, knowing he would have skulked straight out of town if he thought he could get away with it. He was

a total coward when it came to Leslie, and the look she gave him did not help any. "What can I say, Les, I'm fed up. I've got to do something."

"Something? You mean like leaving me here. Is that your idea of something?"

"I don't make a very good target, and I can't take sitting here anymore."

"Where are you running off to? I know you aren't going back home to try to face Daddy. Not you. Not like this. Where then? Back to Sweden? You going to run back there and hide again?" She picked up the ticket folder and flipped it open. "Frankfurt? You're going after Bruckner again, aren't you?"

"What do you mean 'again'? You know I didn't go after him!"

"No?" She waved the ticket folder in his face. "Well, you sure are this time."

"What else can I do? I've got to get some answers."

"Without me?"

"I don't want to get you messed up in this thing."

She put her hands on her hips and stepped closer. "I think the fat guy in the alley, the painter, and the dead driver in the blue van already did that."

"Leslie, it's something I have to do; and I can't take you with me."

"Yeah? Well, try to stop me!"

"Leslie, it's dangerous. You saw what they did, what they're like."

"Exactly, and that's why I'm not letting you go by yourself."

"I already owe your family too much—your brother, your father... if anything happened to you, how would I explain it to him?"

"Why don't you ask him and ask me, before you go making decisions for us."

"All right! If anything happened to you, I don't know how I'd explain it to me."

"What's that supposed to mean?" She folded her arms across her chest, her eyes on fire. "Does it mean you like me? Maybe you'll miss me? How about love? Is that in there somewhere too?"

"Leslie, I don't know what you want me to say."

"Yes you do, Michael Randall; try something adult. And if I have to explain it to you after all this time, then I might as well just smack you silly right here and now."

"Hey, hey!" Manny's voice interrupted them from the doorway. "It doesn't sound like you kids are playing nice in here."

"Great timing, Manny, as usual!" Leslie snapped angrily.

"You've been talking to my wife?"

"Michael was about to tell me..." she paused and looked at both of them in frustration. "Oh, forget it!" She turned her eyes away from Michael and held up the airplane ticket folder. "He's going to Germany, Manny, and he's going alone. Maybe you can talk some sense into him."

Manny looked at him for a moment. "Germany? Now, that's interesting."

"You've got to stop him. He's going to get himself killed."

"Okay, when's your plane leave?" Manny asked.

"Five this afternoon and I'm going to be on it."

"Okay, that's the overnight flight from LaGuardia. I'll see that you're on it."

"You don't need to, I can handle it."

"No problem. I owe you that much. But you don't need to leave for the airport much before 2:30. Even later, if I give you a police escort." He smiled as he raised his hands in mock surrender. "Okay, look, we blew it. I owe both of you a big

apology for yesterday—not for trying, and not for not telling you, but for screwing it up.”

“That’s not good enough, Manny,” Michael replied as he returned to his packing. “I’m not interested in your problems or your excuses. I’ve got enough of my own.”

“Problems? I wish I had your freakin’ problems,” Manny laughed. “From a dumb schmuck in handcuffs sitting in the back seat of a police car, you’ve suddenly become the center of attention, the most popular guy in town; but you don’t need to go to Bonn. Hell, you don’t need to go anywhere. You’ve got people coming here from all over the place, just to see the one and only Randall, Michael T. Why cut and run now? Why now?”

“Cut and run? You fat bastard, you don’t know...”

“Oh, yes I do, I know all about it,” Manny insisted. “Look, we figured somebody might come looking for you. Actually, we hoped they would; but we never thought they’d come that quick or be that good when they got here.”

“He made you look like the Keystone Cops,” Leslie chimed in.

“Leslie,” Manny turned to her with a smile. “Have you ever noticed, it’s always the guys who can’t dance who say the band’s out of tune?”

“All right, so who was he?” Michael asked. “German?”

“That’s a pretty good guess, but the truth is, we haven’t got a clue,” Manny shrugged. “We told the newspapers it was a Mafia hit gone bad. That’s an old New York cop trick. When you’ve got a couple of dead bodies you don’t know what to do with, blame it on a Mob gang war. In New York, it usually is.”

“That wasn’t the Mafia, Manny,” he said flatly.

“No, it wasn’t; but it got the press off our backs. Then, I got the Israelis to get the CIA to feed a story to the FBI that it was the Russians. That got the FBI running around chasing their tails, so they won’t be bothering us either. Mention a Commie, and J. Edgar positively glows. Frankly though, the pattern doesn’t fit. It was too well prepared, too clever by far, and too well executed. The Israelis say a dancing bear isn’t nimble or quick enough to pull off something like this.”

“The Israelis?” Leslie asked.

“Yeah, well, I know some people who know some people, if you know what I mean. The Israeli Mossad is the best in the business—small, new, and very good.”

“Do they know who the painter was working for?” Michael asked.

“The smart money is on the U-boat’s former owners.” Manny answered.

“Then it IS that damned admiral!” Michael shot back.

“Maybe yes, maybe no. Germans come in a lot of different flavors these days. First, there’s Bruckner and the official government establishment in Bonn. Most of them are all right, but nobody completely trusts them. Then there’s the East Germans. The Russians have owned them since the 1930s, but the East German Stasi are mostly second-rate hacks and leftovers. Then there are your old friends in black and silver.”

“The SS?”

“They’ve set up shop in South America where they have a boy’s club for out-of-work thugs called the Brotherhood. They left with a lot of gold, and they own Argentina, Bolivia, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Peru. They own most of Bonn, too; so you won’t get any help there, either. They’ve got themselves tucked away up in those high South American mountains where you’ll never get at them.”

Michael looked at him. "Tell me, Manny, how's a retired New York police detective from the Bronx know all this stuff about the Russians and old Nazis in South America?"

"Me?" Manny smiled. "It's not what I know, Mike. It's *who* I know, who I go talk to, and what they know."

"The Israelis?" Leslie asked.

"They may be new at this spy stuff, but your Nazi pals are at the top of their hit list. That's why I need for you to give me a couple of hours, Mike."

"A couple of hours? For what?"

"There are some people I'd like you to meet. They have a plan and they can explain it to you a hell of a lot better than I can. So come with me. Maybe you'll learn something."

"Michael, a couple of hours, what can it hurt?" Leslie asked.

"After you talk to them," Manny added. "If you still want to catch that five o'clock plane to Germany, that's okay by me."

"Manny, how could you tell him that?" Leslie fumed.

"It doesn't matter, kid; trust me. He might fly over, but they'll never let him out of the airport. The Krauts aren't that stupid. This thing's a big embarrassment, so they'll have his photo up at every gate. They'll toss his butt on the next plane back to New York, and he'll be right back here all red-eyed and cranky."

"Manny, we've got to make that bastard talk," Michael said.

"It'll never happen, sport. Besides, he doesn't matter."

"What do you mean he doesn't matter!"

"No, Manny's right," Leslie began to nod her head. "This thing isn't about the Admiral, is it, Manny? It's all about the U-boat."

"Hey, two points for the Cutie Pie." He threw a thumb in her direction and smiled. "Don't get me wrong, in the end, it is about the Admiral. It's always been about the Admiral. If he really is dead, like you think he is, then somebody went to a lot of trouble to put that other guy in his place. But the only way to flush him out—the only way to flush them out—is to go to Sweden, find that U-boat, and prove he's a phony. That's why it's all about the U-boat. It's your proof."

Michael stared at him. "Manny, I told you; I don't know where it is. That's an awfully big haystack up there."

"Maybe, but they don't know that, do they? They think you do. And if we go up there with a good salvage boat, sonar, divers, and some people who know how to work that stuff, we'll force their hand."

"You want to use me for target practice again?"

"Now or later, kid; 'cause they ain't gonna leave you alone. You can stay here, you can go to Bonn, or you can go back to South Carolina, but eventually they're gonna come after you again."

"That's a cheery thought," Leslie said.

"Come with me to Sweden, you get to shoot back," Manny said, and Michael stopped arguing. "Okay, then. Leslie, go change your clothes, and the two of you meet me in the lobby," Manny said. "My car's downstairs and if I don't convince you, I promise I'll run you out to the airport... if you still want to go... which you won't."

Thirty minutes later they walked up the front steps of an old, nondescript brownstone in the middle of the block on 12th Street near 2nd Avenue on the lower East Side. They were east of Union Square and Washington Square in a quiet, much older part of the city. The house was made of heavy stone blocks, and the nondescript front door looked heavy enough to stop a tank. There was no nameplate on the door, and Michael saw thick steel bars on both the first and second story windows. With the drapes and sheers on the windows, it was as impossible to see inside, as it would be to get inside.

“The Israeli Consulate is around the corner on 2nd Avenue,” Manny explained as he glanced up and down the street before he rang the doorbell. “They use this place when they don’t want certain visitors to be seen strolling in the official front door.”

Once inside, he led them back to a conference room in the center of the house in what used to be the dining room, away from prying eyes and ears and all the windows. Manny then introduced them to two men who were waiting at the table when they entered the room. “Mike, Leslie, I’d like you to meet Doctor Yuri Chorev and Chief Petty Officer Nathan Schiff.”

They all shook hands and Manny said, “Sit, sit. You’ll find the Israelis are too new at this stuff to stand on formality. The good doctor is a marine geologist specializing in underwater mineral formations and oil deposits, or at least that’s what he does between other things. He did some consulting with the Swedes back before the war, which gives us a good excuse for him to go back up and do some further research. Yuri was in the Israeli Navy. He’s been in the Reserves the last two years.”

“The Navy is not one of our larger services,” he smiled.

“And he’s done a number of ‘special tasks’ for the government from time to time, so I think he understands the unique opportunity we have here,” Manny added.

“Will the Swedes be any trouble?” Michael asked.

“Oh, no. The potential for oil deposits in the Baltic is a very hot topic right now, and even a small expedition to study underwater drilling sites will be welcome. I’ve worked the Baltic before, so we should have more than enough political cover,” Chorev added.

“But not so much that the Nazis, the Russians, the CIA, and whoever the hell else is watching us, won’t know we’re coming?” Michael asked.

“I hope not!” Manny chuckled. “What fun would that be?”

Chorev smiled. “And who knows, we might actually find some oil after all.”

“Even if it’s in the fuel tanks of an old U-boat?” Leslie asked.

“What kind of equipment are you bringing?” Michael asked.

“I have an array of vertical and diagonal sonar that can give us reasonably accurate images of the sea bed,” Chorev answered. “They sense objects or terrain changes of a meter or more. That’s not good enough for precise mapping of the bottom, but we’ll know if we run over something as big as a sunken ship. Also, I have some broad-field magnetometers that will help detect metals like iron and particularly steel.”

“Like the hull of a submarine?” Leslie asked.

“I don’t want to mislead you. Depending upon the depths, temperature and salinity layers, and how close we get, we have a decent chance. The Baltic isn’t



deep enough to hide anything that big forever, but it does have a number of large fissures and holes and it will require precise work. In the wrong place, you could lose a battleship if you're not careful."

Manny nodded toward the younger man in a blue denim work uniform in the other chair. "Warrant Officer Schiff is an underwater salvage specialist, a diver if you will. If we find anything, he'll go down and check it out."

"We've done our share of underwater salvage work after the War of Independence," Schiff added. "Clearing out sunken ships and debris along the Mediterranean coast, even a couple of submarines, so we know the problems."

"You'll find the water is a bit colder up there than what you are used to," Michael commented.

"Yes, it is; and it is hard work. Both of you are coming?" he asked.

"Yes!" Leslie quickly answered.

"Looks like all three of us are," Manny added.

"Excellent. Then you can learn to dive with me. This isn't old-fashioned hard-hat diving. The Baltic is shallow, so we would use the newest self-contained aqua lung equipment."

"Not me," Manny laughed. "If I go in, I'd look like Moby Dick."

"Well, count me in," Leslie said.

"What about you, Michael?" Schiff asked. "We have the construction drawings of the Class VII U-boats, but you've actually been inside and know how everything is laid out. Having you along would be invaluable."

Michael looked at him for a long moment. "Okay, I'll dive; but as for going inside and all the rest of it, we'll see," was all he could commit to.

"Some team," Manny chirped. "We got brains, skill, brawn, good looks, and a lot of bad memories."

"And the painter makes six," Leslie chimed in.

"I sure hope so," Manny laughed. "I don't know about you, but I'd love a return engagement."

"Yeah, I'm in," Michael added. "And I know where we can get a good boat."

Michael said nothing, but the truth was, he had to go. He was tied to that U-boat and to Eric Bruckner by a long chain. One end was anchored to Michael's soul and the other end was wrapped around the U-boat. Maybe that was why Bruckner set him free that night. Maybe he knew he and U-582 were doomed. Maybe he knew they all were, and this half-starved B-17 waist gunner standing in front of him was the insurance policy he needed to protect his honor.

## Chapter 23

### Bolivia

The hour was late. Martin Bormann sat in his study, slumped in his favorite red-leather armchair. It was carefully positioned in front of the high, vaulted fireplace so he could stare deep into the flames. Up close like this, the heat from the white-stone hearth drove the evening chill from his old bones, and the dancing

flames drew him in and helped him think. The rest of the room remained shrouded in darkness, as the rolling melodies of *The Flying Dutchman* played on the phonograph. Bormann loved Wagner and he loved it loud, so the big orchestral sound echoed off the stone walls and out across the craggy mountainsides. As the years passed, he had come to appreciate *The Flying Dutchman* more than the others. It had an interesting theme, he thought: a man who was damned to wander the earth forever without ever being allowed to return home. Yes, that was an interesting theme, and one he could understand all too well.

When he had important decisions to make, he disliked being rushed. He preferred to dissect each problem slowly and carefully, holding it up to the light and turning it around and around so he could look deep inside and carefully study each facet, evaluating its strengths and weaknesses, looking for the slightest flaw. Like a diamond cutter with a large rough stone before him, he could lose himself in the intricate geometry for hours on end. Why not? Time was one commodity of which Bormann had an endless supply. Then, after he finally decided what his move would be, he would wager everything on one swift stroke with a mallet and a sharp blade, creating another gem or mere dust.

Tonight he had two such delicate decisions to consider. First, there was the unfinished business with that cursed U-boat; and second, he must finalize the invitation list for his grand annual party here in Bolivia. The party was no trivial matter. For the past five years, he hosted a lavish gala each July 29 for a large but very influential group of South American guests. They would include the ruling elite, conservative politicians, army generals, diplomats, bankers, bishops and other high-ranking Catholic Church leaders, because they were the finely woven fabric that supported his growing empire on the continent. Without them, he could not function.

The party was now only four weeks away and his invitations must go out. In a country like Bolivia, Peru, or Colombia, where the leadership was barely a generation away from a mud hut in the mountains, there was no social register or "Blue Book." To an ambitious army colonel or a local mayor whose wife had developed a sweet tooth for the good life, Bormann's invitation served the purpose. When they received one of his engraved invitations, hand-delivered by a uniformed, heel-clicking chauffeur; that small white envelope was instant confirmation of a man's place in the power elite. To be overlooked meant he had not yet arrived; but to have once been invited and never invited back was far worse. So if an envelope came, they would rise off their death beds to attend, as much to be seen as to avoid the danger of not being seen.

Downstairs, his foyer and grand banquet room would be spectacularly decorated for the occasion. The heavy brass chandeliers, polished oak furniture, and wall after wall of world-class oil paintings and tapestries would seem like a Hollywood set or the surface of the moon to most of his guests. The china was from Dresden and the silver from the finest artisans in Austria; the food and drink would be the best available in South America; and the impossibly long, mahogany banquet table would glitter under the warm glow of hundreds of candles. Yes, everyone said Señor Perez, or "*el Patron*" as he was called, was a proud and smiling host and a true gentleman. He treated his guests with respect and he was never known to ask for a single favor in return. That was unthinkable and

unnecessary. After all, his true friends understood his needs and his desire for privacy without being asked. They considered it an honor to satisfy any trivial matter that might be brought to their attention on his behalf, such as stomping hard on any troublemakers or malcontents.

Naturally, there were whispers. Who was this powerful recluse? There were whispers that he was the closest of friends with Perón in Argentina, Batista in Cuba, and even the great Franco in Spain, and that his investments spanned the length and breadth of South America. However, in Bolivia, a gentleman's business was his own and a wagging tongue would soon be stepped on by a hobnailed boot. As the years passed, the whispers soon faded and fell out of fashion, because Martin Bormann understood power and he knew a hundred subtle ways to use it. Whether it was money, muscle, or a simple invitation list to a party, the man knew how to protect his growing empire.

Then, his mind turned to that other problem, and his smile began to fade. It was the U-582 and that damned American, which apparently held the secret to his missing gold. Like most things in life, the equation was a simple one: what was his was his, and Bormann would never rest until he had it back, every crate, every bar, every painting, and every bauble inside that U-boat. He had carefully studied every nuance and angle, and he made his decision. He reached over, pressed the small button on his intercom, and soon heard the faint but familiar tread of footsteps crossing the hardwood floor. Like a well-trained Doberman, Heinz Kruger came to a halt at the side of his armchair, waiting for his orders.

"It appears that we threw a pebble into their pond, Heinz," he said without bothering to look up. "Interesting, how the ripples continue to spread, eh? Consider our old friend Bruckner. For he rebuffs our overtures, only to suddenly run to us with this story that the American was threatening to expose him as a war criminal. Bruckner? Our squeaky-clean U-boat Kapitän? It boggles the mind."

Bormann looked up at Kruger and their eyes met. "We knew the man was not being candid with us from the very beginning, but you and I are patient men, are we not? So I sent you to New York to talk to the American, only to have you walk into a carefully laid trap. Whose trap doesn't matter. The New York City police, the FBI, or the CIA? We may never know who, but scratch the surface and you will always find the Jews and the Communists underneath. But they had no idea whom they were dealing with, did they Heinz? No, indeed," he chuckled. "I told Decker in Bonn to question the good admiral, but they now have him locked away behind a high wall of security. Why? Are they afraid of the American? Are they stopping him from getting in, or stopping Bruckner from getting out?"

Bormann rested his chin on the tips of his fingers. "This poses an interesting choice. Do I send you to Bonn and have you climb over that wall with a blowtorch and a pair of pliers? Or do we simply put a bullet in his head and write him off as a bad loss?"

"Then we may never learn what happened to the submarine."

"Or my gold." The Reichsleiter stared deeper into the flames. "The Israelis are sending a scientific expedition to the Baltic, to look for oil."

"Oil? What a surprise," Kruger said, his voice heavy and sarcastic.

"They've hired a ship and they will leave for Sweden within the week. Sweden, Heinz. They are going to a small town called Trelleborg on the south coast near

Malmö. And will wonders never cease, your mysterious American, Randall, has signed on as a member of the crew. How remarkable.”

“Do they really think we’re that stupid, Herr Reichsleiter,” Kruger asked. “Or are they trying to be too clever once again?”

“An excellent question. Over the years, I have learned that inside every little problem is a big one trying to get out and bite you on the arse, and we cannot allow that to happen. That’s why we must put an end to this business—swiftly, brutally, and thoroughly—and give his Jewish masters a stern lesson they shall never forget.”

“*Zu Befehl!*” Kruger snapped to attention. “It would be my pleasure.”

“Oh, I’m certain of that, Heinz.” Bormann looked up at him, studying the younger man’s face and the fresh bandage on his cheek in the dim fire light. “The cut on your cheek, is it healing now, Heinz?” Bormann saw a flash of anger in Kruger’s eyes.

“It is nothing, Herr Reichsleiter.”

“Perhaps, but one can always be more careful,” he answered, knowing Kruger was still smarting from the failure and the wound to his ego. “How unfortunate that you were not able to have that leisurely chat with the fellow.”

Kruger answered with the short, curt bow of an obedient headwaiter. “Perhaps I should go to Bonn then, Herr Reichsleiter? The admiral’s security be damned, I’ll find a way to get him alone and make him talk.”

“A lovely thought, but no,” Bormann sighed, knowing Kruger enjoyed that type of work a bit too much. “I don’t want Bruckner dead, not just yet anyway.” The young SS officer had honed his skills to a razor’s edge after the war, but as he did, he became more reckless and more and more sadistic in his methods. A psychopath? Bormann looked up at him and smiled. Unquestionably, but even that word was pathetically inadequate to describe a killing machine like Heinz Kruger. “Let them play out their hand a while longer. They’re going for the U-boat, and what could be better for us, eh? If the American does know where it is, that will save us a lot of time and effort. At the right moment, you will simply take it away from them.” Bormann looked up and saw a faint smile cross Kruger’s lips. “And after I have my submarine back, you may deal with the American, with that fool Bruckner, and with anyone else who has the misfortune of crossing your path.”

“Why bother with Sweden, Herr Reichsleiter?” Kruger countered. “With better support, I could go back to New York tonight, grab the American, and rip the truth out of him.”

“I am certain you could,” Bormann chuckled. “There are other things in play here, things we do not fully understand yet. My gut tells me the answers are not in New York or in Bonn; they lie at the bottom of the Baltic.”

“Then it is Sweden.”

“Yes,” Bormann answered as he pushed his stocky frame to his feet. He stepped over to the hearth and warmed his cold hands at the blazing fire. “As Göring once warned me, a man’s friends may come and go, but his enemies always multiply. Yes, they are lying to us, Heinz, they are all lying to us, but inside each big lie, there is always a tiny kernel of truth. So I want you to go to Sweden. Let the American lead you to the U-boat. If he really does know where it is, then take it

away from them. Better than any man, you know how to get at the truth, whether it lies in Bonn, New York City, or a cold iron tomb on the bottom of the Baltic. Get it for me, Heinz. Get it for me.”

## PART VI

**Trelleborg, Sweden  
1951**

### Chapter 24

Mike Randall pressed his face to the chartered airplane's window and watched the Swedish countryside sweep by below. As the long coast stretched south and finally turned west, the low hills and granite cliffs gave way to a string of broad bays and sandy beaches. In the three years that he lived there, he had fished them all, knowing full well that one of those bays was where Kapitan Bruckner put him ashore that night. But which one, he wondered. The airplane banked to the right as the pilot began his slow descent into the small airport at Trelleborg, gliding low over the flat, green beet fields until its wheels touched lightly on the long strand of runway. The airplane bounced twice and rolled down the tarmac until it came to a stop in the grass near the airport's tiny control tower. The pilot turned off the engine and while the other members of the crew gathered their belongings, Michael climbed out the small fuselage door and stretched.

The short, green Swedish summer was in full bloom and the air hung heavy with the familiar smells of sugar beets, wild flowers, and the salty tang of the sea. It smelled good and felt good, but Michael's long limbs were not made for a cramped airplane like this. From New York to London to Stockholm and on to Trelleborg, he had spent too many hours in too many small seats and boring airports, and the cramped muscles in his back and legs screamed in protest.

Looking around, he saw an old Volvo sedan parked behind the tower. Standing near the lead car was the familiar, barrel-chested figure of Einar Person wearing his usual faded blue pea jacket. Person looked a shade older and a shade grayer than the last time Michael had seen him some three years earlier, but the old man had the same bushy gray beard, and the same yellowed meerschaum pipe clenched between his teeth.

"Michael!" Person called out with a broad smile and a wave of his hand. "Ah, but it is wonderful to see you again, my boy. Emma knew you would come back!"

They met with big smiles and backslapping bear hugs. When they shook hands, Michael found Person's were still rough and callused, his grip still strong. "You look good, Einar. And from your hands, I can tell you haven't slowed down a bit."

"Slow down? When they nail the lid on my coffin, that will be soon enough for me."

"And how is Emma?"

"Same as always. She has been cooking since yesterday. She expects you and all your friends to join us for dinner, and she will brook no arguments about it."

Michael smiled and nodded. "I must tell you, when you wired me last week and asked if you could charter my old whaler, the BRUNNHILDE; well, I thought someone was pulling my leg."

"Until you got the bank wire transfer we sent."

"Yes, you could be a jokester when you lived here with us, but your sense of humor was never worth two thousand dollars."

"My sense of humor? *I* was never worth two thousand dollars."

"Well, as a deck hand or a fisherman, I must admit you were not; but as a friend, you were priceless. Tell me, though; is the two thousand dollars your money?"

"No, Einar, it isn't."

"Good, then I will take every penny of it," he roared with laughter. "If it was yours, I would have torn up the check."

"You always were a stubborn old man."

"And I still am, but if you want the BRUNNHILDE, she is yours."

"I do. Has our equipment arrived?"

"Indeed, two days ago. There are seven large crates. We brought them aboard and put them in the forward cargo hold. I thought it would give you a bit more privacy."

"Excellent, excellent," Michael said as he turned towards the others who had gathered behind him. "Einar, I'd like you to meet our little research group. This is Doctor Yuri Chorev from Israel. He's an international expert in underwater oil shale exploration, who has been consulting with your government on new oil finds in the Baltic."

"A doctor! I do not believe we have had a doctor go out on one of our boats before."

"Well, don't get sick," Chorev quipped. "I'm a geologist, not an MD."

Person paused and looked around at the others. "And I see you brought a young lady with you as well," he bowed and seemed pleasantly surprised.

"This is Leslie Hodge... my research assistant," Michael said.

"Your 'research assistant'?" Person said with a twinkle in his eye and a slight bow. "I suggest you don't try that one on Emma, Michael. She would box your ears good. But Hodge? I think I remember that name."

"My brother, Eddie, was in the Air Corps with Michael," Leslie answered.

"Ah, of course, from South Carolina. Now we know why it took you so long to come back to us," Person said with a quick glance up at Michael. He was certain there was a question in there somewhere, but it appeared the old Swede would hold it for later. "Well, other than my wife, Emma, I don't believe we've had a woman go out to sea with us, either, so that should be a change for the better." Then his eyes came to rest on Manny.

"This is Manny Eismer," Michael said, searching for the appropriate words. "He is a retired policeman and a friend of mine from New York."

"A retired policeman?" Person asked as one of his eyebrows went up. "Another first for the old BRUNNHILDE."

"And David Schiff, a diver who specializes in underwater research."

Person smiled as he looked around at the new faces, then back at Michael. "Oil, eh? Well, you have brought quite a distinguished group with you, an Israeli

scientist, a very fit looking diver, a New York City policeman, and your old friend's sister from South Carolina. Is it oil that brings them all here, or an old, rusting U-boat?" Person silenced Michael's protest with a smile and a wave of his hand. "No need, no need. You are a friend, Michael, and I trust you will do what is proper."

"We'll be doing some poking around, that's all," Michael assured him. "Everything will be legal and aboveboard."

"I am sure it will be," the Swede shook his head. "I lived for a time in Germany in the mid-1930s, before the war, when the Nazis were first flexing their power. I saw things there that I never wanted to see again, so I know all about your Nazis. The Swedish people are fair and have good hearts. We sympathize with the Israeli people; but I'm a Swede, and we have our laws. If everyone understands, there should be no problem."

"Understood," Michael assured him. "And all we are looking for is the truth, Einar," he said quietly.

"Ah, the truth. Nothing is harder to find, and nothing can cause more damage than the truth," Person replied. "But enough of that. Welcome to Trelleborg," Person spread his arms wide. "You have had a long trip and I am certain you must be exhausted. I have reserved some rooms for you in a nice little hotel near the harbor. In the morning, you can move into the cabins on the BRUNNHILDE and get your equipment set up."

"When can we meet the rest of the crew?" Manny asked.

"Most of the regulars were out to sea when I got your cable. So, I shall take the helm myself. The Mate is a new man, a German named Balck; he seems qualified. I only wish that were so with the deck hand. He's a union-hall pickup named Demberg, but we have to take what they give us these days. There's no telling what he'll be like."

"Closing time," the bartender's voice echoed through the nearly empty tavern. The language might be Swedish, but it carried the bored intonation of saloonkeepers the world over. It had been a long night, with barely enough money in the cash box to pay the rent.

"Bottoms up," he called out even louder as he finished washing the last of the glasses, adding a scowl for effect. "Let's go. It's the law, and I must lock up."

As he looked out across the seedy, dimly lit room, the bartender saw there were only three customers left in the place; and he was not about to stop the clock on their account. The two strangers at a table nearest the front door took the hint. They exchanged quick, furtive glances and slowly rose to their feet. The smaller of the two, a sharp-eyed little weasel, dug in his pocket, counted out some folding money, and allowed the bills to fall from his fingertips onto the table. The bartender had seen this act from too many other cheapskates before. Nurse a few beers hour after hour, tell your friend you are picking up the tab, then drop exact change on the table and quickly head for the door. Well, good riddance to both of you, the bartender thought.

Now, there was only the third customer left to deal with, that asshole Demberg. The bartender shook his head and groaned. Over the years, he had seen it all — happy drunks, sad drunks, quiet drunks, loud drunks, angry drunks, stupid drunks, and mean drunks. Demberg was the last two and a real jerk. There were a



half dozen other taverns along the docks. Why did Demberg always end up here, the bartender wanted to know. Despite the two bar calls, Demberg hadn't moved. He sat hunched over his drink, slack-jawed, with his usual vacant expression. If he had heard a word the bartender said, it had not registered. Cheapskates and bad drunks, the bartender cursed. That's all he ever got these days.

"Let's go, Demberg," the bartender called out again. "I gotta lock up, and I'm really tired." Still, Demberg didn't move. "I won't take any crap from you tonight. You hear me? If I toss you out of here again, you won't be coming back."

The bartender had forty pounds on the short, wiry sailor; but he knew Demberg always had a straight razor up his sleeve or in his boot. No matter how drunk he looked, he wasn't to be underestimated. "Come on," the bartender softened. "I gotta go home to my wife. Why don't you go home to yours for a change?"

"Shows what you know, Tomas," he heard a slurred reply as Demberg finally looked up. "Why do you think I came in here? For the company?" he said as he held up his glass. "How about another tot, huh? Two, for you and me; I'll even buy."

"You've had enough already. Now, get out of here before the police come in here and climb all over my ass."

"The police? Down here?" Demberg snorted. "That'll be the day." He gulped the last of his drink, spilling half of it down the front of his shirt. "Oh, all right, you ugly bastard." He slammed the glass on the table and rose to his feet. He wobbled back and forth for a moment, glassy-eyed, and had to lean on the table for support. "Seems a man can't even get drunk anymore without some pissant's got to up and ruin it."

"Do me a favor. Go home and sleep it off, Demberg," the bartender growled. "And tomorrow night, take your business someplace else."

Demberg gave him a nasty look and drew the glass back to throw it at him; but he was still sober enough not to bite the hand that fed him, or the hand that poured his drinks as the case may be; and he set it down. Besides, Demberg knew Tomas kept an oak club under the bar; and the bartender wasn't afraid to use it. Demberg rose to his feet and pulled some coins from his pocket. Tottering back and forth, he dropped them on the table, not even bothering to count. He took a few unsteady steps toward the door, then a few more, his hand touching each tabletop he passed like a blind man navigating by Braille.

"You take care, Demberg," the bartender called out sarcastically. "I wouldn't want you getting hurt out there," he said, not really giving a damn if someone beat the crap out of him, so long as it was down the street and away from his front door.

A half-block further up the street, the bartender's wish was about to come true. The two men who had spent the evening sitting at the front table now hid in a dark doorway waiting patiently for Demberg to come out. The big one stood at the entrance cleaning his fingernails with a long-bladed pocketknife keeping watch, while the little weasel, named Lindstromm, hid in the shadows, his eyes darting nervously up and down the street.

Finally, the tavern's front door opened and Demberg staggered out into the dim circle of red neon light. Lindstromm smiled as Demberg stood at the curb,

wobbling back and forth. The night was cool. The deckhand tipped his head back and took several deep breaths to try to clear the alcoholic haze from his brain, but there was not enough cold air in Sweden to pull that off, not after all the whiskey Demberg had drunk. Slowly, the deck hand turned and began walking a crooked path up the sidewalk directly toward them.

This was going to be ever so easy, the little weasel smiled. While the three men had spent most of that evening in the same bar, Demberg came out dead drunk while the other two were stone sober. Eventually, Demberg's unsteady, shuffling pace brought him close enough for the weasel to step out of the shadows directly into his path. Surprised, Demberg stopped and took a step or two back, trying to focus his blood-shot eyes on this sudden threat from the darkness.

"Is that you, Demberg?" Lindstromm asked in a friendly voice.

"Huh? What?" Demberg snarled, squinting as he tried to see the man's face, still shrouded in shadow. "Get the hell out of my way!"

"Hold on now, Demberg. All I want is a quick word with you," Lindstromm grinned. "Surely you don't mind talking with a fellow sailor?"

"You're a sailor, huh? Well, you don't look like one. You look like a little prick to me, that's what you look like." Demberg balled his hands into tight fists. He had just had a rotten night, and he had a rotten week before that. So why not end it by pounding lumps on this skinny little shit? "Who are you, anyway?" Demberg mumbled as he tried to shield his eyes for a better look. "I can't see your damned face."

"Me? Oh, I'm another hard-working sailor, just like you, Demberg, that's all," came the syrupy reply. "And hey, that wife of yours, she's something else, isn't she?"

Demberg stopped. His eyes narrowed and he bared his teeth as he realized what this stranger was saying to him. He'd do more than just pound lumps on this big mouth. He'd break the man in half.

"Yeah," the stranger went on taunting Demberg with a big grin. "Somebody told me she ain't half-bad looking, but I never turned on the light."

As those words penetrated his drunken haze, Demberg's face twisted with rage. "Come 'ere, you little bastard!" he swore, lunging forward. His hands went for the other man's throat, but they never got that far. He was too drunk to get a good look at the stranger and too drunk to see his partner slip up behind him. A split second later, it didn't matter, as a dull, crunching blow hit Demberg on the back of his head. He never knew what hit him; he never knew who delivered the blow; and he never saw the hard concrete sidewalk as it rushed up and crashed into his face. All he saw was an explosion of red and white stars before everything went black.

Demberg had barely hit the pavement before the big man raised the heavy steel pipe to smash him again. "No!" Lindstromm's voice stopped the man's arm in mid-swing. "They said to put him on ice for a while, Lars, not to kill him." That said, Lindstromm gave Demberg two vicious kicks in the side. He heard the man's ribs snap beneath the steel toe of his boot, and smiled. "That should hold him for a few weeks. Now get his money and his watch. We want this to look good."

"You're sure you can get his berth on the boat?" Lars asked as he rifled through Demberg's pockets.

“It’s all been arranged through the Union.”

The big man grinned as he pulled a fat roll of bills from Demberg’s pocket. “Look what I found, Lindstromm? A bonus.”

The little man snatched the money from Lars’s hand and slipped it in his pocket. “I need that to grease the union steward,” he told him with a syrupy smile. “Don’t worry, I’ll turn the rest of it over to the party treasurer in the morning.”

The big man still had the lead pipe in his hand. He rose to his full height and towered over Lindstromm, tapping the pipe in the palm of his hand. “Don’t press your luck, Lindstromm. I may not have your brains, but I’d never have to buy another drink in this town when the boys learn I was the one who busted your skull; so don’t try me.”

Lindstromm looked up at him and smiled. “Oh, you can’t blame a man for trying, can you, Lars?” he chuckled and pulled the wad of money back out of his pocket. He had a knife in his pants, but Lars was big and strong; and he hadn’t lowered the pipe yet. Slowly, Lindstromm began dividing the stack of bills into two piles. “You’re just too smart for me, Lars. And to prove we can work together, I’ll even give you a little ‘socialist equity,’ eh?” he said as he handed the other man one of the two stacks.

The big man accepted the offering, but his eyes never left Lindstromm’s. He knew the sneaky little shit would kill him in a heartbeat and grab all the money if he thought he could get away with it. After all, it was Lindstromm who told him years ago never to trust anybody, so the big Swede was not about to start with his teacher.

“Now get going,” Lindstromm said. “Phone the Union Hall first thing in the morning. Tell them Demberg’s in the hospital and he won’t be taking any billets for a while. Tell them he got himself hurt in a bad fall. Then I’ll stop by around 9:00 AM and collect my work papers. Go on, go.”

## Chapter 25

After breakfast at the small hotel in town, Michael led the group downhill to the harbor. As they neared the water, the pungent aroma of the docks, the fishing boats, and processing plants rose on the morning air to greet them. He had almost forgotten the sharp smells of cold salt water, herring, and cod. They were far different from the warm water, shellfish, and languid, brackish marshes of South Carolina.

When they walked around the side of the last row of warehouses and reached the quay, they saw the BRUNNHILDE tied to the pier in front of Person’s warehouse. Michael knew her from his three years of near-daily contact; this was the first glimpse the others got of what would be their home for the next few weeks. It would have done him no good to try to describe the old steel-hulled whaler to the others. The QUEEN MARY she was not. She had a tall prow and the wheelhouse stood amidships with glass windows and several radio masts poking through the roof. Forward and aft of the wheelhouse lay the cargo holds, each rigged with a stubby cargo boom. The white paint on her hull above the water line

was streaked and chipped, and her sturdy oak deck had been worn smooth from decades of rubber boots, fishing nets, and wooden crates dragging back and forth across it. While she might not look like much above the water, Michael knew her engines had been rebuilt and they purred like a Mercedes Benz. With a high prow and wide beam, she could take anything the Baltic could throw at her; in the end, that was all that really mattered.

Einar Person came hurrying out through the rear door of his warehouse, pulling the pipe from his mouth as he greeted them with an embarrassed smile. "What can I say, Michael? You insisted on the BRUNNHILDE, because she would not attract too much attention. Well, there she is." Person turned to the others and explained. "I was at the wheel of the BRUNNHILDE early that morning in 1945 when we found him floating in a small black-rubber raft headed for God only knows where, half-dead and out of his mind."

"She's my lucky charm," Michael answered. "That's why I wanted her, Einar."

"Yes," he sighed. "A big, rusting, smelly lucky charm, but we always caught fish when you took her out. We always caught fish—we even caught you, didn't we?"

"True, and that's all we need, Einar, one more good catch, one more big fish."

"The BRUNNHILDE," Leslie frowned as she read the faded name painted on the bow. "Wasn't that one of the Valkyries?"

"Ah, you have heard of her then," Person answered. Yes, Brunnhilde was Queen of the Nibelungen in our Norse legends. They would pick up our fallen heroes from the battlefield and carry them off to Valhalla on their great horses."

"Yes, I know," Leslie smiled as she turned toward Michael. "And do you know what else she did? She killed her boyfriend, Siegfried, when he lied to her."

"Ah, your friend is a lover of opera! Emma will like that," Person laughed.

"One with a very subtle sense of humor," Michael said.

"No, every Saturday afternoon Mama would have the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts on the radio and we all listened," Leslie countered. "See, I'm full of surprises."

"Well, I don't know much about the opera, or queens, or horses," Michael said. "But if you like diesel fumes and the smell of dead fish, you're going to love this Brunnhilde."

Leslie wrinkled her nose and tried not to laugh.

"Do not let her looks fool you," Person jumped in. "Above decks, she may look worn and tired, but down below is another matter. The crew's quarters are clean and freshly painted. The men should find them comfortable; I only hope the young lady will."

"I grew up working six days a week on my Daddy's oyster dredge in South Carolina," Leslie added. "Your boat is a palace compared to one of those."

"Then, we are all set, eh?" Person smiled and motioned toward the boat. "Oh, incidentally, Michael, the union hall had to send me a new deck hand this morning. I had hired on a fellow named Demberg, but he's in the hospital. It seems he got himself beat up and robbed last night outside a bar. These sailors can be such fools," Person shook his head sadly. "Give a man a good job and look what he does? Drinks it all away."

"This may not be any of my business," Leslie interrupted. "Don't you have any of the regular crewmen you can call?"

“Mates, engineers, and officers I can hire, my dear, but for ordinary seamen we must order through those crooks over at the union hall. That is another change for the worse in our Swedish workers *paradise* since Michael was here last. They are nothing but a pack of featherbedding Socialists and Communists; but I did interview the new man, a fellow named Lindstromm, and I think he will do. He knows I expect a full day’s work for a full day’s pay. If he does what he is told, there will be a bonus in his pay envelope.”

“You said you have a new Mate too, a man named Balck,” Michael asked.

“He is a German and the only Mate in port with valid papers, so I grabbed him before someone else did.”

“You know best, Einar. We’ll get by,” Michael reassured him.

“Unions!” the captain shook his head sadly. “Leif Ericson would have never left port if he left all the decisions to the oarsmen, now would he? A pack of Reds, that is what they are; but I have found if you scratch one of those Marxists with enough extra Kroner, there is usually a hard-working capitalist hiding underneath.” They all laughed as Person led them up the gangway. “Come, let me show you your quarters.”

“You said our equipment has arrived?” Yuri Chorev asked.

“Yes, indeed. Two days ago, so we stowed it all in the forward hold. Follow me and we’ll have a look below deck.” With Person leading, they walked up the narrow wooden gangway and stepped onto the BRUNNHILDE’s deck. Michael cast a quick glance around. Einar was right. The BRUNNHILDE might look old and decrepit from the pier, but inside she was as neat and clean as he remembered.

Stepping inside the wheelhouse, Michael saw the navigational equipment had been upgraded, and everything looked new and modern. “Is she not as I told you?” Person beamed as Michael examined the console and the navigational gear. “Some new toys for you this time, eh? See how first impressions can be deceiving?”

They turned and took the steep flight of stairs leading below deck. The corridor was surprisingly clean and freshly painted. On the right and the left were a series of small, neat cabins that would be their homes for the next few weeks. Further aft, the head and the boat’s small galley sat on opposite sides of the corridor. At each end of the corridor stood a thick wooden bulkhead with a solid, iron-ribbed door in the center. Michael remembered that the forward door led to the smaller of the boat’s two main cargo holds, and the aft door led to the main hold and the engine room beyond.

“Miss Hodge will, of course, take my cabin,” Person pointed to the one farthest forward on the right, dismissing her protest with a wave of his hand. “It is bad manners for young people to argue with their elders. Call it the prerogative of gray hair. Besides, it has a private bathroom, and that will make things less awkward for the rest of us.”

“Well, if you insist.” Leslie gave an accommodating nod.

“Never fear,” he added with a subtle smile. “Swedish kindness always comes at a dear price. Since you are accustomed to working around sailors, you can lend a hand in the galley at dinner time.”

“After you taste my cooking, I may end up in the brig,” Leslie confessed. “That has never been one of my better talents.”

Michael took the cabin directly aft of Leslie's, and Person shifted his things to the one across the corridor. Convenient, Michael thought, depending on who was watching whom. Doctor Chorev, Manny, and David Schiff took the remaining three, since Person's small crew had already taken the two at the far end near the galley and head.

When they reassembled in the corridor, Person pointed toward the forward bulkhead. "I know you are anxious to see to your equipment, so if you will please follow me." Person walked forward; but as they approached the iron-ribbed door, the handle suddenly turned and the door swung open toward them. Through the low doorway stepped a man with blond hair dressed in denim overalls, bent over at the waist. Whoever he was, he did not realize the corridor was full of people until he almost collided with Person. Tall and fit, he quickly scanned the group with his steel-blue eyes, and a thin curious smile crossed his lips. "Good morning, Captain. I see our passengers have finally arrived," he said.

"That they have, Balck," Person frowned, clearly annoyed. "But I thought I left strict orders for you and Lindstromm to stay out of the hold."

"Indeed you did, Captain," the Mate quickly agreed as he held up a grimy black can. "But you also told me to grease the bearings, and the only way to get to the paint locker is through the hold."

Person seemed to study the man for a moment, and then he nodded. "You are right, Balck. I forgot, and apologize. But I thought the new man, Lindstromm, was helping you. Why didn't you send him for the grease?"

"Well, I would have," Balck said as he looked around, "but I couldn't find the fellow. You know," he leaned closer and said in a soft, conspiratorial voice, "I think he could use a good talking to, if you know what I mean."

Person studied the Mate for a moment, still not sure. "Yes, yes, I will do that, Balck. Now, get on about your duties."

"Aye, aye," the Mate answered innocently as he stepped aside, letting the small group pass one by one and enter the main hold. For that one brief instant, Balck's bright-blue eyes locked on Michael's, and the young American sensed a detached appraisal being made. Whatever the German was thinking, he said nothing and gave away even less.

Michael saw a fresh, pink scar on the German's cheek. It looked short but deep. "Well, it looks like work on a fishing boat is more dangerous than it used to be," Michael commented.

"Oh, this?" Balck touched his cheek and passed it off with a shrug. "A shave that got a bit too close." With that cryptic half-smile, the German turned and walked away down the corridor with the balanced, fluid motion of a large jungle cat on the prowl.

"An interesting man, your new mate," Michael commented to the captain.

"Balck? He seems competent enough. His last berth was on a steamer off South America. He said he couldn't take the hot weather and wanted to return to the Baltic." Person lit a wooden match and held it over the bowl of his pipe, his eyes glittering with amusement as he drew deep and exhaled several puffs of pungent smoke. "The man's papers are in order," Person said as he blew out the match. "And he says he can dive. I thought that might come in handy where we are going, eh?"

Maybe, Michael thought. Maybe. But like an itch he could not scratch, there was something behind the man's hooded blue eyes; and he didn't like it.

## Chapter 26

### Tallinn, Estonia

Five hundred miles to the east, in the sleepy port city of Tallinn, capital of the glorious Soviet Socialist Republic of Estonia, Captain Junior-Grade Vasily Ruchenko nervously paced the bridge of his newly commissioned fishing trawler. A boat like his might not be a big deal in the West; but a big, ocean-going Soviet "fishing trawler" was not built to catch fish. Her nets were as white as the first day they were hung on the trawler's booms. The nets had never touched seawater, and the booms had never moved. There were a half-dozen radio antennas of different types and heights inside the masts and booms, and two squat radar dishes hidden behind a false parapet on the wheelhouse. Below decks, you would not find the slightest whiff of rotting fish, because the only cod or mackerel that ever came aboard was in a can or box for the breakfast buffet in the officer's mess. The holds were sealed and air conditioned, and contained the most sophisticated computers, radar, sonar, and communications consoles in the Soviet arsenal; because Vasily Ruchenko's fishing trawler was an advanced spy ship designed to track NATO vessels in the Baltic and North Sea. He did not report to the Ministry of Fisheries or to the Navy. Ruchenko reported to the Ministry of the Interior, the dreaded MVD.

A spy trawler could be good duty for a naval officer. The MVD knew little about ship operations, so they left him alone as long as he got their work done. On the other hand, the Navy had no appetite for antagonizing the secret police, so they did the same. That might not be a good situation for an officer with ambitions, but Ruchenko had none. He had come into the Navy as a Basic Seaman in the 1930s, rising up through the ranks one slow, painful grade at a time, earning his shoulder boards the hard way. No bright-eyed academy boy, Politburo Member's nephew, or well-connected ass-kisser, Ruchenko was a no-nonsense grinder with the crow's feet, wrinkles, and gray hair to prove it. Younger and more ambitious officers might scramble for positions on a sleek new destroyer or a cruiser, but his lowly spy trawler was the perfect assignment for him. It was his little world. He followed orders, ran it by the book, and always kept his nose clean.

That was why Ruchenko was pacing nervously back and forth on the bridge. It started that afternoon when the Duty Officer woke him from a well-deserved late-afternoon nap with an urgent radiogram from Moscow. Ruchenko did not like surprises and he did not like urgent radiograms, especially ones from Moscow Center. He would be shipping out with a big shot MVD Colonel on an important, top-secret assignment, and he was to be ready to put to sea on one hour's notice. That set his stomach churning like a concrete mixer.

A spy trawler was a tight little world, as regular and orderly as a Swiss watch. Ordinarily, his job was to troll back and forth on the Grand Bank or off the

western approaches to England, Scotland, Nova Scotia, or New England, where his exceedingly boring job was to monitor American military communications that he couldn't possibly understand. His crew of thirty were handpicked technicians, trained in the best technical and language schools. They were isolated from the outside world, and worked long, tense hours out on the open sea sitting in front of their equipment. Young men being young men, it was all a delicate balance. Dropping a stranger in their midst could muck the whole thing up, even a well-intentioned one; and an MVD Colonel was never well-intentioned.

Ruchenko smelled the Inspector General behind it. The IG's men were the spy's spies, paid by the number of scalps they brought home. He would bet that this MVD Colonel would be a nosey fellow who would sniff around and talk to each of his junior officers and enlisted men. He will instigate, gossip, meddle, count the silverware, poke in all the corners, and examine every accounting record on the boat until he found something wrong. He will tug at every loose end, and pick at the scabs. He will inevitably find some little tidbit, and then write a venomous report blaming the Captain for everything. That was why that urgent message from Moscow was the last thing Ruchenko wanted to read over his late-afternoon black bread and tea.

He had given the Navy sixteen good years. With a touch of luck, he might even make Captain Senior-Grade before he retired. Not bad for a potato farmer's son from Gorky who was pushed through the door marked "Navy" in 1935, while all his friends shuffled through the one marked "Army." But that was the luck of the draw. If the Rodina, the Motherland, needed a sailor, she might not get the smartest one; but she would get a dedicated one.

Still, it was not fair. Before all this blew up, he planned a lovely week for himself in Tallinn. Not that Estonia could ever be mistaken for the lively resorts on the Black Sea or the bustling fleet headquarters in Leningrad; but it was not a sleazy dump like Murmansk, either. He was looking forward to some good meals, catching some sun on the beach, and getting very drunk. Perhaps he would even spend some time with the ladies at the special 'club' reserved for senior naval officers. He would like that. After all, he had been out at sea for seven straight weeks, and he was as randy as a young Ensign.

So, why couldn't Moscow pick on someone else? Why him?

For the tenth time in the past twenty minutes, he glanced at his watch and broke into a cold sweat. Just after noon, in a moment of mindless stupidity, he signed passes to permit half of his crew to go ashore for the evening. That was a perfectly normal thing for a Captain to do when his boat was in its home port, but Ruchenko's luck was hardly running normal today. The radiogram from Moscow put an end to all that. By the time he received it, his men were scattered to the four winds; and it was too late to recall them. Search parties were combing every bar and brothel in town, reporting to Ruchenko by telephone every thirty minutes, but he had no hope of finding them all in time. No hope at all. He was doomed.

He closed his eyes and saw the mountain of paperwork he would face, the questions they would throw at him, badgering him for hours at end. "You mean you put to sea without your full complement of crew, Ruchenko? Most remarkable. And you say you permitted all those men to go ashore at a time like that? A front-



line intelligence vessel? Not ready for sea? Not fully staffed when you were needed? Most remarkable, indeed!"

His stomach churned knowing they would let him pick his own poison.

If he jumped all over the missing men, the harpies would scream, "So severe, Ruchenko? Then it was the crew's fault? How long has this mutinous behavior been going on? A good Captain would have nipped that in the bud months ago, would he not?" If Ruchenko chose to be lenient, they would snipe at him with, "No discipline! Well, no wonder you lost control of your ship, you incompetent hack." He was doomed the moment he received that radiogram from Moscow, and he knew it. Doomed.

His "special" passengers were due to arrive any moment: an MVD Colonel named Varentsov and a Navy Speznaz underwater diving team. He did not know this Varentsov, but the Speznaz were elite Special Forces commandos and that made Ruchenko sweat. Why would they commandeer a front line intelligence asset like this if they were simply out for a Sunday boat ride on the Neva River? More ominously still, why the Speznaz diving team? Was this to be some secret commando operation using his trawler? Ruchenko did not like the sound of that at all. Something was certain to go wrong; or not go well enough, fast enough, high enough, or low enough to please them. Yes, when it finally hits the fan, as it will, Ruchenko would be the one with the shit all over him.

"Comrade Captain," his mousy watch officer called out. "A staff car has pulled up alongside the dock. I believe it is the officials you are expecting. Should I..."

"Yes, you imbecile!" Ruchenko's voice lashed out. "Go greet them!" And relax, he thought. Relax. It was going to take all his skill and guile to get out of this mess with his hide intact, so a bit of caution was in order. Keep your head. Welcome this fellow aboard. Be helpful. Smile. The Moscow colonel would smile. Ruchenko would smile again. Everyone would smile, like a goddamned convention of crocodiles.

Ruchenko smoothed his blue jacket and set a confident pose, projecting every ounce of authority he could muster as the two strangers entered the bridge. In the lead, and therefore in charge, was a chunky, balding civilian dressed in a rumpled brown business suit. Red-eyed and unshaven, he looked utterly undone. His white shirt was badly wrinkled, his coffee-stained red-striped tie was pulled down at the neck, and a cigarette dangled from the corner of his mouth. Ruchenko cursed his bad luck. This Varentsov was not from the Inspector General. He stunk of the Lubyanka, and he looked to be in a foul mood.

In lock-step behind him came a handsome, muscular Navy lieutenant, complete with shiny paratrooper boots, shaved head, and a starched commando jacket. He looked positively terrified, Ruchenko thought. Well, someday you will learn to hide those feelings behind a stone face like mine, my boy. For now though, we find ourselves floating side by side in the same big toilet bowl; so pay attention. When this Colonel finishes with us and pulls the chain, you shall see how fast an old turd like me can do the backstroke, and watch as you float on by.

"Comrades," Ruchenko stepped forward and spread his arms in a warm, friendly greeting. "Welcome aboard, I am..."

"Yes, you are Ruchenko, obviously," the bald man dismissed him with a casual flick of his hand. "And I am Varentsov," he said as he pulled out a thin black

wallet and flashed his gaudy red and gold MVD badge. "This Navy Lieutenant is assigned to me. As of this moment you, your boat, he, and his men are under my personal orders and mine alone. Do you understand me?" He stared at Ruchenko and let the words sink in.

"Yes, yes, Comrade," Ruchenko felt himself shrivel.

"I am here on Politburo business, Captain, and I have not slept in two days. Whatever problems you think you have, I do not want to hear about them. What I want is for you to put out to sea. Now!"

"Uh, yes, of course..." Ruchenko answered, still reeling. "We will be under way momentarily, Comrade Colonel. We have a few minor technical matters that need some attention, but they should not take more than an hour or two..."

"I did not come here to get smoke blown up my ass." Varentsov's expression turned cold and angry. "You received your orders. They were clear and to the point. You had one hour and that is now down to fifty-five minutes."

"Of course, Comrade, I was only..."

"Then get on with it!" Varentsov thundered as he threw his cigarette butt on the deck and ground it out beneath the heel of his shoe for effect.

Ruchenko's hand fumbled for the microphone on the intercom. "Make ready for sea," he barked. "Set the watch!" he snapped, his voice lacking the confident bravado of a few minutes before. "That should speed things up," Ruchenko offered with a thin, plastic smile, hoping they would find the rest of his crew by then. "Naturally, I am pleased to have you aboard *my* boat, Comrade Colonel," he added, putting emphasis on the word "my."

"Ruchenko, aggravate me no further," Varentsov cut him off. "I have no interest in you or this damned fishing boat of yours. You could be a Moscow taxi for all I care. Your job is to deliver me and this diving team where and when I tell you. Nothing more and nothing less. If you perform that simple task, we will have no problems. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Comrade," Ruchenko swallowed hard and nodded.

"Good. Now, have one of your men show us to our quarters."

"Certainly," Ruchenko smiled as he gestured toward the chart table. "If you would step over here and show me our destination, I will set the course."

"Head west," Varentsov waved the question aside. "Steer for the south coast of Sweden, for Malmö, as fast as this boat will take us. That is all you need to know until morning." He shoved a piece of paper into Ruchenko's hand. "Until then, I want your best radioman to monitor this frequency at all times—no, your *two* best men—and if they miss anything, you will share a long and unhappy vacation in the gold mines at Vorkuta, compliments of me, personally." That said, Varentsov spun on his heels and strode out of the compartment, leaving a young Speznaz Lieutenant and an old, gray-haired Captain Junior-Grade staring at each other. The Lieutenant took one look at Ruchenko's blood-red face, snapped off an academy salute, and followed Varentsov out the door.

Alone again, Ruchenko's plastic smile sagged at the corners. He slammed his fist on the table and knew this was would be a very bad trip; it would be his ruin.

On the BRUNNHILDE, it took most of that morning and afternoon to unpack the heavy wooden crates lying in the forward cargo hold and begin assembling

their equipment. Slowly, Michael got to his feet and stretched, trying to work the knots and kinks out of his back and legs. The pain aside, ever since the airplane landed in Sweden he had felt a growing uneasiness. He hadn't been completely honest with Einar. He owed the old man everything and he deserved better, but Michael knew Person knew the score. Michael had told him about 1945, the U-boat, and Bruckner before he left; but Einar didn't know about the gold bars, the 'Admiral', or the killer in the blue van in New York. Both Manny and Yuri Chorev had advised caution. "From what you say, he is a very honest and honorable man, Michael, so don't tell him what he doesn't need to know, not yet." So, he didn't, and the moment had passed. All he could do now was throw himself into the work and push the guilt back into the corner.

Schiff needed help with the diving platform, so Michael got down on his knees and helped him bolt the long aluminum tubes together. When it was fully assembled, carrying a depth finder, magnetometer, and a bulky array of lights and cameras attached, they would lower the platform over the side, and the whaler would drag it back and forth over the search grids. "The depth finder is state-of-the-art and can give us a pretty good profile of the sea bed, shooting straight down or shooting out on a diagonal," Yuri Chorev told him. "A U-boat will make a big bump down there, with a fairly distinct height, length, and width. Even if it's in pieces, we'll see something; then we can maneuver the platform closer. If it's made of steel, the magnetometer will sound off in the wheelhouse with a loud buzzing. Then we can power-up the underwater spotlights and the closed-circuit TV camera and take a look. In theory, it should all work."

"I've used equipment like this in the Mediterranean for the past few years," Schiff added. "But the Baltic is a little different. It's a shallow basin of cold, murky water. It averages less than one hundred twenty-five feet deep; but there are deep holes and trenches, big granite blocks, beds of loose rock, and geologic faults that score the seabed like the grooves on a phonograph record. Even the water poses problems. It is a layer cake of different densities, salinities, and temperatures, any one of which could throw the sonar off. So it is easy to miss something big down there, even something really big like a U-boat."

Michael knew it was a long shot from the beginning, but the thought of going over it and missing it was unthinkable. Finding the U-582 was the only thing that would vindicate him and the real Eric Bruckner; and that was the only reason he came.

The sun was finally below the horizon when Manny Eismer checked his watch and slipped unnoticed down the wheelhouse stairs. It stayed light at this latitude until very late at night, so he had to wait longer than he wanted. Below deck, he paused at his own cabin door to listen for any unusual sounds up on deck or back in the hold, making sure no one was out and about, or following him. He heard nothing. Everything seemed peaceful and quiet as he opened his cabin door and slipped inside, locking it behind him. It was nearly 11:00 PM. Manny was alone now and he had important things to do.

Reaching beneath his bunk, he found the handle of a small metal suitcase and pulled it out. There was a combination lock on the hasp and his fingers quickly spun the dial through a set of numbers until the lock opened, and he raised the

top. In the bottom, under a thick layer of sweaters, slacks, and underwear, lay five Beretta automatics. A Beretta wasn't heavy artillery, but with a bit of practice and patience it could be an accurate and nasty little piece for close-in work. More importantly, it could slip easily into a pants pocket or a waistband. If they needed more firepower than a thirty-two offered, then they were in bigger trouble than they could handle anyway. One was for him. One was for Yuri Chorev and another for Schiff. They were in the military or active reserves, depending upon which story he chose to believe, and they would know how to use it if they had to. One was for Randall. If his story was true, he had the motivation to use one; and that was half the battle. Finally, he had one for Leslie, whether she wanted it or not. Manny slipped a full clip into the receiver of each.

He had told them he would distribute them later that evening after it got dark. Leslie was the only one who complained. "Manny, if a flock of geese come over the boat and you give me a shotgun, we'll have goose for dinner; but I'd probably shoot myself in the foot with one of these."

"You keep it handy anyway, Cutie Pie."

"Manny's right," Michael offered. "You're the easiest target and that makes you the most vulnerable."

"Look, if they want to kill me, this won't stop them."

"It isn't them trying to kill you that bothers me. They'll be trying to grab you, like they tried to grab me," Michael told her. "That makes you a liability for all of us; so, take the gun."

Farther down the corridor, another man stood just inside his own cabin, his ear to the door, listening to the muffled sounds as the fat New York cop shuffled around his cabin. The walls were thick and the sounds little more than faint scratchings, but that did not matter. He already knew about the automatics in the suitcase, and they did not matter either. A sneer curled around the edges of his mouth as he thought about it. No, they did not matter at all.

## Chapter 27

In the far northern latitudes, the sun never sinks far below the horizon in summer. Even at 2:00 AM, the night sky over Trelleborg was a dim twilight. Aboard the BRUNNHILDE, a wiry little man in rubber-soled shoes crept silently out of his cabin and up the staircase into the wheelhouse. Like a ferret on the prowl, his eyes shifted and darted nervously from side to side as he listened for any sound. Was someone watching? Was someone following him? He sniffed and strained to hear, but there was nothing there but the soft creaks and groans of an old boat shifting at her moorings.

Finally satisfied, Lindstrom stepped out on deck. His rubber-soled shoes made no sound on the oak planks as he crept toward the bow, intent on putting as much distance as he could between himself and the wheelhouse. When he reached the forward cargo boom, he knelt down in the shadows and pulled a small radio transmitter from his jacket. He extended its telescoping antenna and glanced at

his wristwatch. He was four minutes late. Damn! The Russians would mark him down for that. But he was the one taking all the risks, not them. Let the MVD swim over here and try it themselves if they think sneaking around and spying on this old whaler was so damned easy.

Quickly, he unfolded the sheet of paper where he had written out the coded message. He pressed his finger to the red button on the transmitter and began tapping it out in Morse Code. It would be short and sweet, but he hadn't practiced sending code in many months. They damned well better be listening, and they damned well better get it straight the first time, too, because Lindstromm was not doing it twice.

Fifteen miles south and over the line in international waters, the fishing trawler cut lazy figure eights across the Baltic's unusually calm surface, leaving only a soft, phosphorescent wake to mark its passage. Inside the signal room, things were anything but calm. Two nervous radio operators sat on the edges of their stools, adjusting and readjusting the dials of their powerful receivers, straining to hear the one sound that would satisfy the maniac Colonel from Moscow who was pacing the floor behind them. He had been expecting a radio message precisely at the top of the hour, but that didn't happen. Nothing. The frequency had been dead silent for the past four minutes. Finally, one of the radio operators fine-tuned the dial and began to write. "Here! I have him now," he whispered with a sigh of relief, quickly transcribing the brief message, not daring to miss a single dot or dash.

Varentsov loomed over the radioman's shoulder, his fingers twitching, ready to rip the sheet off the cipher pad, but he managed to hold back, waiting until the man finished. He pulled a crumpled pack of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket, shook one out, and lit it from the butt of the half-smoked one he still held in his other hand, shaking so badly he knocked the red-hot ash into his palm. "Damn!" he cursed as he brushed it away.

Ruchenko stood in the doorway, watching this Moscow big shot sweat and slowly fall to pieces. "Smoking isn't good for your health, Comrade Colonel."

"And your mouth isn't good for yours, Ruchenko!" Varentsov fired back with a look of withering contempt. Even in his manic state, Varentsov realized he would need this trawler captain's cooperation later; so it wasn't smart to alienate the man completely. While he and Ruchenko both worked for the Ministry, they worked for different Directorates that hated each other. If Varentsov bitched about Ruchenko to his superiors, they would probably pat Ruchenko on the back for tweaking the nose of this arrogant shit from the First Directorate and tell him to screw things up even worse for him.

Instead, Varentsov took out his anger on the radio operator who had finally finished writing out the message. "The paper! Give it to me, you fool!" He tore it from the man's fingers and quickly scanned it, devouring every word, searching for any subtlety or nuance. Not that Varentsov had much riding on the outcome—only his life. The gut-wrenching truth was that he was now totally dependent on idiots like these: an over-the-hill trawler captain, two teenaged radio operators, his paid Swedish spy, and a Navy Special Forces diving team. The Speznaz were crack, but the others were untrustworthy by definition. What a pickle he had put himself in.

However, if they could not save his ass, then he would make sure they all fried in hell right next to him.

“Good news, Comrade Colonel?” Ruchenko dared ask.

“Perhaps,” Varentsov mumbled, lost in his own thoughts. “My agent is on board the whaler now. He says there are five of them plus the Captain and the Mate, all highly trained enemy intelligence operatives and extremely dangerous. The ship’s hold is full of top-secret electronic equipment and diving gear, and they are setting it all up in the forward hold. He says they are CIA and Mossad, even the woman, no doubt about it.”

Ruchenko watched Varentsov’s face—the sweat, the nervous twitches, the blood-shot eyes. He was a rude, arrogant lout, but he must be under incredible pressure. Clearly, he was coming apart at the seams; the man would be lucky to last out the week before he had a complete breakdown. “With equipment like that, it looks to me like those people are searching for something,” Ruchenko offered.

“Obviously! That is why we must stop them.”

“Do you know what are they looking for, Comrade Colonel?”

“An old Nazi U-boat.”

“An old U-boat? Surely you are jesting.”

“Do not aggravate me, Ruchenko!” Varentsov turned on him with a withering stare.

“That was not my intent, Comrade Colonel.” The Captain realized his mistake and quickly retreated. “But we are very close to Swedish territorial waters. Sooner or later the Swedish Navy will want to know why, and my standing orders are not to risk...”

“Your standing orders mean nothing to me. If I tell you to stand your boat on its nose, you will do precisely what I tell you. Do you understand me?”

Ruchenko held his tongue. This First Directorate Colonel was sliding down the long razor blade of failure, lashing out at anything that got in his way, and that made him a very dangerous man to be around.

Varentsov grabbed the cipher pad from the table and jotted down a few brief words. He threw the pad in front of the radio operator. “Here. Send this back to Lindstromm,” he ordered. Tell him I want a report from him every eight hours. Send it!” As the operator began tapping out the message, Varentsov’s knees buckled. He grabbed onto the radioman’s chair or he would have fallen face-first on the floor. He felt dizzy, light-headed. How long had it been since that disastrous meeting with Serov? Four days? Perhaps five, and all without a hot meal or a minute’s sleep. Too many pills, too many cigarettes, and too much vodka.

Varentsov tried to regain control, forcing himself upright. “I want Lindstromm’s frequency monitored at all times... at all times, do you hear me?” He blinked, trying to stop the room from spinning. Then he turned and stumbled out the door.

Ruchenko watched him leave and laid a reassuring hand on the radio operator’s shoulder. “Do what he says, Petrov. That man is like a big pine tree in the forest. He sees the lumberjacks headed his way, and there is nothing he can do to stop them, nothing. I just hope when the big bastard comes crashing down, that we are not underneath him.”

Lindstromm was terrified. He hurried to get the message out, and then he had to sit in agony and wait for a reply. "Come on, come on, you bastards!" he whispered as he tried to melt into the shadow behind the mast. Finally, he heard the dots and dashes and quickly wrote them down. Report every eight hours? He groaned. He got to his feet and quickly looked around the deck. It was still dead quiet, no sign that anyone knew he was there. Operating alone like this with no back-up made it even more dangerous.

As he glanced around the deck one last time, he noticed that the cover to the foredeck hatch had not been completely closed. It was only open a few feet, but that was all he would need. That was where their equipment was, and the open hatch drew his interest like a fistful of cash. The Russians on the trawler told Lindstromm to get a good look at the equipment in the hold, and this might be the very break he had been hoping for. In the afternoon, he tried to work his way inside the hold, until that damned American woman caught him. Lindstromm had smiled and put on his most polite and friendly act, but she sent him packing with a good tongue-lashing.

"Here," he had said, as he stepped closer to help her lift an air tank. "Let a man try." Lindstromm had to admit he was leering at her legs, but what harm was there in that?

"I thought the Captain told you to stay out of the hold," she turned on him with the hard, knowing eyes of a prosecutor.

"Well..." Lindstromm grinned and tried to sound coy, wondering what it was she was hiding down here.

"Then get your butt out of here," she ordered, with no smile, no thanks, no nothing. That smart-mouthed blonde bitch! He had a little man's hatred of being pushed around, and her day would come, he promised himself.

So when he found the forward cargo hatch sitting open like that, it was too much of a temptation to let pass. He crept to the edge of the hold and looked down, wondering what secrets lay below, but it was too dark to see to the bottom. Next to his hand, he saw rungs set in the bulkhead, beckoning him to go down. How convenient, he thought as he cast a final nervous glance around the deck. Why not? It was the middle of the night. The deck was empty and everyone was asleep. Even if they caught him, what was the worst they could do? Fire him? For being in the hold of a ship he was working on? He was not breaking any laws. Lindstromm dropped his legs over the side of the hatch and scrambled down the rungs into the dark hold below.

But Lindstromm was wrong. The deck was not empty and he was not alone. A pair of dark eyes had been watching him from the shadows at the far side of the wheelhouse the entire time he had been on deck. They had been watching every move the little weasel made, and they belonged to Manny Eismer.

Manny Eismer had not slept well. He never did in a strange bed, particularly one that rocked back and forth with that freakin' up-and-down-and-sideways stuff. Half awake, a little awake, mostly awake, whatever; Manny snapped wide-awake when he heard the first creak on the staircase outside his cabin door. An old tub like this was filled with strange sounds, but this was different. It was the

kind of sneaky sound somebody makes when they're trying too damned hard not to make any; and that was a dead bang giveaway.

As quietly as the big man could, he rolled off his bunk and crept to the cabin door, opening it in time to catch a fleeting glimpse of someone disappearing up the stairs into the wheelhouse. Was it Balck? Manny couldn't tell, but it was worth his trouble to find out. Tucking his Beretta inside the ample waistband of his blue-striped boxer shorts, he stepped out the door and slowly followed the shadowy figure up the stairs, moving only when the other man moved. When he heard the feet leave the wheelhouse and move away from him toward the bow, he dropped to his hands and knees and crawled through the wheelhouse. In the dim half-light outside, Manny saw someone hiding behind the cargo boom with a small radio transmitter in his hand. To Manny's surprise, it was not Balck. It was that scrawny deck hand, Lindstromm. He should have known. Like most fat people, Manny could never trust a skinny man. After all, how could you trust somebody who had to be hungry all the time, who didn't know how to have a good time, and who had nothing to feel guilty about?

When the Swede completed his message and slipped the radio inside his shirt, Manny figured he would hang back in the wheelhouse and grab the little shit when he came inside. That posed the least amount of risk and it would give him Lindstromm's radio intact. Once he had it, he could find out what the Swede knew and who he was working for. With a gun and a size-thirteen fist, handling the skinny deckhand should not be very hard.

But Lindstromm fooled him. When the Swede finally stepped out from behind the cargo boom, he headed for the foredeck hatch, not back to the wheelhouse. That ruined Manny's plan. When Lindstromm compounded the problem by slipping over the edge and disappearing down into the hold, Manny knew he had to do something quick. With all the delicate dive equipment lying exposed down there—the regulators, tanks, sonar, and magnetometer—the little shit could cause some serious damage, so Manny headed for the hatch to stop him. He expected Lindstromm to have a knife or even a gun, so he knew to be careful. He would get the drop on the skinny Swede or cold-cock him right from the start, but he knew he had to stop him before it was too late.

With all Manny's attention focused on the foredeck hatch, it never occurred to him that he was not alone on deck, either.

A third set of eyes lurked in the shadows on the far side of the wheelhouse, watching both men with a cold, detached amusement; but watching the fat New York cop more. It was sufficient for Kruger to know that Lindstromm was working for the Russians, but Lindstromm could wait. For the moment, Eismer presented the more inviting target. The fellow was incredibly stupid to come up on deck alone, and the opportunity to reduce the numbers arrayed against him was too good to pass up.

Earlier in the day, he flirted with the idea of grabbing the woman. No doubt she was a CIA operative, not the vacuum-headed civilian she pretended to be. Questioning her might have proved both informative and entertaining, he grinned, but these Americans were too sentimental for that to work. No, her disappearance would probably bring their entire operation to a halt, so he let that opportunity



pass. That left him with a choice between the burly navy warrant officer, the little professor, the big American, Randall, or this fat policeman. The policeman could pose the greater threat, and Kruger believed in eliminating threats quickly and ruthlessly. Since Eismer was considerate enough to offer himself up on deck, alone, and in the dead of night, that decided the issue.

So when Eismer crept out of the wheelhouse and headed for the foredeck hatch, Kruger smiled and followed. A swift blow across the base of the skull with the precision of a surgeon laid the fat cop out cold. As he toppled forward, Kruger's arm caught him and stopped his fall; but it was like catching a sack of sand. The fat cop's head dropped to the side, and his forehead grazed the edge of the hatch cover. It made only the faintest of sounds, but Lindstromm must have heard it, too. Kruger saw the flashlight go out in the hold. No problem. The little weasel was down there alone in the dark, and he wouldn't be doing anything too daring for a while.

Kruger slung the unconscious policeman across his broad shoulders, and turned toward the gangway. The man made quite a load, but even this prodigious weight was no problem for the German. Neither was Lindstromm. Eventually the skinny Swede would screw up enough courage to climb up the ladder and look around, but he wouldn't find anything. Good. The last thing Kruger needed was another aggressive amateur getting in his way at the wrong moment.

As Kruger looked back, he saw a small automatic pistol lying on the deck. Eismer must have dropped it. Kruger smiled and scooped it up. It was a Beretta. He preferred heavier, more powerful handguns, like a Luger or Walther; but he could not deny the fine Italian craftsmanship of a Beretta. Slipping the small automatic into his hip pocket, he glided across the deck with Eismer draped across his back, slipped down the gangplank, across the pier, and into the shadows beyond.

"The night is early, my friend; and you and I have enough time for a long chat," he patted the fat man's rump. "I hope you enjoy the conversation, because it will be your last."

## Chapter 28

It took a few moments for Mike Randall to realize that the faint sound disturbing his sleep was someone's knuckles knocking on his cabin door. "Michael," he heard an anxious voice whispering to him from the passageway. "Wake up!"

"Huh? Whuzzit?" he grumbled as he rolled off the bunk and groped around the floor for his pants. "Hang on."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, hurry up." It was Leslie, he realized, as he opened the door to the dark passageway and let her in. "Manny's gone," she whispered, her voice tense and worried. "I can't find him anywhere."

"Gone?" her words finally registered and he focused his eyes on the dial of his watch. "It's only four-thirty. Isn't he in his cabin?"

“No! I told you he’s gone,” she insisted. “I couldn’t sleep. I got up early and as I passed his door, I noticed it was open a couple of inches and he wasn’t there. I figured he was up on deck, but he wasn’t there either. And he isn’t in the hold, or in the engine room, or any other place else on board either, Michael.”

“You’re sure you didn’t miss him?”

“Miss Manny? How can you miss Manny?” She gave him a look. “Besides, he wouldn’t wander off without saying something to one of us.”

“Yeah, but...”

“And I think somebody’s been down in the hold, snooping around. I’m sure of it.”

Now wide-awake, Michael quickly threw on a shirt and motioned for her to lead as they retraced her steps from Manny’s cabin to the wheelhouse and around the perimeter of the deck. Nothing, nor was the fat man in any of the compartments below deck, or on the pier, or in the water around the boat. Michael stopped and let his eyes slowly circle the deck. She was right. Something was very wrong. He walked over to the open cargo hatch, knelt down, and looked into the hold. That was when he saw a small dark stain on the sharp metal lip of the hatch and wiped a finger across it. The stain was reddish brown and not quite dry in the damp night air. It was blood, no doubt about it. He had seen enough of it over the years to know what it looked like.

Leslie hadn’t seen what he’d found; but she saw a grim, angry expression on his face, and she knew something was wrong. She had only seen that expression on him a couple of times before, like that morning in New York on the docks when he stepped out of that blue van. She shook her head. When he went into his shell, he could be a complete mystery to her. Then again, maybe it was time she should stop kidding herself. Maybe she never would understand him, because there were parts of him deep down inside that he wasn’t about to share with anyone.

“We’ve got to find Manny,” she said.

“Yeah,” Michael said, hands on hips, looking around the empty deck, frustrated. “Wake the others and tell Einar to call the police.”

“The police?”

“We have no choice now, Les, Trelleborg’s a small town, but it has way too many doors. We’ll need the police if we want to open them up.”

“Manny won’t like bringing them in.”

“There’s no choice. I just hope it isn’t too late. Look, until the police get here, we’re going to recheck everything below deck in the rooms and in the hold. That means all the gear, each and every piece. We’ve got to make sure nothing’s been tampered with.”

“Search the hold? Is that going to help us find him?”

“I don’t know, but you said someone was down there. It might give us some clues as to what the hell’s going on.”

“Maybe Manny went off to look for something.”

“Or something came looking for him.”

“I’m so afraid. Why would he leave his cabin like that?”

“He must have heard something, but I’m glad you’re finally getting the picture. These people are playing for keeps.”

“So am I,” she said as she looked up at him with an angry glint in her eye.

“What if it was me? Or you? I know you don’t want to hear this, but it would be better if you went back home until this thing is over.”

“Better for whom? You? Because it wouldn’t be better for me.”

“Leslie, I couldn’t take it if you got hurt.”

“You’ll have to figure something out, because I’m not leaving,” she said as she turned away and went below.

Michael knew he hadn’t made a dent in her resolve. Finally, he turned away and began making a second careful search of the deck and the water around the boat.

“A bit early to start work, isn’t it, Mister Randall?” he heard an overly friendly voice call out to him from the wheelhouse.

Michael looked up and saw the Mate, Balck, smiling down at him. “I couldn’t sleep. Tell me, Balck, you haven’t seen Manny Eismer this morning, have you?”

“Mr. Eismer?” he frowned as he considered the thought. “No, I can’t say I have. Did you try his cabin?”

“Yes, a few minutes ago.”

“Well, it has been a beautiful night; perhaps he went for a walk in town?”

“Yeah, perhaps he did at that,” Michael studied Balck’s face, trying to read those hooded blue eyes. There was something irritating about the man, a confidence bordering on arrogance. Michael knew he didn’t like it, but what could he prove? That was when Leslie came back on deck. She saw Balck and stopped dead in her tracks. Michael turned and found Leslie staring at Balck. The German was staring back at her, seemingly amused by it all. Finally, Balck turned and disappeared into the wheelhouse. That was when Michael knew there *was* something in the Mate’s cold blue eyes. It was an icy detachment, as if he was observing laboratory animals in a cage, and Michael didn’t like it.

Neither did Leslie. Her face was flushed and angry. “He makes my skin crawl. Can’t we get rid of him?”

“No. His papers were in order, and Einar didn’t have any choice.”

“Surely you don’t trust him, do you?”

“Trust him? I’d like to rip that irritating smile off his face; but I can’t, so be careful around him. Meanwhile, let’s get to work,” he said. “We’re going to tear the boat apart inch by inch if we have to.”

Leslie walked away, and Michael watched her go. Lying awake on his bunk the night before, he thought long and hard about chucking it all and taking her back to South Carolina or Wisconsin, or someplace fresh. A fresh start? That might be exactly what they both needed, a place far, far away from an old war and the people who had fought it. He had hoped that returning to Sweden would get him the answers he needed and bring him closer to a resolution of six years of pain and searching, but he’d been a fool. Everywhere he went, everywhere he looked dredged up all the old memories and they were too damned strong for him to cope with.

At noon, they cast off. The BRUNNHILDE motored slowly out through the harbor entrance into the open sea. Under better circumstances, running south along the coast of Sweden might have been a very pleasant trip, Michael thought. The air was warm; and the sky was a high, clear blue, with only the faintest traces of silky-white clouds. A light breeze skimmed across the surface of the water,

giving it a glittering chop. The Baltic? Hard to believe this was the same frozen, wind-swept sea he faced that cruel February six years before, but it was.

The trip out would be a good opportunity to observe the others more closely. Einar Person's expression never changed as he scanned the water from his high perch in the wheelhouse. Balck's expression never changed either. He went about his chores with alert eyes and a confident swagger, leaving Lindstromm the odd-man out. The little Swede appeared nervous. His eyes darted about, constantly looking at the others, as if he expected something to sneak up and bite him on the ass any minute. What was he afraid of, Michael wondered. Or, who?

Captain Person had given Michael the grim news before they sailed, and he had already told most of the others. It was mid-afternoon, and time to tell Leslie. She was working up on deck near the bow, coiling hoses and ropes. "Looks like you're about finished," Michael said as he knelt beside her and watched her work.

"You bet," she replied. Her voice sounded firm and confident, but he could tell the edges were brittle. She refused to look up, hoping he wouldn't see the dark rings around her eyes, but he did. "Well, you might as well tell me," she said. "I saw you whispering to the others, and I'm not stupid. It's about Manny, isn't it?"

"Yeah," he answered, knowing he was not a good liar anyway, not up close like this.

"He's dead," she said, not needing him to tell her.

"Yeah," he nodded as he looked down at the deck. "The police found his body in a warehouse up on the pier. They're treating it as a robbery gone wrong. That kind of crime doesn't happen around here very often, so foreigners are usually the first ones they look at."

"So they think it's one of us? Why did they let us leave?"

"We aren't the only ship in town, and they know Einar. They know where to find us. Meanwhile, they are still investigating."

He saw her strain mounting. "You know, I really do wish it had been me and not him," she said. "Does that make any sense?"

"Yeah," he agreed, remembering Hodge and the pain and anger of that cold morning in Königsberg. "It makes a lot of sense."

"When you get somebody else hurt, the pain blind-sides you."

"Yeah, that's the worst. I think it hurts less if you were the one who got it."

"But I didn't get Manny hurt any more than you got Eddie hurt."

"No, and we need to keep telling ourselves that, don't we."

"Yeah, we do. And it helps?"

"Sometimes... sometimes, but not all the time," he nodded slowly as he thought about what she had just said. "Your father told you what happened in Königsberg, didn't he?"

"Yes, he told me everything the night before I left. He said I needed to know; it was only fair. He said you'd tell me when you were ready; but if I want to understand what you've been going through, I need to know. And now, I do understand."

This was her first trip down the road. Eventually she'd learn the way, but it isn't something you can give someone else directions to. He put his arm around her shoulder and drew her to him. Her head dropped to the nape of his neck, and they both knew she had a big cry coming. Well, he thought, she might as well get it all

out. She had been trying to play a man's game in a man's world for so long that she had forgotten there was a woman hidden beneath the hard, aggressive shell she had been building.

Finally, her tears stopped but her head remained pressed into his shoulder. "I understand, but I was wrong, Michael," she said. "The price is too high."

"It is, but I'm not stopping," he answered, sounding more determined than ever. "Whenever they commit another outrage like this, I become more and more determined to pay them back for all the killing and the hate and the sorrow they've caused. Finding that U-boat is the best way I can think of to get my revenge—not by going out and trying to kill them—but by finding their precious U-boat. That's going to be my revenge."

She looked up into his eyes and saw that expression again. It made her pull back, terrified of the anger he kept bottled up inside. "You scare me when you talk like that, Michael," she said. "Is that all you want? Revenge?"

"No, Leslie; it's a lot more than that. It's like there's a big part of me trapped inside that U-boat. And it'll stay buried there until I go back down and set it all free. That is worth the price, Leslie. You've got to believe me about that. It's worth the price." He looked into her eyes. It was obvious from her expression she finally understood his reasons, but she did not like them any better for the knowing. "When they came on board last night, they weren't trying to stop us, or they would have killed more than just Manny. No, they're after information again. Like Manny said, they were after information."

"But Manny didn't know any more than we did."

"And like he said, they don't know that, do they? And they still don't know. They're betting we'll keep going on and lead them to the U-boat, on their terms," those black eyes flashed. "And they're daring us to try."

## Chapter 29

The young radioman shook with fear as he inched his way into the dark cabin. "Comrade Varentsov?" he whispered as he reached out his hand to wake the MVD Colonel. "It's Petrov, Sir. The Captain told me to wake you," he said as he touched Varentsov's shoulder ever so lightly, as if it were a ticking bomb. "Sir... We received another message... from your agent, and..."

"What! What did you say?" Varentsov shouted as the name registered and suddenly bolted upright in bed. He grabbed the young seaman's wrist and pulled him down toward the bunk. "What message? What? Give it to me, man!"

The radioman twisted his arm to break free, but Varentsov's grip was like a vice. In desperation, the young man shoved the message into the older man's chest. "Here, here!" the sailor screamed, having heard more than enough stories about the perverted tastes of these Kremlin big shots like Beria and all the rest of them.

But the message was all Varentsov cared about. He released Petrov's arm and snatched up the paper, fumbling in the dark to turn on the small reading lamp next to the bed. Varentsov was so absorbed in the words, he did not notice that the young sailor had already retreated to the safety of the passageway.

“Is this all?” Varentsov bellowed, stopping the young man in his tracks.

“Yes, yes, Comrade Colonel! I swear it, I swear it,” the radioman stammered. “That is the message, all of it.”

Varentsov glared at him, then quickly turned his eyes back to the small slip of paper, carefully re-reading each word. The New York City policeman was found dead in town. Murdered! By whom, Varentsov wondered? If Lindstromm had nothing to do with it, who did? Varentsov slammed his fist on the nightstand, realizing he was being outplayed again. It must be those Fascist SS bastards. Like a game of speed chess he once played with a “street” master at a little table in Gorky Park, Varentsov was in way over his head. The pieces on the board were moving too fast. They were coming at him from every direction, attacking faster and faster, too fast for him to hope to understand the pattern and execute a strategy of his own.

It was that imbecile Neptune’s fault, Varentsov raged. All of it. That coward! That traitor! He sold out and gave Varentsov’s entire plan to the Nazis. That must be it! But what could one expect from a German? Even after all the training on doctrine and technique, those goose-stepping bastards were worse than the Armenians or the Georgians. They stick together like glue.

Varentsov suddenly sat up. “Petrov! Tell Ruchenko I want a message sent to the MVD Resident in Stockholm,” he screamed, his rasping voice echoing through the small boat. “I want a complete dossier on every member of that fishing boat’s crew by noon. Do you hear me? By noon!” As he turned toward the radioman, Varentsov saw his cabin door stood wide open; but Petrov was long gone, leaving nothing behind but the sound of his feet running down the passageway.

The entire crew gathered around the chart table in the BRUNNHILDE’s wheelhouse as Chief Warrant Officer David Schiff unrolled a battered hydrographic chart. It was actually a composite of four smaller charts he had taped together, showing the contours of the seabed below. He and Yuri Chorev had spent days poring over old records and planning the search pattern. Superimposed over the chart they had drawn a grid of black squares. Each square had a small red number in the lower right corner. The search would begin with the center square, the most likely place the U-boat would have gone down.

“If we were to pick one place to look, this would be it,” Schiff said as he put his index finger on the center square. “We’ll start there, making parallel passes up and down, like a farmer plowing a field. When we’ve completely covered it, we’ll mark it off with a big X, then work squares around it in a clockwise pattern, then the next ring out, then the next ring, and so on until we find it.”

Michael had no idea which square it was in, but the area seemed right and he was confident that the U-582 was somewhere inside that search area. He could feel it tugging at him like a giant magnet, pulling harder and harder on his soul the closer he got. All this sophisticated electronic gear, the metal detector, the depth finder, and even the lights and TV cameras, were merely there to confirm what his gut already knew.

Person seemed to agree. “That winter was nasty—very cold, with wind and storms. That was the way it was the morning we found Michael floating in that rubber raft. The current would have blown him south and west by the time we

found him, but this is a good place to start. Kapitan Bruckner would have looked for a dark, lee shore to shield him from the worst of it, if he hoped to see Michael safely ashore in that rubber raft. He would have put you over the side, maybe a mile out, then turned and run for deep water. So he needed a bay with no towns or houses, only dark, snow-covered fields and farms."

Person tapped his pipe stem on the center square and smiled. "This U-boat Kapitan of Michael's was one of those fine, young gentlemen of the Kriegsmarine—gentlemen and bastards, one and all, but fools they were not." The old Swede turned and pointed toward the shore. "The safest thing for him would have been to set you free in deep water, where he could quickly dive and be gone. If he did that though, the raft would have surely foundered and you would have drowned. If that was all he wanted, he could have simply tossed you overboard and kept the raft. No, if he wanted you to survive, he had to go in close."

One thing about Einar Person, Michael realized years ago, was there was nothing soft or fuzzy about him, no round corners or soft spots, the man said what he thought.

"I knew those U-boat men. They wore their neat beards and jaunty white hats; but they were bastards one and all, if you will excuse my language. Early in the war, in 1942 and 1943, I captained on several runs from Scotland to Murmansk. They would hit us at night with no warning and no help, either. Hundreds of men were thrown into the sea—the dead and the dying — and not a mother's son among them stood a chance in that freezing water. It was murder. Odd thing though, if those same rotten bastards came upon a lone sailor floating on the sea, they'd fish him out and give him hot food, medicine, even the clothes off their backs. Perhaps that was their way of compensating for all the other horrible things they did. I don't know. So you were lucky, Michael. That night back in 1945, you caught one with a case of bad conscience."

"Maybe, Einar; but I'd prefer to think I just caught one of the good ones."

"One of the good ones?" Person snorted. "Perhaps you did. But good or bad, those U-boat men always went by the book. So your Kapitan must have been a bit crazy in the head that night. Too much conscience? Too much schnapps? I don't know, because he broke all the rules." Person pointed to Michael with the stem of his pipe. "First, he risked his boat and his crew by surfacing in Swedish water this close to the Strait. Then, to take it on into shallow water to drop off an American prisoner? Well, he knew he would have been court-martialed and shot if Admiral Carnaris ever found out. They had rules! And they pounded them into their pointy little heads in kindergarten. *Don't litter. Look both ways before you cross the street. Be polite to your mother. And never take a U-boat into shallow water.* Ah, what glorious bastards they were!" Person roared with laughter.

Mike Randall nodded, humoring him. "Well," he shrugged, "I know how you feel, Einar; but my U-boat Kapitan was different."

"Yes, perhaps, and maybe that's why his U-boat lies on the bottom of the sea."

The search began that afternoon. As Yuri Chorev had warned, it was hot, slow, boring work. They would lower the platform over the side and let it dangle seventy-five feet or so above the ever-changing bottom. They learned that if they let it ride much lower, the field of vision of the instruments would be too narrow.

Worse still, the aluminum frame might hit a rock and damage the delicate equipment. If they let the platform ride too high, they ran the risk of missing everything in the shifting sands and mud. That was why the most nerve-wracking job was to sit at the equipment console hour after hour, watching the sea bed rise and fall beneath the keel, continually calling out instructions to raise or lower the winch. With the wind and currents, a job like that could put a man's blood pressure in orbit in a matter of minutes. In fact, Michael's worst nightmare was for them to spend weeks combing these waters over and over again, only to open a newspaper years later and read where some local fisherman snagged a derelict German U-boat in his nets, right in the middle of their search grid.

In the beginning, though, it was exciting. Everything was new, they were actually doing something, and there was the anxious anticipation, waiting for the equipment to start screaming at them that they'd found something. It only took a few days for the novelty to fade into insufferable boredom. They worked in two-hour shifts with Person, Michael, and Balck alternating at the helm while the others took turns at the consoles and winch. On a good day, they saw their progress on the chart as Chorev crossed off a square, then two squares as their techniques improved. On a bad day, however, the hours dragged and dragged. Then, just as the boredom was about to drive them mad, the dials would leap and buzzers would sound. Their hopes would soar with cries of, "Reverse engines!" and "Stop the boat!" They'd turn on the underwater lights and the TV camera and drag the platform back over the spot to get a second set of readings. With a dozen eyes glued to the small black-and-white TV monitor, they'd argue whether it looked like a long rock formation, a large hunk of scrap metal, or maybe the U-boat. They would raise the platform and lower it, trading the width of the view for the resolution, but at that point, there would be no choice. Two members of the crew would don their wet suits and go down for a closer look.

Diving was new to Michael, but he caught on fast. He stood at the head of the ladder decked out in all of his diving gear and caught his reflection in the wheelhouse window. He wore a thick, black rubber wet suit, a hood, gloves, padded boots, regulator, hoses, a big air tank, buoyancy vest, fins, a plastic writing slate on his thigh, a watch, a depth gauge, a knife, and the small spear gun they all carried. Amazing! All of that gear had the sole purpose of permitting the human body to go somewhere it was never meant to go.

On his first dive, Michael's blood ran cold as he realized what might be down there and where he was about to go. Even worse, he remembered the cold February night on the deck of the U-boat. He remembered every detail and it took every ounce of courage he could muster to walk to the ladder, step off, and sink six years back in time.

The Baltic was never warm, even in mid-summer, and the first touch of ice-cold water on even the tiny gap of exposed skin between his mask and hood took his breath away. The only comparable experience he could remember was sleeping on the beach at Lake Michigan on a blazing hot summer day when one of the girls threw a cup of ice water on his bare back. This was about the same. "Calm down, calm down," he told himself. That is what Schiff told them. "Take a few slow, steady breaths, then float, get your buoyancy balanced, check out all your equipment, and get your bearings."



It all felt so different in the water, so new. In a minute or two, the icy tingling passed; but with that first bubbly splash and a few hurried breaths, his other senses came alive. He was floating beneath the surface, and raised his head a few inches to look up. Like Alice through the looking glass, the surface above was like the backside of a silvery, shimmering mirror. The odd thing was, rather than go silent; you could hear everything. After a moment or two, small trickles of water seeped around the seals of the wet suit, and he could feel sharp pricks and stinging on the exposed bands of skin at the base of his throat, along a thin line along his forehead, and around his ankles and wrists. The temperature never got much over forty degrees down here. At first, it felt strangely refreshing; but in a few minutes, those icy pinpricks turned to a dull ache. Without the heavy wet suit, it would overwhelm a human body in seven to ten minutes. The muscles would slow and refuse to respond. Swimming would become awkward, forcing a diver to suck down oxygen in bigger gulps, faster and faster as the body strained to fight the cold, trying to warm itself as it inevitably slipped into hyperventilation and hypothermia.

Still, hanging suspended in the sparkling water with the tangy, pungent taste of salt on your lips was an incredible experience, he thought. As he inhaled and exhaled, the sound of each breath was amplified by air gushing and wheezing through the regulator. It sent a stream of thousands of tiny pearl-like bubbles racing up toward the surface, making the entire experience look, sound, taste, and feel amazing. That was the first dive. After a few more, the thrill quickly wore off.

“You must expect some false alarms up here in the Baltic,” Einar Person warned. “Ever since the Vikings, boats of every size and description have sailed around the southern tip of Sweden. Sometimes they don’t make it, especially in winter, when it can boil like a cauldron and things disappear.” As it turned out, Person was the master of Nordic understatement. Over the next week or so, they found the rusting hulk of an old coastal freighter, a tug, and a barge, not to mention three anchors, a load of steel beams, and a pile of scrap iron. Each one set the magnetometer and their hopes ringing; but each came to naught, just one more part of the dull routine.

On the sixth day out, Michael was taking his turn at the console, while Einar Person manned the wheel. As usual, the work was hot and boring. Michael was concentrating on the depth finder when a voice called down from the roof of the wheelhouse.

“Captain Person... Mister Randall?” they heard Balck say, “Can you come up here for a moment?”

“We’re a bit busy down here, Balck,” Person growled.

“No doubt, but I think you’ll find it worth the trip, Balck answered in a smug voice as he peered at them over the edge of the roof. “We have company.”

Person and Randall exchanged puzzled looks. Person throttled back the engines to neutral and in less than a minute, the two men were standing on the wheelhouse roof next to Balck. The Mate had a pair of powerful field glasses in his hands as he pointed toward a dim speck on the horizon.

“That’s a Russian fishing trawler out there, a big one,” he said. “She’s been trailing us all day, hull down, just over the horizon.”

Person took the field glasses and focused on the spot. "Balck's right. She's Russian, one of their new spy trawlers."

"I think they were there yesterday," Balck said with an amused smile. "Maybe the day before, too. At first, I thought it was just coincidence but not three days running."

"They usually go on to the North Sea and the Atlantic," Person added. "It is odd to find them this close to Swedish waters, but they appear to know where the line is, and to stay just outside."

"I think they're watching us," Balck said. "Why would they be doing that, Captain? Do you think they are looking for *oil*, too?"

"Russians?" Michael sounded surprised. "No, not a clue."

"Ivan can be every bit as dangerous as your German friends," Person warned. "If we were smart, we would go back to port now and turn this entire business over to the Swedish Navy, but that is up to you and the others, Michael. It is your charter."

Michael took a long, hard look at the trawler. "No, if they aren't doing anything wrong, neither are we. Besides, we know they're out there now."

"Your choice," Person shrugged as he handed the binoculars to Balck. "Good work. And keep an eye on that trawler for us," he added. "Let me know if anything changes."

"As you wish," the German answered.

Michael stood next to Balck and continued to stare out to sea. In a way, seeing the Russian trawler out there filled in some of the blank spots, he thought as he reached into his pants pocket. Absent-mindedly, he pulled out the silver cigarette case and twirled it nervously between his fingertips. As he turned back, Balck's eyes flashed as they saw the twirling piece of silver.

The German held out his hand. "May I see that?" he asked pleasantly enough.

Michael handed him the cigarette case, but Balck's expression never changed. He ran his fingers across the ornate cover, fondly, almost reverently. "A lovely old antique you have here, Herr Randall. I was not aware you smoked."

"I don't; it's a souvenir, a good luck charm, you might say."

"A souvenir?" Balck smiled as he opened the top and read the inscription engraved inside. "How very... interesting," he commented as he snapped the case shut and handed it back, his eyes giving nothing away. "A most unusual object for an American to be carrying around, especially one who does not smoke."

"It's a nasty habit I never picked up, even during the war."

"I did, but I gave it up. It seems when I really wanted one, I could never find one, so I quit. But that silver case, I'm sure there must be a story that goes with it."

"Someday, I'll tell you all about it, Balck," Randall answered as he slipped it back into his pocket. "You might find it interesting."

"Oh, I'm certain I would," Balck answered.

"You're German," Randall commented. "Bormann and that fellow Kruger, did you ever hear of them or see them during the war?"

"Me? Oh, no," Balck shook his head as his lips curved into a wry smile. "I was a junior officer in cargo ships, mostly on the Rhine and back and forth in Holland and France. As I remember, that fellow Bormann was one of the beer hall

roughnecks who worked for Hitler in Berlin. I think I read he is dead. The other name? Kruger? I don't recall hearing it during the war, so he must not have been too important, eh?" Balck smiled innocently. "Remember, Herr Randall, not all Germans were Nazis. Most of us were only trying to stay alive, and stay one step ahead of the Russians."

"Speaking of which..." Michael reminded him.

"Ah, yes," Balck replied. "I shall keep an eye on that trawler for you. Then you and the Captain will be surprised how useful I can be around here," he chuckled.

## Chapter 30

Nine more days passed, each as uneventful as the one preceding it while the Brunnhilde passed back and forth across the surface in precise patterns. As she did, Schiff had the unwelcome duty of crossing another square off his hydrographic chart, each "X" signifying the crew's mounting sense of frustration. When they began the search, completing a grid square was cause for celebration or at least a smile. As the days passed, that changed. Now, each "X" represented a dry hole, as one more good possibility had turned bad and the remaining list got shorter and shorter. Yet, as fruitless as it appeared from the BRUNNHILDE's wheelhouse, they could take comfort from a quick glance out to sea. All the Russians could do was sit out there and watch, earning their frustrations vicariously.

It was on the tenth day that they found something.

From the first contact, they all knew this one was different. The readings on the sonar and the magnetometer were louder and stronger than they had seen or heard before. All eyes immediately turned toward David Schiff as he leaned over the instrument panel and concentrated on the dials and gauges. With a deft hand, Person reversed the engines and let the boat drift slowly back over the spot. As he did, the results were there on the instruments and the graph paper for everyone to see.

They made three slow passes over the same spot, each revealing a slightly different shape; but it was a linear hump on the ocean floor, it was long, and it was metal. They turned on the bright underwater lights and TV camera and lowered the platform until the object came into clearer focus. Unfortunately, at this depth the water was murky, with sediments swirling through the cold currents. To get a clear picture, the field of vision had been sharply narrowed; but something was there, no doubt about it. It appeared flat and smooth, nestled in a field of large rocks, with large piles of sand and sediment pushed up against the near side. Could it be the U-boat? Maybe, Michael thought, but there were many other possibilities to consider; so don't get too excited, he warned himself. There had already been too many false alarms.

"It's my turn to go down," Michael asserted as he walked out the door and headed for the rack of wet suits. "Balck," he called back over his shoulder. "You've been itching to dive. Why don't you come along," thinking that was also the best way to keep the big Mate close and know where he was.

Even with practice and a half-dozen extra hands helping, putting on their dive gear seemed to take forever. Finally decked-out from masks to fins, he and Balck slipped over the side and began their slow descent down the cable. It had bright yellow stripes at five-foot intervals. When they reached the thirty-foot mark, Michael paused to equalize the pressure in his mask and vest, and looked back up. The round, slime-covered keel of the old whaler looked black against the glittering silver sea around it. As he dropped lower, the water darkened from a pale blue-green at the surface to a deep indigo at the fifty-foot mark, and finally an oppressive matte-black further down. The total darkness of the sea bottom seemed to swallow everything, from sunlight to ships and planes, and flesh and blood, until they saw the diving platform below, and the dim circle of white light around it.

While he kept his focus on the dive and the platform, Michael also kept a wary eye on Balck. From the way the man swam and handled himself in the water, it was obvious he might be a novice diver, but he was very athletic. He moved effortlessly through the water, not fighting it like the rest of them had on their first few times down.

As they neared the platform, Michael began to make out the dim outline of a large black object on the ocean floor directly beneath it, every bit as dim and unrecognizable as it had been on the television screen. Still, being there and seeing it with his own eyes added a scale and perspective that the small TV screen could never provide. It was big. The circle of light was maybe twenty to thirty feet wide, and the object began out there in the darkness to his left, passed through the circle of light beneath the platform, and disappeared into the darkness to the right. Swimming down through his own shadow, Michael reached the surface of the object and saw it was surprisingly smooth. He touched it with his gloved hand and watched a puff of silt rise in the water around him. He knew the others up in the wheelhouse were watching his every move on the monitor. Anxious to learn more, he pulled his knife from its sheath. Tapping its handle on the surface, he heard a dull, hollow *Thunk!* Whatever this thing was, it was definitely man-made. But made by whom and for what? Michael turned and swam off to the right, his flashlight beam playing along the humped-back surface as it disappeared into the darkness. There was an end to it out there somewhere, and knowing that made his heart beat even faster.

After swimming another twenty feet, he saw the dim outline of a vertical shape rising up ahead of them in the darkness. It was tall and thin, standing at an awkward angle. The conning tower? He tried to contain his excitement, realizing there was something about it that just didn't look quite right. The top looked too thin, too stubby, and too jagged, as if it had been sheared off; but by what? The two bombs? His heart raced as he realized he could be looking at his own tomb if the Kapitan had not set him free that night. Michael closed his eyes. No matter how hard he tried to fend them off, those horrible memories crowded in on him again: the U-boat's wake, a rubber raft on a choppy sea, roaring engines, two shattering explosions, and those choking orange-black flames. Could this really be the U-582? Then the truth hit him in the gut. No, this was not a submarine. It was far too small for that. It was an airplane; and the vertical section wasn't a conning tower, but the airplane's broken wing standing upright in the water.

Michael swam closer, probed with his flashlight beam, and found dim, red, white, and blue concentric rings on the wing, the shattered cockpit windows, and the broken Plexiglas of a nose bubble. It was a British bomber that must have had been shot down and come to rest here on the bottom, like his old B-17 that had been shot down all those years ago. The right wing probably snapped off when it hit the water. Half of the left wing was gone, and only the last twenty feet remained, standing up like a tombstone in some long-neglected cemetery.

The bomber was a big one, maybe a Wellington or Lancaster, and not much different from his own B-17. From the holes in her side, she must have crashed after running the gauntlet of heavy fire on a bombing run over Hamburg or Wilhelmshaven. He shuddered, knowing the full measure of hell its crew had gone through, just like the hell he and his B-17 crew had gone through on their last mission. After they turned toward the target on their final run, the pilot had to hold his course. The Germans knew that, and the sky around them would erupt with dozens of puffy, black clouds. Unfortunately, these clouds didn't have silver linings; they were filled with sharp steel as the flak guns began ripping big chunks out of the fragile airplane. Shot up bad, England was now out of the question. The bomber could only turn, and hope to reach the coast. The German night fighters knew that too. They would be waiting to catch the homeward-bound planes and the cripples, to make certain the wounded ones never returned to bomb their cities again. The bomber might have come once, but it was not going to come back. Too bad, Michael thought, the crash site was only a few miles from the Swedish coast; they almost made it.

He swam to the window of the cockpit and poked his flashlight inside. The window was small and the space very tight, but he managed to get his head and arm inside. The cockpit had been torn apart. The narrow beam illuminated the tattered insulation on the ceiling. Wires hung loose and it had collapsed in places. The control panel was smashed. It felt cold and eerie, he thought, as if he was peering into his own long-dead past. Leaning further in, he swung the narrow beam of light through the cockpit until it illuminated something only a foot beyond his face mask to his right. It was a human skeleton, the co-pilot, still in his rotting flight suit, strapped upright in his seat. He recoiled in fright and cracked his head against the window frame.

Michael was not prepared for this. He should have expected to find skeletons down here sooner or later, but the shock of stumbling upon the first one close up like this hit him without any warning. Easy, he thought. Take a few deep breaths. Easy! He tried again to back out of the window, but his elbow struck the window frame and he dropped the flashlight. It slipped out of his grip and it dropped inside the cockpit, but he did not stop, and he did not even think about reaching back inside for it. He had seen enough and quickly turned and swam away.

Finding the skeleton left him inexplicably numb. He knew he would see some sooner or later, so why was it having this effect on him, he wondered. One more dead body shouldn't bother a man who had seen and done all the things he had seen and done, but this was different. Maybe it was the way he came upon it, the suddenness; but much more than that, he knew that airplane was a tomb and there was something terribly wrong about disturbing it after all these years. A tomb? Imagine how much worse it will be when they find the U-boat. It had thirty-

five or forty men on board when it went down; every one of them was still locked inside, and some of them were not strangers.

Slowly, that old feeling crept up his spine again. He was trapped in his own dead past; and it didn't begin when he read that newspaper story; when he picked up the silver cigarette case; when Heinz Kruger, Martin Bormann or even Eric Bruckner and his U-boat crossed his path; or with the death of Eddie Hodge. They were only the mile markers on a long road that began almost two decades before, when the German people sold their souls to a suicidal maniac with a Charlie Chaplin moustache and a blueprint for mass murder. As improbable as it may seem, an old B-17 waist gunner named Michael Randall knew he was a vengeful angel sent to even the score and find the truth. That was what really brought him to New York, brought him up here to Sweden. It was the truth; and he would find it inside that old German U-boat. They could keep the gold bars, the diamonds and jewels, the art, and all the rest. Michael wanted the truth; and through it, he would get his revenge.

As he swam back to the platform, he turned his head and realized Balck was swimming next to him. The German had hung back, watching him as he stuck his head inside the cockpit. The water was murky and Balck wore a mask, so Michael could not see the expression on the man's face. He knew Balck was laughing at him, but all he could do was raise his arm and point up toward the surface. Let Balck lead the way. That way he could keep him in sight as they swam back up to the whaler.

As they began to climb the cable, Mike Randall took a last look back down. At the edge of the circle of light below the platform, he saw the dim glow of his flashlight as it illuminated the inside of the cockpit. Funny; it reminded him of a child's night-light at the end of a hallway in an old farmhouse back in Wisconsin. In an hour or so, the batteries would die and the light would go out. Darkness would return and fill the cockpit, leaving the co-pilot to resume his vigil in an everlasting night.

## **Chapter 31**

After the experience with the British bomber, each succeeding day passed with agonizing slowness. The emotional peaks and valleys of those first days were now bulldozed flat by a dull routine, decreasing expectation, and the fear of what they'd find when they did locate the U-boat. It became easy to assume that the next strange shape on the bottom was merely a bed of rocks; or that the next sonar reading was another lost anchor, a rusting turn-of-the-century barge, a boiler, or a small sailboat that had been caught out in a storm. For the next five days, that was exactly what each new reading turned out to be. Five days, almost six, and that was all they found.

It was early evening, barely past 7:00 PM, and they were uniformly exhausted. The crew had been at it all day, but this was summer in the far north and the sun was still a long way from the horizon, "When people get tired, they make mistakes, Michael," Einar said. "Someone will get hurt, so I suggest we quit for the day."

Reluctantly, Michael agreed. He waved to Schiff, who was on the winch to bring the diving platform up, but Yuri Chorev stuck his head out the wheelhouse window.

“I agree with quitting, Einar,” Chorev said. “But we only need one more pass to complete the square we’ve been working on all afternoon, and then we can make a fresh start on a new square in the morning.”

Person looked up at the sky and at the horizon. “The light is holding, so I suppose thirty minutes more would not hurt. Just tell everyone to be careful.”

Michael stayed at the helm fighting with the currents to keep the slow moving ship on the proper heading, dividing his attention between the compass and the water, while Schiff split his attention between the magnetometer and sonar displays. It was hard to believe that the once-crisp map on the chart table had become tattered and dirty so quickly. It was stained and smudged with handprints and coffee, split along a seam, re-taped, and covered now with row after row of bright red “X’s” marking the squares that they had already searched. Was that progress? Depends on how you count it, he thought. They still had not found the elusive U-boat. None of them would dare suggest it did not exist, or that it was not up here in Swedish waters to begin with, but he could read their faces. Unfortunately, their hopes and his now lay with a pitifully small number of squares around the outer periphery of the navigation chart. That was all they had left, and they put a finite end to it.

Michael stared at the chart. Could they have missed it? He wondered. With the shifting currents and wind, it was very easy for the BRUNNHILDE to drift off course, even by a few degrees. Or, had the temperamental magnetometer simply not registered? Did a thermal layer throw them a curve? Could the U-boat have ended up in one of the Baltic’s infamous trenches or a deep hole? Or, had it been anywhere around here to begin with? That was what was going through Michael’s mind, over and over again, until he realized there was a loud buzzing coming from the equipment console to his left that Schiff was monitoring. It was that damned magnetometer again! God, he was learning to hate that sound. All that the loud buzzing did was to deepen his frustration, so he ignored it and forced his full attention back on the wheel. No doubt, this was another false reading, he thought, one more on the heels of so many others before it. But the damned thing kept right on buzzing!

Michael turned angrily toward the young warrant officer. Usually, whoever was at the console had the decency to turn the thing off before the noise drove everyone else nuts. David knew that; but as Michael turned and glared at him, he did a quick double take.

“Stop the engines,” Schiff said in a soft whisper as he leaned forward. His face was close to the scope, and he motioned to Michael with a crooked finger. “Take a look,” he added, not daring to take his eyes off the dials and gauges for fear he’d break the magical spell. “There is something down there, and it is big, very big.”

Michael cut the engines back to neutral. As soon as the diesel noise dropped, Einar stepped into the wheelhouse. His eyes met Michael’s, and the captain immediately knew why. He stepped over and took the helm. With his far more talented hands, he eased the engines into a lower gear and began working the boat

backward over the spot Schiff had identified. Michael stepped to the console and turned on the lights and the television camera.

Schiff's voice was barely above a whisper as he told Person, "Go nice and slow now, Captain — nice and slow."

One by one, the rest of the crew gathered in the wheelhouse. No one needed to be called. It was as if everyone knew something was different this time. As the long minutes passed, Schiff took four sets of readings, each from a different starting point and each on a different vector; but the images they provided were unmistakable. Whatever was down there was made of steel; and there was a lot of it, lying in a long, narrow hump on the ocean floor. What was it? The TV pictures were the most frustrating yet exciting ones Michael had seen so far. This was no rock pile or scrap heap, and it was far too big to be another airplane. Dark and grainy, the pictures showed a smooth surface, black on murky black, with tantalizingly little relief or details.

"We must check this one out," Schiff insisted. "I know it has been a long day for everyone, but we have no choice."

"I remind you, you are all exhausted," Person warned. "That can make diving a very dangerous business."

"You are absolutely right, Einar," Michael answered for the others. "But we'll all sleep a whole lot better if we know. Besides, it shouldn't take more than an hour to check it out and maybe a lot less. Schiff and I will go. We've been cooped up here in the wheelhouse all day, and we need a little exercise."

"Oh, no you don't!" Leslie stepped forward and asserted herself. "We've got a regular rotation set up, and fair is fair. Yuri and I are next on the list."

Michael didn't like the idea, but he knew she was right. With eight hands helping to dress two bodies, she and Doctor Chorev were soon in the water and gone with only a small pool of bubbles to mark the spot. Michael hurried back to the wheelhouse with the others, where Person continued to finesse the rudder and the engine to keep the boat steady. As they gathered around the closed circuit TV monitor and waited, Michael realized that it was a lot more difficult to stay up here with nothing to do than it ever was to make that cold, lonely dive to the bottom. Down there you could feel it, taste it, see its subtle shades, and become part of it. Up here on deck, you were little more than excess baggage.

For too many long minutes, nothing changed on the small black-and-white screen. Finally, he saw a dim blur cut across the screen from left to right. Was it a diver's fin? A moment later, the remainder of a black-suited figure swam into view. From the soft curves, under that thick layer of black rubber he knew it was Leslie. Yuri followed close behind as their white flashlights beams criss-crossed through the murky water. Lower and lower they swam until they reached the surface of the dark, smooth object below. Leslie paused, turned her head, and looked up at the camera. She waved her arm and pointed to the left as she and Yuri Chorev swam out of the camera's field of view, leaving their audience up in the wheelhouse staring at an empty screen again, wishing they could stick their heads inside the TV monitor and peer around the corner. Surely, Leslie and Yuri will be back in a minute or two, Michael thought; but they were not. The minute or two slowly stretched into four and five as his eyes alternated between the television screen



and his wristwatch. Ten minutes. Where were they, he wondered, as he began to sweat.

Suddenly, a black-garbed swimmer reentered the camera's view followed by a second one. The first one quickly swam up to the camera lens and stopped a few feet away. It was Leslie. She reached for the slate board and grease pencil dangling from her thigh and bent over. She wrote something in quick, bold strokes and then raised her slate up to the camera lens. The numerals "582" were all she had written. That was all she needed to write.

Leslie could not see the broad grins on the faces up in the wheelhouse, but Michael could see the one on hers as her mouth curved upward around the edge of her regulator. As casually as he could, he looked away from the TV screen to catch the reactions of the others. Schiff had grabbed old Person by the arms and the two of them danced around the deck, the Captain's face split from ear to ear with a broad grin. Person's was not the kind of face that lied that easily. Michael knew the old man never expected them to find the U-boat, but he seemed legitimately pleased now that they had.

That brought Michael around to Balck. The Mate was the only one who continued to stare at the television screen. Slowly, he began to nod, his eyes firmly focused on the smooth, black hull of the old German submarine; but his expression remained as passive as ever, hidden behind that thin, cynical smile. Still, the Mate seemed pleased that they had found the U-boat. Why? Beyond the pay and special bonuses Person had promised the two crewmen, Michael did not have a clue.

To Michael's surprise, it was the wiry little Swede, Lindstromm, who had the most interesting reaction. He backed away from the television set, his eyes riveted on the screen; and did not appear pleased at all. He tried to celebrate and laugh along with the others, but his joy looked forced and artificial. He would smile, but the edges kept coming up like cheap linoleum. Clearly, the little Swede was afraid of something.

They rushed out of the wheelhouse and hurried to the ladder. It would take another ten minutes for the two divers to decompress and reach the surface, but no one cared. This was a very happy wait, not a tense one, as they listened to Person and David Schiff quickly outline their plans for the next day. They would go back down in the morning to bring back some proof, but they would all get more than enough chances to dive on the U-boat.

Finally, Michael saw two heads break the surface near the ladder. Eager hands helped them climb up on deck. When they raised their masks, Leslie's and Yuri's faces were all smiles. "And you're sure?" Michael asked, still not believing.

"No question about it," Yuri spoke first. "The U-boat is sitting almost upright and its number is painted on the side of the conning tower in big white numerals just like you said."

After quickly climbing the ladder, Leslie beamed as she threw her arms around his neck. "You've got your submarine. Can we go home now?"

He held her in his arms and wanted to say more, but Yuri Chorev interrupted, the words bubbling out of the normally restrained college professor. "It really is incredible, Michael," he said. "Your description was accurate down to the smallest detail and the proof lies down there on the bottom, just as you said it was. There's

a big hole in the aft deck and some twisted pieces of metal where you said they put that rack of oil drums. The hull and all the rest of it on the aft deck are black from the explosion and the burning fuel oil. We saw a second big hole at the base of the conning tower, down low where it meets the deck. Lord, with two direct hits, she must have sunk like a rock. Like you said, there's no deck gun. The mount was there, but no gun; and when we swam up to the bow, we saw that the forward torpedo tube doors were welded shut. We did not check the rear doors, but I would like to know how many U-boats had that done to them."

"And you don't have to ask, Michael," Leslie loosened her hold on his neck and looked up at him. "We tried."

"Tried what?"

"The hatch in the foredeck that goes down to the torpedo room. We tried to open it, but it's sprung or rusted shut; so we'll have to cut it open."

"In the morning," he insisted. "For now, let's raise the platform and stow the gear. Tomorrow's going to be a long day."

## Chapter 32

It was nearly midnight and Michael had chosen his spot well. He was crouched behind a wooden crate near the stern of the old whaler, where he had a clear view of the entire deck. He could see down and across it, up both railings, and into the wheelhouse as far as the head of the staircase. Below, the holds and engine room were locked up tight. So he was content to hunker down here in the shadows, knowing they had to come up here on deck to try anything, and that meant coming through the wheelhouse and past him.

He drew his dark jacket tighter around him. The night had grown cool. A thin mist hung on the water, obscuring the Swedish coast in the distance. Another romantic summer night in Scandinavia and an excellent opportunity to get himself killed if he wasn't careful. After all, wasn't this exactly what Manny was doing the night he disappeared? Michael touched the grip on the Beretta in his jacket pocket, because tonight, someone was going to pay. Michael had grown to like the fat police detective, and he was not going to forget what they did to him. Soon he would call in all the IOUs.

Despite the danger and the late hour, today had been deeply satisfying, undoubtedly the most satisfying day Michael had had in the past six years. They actually found the U-582, as impossible as that once seemed. Almost no one believed him in the beginning, only Eddie's father, Leslie, and Manny; but now, it wasn't hope, unsupported theories, or even bad guesses. The U-582 was real; and it was here, just as he said it would be, lying not one hundred fifty feet beneath them. Here! Off the coast of Sweden, not Poland, and this would sink the official version of Eric Bruckner deeper than his U-boat. Someone had spent years crafting layer upon layer of lies on top of the U-boat Kapitan's memory. He wasn't lying in a feather bed in Bonn, where his Russian masters wanted a naive world to think he was. It had to be the Russians. The trawler proved that and tomorrow morning Michael would prove it.

As for all the rest—the gold, the art, the jewels, and all those crates and boxes full of loot in the forward torpedo room—he felt no elation over finding any of that. The submarine could be forty tons of scrap iron as far as he was concerned, and that included all the treasure Martin Bormann and Heinz Kruger had crammed inside her. Finding it and returning it to where it belonged would be satisfaction enough for Michael; and denying it to those black-hearted bastards would be a nice bonus, knowing that might put at least a small crimp in their plans. That would be his revenge.

Michael looked out across the water at where he knew the Russian trawler was still circling. One way or another, they would make their move and they would make it soon. The die was cast now, and they had no choice. These might be Swedish waters, but once they knew the U-boat had been found, the Russians had to stop him from getting inside and coming back up with proof. Once they knew. Unless Michael missed his guess, someone on board the BRUNNHILDE had a serious problem. Was it Balck or Lindstromm? One of them had to get a message to that Russian trawler, and let them know it had been found or incur the dancing bear's full wrath. Whether he had a radio transmitter or a signal light, Michael was betting the guy would sneak up here on deck where he would stand less chance of being seen or heard, and the only question was who "the guy" would turn out to be.

The divers would need three or four hours to get inside the submarine and finish their search, hopefully not much more than that. So, they had to keep the news from reaching the Russians until midday. Photographs, the logbook, one of the gold bars, something from the control room with the boat's monogram, they would need something distinctive that could only have come from the U-582. Then, it would be all over. All he had to do was stop the spy from sending his message.

Michael heard the soft bump of a cabin door and faint footsteps in the passageway below. There! Someone was coming up the stairs into the wheelhouse. Michael's fingers tightened around the butt of the Beretta and leaned further back into the shadows. Whoever it was, he might have surprised Manny Eisner; but he wasn't going to surprise Mike Randall. He saw a small, dark figure appear at the head of the stairs and step into the wheelhouse. The shape and the stride? His hand relaxed on the butt of the automatic as he saw it was Leslie. She stepped out on deck and began slowly walking aft. When she was no more than five feet away from him, he rose from the shadows.

"What're you doing up here?" he chided her. "I told you the deck wasn't safe."

"Not with people jumping out of the shadows and scaring the wits out of other people it isn't!" she answered angrily. "I couldn't sleep, so I came up to get some fresh air. There's no crime in that, is there? Now, what are YOU doing up here?" Hands on hips, she demanded an answer as she saw him dressed in dark clothes and hiding in a corner behind a crate. "You've been playing guard up here, haven't you? Why didn't you tell me? I would have helped."

"That was what I was afraid of; but there's no need, Schiff and I are trading off every four hours. Besides, it's just for this one night. Come tomorrow, as soon as I come back up, we're heading back to port; so it's no big deal."

"It isn't, huh?" she eyed him suspiciously as she stepped over to the railing. She stared out across the dark water, and her expression grew more troubled.

"What's the matter now?" he asked.

"When I was down there, I touched the hull of that U-boat," she answered as she raised her hand and looked at it, as if it belonged to someone else. She was trembling. "This whole thing had been a game, some kind of big adventure, until then." She turned and stared up at him looking small and fragile, very female, and very much alone. "Even through those thick gloves, I could feel it. Touching it... it felt like touching... a tombstone. Can you understand that?"

"Oh, I can understand it, all right. Believe me, I can understand it."

"It sent a cold chill straight through me, Michael, one I still can't get rid of."

"You did your dive today. Tomorrow you stay up on deck."

"I don't want to go back down there again—ever," she shivered. "I... I don't think I could handle it."

"You don't have to. There's more than enough for you to do up here."

She stepped towards him and put her arms around his waist, desperate for the warmth and the closeness. He put his arms around her shoulders and pulled her to him, feeling her body tremble. He slipped his jacket off and draped it over her, holding her even closer until the trembling stopped.

"You ought to go below," he offered quietly. "It's getting cold up here, and it could still be dangerous."

"Come with me," she asked in a small, soft voice. "I don't want to be alone."

"I... I'd like to do that, Leslie. God, you don't know how much I'd like to, but not tonight. I have to take a rain check."

Her eyes flared. "I'm not some goddamned baseball game, Michael Randall!" she pinched him hard and angrily on his side.

"Ah! I didn't mean anything, Les, it's just..."

"Well, I did! I love you, Michael Randall. I was beginning to think you loved me too, but maybe I've just been dreaming all these years."

"No, Les. I... I love you, too, but..."

"No *buts*, Michael. It's a simple yes or no."

"Leslie!" he said as he felt another hot, painful welt throbbing below his ribs.

"Yes or no. After three years, I'm tired of waiting for you to do something."

Michael pulled her close again, turned her face up, and kissed her hard.

She wrapped her arms around him, squeezed him, and kissed him back just as hard. When they finally separated, she looked up at him and said softly, "Let's go downstairs."

"Not tonight, Les. I can't. I have to stay up here."

"I'm not the kind who asks twice, Michael. You'd better remember that."

"Then I'll have to earn another chance."

She reached up, dug her fingers into his hair, pulled his face down to hers, and shut him up with another kiss. Her lips were firm and moist as they parted, and her tongue explored his mouth. She pressed her body into his, and they stood there until she finally pried her fingers loose and pushed him away. "There!" she smiled. "That's an old southern tradition. I've staked my claim, and now you can spend the rest of the night thinking about what you're missing. How's that?"

“It’s called cruel and unusual punishment,” he answered, as his voice cracked, and he felt stirrings he had not felt in years.

“Cruel and unusual? You have no one to blame but yourself. You’re the one with the bad case of will power.”

She turned away from him and leaned her elbows on the railing. Michael joined her and put his arm over her shoulder. It was a lovely, calm night, and they stood staring absently out across the calm water, neither of them saying anything more. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her lean out and tilt her head sideways. A puzzled expression spread across her face as she pointed down toward the water and forward from where they were standing. “Michael, what’s that?” she asked.

Following the line of her arm, he saw a long, thin silver wire protruding from a porthole in one of the cabins near the middle of the ship, the third one back. The wire waved about in the air; and it took Michael a second or two to realize it was an antenna, one of those telescoping, silver things they put on a hand-held portable radio. That was when the truth suddenly crashed down on him. He felt so stupid. He had been waiting for someone to come up on deck when all the guy needed was an open porthole to communicate with the Russian trawler. He must be down there right now, already sending his message.

Michael laid his finger across Leslie’s lips and said, “Stay here,” then he turned and ran toward the wheelhouse. He moved quickly and quietly on the balls of his feet, taking the stairs two at a time. At the bottom, the dark corridor was empty. It was lit by one tiny light bulb screwed into a ceiling fixture a few doors down, barely enough to cast shadows. He pulled the Beretta from his jacket pocket and worked his way back to the third cabin. That had been Manny’s! The bastard was adding insult to injury; and he would pay for that, too. The cabin door was closed, so whoever was using it was still inside. Who could it be, he wondered. Balck? Lindstromm? Whoever it was, he was in for a rude shock, Michael thought. Company was coming, and it wasn’t knocking.

Michael’s nerves were right on the edge, as they were when he was on a bombing run over Germany. His heart was racing, but he felt good, damned good. The old reflexes were coming alive again, flashing back over the situation, ticking off his options. There was only one way into that cabin and only one way to get out. That made things simple. No need to try the door handle. No need to be polite and ask. Everything would hit the fan the second he went through the door anyway, so there was no reason to play around. Besides, a little overt aggression matched his mood perfectly.

When Michael reached the spot opposite the cabin door, he took a quick look at the doorframe. How strong could those old iron hinges be, he wondered? And the wood? Forty, maybe fifty years old? There was only one way to find out. He bounced up and down on the balls of his feet like a high jumper getting his rhythm; then, with one swift, fluid motion, he drove his right foot into the door just above the lock, the way they do it in the movies. In the movies, the old doorframes are not made of seasoned Scandinavian red oak; the locks are not made of tempered Swedish steel; and the hero gets more for his trouble than a loud Bam! and a sore foot. The cabin door didn’t fly open as he hoped it would; the lock did not break; and the wood frame did not splinter into a dozen pieces, either. It did not crack and it did not even budge.

“Damn!” he swore as he stumbled back against the wall.

The element of surprise was gone, but there was no turning back now. Like hitting a blocking sled on the practice field back in high school or taking out a linebacker on an end sweep, Michael lowered his shoulder and ran at the door with bull-rush, accelerating through it, and giving it a solid forearm shiver for good measure. If he was certain about anything, he was certain that something would break; he hoped it would be the door. This time he was right. The doorframe splintered with a sharp “Crack!” and the heavy oak door blew back on its hinges and crashed into the sidewall of the cabin with a loud, echoing “Blam!”

Michael’s momentum carried him through the doorway and into the cabin, but he was off balance and out of control as he tripped over his own feet and fell forward onto the deck. In the end, that was what saved his life. For as he fell, someone fired a large-caliber handgun at him from out of the darkness. In the narrow confines of that small oak-paneled cabin, the blue-white flash from the muzzle sounded like a howitzer. So much for catching the bastard by surprise, Michael thought. If he had to guess, he figured the man inside was even more scared than he was. He had been hiding inside this dark cabin; and the crash of the door would have rattled anybody. Without thinking, he would have spun, raised the gun, and pointed it toward the dim light in the doorway, right where Michael would have been standing if he had not stumbled.

Michael hit the floor and kept rolling into the shadows along the sidewall as two more gunshots rang out. Fortunately, the guy was still aiming high. The first bullet slammed into the door, and the next two punched holes in the sidewall. Michael could feel the impacts of the heavy slugs, and wondered if the guy was using an elephant gun. Whatever, this gun battle was already too one-sided, and it would soon be fatal if he did not do something quickly. Lying on his back, he gripped the Beretta with both hands. He pointed it in the general direction of the gunman, and started pulling the trigger, again, again, and again; knowing there was no time to aim and figuring it really did not matter. Whether he hit the bastard or not; even if he missed flesh and bone, the guy would need the balls from a pawn shop marquee not to be totally unnerved by all the bullets flying in his direction.

## Chapter 33

Lindstromm’s nerves had been fraying ever since that night in port when he was stupid enough to climb down into the forward cargo hatch to sneak a quick peek at their diving gear. What did he think that would accomplish? Did he really think the Russians would give him a bonus, a little extra money? Those ingrates. All he ever got from them was more trouble. Lindstromm never could understand what had happened that night. When he was prowling around the hold, he was positive he heard a noise up on deck near the hatch. He immediately switched his small flashlight off and pressed himself flat against the bulkhead. They had caught him in the act, and he knew he was doomed. He hadn’t brought his favorite old Webley revolver, or even a filleting knife along; he left them wrapped in an old pair

of overalls at the bottom of his sea chest. All he was carrying was the little radio, and he felt utterly naked. Cold sweat rolled down his back as he stood there, wondering how he would talk his way out of this one. There was nothing he could do, so he stayed hidden in the cargo hold; but as the deafening silence dragged on and on, nothing happened. Nothing!

After ten minutes, perhaps fifteen, he slowly inched his way back to the ladder without making a sound. He closed his fingers around the first cold, iron rung, and began to climb. His palms were so sweaty he thought he would lose his grip and fall, but he kept climbing until his hands reached the top rung. Finally, he took a deep breath and raised his head above the rim of the hatch for a quick peek. Still, nothing! The deck was as empty and deserted as it had been when he climbed down into the hatch. How could that be? Lindstromm *knew* what he had heard. Someone had been up here walking around on deck, but who was it, and why did they leave him alone? Why were there no bright lights stabbing down through the darkness and pinning him against the bulkhead like a bug on the wall? Why? None of it made any sense.

He scampered up the remaining rungs, dashed across the deck, and scurried below to the safety of his cabin, thoroughly shaken. The next morning he learned that the fat New York City policeman was missing. He wasn't just missing; they found him in an old warehouse not a quarter mile away from the pier with his throat slit. It had to be those damned, double-dealing Russians. He knew it. He never should have trusted them. They had been setting him up all along, the devious shits! They were the ones who grabbed that fat policeman, Eismer; and they left Lindstromm here on the BRUNNHILDE to take the fall.

Nothing the MVD did surprised Lindstromm any longer. They might pay well, but they had no loyalty. They would toss a man out like yesterday's garbage the instant it served their purpose. But what if he was wrong? What if it was not the Russians? Then, who could it be, he wondered? On second thought, Lindstromm did not want to know. What he wanted was out. He had no qualms about the spying or cold-cocking that drunk, Demberg, if that was what they wanted him to do. He could crack a fellow over the head or snoop with the best of them, if the money was good, and he thought he could get away with it. After all, everything had its price—everything, except being their fall guy.

Those damned Russians, he raged in silence. They had stuck him good this time, but it was time to cut his losses and run as far and as fast as his nervous feet would carry him. If he did, he would be blamed for the murder of that New York cop for sure. Maybe that was what they had in mind all along, to tie him in even deeper, those clever bastards! They knew he couldn't run, and this was their way of forcing him to stay on board and do their bidding, right up to the end. Still, you could not bury a sneaky little ferret like Lindstromm that easily. He knew he had to run, but where? He wracked his brain considering the alternatives; but by the time he realized how much trouble he was in, the BRUNNHILDE had slipped her moorings and put to sea. Lindstromm ran up on deck and saw they were two miles out in the shipping channel. He wanted to jump over the side and swim all the way home; but he was too terrified to even do that, no thanks to his good comrades in Moscow.

Now he was really stuck, so Lindstromm had no choice but to keep his scheduled radio contacts with the Russians. Still, nothing he did satisfied them. They always wanted more, more, and more, no matter how much he gave them or how many risks he took to get it. They wanted to know everything that was going on; how the search was going; and what had been found, day by day, hour by hour. Most importantly, they wanted to be told the moment the U-boat was found. If he dared disobey, no one could run far enough or fast enough to escape the Russians' wrath. They would hunt him down like a dog.

After that night, he stayed below decks and sent his messages to the trawler from the head, from the paint locker, or from the fat policeman's cabin, now that it was empty. He went along like this for days, until they found the U-boat; then he got scared. From the tone of the messages, he knew the Russians were going to do something stupid, so he dug out his old Webley revolver and kept it handy, just in case. The Russians told him over and over again not to carry a gun. They said it was too risky, which meant they did not trust him; but if the police caught him, they would immediately suspect him of something. But what did the Russians know? They were sitting miles away on their spy ship, sipping their vodka, all warm and comfortable. They were not the ones stuck here on this old tub, cold, lonely, and sweating in the dark. That was why the Swede had shoved the Webley into the waistband of his pants. On this cursed boat, the old British .455 caliber cannon was the best friend he had; so let them come, especially that German bully, Balck; the American; or even that tight old bastard Person. He'd show them all.

Lindstromm knew he had to radio the trawler and tell them the U-boat had been found. If he did not, the Russians would have his hide for sure. The dead policeman's cabin was empty, so he went there. He was almost finished sending the message when he heard the faint shuffling of feet in the corridor, followed by that first loud crash on the cabin door. Startled, the radio slipped from his sweating fingers and broke into a hundred pieces on the deck. Now, he really was alone; and that was when all hell broke loose. The room was dark and the silhouette of a tall man filled the doorway, backlit by the dim light from the corridor. Whoever he was, he was big. The lighting made him look even bigger, and in that instant, Lindstromm knew the game was up. His hand immediately went for the butt of the revolver jammed in his belt, but the hammer snagged on his pants and he panicked as he struggled to pull it free.

Little men like big guns, which is why the wiry Swede brought the big, British Webley revolver along. For him, it was the perfect choice: loud and mean, with enough firepower to drop a charging rhino; but he had not figured on the front sight snagging on his waistband. When the doorframe shattered and the heavy door crashed against the bulkhead, he yanked on the pistol with both hands and finally ripped it free. The only way out of that cabin was to blast that fool out of the way, run through the door, and never look back, so he did not try to aim; he pointed the Webley at the doorway and began pulling the trigger. It went off with the kick of a mule. He was already off-balance, and the recoil knocked him backward as he pulled the trigger again, and again. The cabin's paneling and thick



oak deck shuddered and splintered, but Lindstromm couldn't tell if he had hit anyone.

The dark figure in the doorway dove into the cabin and rolled across the deck into the shadows to the right. Lindstromm swung the revolver around and tried to track the bastard, but it was not easy. The bright-orange muzzle flashes and the roar of the small cannon had left him half-deaf and seeing stars; but the coup de grace came when the intruder answered with gunshots of his own. The cabin was suddenly lit by a series of small blue-white flashes and the sharp Crack! Crack! Crack! of an automatic. The man in the shadows was shooting back at him, and the Swede's eyes bulged out of their sockets. He had not bargained on being shot at, and he panicked. The door stood wide open, so he jumped to his feet and ran. He bounced off the far corridor wall and headed for the stairs, only a few long strides away. It was so close, but already a lifetime too late.

Damn, he swore, as he saw someone standing at the foot of the stairs, blocking his way. It was that cursed woman, that arrogant American bitch! Well, not for long, he thought, as he raised his revolver, intent on blasting this final obstacle out of his way forever. But as Lindstromm began to squeeze the trigger, something hit him in his side and lifted him off his feet, slamming him against the corridor wall as if he were a rag doll. The blow knocked the wind out of him and left him stunned. The revolver fired, but the bullet went well-wide of its mark, harmlessly burying itself into the side wall, as a powerful hand pinned him against the bulkhead by the throat, his feet dangling a few feet above the deck and incapable of any defense or retaliation. It held him there with one hand, while it ripped the revolver from his fingers with the other, as if he were a naughty child caught playing with a toy he was not allowed to have. The Swede tried to focus and see through the fog, but it was hopeless. His head was pounding and he could not think. Then, through the haze, he saw a face only inches away, grinning at him. It made Lindstromm shudder, like a mouse that had just been caught by a big farm cat. It was playing with him now. When it tired of the sport, the cat would kill him; and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Then the face spoke. It whispered something in his ear, but Lindstromm was too stunned and terrified to understand the words until his gut exploded with pain from a vicious punch to the solar plexus, hard, up and under the rib cage. Lindstromm had been beaten by experts, but he had never experienced anything like this. A sharp, burning pain rose up inside him, slicing hot and deep, from his bowels up into his chest, ripping and tearing his heart out. That was when the skinny Swede realized the awful truth. He lowered his eyes and saw he had been skewered by the long, thin blade of his own filleting knife. Its handle protruded from his stomach just below the rib cage. The face was grinning at him now, and those cold blue eyes were laughing at him.

"Balck!" Lindstromm tried to say. His lips formed the name, but the only sound that escaped from his mouth was a squeaky gasp. The German released his grip on the Swede's throat and his body went limp and slid down the wall. Lindstromm commanded his legs to straighten themselves and support him, so he could stand and continue on to the stairs, but they refused to obey. There was no feeling left in them, no strength. There was no strength in the rest of his body, either. A thick

fog began rolling in around him making Lindstromm shiver, and leaving him tired and confused as he collapsed onto the floor.

Dead.

## Chapter 34

Balck, Kruger, or any of the half-dozen other names he regularly used had been standing inside his own dark cabin, waiting impatiently for Lindstromm to finish sending his message to the Russian trawler. With his own porthole open, he could hear the man tap out his message, but Kruger's ears were tuned to other sounds as well. He heard soft voices and footsteps up on deck. It was that upstart American interfering with his plans again. Randall and the woman were huddled together near the stern, talking in whispers. Damn them both! They must have heard something, too; because Kruger heard the American suddenly run across the deck and down the stairs, trying too hard not to make noise as he crept along the hallway right past Kruger's door.

So be it, the German reluctantly conceded. Comrade Lindstromm had served his purpose. His daily reports were enough to keep the Russians at bay and keep the American's attention directed out to sea, precisely where Kruger wanted it. Otherwise, the Russians would have lost their patience and attacked the whaler days ago, before the American found the U-boat, and that would have ruined everything. Now that the submarine had been located, the time had come to prod the slumbering Russian bear into action. Lindstromm was their trip wire, and the time had come to put him to use. If Kruger played it right, the Russians would attack the BRUNNHILDE and kill its crew for him. Meanwhile, Kruger would set the timer on the explosives he had planted in the engine room and slip quietly away. When it went off, the BRUNNHILDE would be gone and there would be wreckage scattered all along the coast. With their spy trawler sitting just over the horizon, they would catch all the blame. Later, Bormann could send his own salvage teams here and open the U-boat at his leisure.

Kruger had to admit he would have enjoyed killing Lindstromm himself. He never liked the little weasel, but it looked as if the impetuous American would deny him even that small pleasure. When action finally came, it began with two loud crashes and a fusillade of gunshots in the cabin next door. Kruger rolled his eyes in professional embarrassment. What utter incompetence! One bullet is all either man should have needed, so perhaps they'll kill each other and save him the trouble.

Kruger opened his door and slipped into the corridor with his fishing knife in his hand. Whoever came out of that cabin was as good as dead, although Kruger would prefer to take his revenge on the American. Randall had escaped his clutches in New York, and Kruger's cheek still tingled where that piece of brick had cut him. He owed the tall American for that, for the shots he fired at him in that alley, and for stealing his silver cigarette case and bandying it about like a souvenir. That was the last straw. The cigarette case was a gift from Bormann and had been one of Kruger's prized possessions. He knew he left it on the U-boat that

last night in Königsberg. He had no idea how this impudent American ended up with it, but it did prove Randall's story really was true. He had been there, in Königsberg, and that meant the U-boat sank here, off Sweden, not off Poland. That was the proof Kruger needed that the 'Admiral' Bruckner in Bonn was a Russian agent.

It really didn't matter to him. Randall? Lindstromm? One of them would kill the other in the cabin, and the winner got Kruger. If it were the Swede who emerged victorious, Kruger would kill him and say he avenged the death of the unfortunate American. Randall was bigger and much stronger, and Kruger expected him to win. If it was Randall who stumbled out, well then a tragic mistake was about to unfold in the dimly lit corridor. With all that noise and confusion, gunshots and bullets flying everywhere, and two men grappling in the dark, who would blame him if he accidentally killed the wrong man?

To his mild surprise, Lindstromm came out of the cabin, careened off the wall, and ran right into Kruger's hitting zone. The German was braced and caught the Swede from the side with a monstrous backhand that slammed him against the corridor wall. Then he closed in, held him there by his throat, and pressed up against him with his body. He could smell the fear pouring out of the Swede. As he drank it in, he felt that old, powerful thrill surging through him again, and leaned closer.

"You have been a naughty boy, have you not, Comrade Lindstromm?" he whispered in the Swede's ear as he drove the knife in under the Swede's ribs. The powerful thrust went in up to the hilt with one clean stroke. A powerful rush washed over Kruger as the blade cut deep and an explosion of pain and fear radiated out from the Swede. Kruger looked deep into Lindstromm's eyes before he released his grip on his throat. Lindstromm hung there for an instant before he slid down the wall and collapsed on the deck at Kruger's feet.

It wasn't simply the act of killing or snuffing out a life that he craved, it was this rush of power he felt when he did it; for him, it was orgasmic. He held Lindstromm's life in the palm of his hand as if it were a snowflake, and watched it vanish—delicate, fragile, never to return, never to be replicated, never, ever. Yes, that was true power.

Michael quickly jumped to his feet and stumbled out the cabin door. He was hot on Lindstromm's tail, but the little weasel was fast and had a big lead. He'd have to run like the wind if he hoped to catch him. As he rounded the corner and took his first long stride down the long, dark corridor, he ran headlong into someone or something standing in the center of the corridor like a giant oak. The American bounced off and fell backwards into the wall. As he regained his balance and looked up, he was astonished to see it was Balck that he had run into. Michael was tall and fairly muscular himself, but the German Mate never moved when their bodies collided. Instead, the man looked like he was in a trance, staring down at Lindstromm's body lying at his feet.

The other cabin doors quickly opened and lights came on, illuminating the confused scene from every direction. One by one, the other members of the crew gathered around, everyone's eyes drawn to the body on the deck, to the handle of the knife sticking out of it, and to the expression of total rapture on Balck's face.

Slowly, the glow on his face faded and he turned his eyes on Mike Randall. Balck seemed surprised when he saw the American standing next to him, perhaps even a bit angry when he recognized who it was. Then that look too was gone, but it had been there. Michael saw it.

Schiff was the first to react with a low whistle as he bent down over the body. He touched the bloody handle of the knife and saw the look of complete terror frozen on the Swede's face. The knife had been driven in up to its haft. They all wondered how much strength was required to do something that horrific, and how much pain and fear was required to produce an expression like that on someone's face. Like Schiff, they could only wonder.

Finally, it was Balck himself who broke the silence. He bent down, stiff legged, almost mechanical, and picked Lindstromm's Webley revolver off the floor. He gave it a brief appraisal, then held it out toward Michael. "Here," he said. "I heard all those gunshots and wondered if there was a war going on in there. When the shooting stopped, I picked up my fishing knife and stepped into the corridor. That was when this fellow Lindstromm pointed his revolver at me; and... well, I could not very well let him shoot me, could I?"

The others were speechless. They stared open-mouthed at the long-barreled Webley, which the German seemed to take so lightly and at the result lying dead at his feet.

"He, uh... he had a radio," Randall tried to explain. "We saw the antenna sticking out of the porthole; Leslie and I did; so I ran down here to stop him. That was when he started shooting at me."

"Ah! That explains it then," Balck calmly shrugged. "The Russian fishing trawler! This fellow Lindstromm must have been working for them all along. And you know, I would bet he is the one who killed your friend Eismer."

Person muttered something in Swedish as he looked down at the body. No one understood the words, but the old man's meaning was clear enough when he switched to English. "Such a thing, for a Swede to join with that Communist filth. And a murderer to boot." He shook his head sadly and laid his hand on Balck's shoulder. "You did well, Balck, and we owe you our thanks. If you had not stopped him, there's no telling how much more mischief he might have caused."

The others quickly nodded their agreement, everyone except Michael. His attention lay elsewhere, at the end of the corridor where Leslie stood at the foot of the stairs. She must have been there the entire time Michael was in the cabin, he realized; and she had seen the whole grizzly scene unfold between Balck and Lindstromm. Now, she stood there wide-eyed with an expression of stark terror, but she was not looking at Lindstromm's body. Her eyes were fixed on Balck. One by one, the others turned and saw her standing there, too. So did Balck. At first he seemed surprised, then puzzled, and then mildly pleased, as if the two of them shared some dark secret the others could only guess at.

On the Russian trawler, Sergei Varentsov paced frantically back and forth across the floor of the small radio room. He paused again and again to reread the brief, but incomplete radiogram, as if the words would change if he only gave them another chance; but they refused. The unfinished message continued to mock him.

Varentsov began to sweat. The walls of the small compartment were closing in on him, trapping him in his own stupidity and mistakes. He had completely lost control of the situation. Instead of his being the one who was pulling the strings and making things happen, he was on the receiving end, being pushed and shoved faster and faster by powerful, unseen forces toward the yawning chasm of failure. It lay directly in front of him, gaping and yawning, opening wide between his feet, spreading, and waiting for him to lose his footing and fall in. If he looked down, he could see the fires of hell glowing white hot beneath him. He could feel the flame reach up, singeing his hands and his face; and he could smell the acrid stench that filled the air. He tried to turn his head away from the worst of it, but he smelled burning flesh—his own flesh. The flames licked up his pants legs with a pop and crackle and began to embrace him, and he was powerless to stop them. They would soon devour him, eating the flesh off his bones until nothing was left but a black, twisted skeleton propped up in a snow drift at the side door of the MVD headquarters in Moscow.

This had to be some horrible nightmare, but Varentsov knew he wasn't sleeping. He was wide awake, pacing back and forth in the trawler's radio room; and Lindstromm's last message confirmed his worst fears. The Israelis and their American lackeys had found that cursed U-boat. Here, off Sweden, not Poland! Worse still, Lindstromm's message stopped in mid-sentence. That meant the fool had gotten himself caught and he would be talking his head off to them at this very moment, if he were not already dead. In either event, it left Varentsov stone blind at precisely the wrong moment—when he needed accurate information about the Israelis' plans. Damn that fool Lindstromm!

It was only a matter of hours before the Israelis would dive on the wreck again and photograph it or go inside and bring hard evidence that proved Neptune's story was a tissue of lies. All those years of work, ruined. Ruined! Serov would not accept his lame excuses. He would have all the blame heaped on him now, leaving Varentsov with only two choices. He could go to the ship's railing with a nine-millimeter pistol and blow his brains out. That would save him a life of pain and humiliation, and be his best choice; if it were not that Varentsov was a total coward. It was one thing to put a bullet in someone else's head, and quite another to contemplate putting a bullet in one's own, so that was out. Or, he could make one last attempt to stop them. Right now. At this very moment. Fate! Fate is an unforgiving whore, Varentsov cursed; but if that damned whaler made it back to Sweden, Varentsov was as good as dead.

The MVD Colonel stumbled out the radio room door and headed for the crew compartment further aft where his diving team was waiting. He barged in and glared at the young Speznaz lieutenant. "Get your men ready," he ordered in a hoarse, angry voice. "Now! We will move this ship closer in toward shore so you can take your team in and destroy that U-boat. That damned old whaler too, and everyone on it. All of them! And I will tolerate no mistakes. Do you hear me, boy!"

"Yes, yes, Comrade Colonel, I..." the young officer stammered as he saw the desperation in Varentsov's eyes.

Varentsov didn't wait for a reply. He turned and ran back to his own cabin. He was in agony. His skin was on fire and he needed a pill. A red one. And a purple one. Maybe two of them. His face and his hands were burning and the pills were

the only things that could chase away the pain now. Oh God, he moaned as he threw himself on the bunk. The flames were burning the flesh off him now. He was right on the edge, the edge of the chasm and he knew this was his very last chance.

## Chapter 35

Their morning began at first light with leaden clouds crowding the sky and a cold, pale mist masking the Swedish coast. It looked to be a somber day, and the mood on board the BRUNNHILDE was no brighter. The diving platform had been swung over the side and lowered into the water. The television camera remained bolted in place; but the magnetometer, the depth finder, and the rest of the search equipment had been replaced by more flood lights, all the platform could carry, an oxy-acetylene torch, gas cylinders, coils of rubber hose, bolt cutters, and a couple of long crow bars and prying irons. Michael knew what the foredeck hatch and the torpedo room looked like, and they would need every bit of that gear if they hoped to pop it open and get inside.

They were sending three men down this time: Michael, David Schiff, and Balck. They were busy suiting up and rechecking their tanks, regulators, and personal equipment, while the others finished bolting the gear to the platform. Michael turned and saw Leslie standing by herself near the bow railing watching him. Her arms were folded across her chest and her face looked pale, drawn, and very troubled. He walked over, but she turned away and stared out to sea, her eyes glassy and sunken.

“Are you all right?” he asked quietly, laying his hand on her arm.

She jumped, startled, as if she had been touched by a high-voltage line. She turned her head, saw his wet suit and diving gear, and shuddered.

“You’re freezing,” he said as he put his arm around her.

“I’m fine.”

“Leslie, last night happened. It’s something you’re going to have to get past.”

“Maybe you can, I can’t.”

“Lindstromm would have killed you, if Balck hadn’t stopped him.”

“You didn’t see his face,” she whispered.

“It was a bad way to die.”

“Not Lindstromm’s; I meant Balck’s.” Even the name seemed to terrorize her. “It was like something I’ve never seen before—his eyes. The expression on his face—I can’t even describe it. He didn’t kill Lindstromm; it was an execution, a... ritual slaughter.”

“Leslie, I know the whole thing was horrible, but...”

“No,” she shook her head and tried to find the words. “You *don’t* know. You can’t even begin to know, if you didn’t see his expression. The man is evil. My god, when he drove that knife into Lindstromm it was like he was possessed.”

Michael put his hand on her shoulder and tried to reassure her. “A couple of hours, Les, that’s all we need.”

“You can’t go down there with him.”

"I'm sure as hell not leaving him up here with you. Relax, I'll keep an eye on him."

"What about the Russian trawler?" she asked. "You don't know what Lindstrom told them. They're not going to sit out there much longer."

"We still have time, Leslie. They're Russians; they can't do anything without orders," he lied confidently. "A few hours, then it'll all be over."

"No, it won't." she said angrily as she turned toward him. "Don't go down there with him. If you do, you'll never come back. I know it." She raised her hand and placed her hand against his cheek. "I couldn't handle that, Michael."

"I've come too far to stop now, Les. I've got to go down there and touch it again, like you did; and I've got to get inside. I owe that to Eric Bruckner and his crew, and I promised Eddie."

"Eddie? My brother, Eddie?" She looked up at him, stunned.

"I promised him people would know what happened back there; that I wouldn't let them get away with it."

"They aren't getting away with it, Michael. We found their U-boat. Now, we can go back to Sweden and tell the whole world what's down there."

"We need proof, Les; we need proof. And I have to be the one to go."

Her eyes pleaded with him, but she saw it was hopeless. His mind was made up. Slowly she let her hand slip off his cheek and drop to her side as she turned away.

"It was my idea to let Balck dive with me today," he told her. "Not his. So relax. It won't take long—a half-hour. It shouldn't take much more. Then we'll go, I promise."

"No. Somebody's going to get killed down there, and it's probably going to be you," she said in a quiet, pain-filled voice. "I can't handle that."

"You're imagining things."

She shook her head, resigned to her fate and to his. "I wish my Daddy had never seen that damned newspaper story. I wish..." but she couldn't finish the words. There was nothing else for him to say, either. He knew he'd never change her mind, and Schiff and Balck were waiting for him at the ladder.

Michael left her standing there and slipped over the side into the dark, icy water to begin his quick descent to the bottom, focusing all his attention on the dive. Unfortunately, the events of the night before and this morning had taken their toll. Leslie's words were still echoing in his ears, and the satisfaction he expected to feel on finally heading down to the hull of the U-582 wasn't there. He felt stiff and slow as he followed the cable down, and even the water felt colder today. It was pure illusion, of course; but that didn't stop an icy shiver from running down his spine.

When they reached the platform, the new lights had helped create wider and brighter pools of light and he could see the dim outline of the U-boat below. Despite the weeks of preparation, his stomach leaped into his throat as he realized it really was the U-582 lying there. He turned his head, his eyes following the U-boat's hull as it disappeared into the vast, black unknown; but right at the edge of the circle of light, he saw the dim outline of the battered conning tower jutting up at an awkward angle. In his mind's eye, he saw it the way it looked that terrible night it went down, standing proud, with a small rubber raft, a thin moon riding

high in the sky, the brisk wind, and the numbing cold. And he saw the sudden explosions, the orange fireballs, the clouds of choking black smoke, and the empty, painful silence that followed. To be here again, on the same deck where he and Eric Bruckner said good-bye over six years ago, took his breath away.

Michael's pulse quickened as he took a rope from the platform, tied it off to a railing on the conning tower, and pulled it tight to anchor the platform and its lights over the foredeck hatch. Les was right. Being here and touching it wasn't the same as watching it on that small black-and-white TV up in the wheelhouse. He now had a clear view of the foredeck hatch where he and the Russian POWs had lowered all those boxes and crates that day in the submarine pen in Königsberg. The hatch was set midway between the conning tower and the bow, recessed below the old wooden deck planks. It was sized so that torpedoes could be slid down into the compartment. That explained why it had a wider diameter than the others, but Bormann and Kruger would have known that long before they sent their trucks to Königsberg, those bastards! They would have known precisely what size crate would fit down through that hatch. They had it all figured out. They had everything figured out, except a U-boat Kapitan with a conscience and an American stowaway.

The deck was covered with silt and debris, the railings were bent and twisted, and what was left of the wooden decking had largely rotted away. Still, in a disturbingly quiet way, the hatch and its steel collar looked much the same as they had six years before. There was rust and corrosion, and no one could tell how badly the plates had been twisted and sprung, but there appeared to be no serious damage that would stand in the way of their forcing the hatch open and getting inside. It was round and hump-backed like all the other hatches, with a thick steel collar and a large circular locking wheel at its center. He swam closer, reached out, and touched it. Even through his thick rubber gloves, he felt the numbing cold of the old, rusted steel — felt, or imagined? The real chill would come from the sobering realization of what lay on the other side. He wrapped his fingers around the locking wheel and tried to turn it, but the wheel wouldn't budge, not that he expected it to after all these years. He flexed his hands and tightened his grip, bracing himself, and tried once more; but again, nothing. The wheel would not turn.

Balck had followed him down. He appeared next to Michael and motioned him aside while he slipped a long, steel prying bar between the spokes of the wheel. Together they pushed and pulled on the bar, trying to leverage the wheel—still nothing. While they were trying to turn the wheel, Schiff finished uncoiling the black rubber hoses and nozzles of the acetylene torch and motioned both of them away. He turned the valves and a thin stream of bubbles gushed from the jets. He adjusted the nozzle and squeezed the starter. A brilliant flash of light bathed the scene in a stark white, much harsher and brighter than the overhead lights. Schiff lowered a dark visor over his face and adjusted the valves one last time, focusing the flame into a blinding, four-inch blue dagger. He touched the flame to the hatch collar directly opposite the hinge, where he knew one of the thick, steel flanges would be located. The edge of the thick collar began to melt in big drops, but until Schiff cut a chunk of steel away, there was nothing for Michael to do but float nearby and wait, keeping one eye on the torch and an even more watchful eye on



the German. Not that he believed everything Leslie said, he just didn't believe in taking any chances, either.

In a few minutes, Schiff had cut a deep arc through the thick steel collar. He set the torch aside and motioned for his two companions to have another try with the prying iron. Balck wedged the tip of the bar into the fresh cut while Michael lent a hand, bracing their feet against the rear edge of the collar and pulling back. The two divers strained, once, twice, a third time, until they felt a large piece of steel snap off with a sharp Crack! exposing the flange and a section of fresh, bright steel. They tried again to force the wheel to turn, but the hatch remained tightly sealed.

Schiff set to work again with the acetylene torch. Between the bright glare of the floodlights and the cutting torch, Michael kept glancing over at Balck, searching his eyes for some clue as to what the German was really thinking; but the Mate gave away nothing. His attention appeared to be focused on the hatch too.

For the next few minutes, they alternated between the torch and the bar, nibbling chunks of steel off the collar like mice working around a block of hard cheese. After the fifth try, they passed the bar through the spokes of the wheel and tried to turn it again. They felt it begin to give, only a few inches at first; but the wheel did begin to turn. He and Balck glanced at each other and nodded, each man taking a fresh grip as they leaned into the bar. The wheel moved again, squealing in loud protest as a thin stream of air bubbles escaped around the edge of the hatch. This would be stale, foul air, trapped inside the U-boat's hull for more than six years, perhaps the very air he breathed himself, and that was a bone chilling thought. Schiff tapped him on the arm and motioned them aside again. Their oxygen was half gone now; and he knew they must keep moving.

Floating motionlessly in the water and backlit by the bright lights from the platform, Michael suddenly saw a flash of silver pass by only inches from his head. It continued on down and bounced off the U-boat's hull with a loud *Chink!*, leaving a fresh gouge on the thick steel plate. It was a long silver spear. Michael's first thought was Balck. The bastard must have got above them and fired his spear gun at him. When he looked around and located the German, he realized he was wrong. The spear was full-sized, not one of the short darts they carried; and the trajectory was all wrong. Balck was floating off to Michael's left, level with him, and appeared to be as surprised as the American. The spear had come from high above and to the right. Pivoting around and shielding his eyes, Michael tried to look up into the bright floodlights and locate their attacker. That was when a second stainless-steel spear sliced between them and dug its sharp point into the rotting wood of the U-boat's foredeck.

Instinctively, Michael backpedaled and tried to put as much water as he could between himself and their unseen attacker. One man? Or two? Whoever he was, he had the high ground and darkness on his side, while the three of them were blinded by the lights and lit up like ducks in a shooting gallery.

## Chapter 36

Michael thought his reflexes were good. In addition to playing tight end in high school, he had played a little third base, where he learned to catch the ball or lose some teeth. But he couldn't move half as fast as the German. Even underwater, he was cat-quick and certain, with nerves of steel. He had tracked the path of the second spear and pointed up and to the right where the shooters were lurking above the lights. Now, Michael saw them, too. They weren't much more than shadowy grays on black, but he saw four silhouettes closing in on them in a box formation, blocking any hope of their retreating to the surface. These guys were pros. Their wet suits, masks, equipment harnesses, fins, and tanks were matching and of the most modern design. They had to be Red Navy frogmen from the trawler, carrying long-barreled spear guns, and closing in for the kill. That meant the waiting game was over. Whatever Lindstromm told them in his message last night, someone must have decided the time had come to put a violent and permanent end to this game.

In that moment of grim recognition, Michael saw two bursts of air bubbles, and two more of the three-foot long silver spears sliced through the water toward them. One spear was aimed at Balck. Michael watched in disbelief at how quickly and calmly the big Mate reacted. Like a gymnast working in slow motion, at the last possible moment Balck lashed out with a powerful kick that propelled him upward and out of the way, his body bending around the oncoming spear like a matador sidestepping a charging bull. The spear passed only inches from his chest, as if he had it under control the whole time.

David Schiff was not so lucky. With his visor down and his attention focused on the acetylene torch, he was unaware they were under attack until the second spear caught him in the back. Michael groaned as the spear pierced Schiff's wet suit. The big man rolled forward and dropped the blazing torch on the deck. His hands reached back, pawing at the shaft of the spear with his fingers, while a dark cloud of blood formed around him in the water.

The odds had not been good to begin with, and they were getting worse by the second. It was now four against two and the hunters seemed to be a lot more skilled at this than the hunted. The Russians held their tight formation as they closed in. Each of them had now fired his spear, so they dropped the spear guns and were not even bothering to reload. Michael didn't find that particularly encouraging. With less than thirty feet to go, each man let something else drop. It was a heavy disk, like a thick dinner plate with a handle. They wobbled and fluttered as they fell through the water and landed on the deck. Round, flat plates with handles? Those were limpet mines, and Michael knew each carried enough plastique to destroy what was left of the U-boat and blow the BRUNNHILDE halfway to Leningrad. That was exactly what the Russians had in mind, he realized.

With their hands now free, the Russians drew their knives and let the blades flash in the bright glare of the floodlights. Once they carved up these two remaining minor irritants, the Russians would destroy the U-boat and the whaler. This time, not even the dead would be left to tell the tale. Michael looked up at the platform. The lights and TV camera were still running, and Person, Yuri Chorev, and Leslie would have ringside seats to a very lopsided fight. He could only pray

that Einar would have the good sense to cut the BRUNNHILDE's lines and get away before the Russians came after them, too.

Up in the wheelhouse, Einar Person was the first to sense that something had gone very wrong below. He had one eye on the small, grainy TV monitor and one on the whaler's controls as the first spear flashed across the screen. Between the harsh underwater lights and the murky water, the television picture had never been particularly clear, but he knew he saw something and it wasn't electronic interference. Person leaned closer, carefully studying the reactions of the two divers. When the next spear shot past them and bounced off the U-boat's hull, he knew it for certain.

"Here, woman," Person shouted to Leslie. "Take the wheel and be quick about it!" He turned and took the steep flight of stairs two at a time, heading straight for his cabin. At the rear of his closet behind a pile of musty uniforms lay an old cardboard suitcase. Person got on his knees and dragged it out. He pulled a small, brass key from his jacket pocket and opened the lock. Inside lay a small, but modern and very powerful radio transmitter and two large batteries. He flipped a bank of toggle switches and watched the dials and meters spring to life. Like that traitor Lindstromm, he knew people were listening at the other end; but the ones on the captain's frequency spoke Swedish, not Russian. His message was quick and to the point, but the Swede insisted they repeat it back to him, because men were going to die this day—he hoped the right ones—and there was little margin for error. The fact the Russians would actually dare attack in Swedish waters was something Person never thought possible. They were desperate, and there was no room for the slightest error.

He switched off the radio and rose slowly to his feet. The old joints were letting him know what they thought of the abuse he had been putting them through. They yearned for another slow walk on the beach, his favorite rocking chair, and a lazy afternoon nap in the sun. That was where these old bones belonged, even if he would not admit it to anyone except Emma. However, the times were perilous, and Einar Person would never turn down a request for help from his country. He had spent too many years in and out of uniform to do that. When he received Michael's request for a boat, he knew what his young friend was after, and it wasn't petroleum. Person liked the young American, but he immediately discussed the request with the naval intelligence staff in Malmö. He valued old friendships, but he valued his country even more.

The Captain reached up to the shelf above his bunk and pulled down his old, gilt-edged, family Bible. In times of trouble, Einar Person knew he could always take some comfort from the Good Book. Opening the cover, he pulled a well-used Swedish officer's Nagant revolver from the hollowed-out cavity inside. He checked the bullets in the drum and clicked the safety off. Satisfied, he slipped the old Nagant into his jacket pocket and headed back up on deck.

One hundred and thirty feet below, while Michael thought things could not get much worse, Balck appeared quite unconcerned. The German pointed toward the Russian frogman on the far right. Michael frowned, still not comprehending, until Balck's message sank in. The German was showing him which one of the

four Russians was to be “his, as if he had “dibs” on the others. Could Balck be serious? He was delegating the single frogman on the far right to the American—if Michael thought he could handle him, that is—while the German attended to the other three. Balck even had the nerve to point a second time, just to make sure Michael got the point, before he drew his spear pistol from its holster. The German gave it a leisurely examination, completely ignoring the Russians as they closed in, knives flashing.

At twenty-five feet, the Russians suddenly attacked in unison. Fortunately, even skilled combat under water looks more like a slow-motion ballet than a martial arts display. Two of the Russians gave big leg kicks and charged at Balck while the other two swam toward Michael. Twenty feet, fifteen, then they closed to ten before Balck raised his head and the barrel of his spear pistol at the same time, making an off-handed shot without even appearing to aim. There was a burst of compressed air and a twelve-inch silver dart sped through the water to take out the Russian closest to Michael. It hit the man high on the chest near the base of his throat and stopped him dead in the water. He balled-up like a sea urchin and thrashed about in his own blood. That was when Michael realized what Balck had done with that one shot. He had split the Russian line and left Michael’s “man” alone on the far right with a large gap between him and the other two. Michael was even more surprised when he saw the crazy German draw his sheath knife and charge directly at his “two.” If the Russians were supposed to be the hunters and Balck was supposed to be the hunted, no one bothered to let him know.

Regardless of how fascinating the show might be, Michael knew this was not the time to be a spectator. He drew his own spear pistol, but the Russian was on him before he could get off a shot. In desperation, he used the barrel to parry the Russian’s knife; but the force of the blow bowled them both over, sending them tumbling toward the deck of the U-boat.

Michael was bigger than the Russian, probably stronger, but he was out of his element down here against an expert. The longer the fight lasted, the worse his chances would surely become. The two men bounced off the deck together, but the Russian managed to plant his foot and push away, quickly returning to an attacking position. Holding his knife straight in front of him, he charged at Michael. This time the American got his spear pistol between them, and pointed it at the Russian’s stomach. As the knife was about to strike home, he squeezed the trigger, knowing he only had one shot. The spear gun fired with a burst of gas and the spear struck the Russian in the stomach, stopping him and sending him tumbling over backward. He dropped his knife and pawed at the nub of the shaft; trying desperately to get a grip on it with his gloved fingers as he thrashed around in the water, but he had no chance. Finally, his struggling stopped. His body grew still and floated in the water, limp and very dead.

Michael knew not to celebrate his kill. By now, the other two Russians would be all over Balck, slicing him into fish bait. Surprisingly, as he turned to help he saw Balck was more than holding his own. By careful maneuvering, he kept the two Russians in each other’s way, bunched together and unable to coordinate their attack; and while there was blood in the water, most of it seemed to come from the Russians, not from Balck. He had gone on the attack. There was a deep gash running down one of the Russian’s legs and a cut in the other one’s arm. More

importantly, the Russians were so intent on getting at Balck that they didn't notice Michael working his way around behind them.

No time for games, Michael realized. He reached out and grabbed the air tank on the closest Russian. With a quick twist and a pull, he ripped one of the black rubber air hoses free, and his half of the battle ended in a mad rush of air bubbles. The Russian spun around in a tight circle like a dog chasing his tail, reaching back over his shoulder to find the hose and re-attach it; but there was nothing he could do about it. His only hope for more air lay a hundred and thirty feet straight up. Even if he made it without stopping to decompress, he faced a painful case of the bends or much worse. Well, sweet dreams, comrade, Michael thought, without the slightest twinge of remorse.

The fight was over and Michael could now relax. It was two to one now. Somehow, he and Balck had won. Michael turned back toward the German expecting to see the fourth Russian beating a hasty retreat, but Balck wouldn't let the man leave. He was taller and better built than the other three, and his wet suit had a thin red stripe around the bicep, marking him as an officer or a sergeant for sure. Having seen what happened to the others, the fourth Russian stayed on the defensive, with his knife in front of him, waving it back and forth in small circles as he back-pedaled and tried to get away. Unfortunately, with fins, it is much easier to swim forward than backward. Balck stayed with him stroke for stroke, not giving him any room to turn and swim away. The German's knife had already drawn blood, and he wanted more, probing for an opening as he slashed and cut. It didn't take the Russian long to figure out the hopelessness of his predicament. He could not get away if Balck did not want him to, so he stopped trying. He took up a good defensive position and stood his ground, searching for an opening.

Michael shook his head. Let him go, Balck, he thought. Why take a risk you don't need to take? However, as he watched Balck more closely, even through the facemask he saw Balck was actually enjoying this. He was playing with the Russian, toying with him. That was when Michael remembered Leslie's words. It was in Balck's eyes, she said. They were evil. He executed Lindstromm, and he looked like he was thoroughly enjoying this dance of death with the Russians. Michael had enough and swam away, knowing David Schiff needed his help much more than Balck. He was floating near the deck of the U-boat. Air bubbles rose from his regulator in small, thin bursts; so he was still alive; but he would not stay that way for long if Michael didn't get him back to the BRUNNHILDE.

He grabbed Schiff by his diving harness and pulled him upward toward the diving platform, beginning the long ascent back to the surface. When he reached the cable, he turned and looked back down. Balck had not even noticed he was gone. He was totally focused on the Russian as they continued to circle and turn, first left then right, slashing and feinting at each other with their knives. Suddenly, to Michael's horror, he saw the German make a mistake. Balck swung too far to his right and exposed his left side to the Russian's knife. That gave him the opening he must have been praying for, and the Russian went for it without a second thought, lunging forward with his blade. Michael wanted to scream a warning but that was impossible underwater. All he could do was watch in horror.

It was over in a split second but not the way the Russian had planned.

Balck had anticipated the Russian's knife thrust. Hell, Michael thought, he baited him into it. As the Russian continued his forward thrust, Balck completed his turn. He deflected the knife blade at the last possible instant. It creased his wet suit, but that was as close as the Russian would come. With his body now stretched-out and off balance, it was child's play. Balck swung in behind and wrapped his arm around the Russian's neck. He even paused to show him the blade before he drew it across the Russian's throat. A dark, billowing cloud of blood engulfed the two swimmers. Leslie had it right. The German was a psychopath, a skilled and highly dangerous killer. Balck executed this Russian the same way she said he executed Lindstromm, not because he had to but because he wanted to. Taking on and killing three Russian Navy frogmen singlehandedly? With odds like that, he would look like a hero; but not to anyone who had witnessed the one-sided slaughter.

When Einar Person arrived back on deck, he found Leslie and Yuri Chorev bent over the railing looking into the water. Two heads had broken the surface, not ten feet from the side of the boat. It was Michael, pulling that young Israeli, Schiff. Person breathed a sigh of relief, thankful for that much at least. He could not imagine what had gone on down below, but Schiff had a spear protruding from his side. Carefully, the four of them working together managed to drag him up the ladder and lay him out on the deck. Person quickly joined Dr. Chorev as they set to work on the young petty officer's wound.

Moments later, when Person looked back up, he saw Leslie and Michael standing near the side of the wheelhouse, arguing. What fools! Her eyes were red and her face was flushed as she gripped his arm. If such a thing was possible, the girl appeared to be even more disturbed than the night before. Person knew he should never have brought a woman on board, not with all the risks this trip entailed, but there was nothing he could do to stop her from coming. Suddenly, her head turned; her eyes grew round as saucers as she saw Balck emerge from the water and climb the ladder. He stepped on deck and pulled off his facemask, unbuckled his harness, and let his air tanks drop to the deck with a loud Clang! She glared at him and he smiled back at her. His face was flush; he appeared to be enjoying this, taunting them with a cruel, defiant smile. He turned and strode away, but her eyes never left him until he disappeared around the corner of the wheelhouse and went below.

Leslie looked even worse than she had before. She appeared to be coming apart at the seams as she shook her head and buried her face in her hands. "No, you can't do that," she argued as Michael put on a fresh set of air tanks and walked back to the ladder.

"Where do you think you're going?" Person chimed in, his voice carrying a new and more authoritative edge.

"I won't be long," Michael answered. "Have the ship ready to run back to port the second I come back up."

"Who are you to give me orders?" Person bellowed. "I forbid you to go back down there, Michael," but the foolish American boy ignored him. He stepped off the ladder and disappeared beneath the surface, leaving Person standing on the deck, fuming.

The girl knew how foolish he was, as she stared down into the water. “He wouldn’t listen to me, either. He said this would be his last chance, and he refused to listen to me.”

As she spoke, a long shadow fell across the deck. Person turned and saw Balck standing behind them. The German must have heard Leslie’s last words, too. He had an amused smile on his face; and he, too, was carrying a fresh set of air tanks. He threw the harness across his back and stepped toward the ladder, but Leslie stood there and blocked his way. Balck responded with a cynical laugh and shoved her aside, none too gently.

“See here, Balck! What do you think...” the Captain said, but Balck was not listening either. They both stood helpless as Balck jumped into the water and disappeared beneath the surface.

“At least your man will have some help down there,” Person tried to comfort her.

“You don’t understand,” she answered in a tense whisper. “Balck isn’t going down there to help; he’s going down there to kill him.”

## Chapter 37

Stupid? Of course it was; but that U-boat was pulling him back down like a giant magnet, and knowing it was there was not enough. He had to open the hatch and get inside. It was a moral commandment, a debt of honor he owed those men. He was their witness. He had to find iron-clad proof no one could excuse or slither out of; and he had to bring it back up before the Russians returned and destroyed it, because the broken hulk of Eric Bruckner’s U-boat was the long, accusing finger that pointed back through time to the depravity that had sent it out on that last mission. He owed them—Bruckner, his crew, Eddie Hodge, a dozen half-starved Russian POWs, those cops back in New York, Manny, and maybe David Schiff. They were the price that had to be paid to rip the cover off Martin Bormann’s evil conspiracy and to shed light on the reality of what happened.

This time, the descent seemed to take forever. When he reached the deck and swam forward, he remembered Schiff had almost gotten the hatch open when the Russians attacked. His sputtering acetylene torch was still lying on the deck where the petty officer had dropped it. Michael picked it up, readjusted the flame, and resumed cutting through what was left of the collar, hoping it wouldn’t take much more time. Finishing the first cut, he laid the torch aside. Wedging the long prying iron into the new crack he had cut, he pulled down on it and leaned back, rocking back and forth, straining until he felt a big chunk of steel break off with a loud Clank! He slipped the bar between the spokes of the wheel and used it as a long lever to try to turn the locking wheel. Slowly and painfully, it started moving, creaking, and squeaking at first, but it moved, then a quarter turn, a half, then one full revolution before it jammed again. He shoved the bar back in and went at it again, forcing it around another turn, then another and another, finding it easier each time. Finally, he withdrew the bar from between the spokes and wedged it under the lip between the ring and the hatch. When he pulled down and rocked back this time with all his weight, the heavy hatch plate groaned; but it did

begin to rise, if ever so slightly. He gave it one last pull and the hatch came up, only a few inches, but it broke free of six years of rust and corrosion and was open.

He floated next to the hatch as a large air bubble slipped through the narrow gap and rushed past him toward the surface, reminding him how tired he was and how much his arms, his neck, and his thighs ached. Hard work at depth in cold water could be exhausting in a very short time. He was breathing heavily now, sucking down his own air in big gulps, which was not a good idea. The bar dropped from his fingers and he reached down for the hatch plate. He curled his fingers under the lip, got his legs beneath him braced against the deck, and pushed up with his last reservoir of strength. He could feel his muscles beginning to tremble from the strain, and he knew he couldn't keep this up much longer. Finally, he felt the hatch plate move. It came up, only a few inches at first, but he refused to let it stop. His legs pushed harder, then even more, screaming in pain; but he ignored it as the hatch came up, all the way to vertical. He let himself float free, hanging in the water, and taking slow, deep breaths until his muscles started to relax.

Michael reached for his flashlight and looked down through the hatch. This was the very compartment he had gone into when he and the Russians lowered all those wooden boxes and crates into the torpedo room six years before. As far as he knew, it had lain undisturbed since those two German sailors came to get him and escort him aft to the control room. Michael shivered; it was as if this hatch was the portal of a time machine that would carry him back six years into his own past. His past? It could have been his grave, and it should have been. He was tempting fate going inside a second time, but he had to.

Holding his flashlight in front of him, Michael went in head first, careful to make sure his tanks, regulator, hoses, and harness did not snag on the freshly cut edges around the collar. It was a tight fit, but he made it through and righted himself. Floating free, he swung his flashlight around the compartment and quickly saw it had taken a severe pounding when the submarine sank. The flashlight beam danced across the smashed wooden crates and boxes strewn about the deck in piles. What if he had been in here that night, he wondered. That was a thought too terrible to contemplate. In the midst of the destruction, he saw the glitter of gold bars, the twinkling of fine jewelry, broken porcelain figurines, pearls, diamond broaches, coins, bundles of soggy, rotting tapestries, carpets, and the broken frames of shattered amber panels. Incredible. Even after six years submerged in cold, corrosive saltwater, nothing could take away the luster of what was obviously a king's ransom. But it was not a king's ransom, it was loot. Whether it came from a bank vault, a public museum, a Czar's palace, or the house of a defenseless Jewish shopkeeper, Michael intended to put it back where it belonged.

In the far corner, he saw a pile of large metal boxes that looked as if they had bounced back and forth off the bulkheads before they crashed back to the deck. Michael remembered lowering them down through the hatch. They looked like ammunition boxes, with handles that snapped down, to lock and seal the tops in place. Some were still intact, but the tops had popped off others, spilling piles of official-looking papers, index cards, and ledger books across the deck. What were



they? Nazi Party financial records? Gestapo files? Party membership cards? He touched the cover of a ledger book and it broke apart. The cold saltwater turned the wooden crates and boxes and the cloth and paper to mush, but the jewels and gold bars would look about as they had that last terrible February night.

He looked down at his oxygen gauge. He would love to spend longer exploring the compartment; but his air tank was more than half-empty, and he had to get back to the BRUNNHILDE. He glanced quickly around the cluttered compartment trying to decide what to take with him. A gold bar? That would get their attention, he thought, as he picked one up and jammed it inside his belt. A few rare coins? Maybe an antique ring and a couple of those diamond-studded necklaces? Yes, those should do nicely. They ought to be enough to convince the American State Department, the West Germans—hell, the whole world—of what lay down here and what it meant.

However, Michael's joy was suddenly short-lived when he heard a loud Clang! on the deck above, followed by the creaking and groaning of metal scraping on metal. Had the Russian divers come back to finish the job? He swung the flashlight beam toward the hatch and saw what he feared most. It was closing, settling back down into that heavy steel collar. He kicked his fins and swam furiously upward, but he was too late. In the bright flashlight beam, a face stared down at him through the narrowing gap; and squeezed inside that black-rubber mask were a pair of laughing blue eyes. That was no Russian; it was Balck, and the bastard was closing the hatch, trapping him inside the U-boat. Michael managed to get his hands on the hatch plate before it came all the way down, but he had no leverage. The momentum of the heavy steel pushed him back into the compartment until he heard it close with a dull Clang! He beat on the hatch, first with his fist, and then with the gold bar, leaving bright yellow scratches on the thick steel. That accomplished very little, so he wedged his legs inside the collar and pushed up with all his might. He even turned and twisted the locking wheel, but none of that was any use. The hatch moved up an inch or two, until it hit something and stopped. That bastard Balck must have jammed something into the collar and wedged it shut.

That was when it dawned on him that he had now come full circle. He was trapped inside the same compartment he had hidden in some six years before. How ironic. But this time, there would be no German sailors coming in to get him and set him free. This time, the torpedo room really would be his tomb. He ceased his futile struggle with the hatch and tried to think. Think, he screamed, as he turned the bright beam of his flashlight back on the hatch, hoping this was all some monstrous joke; but it was not.

Michael stopped breathing, listening for some sound outside; but he heard nothing. No, there was something, here inside, not out there. He whipped the flashlight beam around the empty compartment and swore he heard faint noises in the compartment, laughter and voices, faint and muffled, but coming from the dark corners of the compartment. Now, he really began to sweat. He knew he was alone in here; but there! He swore he saw thin figures moving about in the dark corners, growing bolder. Ghosts? My God, he thought, he really was beginning to crack under the pressure. Then out of the corner of his eye, he saw pale gray figures in German Navy uniforms marching aft. Some were dressed in work

clothes and some in those bulky oilskins they wore when they went up on watch. As they marched past him laughing and smiling, they pointed long, bony fingers at him. They waved and smiled and welcomed him back; and this time they had no intention of letting him leave.

After he entered the water the second time, Kruger kept well back, content to let the American lead him down the cable. Rather than go for him now in open water, Kruger was content to watch and wait for the right moment to strike, hidden by the inky black water up above the floodlights. Strange to be here looking down on the very deck where he himself had walked that cold winter day in 1945. It was a chilling reminder that life could indeed be fleeting, even his own. So he knew it was best to pull back and wait.

Randall! Kruger remembered he had almost come unglued that morning in the corridor when he saw Randall fondling his silver cigarette case—*his* silver cigarette case! Did Randall know who he was? Was he trying to provoke a reaction? Kruger had spent years training his emotions, and that morning he kept it all inside. But the cigarette case had become a matter of personal honor to him; Kruger had sworn a blood oath he would get it back, and that the American would die for taking it. He blamed himself for allowing Randall to stow away and escape from Königsberg in the first place. By doing so, he became a witness, and he could not allow that. Kruger should have known that their German guard Stolz was utterly incompetent, and required a head count of the prisoners before the trucks left the submarine pen. But that was only the first time he underestimated the pesky American and failed to take his life. There was also that morning in New York. He should have shot Randall himself rather than trust those damned Spaniards. Finally, he should have killed him this morning when they went down on the first dive. Instead of toying with that last Russian, he should have turned the knife on Randall.

Indulging himself in a knife fight with the Russian Speznaz diver was understandable, but Kruger's ego demanded that mistakes like that be corrected. He should have turned the knife on the American and carved him into fish bait, then gone up and made a clean sweep of the rest of them on the whaler; but Kruger could not stop himself. The Russian waged a more credible fight than Kruger expected, and the intense pleasure of feeling the Russian die in his arms proved too intense to pass up. That had always been Kruger's failing, he loved to kill far too much. Even Bormann had lectured him about it, warning the young Sturmbannführer that some day it would be his downfall, but Kruger only laughed. It was not as if he had any choice. Like a powerful narcotic, he could not live without it.

Kruger watched Randall as he worked on the hatch with the acetylene torch and a long steel bar. Maybe the fool would give up in frustration and come up to the platform, making it a simple matter for Kruger to slip behind him with the knife. That would be ideal. Unfortunately, the American's streak of good fortune continued unabated. Somehow, the devil managed to get the hatch open; and the expression on Kruger's face turned cold and vengeful. It was time to kill him. There were four more up on the deck of the old whaler, but Randall was the head. Cut off the head and the body will wither and die.

He watched Randall use the torch and the steel bar. The American was strong, but it was a struggle as he chipped away at the cowling. Finally, he got the wheel turning, raised the heavy steel hatch plate, and swam head first down through the hatch into the bow torpedo room. As the American's fins disappeared inside, Kruger paused to look around the platform and drew his knife. With one swift cut, he severed the thin cable that fed the TV camera. In all likelihood, the group up on the BRUNNHILDE was too busy to be watching anyway; but Kruger saw no reason to take any chances. Now, he had complete privacy. He swam down to the deck of the U-boat and picked up the long, steel prying bar the American had been using to open the hatch. Damn that man! Kruger never intended to let him get inside. Bormann would have his hide for permitting a sacrilege like that. Well, Kruger thought, if the American wanted to be inside that badly, there was no sense stopping him now. So, let him go inside, let him look around, and let him take his sweet time doing it, Kruger sneered as he pushed the hatch down and jammed it shut with the prying iron. He would have an eternity.

Inside, Michael refused to admit he was trapped. He tried to open the hatch again and again, gripping the locking wheel with both hands, pushing and pulling against the thick steel plate with all his strength; but it was no use. Someone had wedged the hatch shut from the outside, and there was nothing he could do to force it open. Finally, he backed away, feeling frustrated, stupid, and exhausted. He was breathing hard, and that was no good. At that rate, he would burn through his remaining oxygen in a matter of minutes.

It had to be Balck. Leslie was right. He had played right into the German's hands, and Balck must be outside laughing at him right now. But beneath the anger and the frustration, Michael felt a new white-hot determination. There was no way he was going to let that blue-eyed bastard get away with this—not this time and not this easily. Balck! In the back of the American's mind sprang the firm conviction this was not the first time they had met. He would bet his life on it; and in an all-too-real sense, he already had.

As he listened to his own labored breathing, an even sicker thought came to him. At that very moment, Balck was swimming back up to the BRUNNHILDE. Up on deck, who was left to stop him? One badly-terrorized woman? A wounded Israeli diver? A middle-aged marine biologist? Or, a sixty-year-old Swedish fishing boat captain? The four of them together would not even slow the big German down.

There was no choice now. Michael had to get out of this compartment—but how? His mind raced back to that night six years before when those two sailors marched him aft, trying to remember what the interior of the U-boat looked like, trying to think of another way out. The foredeck hatch was now out, Balck had seen to that, and both the forward and aft torpedo tubes had been welded shut before the U-boat left Königsberg. There were the conning tower and the aft deck hatch, but to get to them he had to get into those compartments. How many were there? Three, maybe four? Unfortunately, each had its own watertight door; if it was as badly jammed and corroded as this one, he was doomed.

Time was running out with every breath Michael took, but he had to try. Life had now come full circle. He could die here in the forward torpedo room, where he

probably should have died all those years before, or he could die farther aft trying again to get out.

## Chapter 38

As he neared the surface, Kruger paused and drew his knife. He ran the sharp blade down his forearm, slicing deep enough through the wet suit to draw blood. Despite the burning chill of cold saltwater on the fresh cut, his expression never changed as it formed a dark cloud in the water around him. Nice touch, he thought, as he patted the waistband of his wet suit under his diving harness to make sure his other little surprise was still firmly in place. It was the Beretta he took off that fat Jew cop, Eismer, from New York, and he would soon put it to good use. When his head broke the surface near the BRUNNHILDE, Kruger thrashed about in the water and called out for help. "*Hilfe, hilfe!*" he sputtered, cradling his wounded arm so that the blood ran down his chest for good effect.

"Balck!" Person shouted in dismay as he ran to the railing, "My God, man, you're bleeding. What has happened?"

"It was the Russians, they came back," he stammered as he grabbed the ladder and hung on. "Randall and I were working on the hatch. We nearly had it open when they hit us again. I never saw them... I never saw them."

Person reached over the side and pulled him up the ladder. The old man was stronger than he looked, Kruger realized. He leaned against the wheelhouse wall, carefully looking around to make sure they were all there. Chorev, the Israeli scientist, was kneeling next to Schiff, helping to bandage the man's wound, and that damned American woman was kneeling next to him. She looked pale, her arms hanging limp at her side, until she realized Balck was standing behind her.

"Where is Michael?" she demanded to know as she turned and glared at him. "What did you do to him?"

"It was the Russians!" Balck snapped back, unaccustomed to a mouthy woman chastising him. "They grabbed him and there was nothing I could do to stop them. I tried, and this is what I got for my trouble," he said, as he held up his arm and let the blood drip on the deck. "He was a brave man. He held them back so I could get away."

Leslie stepped closer and looked into Balck's eyes. "You're a liar!" she shouted.

"What are you saying, woman?" Person tried to cut her off. "Can't you see Balck's been hurt?"

"No! I don't think there were any Russians down there—not this time." She pointed an accusing finger at the German. "There was only him." That said, she rose and ran to the rack that held their scuba diving equipment.

"Where do you think you're going?" Person demanded to know, trying desperately to reassert his authority.

"Where do you think!" she said as she pulled her wet suit off the rack.

"Don't be impertinent with me, woman," Person grabbed her arm.

"I'm going down there!" she said as she pointed over the side.

While she and Person argued, Kruger slipped his hand inside his waistband and pulled out the Beretta. He rose to his full height, and when he next spoke, his voice was not that of a wounded, exhausted man; it was loud and confident, and in full command. "No, you aren't, Fraulein," he demanded. "You aren't going anywhere."

Leslie spun around, ready to answer his challenge, and she saw the small automatic in his hand. In that instant, a look of complete understanding passed between them. Maybe it was the arrogant smirk or the icy detachment in Balck's eyes that set her off; but Leslie's expression of defiance quickly flared into white-hot anger.

"That's one of our Beretta's, isn't it? It's Manny Eismer's gun, isn't it?" she accused him. "You bastard! You took it from him when you killed him, didn't you?"

Kruger didn't even bother to answer. He looked at her with those cold, cruel blue eyes and laughed.

Rivers of sweat ran down inside Michael's wet suit as he set to work on the round watertight door at the rear of the torpedo room. He closed his eyes, picturing the compartments on the other side of the door, trying to remember the details. There was the wardroom and another compartment between there and the control room, but he could not recall exactly what it was. He had ducked his head to go through three doorways, but it was all a blur now. Each of the watertight doors had a round locking wheel in the center. They were standing open when he went through, but surely they would have closed them before the U-boat dived. If they did, he would have to find a way to get them open. He grabbed that first wheel with both hands and gave it a hard turn, not expecting it to move; and it did not.

Michael backed off, took a close look at the door mechanism, and then pulled the heavy, gold bar from his belt. He began pounding it on the spokes of the wheel, hoping to loosen six years of corrosion so it would turn. It did not; but he kept pounding, because the loud clanging seemed therapeutic. Not only did it channel his anger and frustration into some constructive violence, but the heavy blows helped mask his own heavy breathing. He bashed the spoke again and again, making the U-boat ring like a big church bell until the wheel finally moved. He let the gold bar drop onto the deck and grabbed the spokes again, trying to muscle the wheel the rest of the way around. His arms began to quiver as he strained to keep it turning, groaning right along with the old, rusted steel, until the wheel would turn no further.

The watertight door opened inward, toward him. He pulled on it, but the seal would not break free. Figures, he growled. Nothing was going to be easy today. Turning on his side, he planted both feet on the bulkhead and he tried to lift the door up. As with the locking wheel, after enough sweat and grunts, it finally broke free and opened. He had to stop. His head was pounding, forcing him to gulp down huge mouthfuls of air from his tank. Funny, he didn't realize how hard he'd worked until he stopped. He retrieved the flashlight and the gold bar, and wiggled through the gap into the next compartment.

It was the wardroom. That was where he saw the first one, as the white circle of light from the flashlight passed over a human skeleton. He held the light there as a sour taste of stomach acid rose into his throat. One skeleton? No, there were four, lying amid the debris in the far corner. Ever since that terrifying moment in the fuselage of the old British bomber, he tried to prepare himself; knowing he would need to deal with them, probably with little warning. Like the wooden crates in the torpedo room, the sailors would have been flung around the small compartment before they came to rest in the corner that last night. Not a very pleasant way to die, but it would have been quick. He swung the light beam away, but the image remained there, burned onto the back of his eyelids. They were little more than bones bound together by the thick seams of their uniforms, covered with a fine layer of silt. Were these the two German sailors who helped him that night? He would never know, but they were in here somewhere.

He had to get a grip on himself. If he didn't, he'd be joining them in the very near future, so he turned away and swam aft. He had to keep moving, because his time was expiring with every breath he took. Fortunately, the next watertight door stood open. The hatch plate had been badly bent on its hinge, and the collar was sprung, probably when the U-boat sank and hit the bottom; but it was open and it took him into the radio room. A small victory, he thought, considering that the next hatch was shut tight. On the deck lay two more skeletons. He ignored them and focused on the hatch. These two didn't bother him nearly as much as the ones in the wardroom. Maybe the shock and novelty had worn off, and they'd become easier to ignore.

That was when he realized his breathing was becoming more labored. It was a gradual thing; but he felt his chest tightening as he ran out of air, slowly suffocating, minute by agonizing minute. Soon, he would be lying on the deck next to the dead Germans, unless he found a way out. Six years before, Eric Bruckner set him free; but fate would not be as kind to him this time.

His air tank held a small emergency reserve. Twisting that valve would give him a new stream of fresh air. It would be such an easy thing to do, but he fought back the urge. The reserve was only good for ten minutes, not much more; and he intended to hoard it until the bitter end. He had no idea how far the main tank would take him. Perhaps another ten minutes? Maybe twenty? No telling. But when he opened that emergency valve, he was placing a finite limit on it all. Ten minutes! That would be harder to cope with than not knowing; so he pushed on, determined to take it slow and easy. Stay calm, he told himself. Put your energy into getting out of here, not your fraying nerves.

Michael set to work on the watertight door; but no matter how hard he struggled, the wheel on this one wouldn't turn any easier than the one back in the torpedo room. He banged on the spokes with the gold bar, but all that yielded was paint chips and dented gold. He paused to look around. The hammering had gotten him nowhere. He needed something else. There! In the corner of the compartment, he saw the table that held the radio. It had ripped loose from the wall and lay in pieces on the deck, its tubular steel front legs sticking up in the air like a dead animal lying on its back. One of those table legs might work, he thought. A human skeleton lay wedged beneath; but Michael ignored it as he had the last two, finding himself increasingly desensitized to death as each minute

passed. He grabbed the table and twisted it, pulling and pushing until it broke free from the rotting wood and he could wedge it between the spokes of the wheel. He slipped his shoulder under the rod and pushed up, using the table leg as a lever, forcing the wheel to turn. The muscles in his legs ached, and his shoulder screamed in pain but he heard the wheel groan as it began to move, faster and faster, until it finally spun free; and he could pull the door open.

He relaxed and floated free, taking several deep breaths to clear his head. A dull ache had settled behind his eyes, pounding like a kettledrum; but he refused to quit. It was the oxygen debt building inside, slowly poisoning him. But the path to the control room and the conning tower now stood open and this was not the time to give in. If he did, he was dead.

He gathered up his makeshift collection of tools; with a few kicks, he swam on into the devastation of what had been the U-boat's control room, where the first bomb spent its awful fury. As he looked around, Michael imagined what it must have been like when the bomb blew through the outer hull and detonated inside this confined space—the blast, the sudden flash, the searing flames, the shrapnel, the twisting metal, the bursting pipes, and the choking black smoke. The walls were burned black, the deck plates buckled, pipes bent and twisted, and the rows of dials and control levers along the bulkheads smashed beyond recognition. To his left, only tiny blackened pieces of wood remained of the chart table where he stood that night. On the far side of the room stood the watertight door that led aft toward the engine room and the aft torpedo room. That was where the second bomb would have struck, and the door looked to be shut tight.

Michael turned his flashlight toward the ceiling. The narrow beam swept across the jagged hole where the bomb had struck at the base of the conning tower wall, exploding in the control room below. Six feet over, the hatch that had led up to the conning tower appeared to be open, only a foot or so, but it was open. The ladder and the hatch collar were bent and twisted, but it looked like he could squeeze through. That was good, because the conning tower would be his last chance to get out. He hadn't the strength for more than one battle.

Michael swam closer and studied the hatch collar. He squinted, fighting to keep his eyes in focus, but it was becoming harder to think clearly. His head ached and his eyes wouldn't clear. Worse still, his arms and legs felt like they were encased in lead. He was exhausted. His brain kept screaming, "Keep moving, keep moving," but his body refused to respond, leaving him dopey and sluggish. It was no use; he finally had to admit it. He needed air. Without his full faculties, he stood no chance down here; and he would be wasting more oxygen than he was saving. Reluctantly, he reached back over his shoulder and found the valve for the emergency air supply. He gave it a twist and felt as if he had just stuck his head in a noose.

Now relax, he told himself. Take a few deep breaths and clear your head, just a few slow, easy breaths. Savor the air. Caress it with short, shallow breaths. Nurse it along; but remember, once it is gone, there is no more.

"Answer me, damn you!" That infuriating American woman screamed at Kruger, but he ignored her. "That's Manny Eismer's gun, isn't it?"

Kruger shook his head. It was all so amusing. He had killed many men, so many that he had lost count years before, but very few women. Somehow, it did not seem... sporting. This irritating woman was different, however. He so wanted to shoot her then and silence that mouth of hers, but he knew he must wait until he got them all below.

Person's eyes narrowed as Leslie's words sank home. "By god, you really are a pig, aren't you, Balck?" the Captain sputtered. His hands closed into two large, menacing fists as he stepped toward the German.

Balck answered with a look of complete disdain. He raised his Beretta and pointed it at Leslie's nose. "Stop right there, Captain. I might have to empty the whole magazine to stop an old bear like you, but one shot will splatter her brains all over the deck. You would not want to see that happen, now, would you?"

As usual, Kruger knew how to play a man. The threat of shooting the girl was enough to stop Person in mid-stride. "Now back up!" Kruger ordered, his blue eyes hard and cold as arctic ice. "While you are at it, take that pistol out of your pocket, Captain. You seem to have acquired one too many bulges today. Two fingers, if you please. We would not want anyone else to get hurt, would we?"

Person growled something angry in Swedish, but he did as he was told. Slowly, he reached back and pulled out his old Nagant revolver. "Toss it over the side, if you please." As Person's pistol splashed into the sea, Kruger knew their last threat was sinking to the bottom of the Baltic with it.

"Good. Now, back up, all of you!" he ordered. "And pick him up," Kruger motioned toward Schiff's unconscious body. "We are going below, all five of us."

"You can't do that," the American woman protested. "David will bleed to death if we move him."

"And he'll bleed to death from a fresh hole in his head if you don't," Kruger warned. "You first, Captain. Take his shoulders. And you, Doctor, pick him up under the knees and carry him into the wheelhouse. No tricks or I really will shoot him."

Captain Person and Yuri Chorev looked at each other, but reluctantly they bent down and picked up the heavy petty officer as Balck ordered. He was a load for them to carry; but as gently as they could, they set off in a slow column toward the wheelhouse. The American woman was in the lead, looking back over her shoulder at Person and Chorev, who were struggling to carry Schiff between them. Kruger took up the rear. As with most former SS officers, Kruger had little experience with prisoners. On the Eastern Front they rarely took any, so he kept his automatic moving, sweeping quickly and randomly from one to the other.

"What did you do to Michael?" that damned woman shouted at him as she stopped at the wheelhouse door and blocked their way. "Did you kill him, too?"

"Who? The good Sergeant Randall? Oh, I would have dearly loved to kill that fellow. He has been quite a nuisance, you know," Kruger grinned, watching her eyes and enjoying the pain he was inflicting. "But he was so intent on getting inside that old U-boat; it would have been rude of me to interrupt. He so wanted to be with his old friend Kapitan Bruckner again, that I made sure he would have all the time he needed to reminisce," the German said as he laughed at her. "A lifetime! That is what he has now. A lifetime or what is left of one."



## Chapter 39

Michael closed his eyes and took his first breaths from the emergency reserve. He drew them in and savored them like a cold beer on a hot day. Slowly, his head cleared; and the overwhelming sense of weariness left his arms and legs. Despite the lift, when he opened his eyes, that damned hatch looked every bit as imposing as it had; and he knew he was on borrowed time. Jamming the table leg under the edge of the upper hatch, he pulled down hard, shifting it to other spots around the rim. With a series of loud, frustrated grunts, he pushed and pulled; but still, the steel plate would not yield. He flipped upside-down and hooked his fingers under the edge of the hatch collar, slipped off his fins, planted his feet firmly on the steel plate, and pushed up with all the power his legs could muster. He felt it wobble a few inches and move, but not nearly enough.

Pausing for a few deep breaths, he went at it again, jamming both legs against the steel plate, knees bent, thigh muscles straining, grunting. His legs quivered and the rough, steel edge cut through the palms of his diving gloves. He ignored the pain, determined to pound away until the plate gave way; but after a few minutes, he had to stop, because the pain was too intense. He let his body go limp and gathered his fading strength for one last try. He focused it through the lens of his own anger, breathing deeply and concentrating all his energy on the hatch. Slowly he drew his feet back and launched them against the metal plate like a battering ram, blocking out the pain shooting up his legs. This time the hatch did move. Not far, but it moved and that was all that mattered. He threw himself at it again and again, like a maniac, until the hinge snapped and the big steel saucer broke free. It floated upward into the conning tower, tumbling slowly through the water until it fell onto the deck above with a loud Clang!

Like an old club fighter who had taken one too many body shots, each of the battles he had fought over the past eighteen hours had taken its toll. His entire body ached. His rubber gloves were shredded; and the skin inside was raw and oozing blood. Well, one good thing about cold saltwater, he thought, it would stop the bleeding and kill the pain soon enough. His arms were weak and his fingers slow to obey, but Michael managed to retrieve his flashlight, the table leg, and even his prized gold bar. Clutching them to his chest, he swam slowly up through the hatch into the conning tower.

Michael swung his flashlight beam around the conning tower. Everything had been burned black, with bits of oil slickers, boots, and bones lying among the twisted metal. The men who died in here were the ones who stood that last watch up on deck, the ones who helped him climb down into the rubber raft, and, of course, the Kapitan himself. Maybe they were the lucky ones. They would have died instantly, not like the men trapped in the compartments fore and aft. They would not have spent long, agonizing minutes being tossed around, knowing the U-boat was heading to the bottom with no hope of getting out alive. No one could have escaped—no one. Not the lowest seaman, not the Kapitan, and certainly not that phony admiral sitting in an office in Bonn.

Looking around, Michael knew his own end would not take very long either. The hatch that led up to the bridge was blocked by a twisted steel plate that had been ripped from the ceiling and completely blocked his way. He would need an acetylene torch and a set of jacks to stand half a chance of getting through. Funny! He found himself laughing. It all seemed so damned funny now. His head was pounding, but it was so damned funny. What kind of fool would come back here to Sweden, dragging Manny, Schiff, Chorev, and Leslie with him in an amateur attempt to find this U-boat? He should have stayed with her back in Rock Creek, South Carolina, on the oyster boat. Yep, some things should be left alone; and some people should be allowed to rest in peace.

Low on the far bulkhead, about three feet above the deck, he saw the hole where the British bomb punched through the side of the conning tower and the deck before exploding in the control room below, killing everyone in both compartments. Michael looked at the hole. Could he squeeze through it? He stared at the hole and blinked, trying hard to concentrate on the problem; but the hole was too small and the edges too sharp. The jagged edges had been bent inward like the teeth of a hungry shark, daring him to come and try. He ran his finger across the metal and saw the futility of even trying. He was far too big, and the rusty steel would cut him to ribbons before he was halfway through.

He had reached a bitter dead end here in the conning tower, one hatch short, he realized as he leaned back against the bulkhead, exhausted. It was far too late for him to go back down and try to reach the hatch in the rear torpedo room. Then again, perhaps this was the way it was meant to be, he thought. Perhaps Bruckner made a big mistake six years ago. Perhaps Mike Randall was supposed to die here in the U-boat after all. Maybe that was to have been his fate. He glanced around and knew he could get comfortable with the idea, but there was that promise he made to Eddie Hodge. And there was Manny Eisner and the other dead cops back in New York. Worse still, he realized Leslie, Yuri Chorev, Schiff, and Einar Person were still up on the deck of the whaler, and none of that had anything to do with fate. It was Balck.

Michael felt his eyes begin to close. He was tired, but his flashlight batteries were fresh and the beam still clear and bright. Yes, it would last a lot longer than he would, he realized. Well, that wasn't all bad. When he finally nodded off, the flashlight would keep him company; as his other flashlight kept the pilot of that old British bomber company, for a while anyway; and that made him laugh. A dead man with a night light, sitting alone in the conning tower of an old German submarine where he could spend eternity keeping all the skeletons company—how funny. He lowered the flashlight beam to the deck. It came to rest in the near corner, only a few feet from where he sat. Protruding from a soft mound of sediment, he saw a shredded boot, a few bones, and a hat. A hat? Well, what was left of one, jammed against the bulkhead and half-buried in the silt. He reached out and picked it up. No, it was only the headband and visor of an old, high-peaked, German naval officer's hat. The gold-braid and brass emblem were now black from the flames and years of emersion in seawater; and except for a few seams of dingy, white cloth, the cover had completely rotted away. It was Bruckner's; he was the only one up on deck wearing this kind of hat that night. It was his!

Michael leaned back against the bulkhead and heard those voices again; they were faint at first, but he heard them. He glanced around the conning tower, it was those same voices he heard back in the torpedo room, whispering his name and calling out to him. They were singing a rousing military march; their voices growing louder. He leaned over, looked down through the hatch into the control room, and swore he saw a column of German submariners, shaggy and ill-kempt, dressed in their peaked forage caps, boots, and oilskins, ready to go up on deck. They were gathering in the control room below, smiling and waving to him, welcoming him back.

Michael began to laugh into his mouthpiece. He needed a hat, too. How else could he join the crew if he didn't have a hat? That old hatband would have to do. He picked it up and put it on his head, but he was too tired now. Maybe he could concentrate tomorrow, but not today. He was so very tired. Just a short nap. A few minutes, that's all.

Leslie stood in the doorway of the wheelhouse and glared at Balck, consumed by a white-hot hatred she never thought anyone could ignite inside her. The German had trapped Michael down in that submarine. Worse still, he may have already killed him. One way or another, Leslie knew she had to get down there and help him, but how? As she raged, Leslie became aware of a new sound. It was only a soft whisper at first, but as it crept into her brain, she heard it grow into a soft whine, then louder and louder until it demanded she turn and look. Her eyes were drawn toward a loud roar and three black dots coming straight at them from the Swedish coast at an incredible speed.

Even Balck was forced to look. It was a tight formation of new, swept-wing jet fighters that roared directly overhead, barely clearing the old whaler's radio mast. From the blue circles and gold crowns on their wings and fuselages, these were Swedish Air Force jets. The hot downdraft of their Saab engines was deafening as it slammed into the small ship and set it rocking like a child's toy. Then they banked and continued out to sea, heading straight for the Russian trawler. Clearly, the Swedes wanted to send a message to everyone aboard both boats to let them know these were Swedish waters and they had arrived.

That was when Yuri Chorev made his move.

Leslie never understood why the small, marine geologist did what he did. It seemed so uncharacteristic of the man. He was a gentle, thoughtful academic, the last one anyone would expect to challenge a man like Balck, but maybe that was the whole point. He dropped David Schiff's legs, spun around, and threw himself onto the German's gun arm; wrapping his body around it and hanging on with every ounce of strength, pushing Balck back toward the railing. The Berettas that Manny brought were small caliber, and Leslie heard Balck's go off with a muffled Pop! She screamed, and wanted to grab Yuri Chorev and pull him away from the gun, but it was too late. All she could do was watch and scream.

When Yuri Chorev dropped David Schiff's legs, Einar Person became the sole support of the muscular petty officer, and the old man wasn't prepared for that. He stumbled backward into Leslie, knocking her off balance; and all three of them tumbled onto the deck. Both she and Person tried to get back up, but all they accomplished was to get in each other's way, hopelessly tangled on the deck as

they watched the cruelly one-sided fight play itself out above them, unable to stop it.

Kruger's eyes flared. The Israeli scientist seemed like a man possessed. He had the German's arm in a bear hug, his angry, crimson face only a few inches from Kruger's as he tried to pry the pistol from Kruger's grip. The sheer impudence of the smaller man's suicidal attack stunned him for a moment, driving him backward and into a rage. Kruger did not have time for this. He jammed the automatic into Chorev's gut and pulled the trigger again. The expression on the German's face soon turned from surprise to anger as he realized Chorev was still there, hanging on as tightly as ever. Kruger pulled backward and tried to free the Beretta and his gun hand once more, but Chorev still refused to let go. It seemed such a pathetic mismatch, but that damned fool was still there, gripping Kruger's arm even tighter.

The German went into a rage, growling like an angry animal, whipping Chorev from side to side, trying to break this lunatic's hold on his arm; but Chorev still refused to let go. Kruger lifted the Israeli completely off the deck and slammed him against the wall of the wheelhouse with all his might, pounding him into the solid oak, still to no avail. Chorev's eyes were closed, his teeth clenched, and his face wracked with pain; but he refused to release his grip on the German's arm.

Kruger was furious, as if he were the one who was caught in the trap, and began pulling the trigger, again and again.

Later, all Leslie remembered was that something snapped deep inside her and she knew she had to do something. She reached back to push herself off the deck and found her right hand pressing on something hard. She looked down and saw it was Schiff's spear pistol, still strapped in its holster to the warrant officer's thigh.

In that instant, Leslie's mind cleared. It all seemed so logical, so cold and unemotional. Revenge? No, it was much more primitive than that, far more elemental. She remembered the expression on Balck's face in the corridor the night before, when he skewered that deck hand Lindstromm with his filleting knife, and he had Balck had the same expression on his face now. The cold-eyed bastard was evil personified. Suddenly, Leslie felt an overpowering burst of strength fill her, as if all of Balck's legion of victims had risen up and were now rallying to her side. They formed a long line that stretched back over the years, and lent her all the courage and strength she needed. Yes, it was all so clear now. She had become their instrument of revenge. Nothing seemed more natural now. This was why she followed Michael here to Sweden. This must be her destiny too, as it was his. She felt the spirit of his victims wrap her fingers around the grip of that spear gun and rip it out of the holster as she looked up into Balck's cruel blue eyes.

## Chapter 40

Rung by rung, Sergei Varentsov climbed to the top of the Soviet trawler's radar mast. With his ample gut pressed against the mast, he braced himself against the roll and pitch of the boat and focused his field glasses on the faint smudge on the horizon. The damned thing should have blown up by now! There should be smoke and wreckage on the water, but through the morning mist, Varentsov could still see the BRUNNHILDE riding unharmed on the rising seas, mocking him. The Speznaz diving team he sent had more than enough time to blow that damned whaler out of the water, destroy the U-boat, and swim back here; so where were they? Where were the explosions? Where were the smoke and flames that would finally bring an end to his misery, and where were the divers? Where were they!

He cursed his rotten luck. The flames of hell were rising up around him again, licking at his pants legs even up here at the top of the mast. He had browbeaten that insolent Ruchenko, ordering him to take the trawler in closer to shore, well inside Swedish waters, so he could get a better look; but that was a half-hour ago, and he could see the Russian spy trawler had barely moved. Varentsov suddenly felt dizzy and light-headed. He grabbed the mast with both arms, too weak to stand. The fiery chasm was opening up beneath him again. "Give it up, Varentsov," the flames whispered to him, speaking in Serov's voice this time. "You are a miserable failure and a traitor. Put a gun to your head or swallow a handful of your red pills; but end it now, before I end it for you, because you are finished." He felt the blistering heat, and saw his trousers smoking; knowing all the while that the flames weren't real. It was insane. He was insane, but it felt so real.

Varentsov knew he had to end this. Soon, his choice would be suicide or that personal hell Serov crafted for him, knee-deep in the snow outside the rear door of the Lubyanka. He willed his shaking legs back down the rungs of the mast until he collapsed on deck. Half crawling, he stumbled down the stairs and went below, desperate to reach the radio room. Wind blown and wild-eyed, he burst through the door and found that traitor Ruchenko and his radioman with their heads pressed together, whispering and grinning, no doubt conspiring against him, again. As the sweat poured off his face, Varentsov screamed at them from the doorway, "How far? How far away are we?"

"How far? You mean from that old whaler?" came the Captain's astonished reply as he looked at Varentsov and saw the man was shaking, completely out of control. "Three miles, I would say. Why do you ask?"

"Why? Because it is up to us now. Don't you understand? It is up to us. You have small arms on board. Pistols, Kalashnikovs and machine guns? Well, break them out," Varentsov ordered, his eyes dancing. "Yes, break them out. They only have a skeleton crew on that old tub. They will never know what hit them."

The Captain's jaw dropped as he heard Varentsov's words.

"There is no choice, Ruchenko," Varentsov said with a sharp, nervous laugh. "Surely, you see that now. We must act swiftly and decisively or all will be lost."

Unfortunately, all the trawler captain saw was a maniac, and one with an MVD Colonel's commission at that. "We?" Ruchenko asked. "You mean you want us to attack the whaler?" he asked incredulously. "I took my ship well inside Swedish waters to drop off your diving team, Comrade Colonel; but I dare not go any closer."

“If you disobey me again, I’ll have you shot, you insolent...”

“Perhaps you will, but if I lose this ship with all its top secret electronic equipment, you will need to stand at the end of a very long line. My orders were to bring you here and be your ‘Moscow taxi’ as you called it; but if you need more than that, you should have them send you a damned Navy frigate!”

Before the argument could get any more heated, a panicky voice interrupted them over the loud speaker. “Captain! This is the bridge. We have high speed aircraft on the radar, coming in fast from the northwest.”

Ruchenko bolted from the radio room and took the stairs two at a time with Varentsov hot on his heels, screaming more threats at him. As they reached the bridge, the MVD Colonel’s loud ranting was drowned out by the roar of three swept-wing jet fighters passing overhead, only a few feet above the trawler’s radar mast.

“Are those ours, Ruchenko?” Varentsov screamed. “Yes! Look! I think they are Mig-15s,” hoping against all hope that Moscow had sent him help.

“Mig15s?” Ruchenko scoffed. “No, no. Those are Swedish, Saab 29s. Look at the colors, man! And look at the bombs hanging under their wings, Comrade Colonel. I have no doubt that Stockholm vectored them over us for your benefit,” the trawler Captain said as the heavy ship rocked from side to side in the down draft. “As I told you, we are still well inside their territorial waters; and that was the only warning they are likely to give us. We must move farther out to sea.”

“No! No!” Varentsov raged. “We must attack... we must...”

“It is over, Varentsov. This game of yours is over.”

“No!” Varentsov screamed. “They cannot do this to me.”

“*They* can’t?” the Captain asked incredulously. “*They?* You need help, Comrade Colonel. You are out of control.”

Varentsov stared wide-eyed at the contrails of the Swedish jets as they turned and came back for a second pass. His lips were moving, but the words no longer came out.

Ruchenko looked at him and knew precisely why this *big* Moscow Colonel was in such a panic. First, there was the small matter of the Speznaz Diving Team he sent to blow up the old U-boat. They left with forty-five minutes of air, perhaps a bit more; but that was well over an hour ago. It was the simplest of Stalinist arithmetic. Failure equals the basement of the Lubyanka. If those divers had been MVD men, no one in Moscow Center would give a fig. Unfortunately for Varentsov, they were an elite and very expensive special operations unit the MVD had *borrowed* from the Navy. Given the intense intra-service hatreds involved, the MVD would be forced to grovel and apologize to the Navy; and the good Colonel would pay a heavy price for it.

Unfortunately, when shit like that hit the fan, it splattered everyone in the room. That could create a problem of fatal proportions for one Captain Junior Grade Vasily Ruchenko as well. The MVD would try to blame the Navy, and the Navy would want its own scapegoat. Yes, when it all hit the fan, everyone associated with this fiasco would be packed off to the gulag. What rotten-ass luck, and just when everything was going his way, Ruchenko glowered.

Kruger's face was only inches from Chorev as he fired the pistol into the man's stomach one more time. He was still draped across Kruger's gun-arm, and the German felt the impact of each bullet and smelled the fear radiating from the man. In that instant, Kruger felt the old rush welled up inside until he thought he would burst. He closed his eyes and savored every second of it, even though he knew he shouldn't. He must end this business, so he forced himself to open his eyes and focus on this maniac Israeli. He must free himself and be rid of him. Kruger raised his left arm and brought his fist down on Chorev's back like a sledgehammer, determined to break free of this madman's grip. The blow would have killed most men. It finally broke Chorev's grip on Kruger's arm, and the Israeli collapsed in a heap on the deck.

The German looked down on the body of his latest victim and exulted. Free! He had finally broken free and now he could conclude his business with the other three. As he turned his eyes back toward them, he found the American woman sitting on the deck directly in front of him. Their eyes locked on each other's, and both were filled with hate. The bitch, he thought! She was behind this, whether he shot her up here or below deck no longer mattered to him, she would be the next to die. After all, he had serious work left to do. He must radio Wilhelmshaven. He must set his explosive charges below deck and scuttle this old whaler, and he must make good his escape. With the Swedish Air Force nosing around, their Navy would soon follow, so he must move quickly.

Odd though, he saw that the woman had something in her hand. Her arm was turning, extending upward toward him. What was it, he wondered as his brain raced to catch up. It was short and black with a shiny-silver tip. He knew he should have killed them all the moment he came back aboard. In fact, he should have killed her first. The bitch had a smart tongue and an arrogant mouth, but one bullet would put an end to that problem. Yet as he raised the Beretta automatic and began to swing it around toward her, he felt a thin, icy shiver run down his spine. Something was wrong; something was very wrong with the picture that lay before him. Perhaps it was that shiny, pointed thing in her hand. His arm felt numb from struggling with that fool Chorev, from all that beating and pounding. It felt slow. Could that be it? Was he simply tired? Maybe it was only a heartbeat or two, but his arm felt sluggish. His eyes finally focused on her hands and on that shiny, silver tip, and he realized what it was. The bitch was holding a spear pistol. It was already pointed directly at him, while he was still swinging the automatic around toward her; and that made the scene all wrong as that icy shiver raced down his spine again, even stronger this time.

Sturmbannführer Heinz Kruger, recipient of the Knight's Cross with Swords and Diamonds from the hand of Adolf Hitler himself, had never found himself this close to the wrong end of anyone else's weapon. It had always been the other way around. Yet in that split second when he realized what she was holding in her hands, Kruger felt a sudden and unwanted bond with his many, many victims. This was what they must have seen and felt as they looked down the barrel of his weapon and realized they were about to die.

Leslie did not have time to aim or even think. If she had, she probably would have frozen. Balck loomed above her in his wet suit, a black-garbed shape

silhouetted against the bright blue morning sky. He was turning toward her, his right arm and the automatic in his hand covered with Yuri Chorev's blood. While his eyes were already locked on her, his pistol was still tracking around. If she had any doubts, one look into those cold, blue eyes told her everything she needed to know. Balck was an animal. He would kill her and then kill the others, just as he killed Lindstromm and God only knew how many more. While Eddie and her Daddy liked hunting duck back home, no one was better than Leslie at shooting quail. They would flush from the stubbly cornrows right at your feet, and you did not have time to think or aim. A good quail hunter turned from the waist and shoulder and squeezed the trigger when it felt right, trusting to instinct to do the rest. That was what she did.

For an instant she felt—nothing.

Time stopped. She never heard the soft click of the trigger. She never felt the burst of compressed air that propelled the silver rod from the barrel of the spear gun. And she never heard the sharp crack of Balck's automatic as he shot at her. Her eyes remained fused on his. The recoil of the spear gun knocked her backwards just as a finger of blue flame exploded from the muzzle of the Beretta.

She never knew which of them saved her life—the recoil of her spear pistol or Balck's own haste. If he had taken the time to finish his turn and aim the Beretta at her before he fired, she would surely be dead. But he didn't. He continued to tower over her as if nothing had happened, but something was very different. Those hateful blue eyes dropped to his chest and he frowned. The Walther was now pointed at her head, but it was as if he had forgotten about it. Its barrel was no longer rock-solid steady. It began to waver.

"Go ahead. Shoot, you bastard," she screamed at him. "Shoot!"

Still, the German did nothing. Why? As she looked up at him, she saw the answer in his eyes. They looked surprised, strangely distant, and suddenly full of fear. Slowly, his arm sagged. The pistol slipped from his fingers and clattered on the deck as if it no longer meant anything to him. He brought both hands to his chest, his fingers moving, scratching and digging at something. His eyes slowly glazed over and Balck swayed back and forth like a tall, leafy tree in a strong wind.

That was when Leslie saw it: between his fingertips the nub of a stainless-steel spear protruded from the center of Balck's chest.

Kruger's brain could not comprehend what had happened. He had experienced pain before, but nothing like this. It began with a numbing punch in the center of his chest that spread to the pit of his stomach and up to the top of his head, sucking the energy out of him. He wanted to shoot that American bitch again, but his arm grew heavy and listless and it hardly seemed to matter anymore. Slowly, his eyes dropped to his chest. That was when he saw the nub of the spear sticking out. This couldn't be happening. It must be a joke; something must be stuck to the front of his wet suit. No other explanation was possible.

After all, he was Heinz Kruger. He was invincible.

An icy chill swept through him, and he never heard the Walther clatter on the deck at his feet. His fingers seemed to have taken on a will of their own as they felt for the shaft of the spear and closed around that shiny silver nub. He tried to brush it off and make it go away, until he saw dark blood oozing out around it.



If someone held a mirror up to his eyes and he could see the expression on his own face, he might have understood. The arrogant smile had vanished along with the sadistic glow in his cold blue eyes. They were replaced by the same uncomprehending expression he had placed on so many other faces. He saw the victim, the look of the soon-to-be-dead. In that instant of terrible understanding, Heinz Kruger's eyes rolled back in his head, his body went limp, and he toppled backward on the BRUNNHILDE's deck... dead.

Captain Vasily Ruchenko didn't think things could get any worse, until his Radar Officer called to him in a panicky voice. "Captain!" he said, pointing at one of the screens. "High-speed boats, coming straight at us—range five miles and closing. Swedish Patrol boats, I think—two of them."

"No!" Varentsov screamed. "We must go after that whaler. Do you hear me!"

Now it was Ruchenko's turn to sweat. With Swedish jet fighters and two patrol boats closing on him, he was a sitting duck. He looked over at Varentsov, knowing he was about to lose his ship and his career because of this lunatic.

"Shut up, you fool! You were out-played, and this fiasco is over."

"Captain," his radio officer interrupted him again. "It's the Swedish Navy. They say we're inside their territorial waters, and they insist we heave-to."

The Captain turned and looked at Varentsov with disgust. "See what you have done, Mister big-shot Moscow Colonel? Do I start a war, or do I let the Swedes capture my trawler, eh? The American CIA would love to get their hands on her, but don't worry. We have explosive charges along the keel, and I'll blow this boat into next Tuesday before I let anyone set foot on my deck. It will all be on your head; but you need not worry, we shall all be dead."

Varentsov turned white. His eyes darted back and forth between Ruchenko and the radar screen. Finally, Varentsov's shoulders sank. In desperation, he asked, "What... what else can I do?"

"Do? What else can you do? You? Nothing!" Turning to his electronics officer, Ruchenko said, "Radio the Swedes. Tell them our navigational gear shows we are a mile outside of their territorial water. But in the interest of international cooperation between our two great peoples, we shall move a bit farther out to a place where the cod are more plentiful; and we thank them for their assistance... and get us back in deep water. Now!"

Looking back at Varentsov he said, "We will soon know if that suffices. The Swedes won't like it; but I don't think they want a shooting war with us, either." Ruchenko looked over at the MVD Colonel and actually felt a twinge of pity for the man. "I suggest you retire to your cabin, Comrade Varentsov. You look exhausted, and you will need all your faculties when you prepare your final report on this fiasco. Do you not agree?"

## Chapter 41

Einar Person was feeling his age. Emma was right, it was time he got out of this business for good and retired. She was always right. With a painful groan, he

rolled over and took a quick inventory of his moving parts. Nothing seemed missing or broken. Slowly, he rose to his feet and looked at Leslie. She lay on the deck staring at Balck's lifeless body. Her fingers remained locked around the butt of Schiff's spear pistol, which she kept pointed at the German as if he might get up and come after her again. The spear gun was empty and useless now, but that no longer mattered. Balck was not getting up; and he was not coming after her or anyone else, not ever again, which was just fine with Einar Person. The Captain knelt beside Yuri Chorev to offer what help he could, but it was too late. There was no pulse, not that he expected to find one after all those gunshots and all that blood. Too bad, he was a good man, a brave one, and he died hard. Person saw Leslie get to her feet. She leaned heavily against the wall of the wheelhouse, knees shaking, staring down at the bodies and the blood splattered across the deck. Finally, she took a deep breath and walked away, her legs growing steadier with each step she took.

"Where do you think you are going, young lady?" Person called after her, but she offered no reply. When she reached the rack that held their diving gear, she began pulling on her wet suit. "Leslie, where are you going, I asked."

"Down there." She pointed over the side, her voice little more than a whisper.

"No, no, I forbid it! You are in no condition."

"No condition? If I don't, who will?" she asked as she pulled up the wet suit's zipper. "You? Schiff? Or maybe you'd rather send poor Yuri?"

"It is far too dangerous down there, woman. Can't you see that?"

"The only thing dangerous down there was Balck, and he's dead now," she said with a cold, forced smile. "But Michael's still down there and I've got to go."

"Not alone, Leslie, you can't go alone. You will only get yourself killed, too," he said, but his words had no effect as she slipped two air tanks into her harness and pulled it on. "Wait. Please?" he asked as his tone softened. "A few minutes, no more. You saw the jet airplanes go over. I have Navy patrol boats coming too, and a contingent of Swedish Marines. They'll be here any minute now, you'll see."

"We don't have minutes, Einar. Michael may be dead already, and he'll be dead for sure if I don't go down there now."

Person looked at her. She looked so very young, but perhaps he had gotten that much older. Reluctantly, he nodded his assent. "Yes, of course, you are right. I'm an old fool, now go. I will do what I can for these two."

As she walked to the ladder and put on her mask, she turned and asked, "Those Swedish Air Force jets... they didn't just happen to be in the neighborhood, did they?"

"No," he confessed. "No more than that Soviet trawler, the Israeli Mossad, the damned MVD, or a blond-headed German psychopath. It seems that everyone is interested in this little research trip Michael arranged for us. So go, woman, if that is what you must do. Go, and bring that man of yours back up here before it is too late."

The sting of ice-cold seawater on her face revived her as she descended the cable hand-over-hand as quickly as she dared. Halfway down she saw a motionless figure floating in the water near the cable. It was a man in a wet suit, suspended in a hazy cloud of blood. Was it Michael? She panicked until she

realized the wet suit was all wrong. From the design and equipment he carried, it must be one of the Russians. She quickly left him behind and continued down, taking no solace in the Russian's misfortune. When she reached the diving platform, she saw another body and then two more floating lower, down near the U-boat in the harsh glare of the floodlights—more Russians. Thank God, Michael was not one of them, either.

Suddenly she remembered Balck's words. He was giving Michael "all the time he would need... A lifetime!" Leslie saw the U-boat's foredeck hatch, and she immediately understood. Balck had wedged it shut with a prying bar, jamming it between the hatch plate and the handrail so it would be impossible to open it from the inside. With three quick strokes, she reached the hatch and grabbed the steel bar. Planting her feet on the deck, she pulled on the bar with all her strength, but Balck had wedged it in tight. By twisting the bar and pulling it from side to side, she was finally able to make it move. She braced her feet against the hatch collar, tugging and yanking at it with all her might, finding strength she didn't know she had, until the bar finally came loose.

Her hands ached and her shoulders were on fire; but she had beaten Balck again. She shoved the steel bar to the side and reached for the locking wheel. Leslie was no debutante. Working on her father's fishing boats, hauling in nets and crab pots since her early teens, had left her with solid shoulders and legs. Still, while few people looking at the girl would think she had the strength to raise a heavy steel hatch like this, she had no doubt. Michael was trapped on the other side, and that was all the motivation she needed. She closed her eyes and used her legs and back to pull up until she felt the hatch move. As if in a trance, there was no strain or pain, but it came up, higher and higher, until she forced it upright and tipped it backward onto the deck. Somehow, with all that adrenaline and anger pumping inside her, she managed to open the hatch; and she didn't even realize it.

Leslie was so anxious to slip through the hatch and get inside the torpedo room that she almost missed seeing a faint glow at the base of the conning tower. That was where one of the bombs from the British airplane hit, leaving a jagged hole where the conning tower met the deck. It hit her like a thunderbolt! It had to be a flashlight, and that meant Michael was there. She forgot about the torpedo room and quickly swam aft, her legs pumping as she skimmed along the deck toward the dim light. The hole had sharp edges of torn metal, but she thrust her head inside anyway. There! She saw a man in a wet suit slumped against the far wall. It was Michael, with his flashlight lying next to him. His head lay on his chest as if he had fallen asleep, and he had what looked like the brim of an old hat on his head.

As excited as she was to see him, she looked in vain for air bubbles coming from his regulator. Oh, my God, she wanted to scream, until she saw a thin stream of bubbles, maybe only four or five, rising to join a small silver pool trapped against the ceiling. She had to get to him; it had to be her; and it had to be now, she knew, because there was no one else. If she returned to the foredeck hatch and tried to work her way back, she had no idea what might be blocking her way. Besides, she could not stand the thought of taking her eyes off him. She reached in through the hole and tried to touch him, but she could not stretch that far. He

was too far away and the hole too small. It could not be more than a foot across. Perhaps she could wake him? Maybe she could get him to come over here and take some air from her tanks? If they shared hers until he revived, maybe they could figure out a way to get him out. None of that would matter, though, if she didn't wake him up.

Desperate, she swam back to the foredeck hatch and picked up the long prying bar. Struggling to pick it up with both hands, she dragged it along the deck to the conning tower. She pushed it through the hole toward Michael and jammed it against his leg. Still, no response. She pushed it into him again, even harder, but he still would not move. Finally, she raised the bar and beat it against the side of the conning tower next to where he was lying. A loud, echoing Boom! filled the small steel room. It must be like having your head inside a big cathedral bell, she figured; so she beat it against the wall again and again. Surely, that would wake him up, but his eyes never opened. She swore she saw his head move and the corners of his mouth turn down in a frown inside his mask. He was alive, barely, but he wouldn't be for long if she didn't get him some air.

He was so close, she wanted to scream. Still, the more her hope faded, the more desperate she became. There was no way she was going to lose him, not when he was this close. She had to get in there, so she grabbed the iron bar again and jammed it back into the hole, working the bar under the longest and sharpest of the steel points blocking her way. With a deep breath, she placed the bar on her shoulder and set her feet firmly on the deck. She closed her eyes and pushed up with a steady, even pressure, legs quivering, shoulder screaming, with that expression of grim concentration. The steel plate inside the bulkhead had to be a quarter-inch thick, and there was no way it should have bent beneath a woman's shoulder. Still, desperate people do amazing things when there is no choice. She pushed up, harder and harder, and felt it move. She opened her eyes and saw the jagged point of steel had bent upward, only a few inches; but it had moved and she knew those few inches were all she was going to get.

She let the bar fall from her shoulder and a wave of intense pain shot down her back and thighs. Ignoring it, she unbuckled her diving harness and vest, slipped the air tanks off her back, and shoved them through the hole ahead of her. She dropped down and put her head through the hole again. Next, she took off the flotation vest, the weight belt, writing pad, and even her knife — anything that might stop her from getting through that hole. Extending her arms over her head, she squeezed inside. Taking a deep breath, she laid her mouthpiece and regulator aside, freeing herself to maneuver the soft lines of her body around the razor-sharp points of steel. She turned onto her side, feeling her way, bending and trying to float over them. She pushed with her arms and kept kicking, moving forward one inch at a time, slowly squeezing and twisting until she got her shoulders through, then her chest, and finally her waist.

Halfway in, she paused to take a few deep breaths from the air tanks. Halfway! She was so close that she could feel his presence now; so close she could almost touch him, but not quite. Leslie felt a sharp pain as a sharp steel edge dug into her hip. She was stuck. She shifted around several times, trying to find a fit, but there was no slack. The sharp point dug in and it really began to hurt. Worse, it was holding her back. She looked at his face and took one more long, deep breath

from the tank. Closing her eyes, she tried to relax, to float, and make her body soft and pliable as she pushed. The sharp steel cut through her insulated rubber suit and into her left hip. She bit her lip as the hot pain and icy cold water flooded in, but she didn't stop. Wiping her mind clean, she pushed and twisted, slowly but firmly, blocking out the searing pain. Reaching both hands, she stretched out, wrapped her fingers around the periscope housing, and pulled with all her strength. A sharp, new pain shot down her leg like a hot poker. Gritting her teeth, she pulled even harder until her body suddenly popped through the hole.

She'd made it! She floated free for a moment and closed her eyes as the salt water hit the open gash and her leg exploded with a new round of pain. Leslie was used to the ocean. She knew the numbing cold of the Baltic would soon anesthetize the sharp, burning pain in her hip. She started to count backward from one hundred and got to eighty-seven before the pain began to fade. Daring to look down, she saw a deep, twelve-inch gash in her hip and thigh, but it was worth it. She had made it inside. As for the cut? She had far more important things to worry about now.

With her air tanks in her hands, she swam over to where Michael lay, pausing to take a deep breath from her mouthpiece as she grabbed his. She tried to pull it out of his mouth, but he would not let it go. Probably reflexes, she thought, but his teeth were clamped tight on the black rubber of his own mouthpiece. It was his last tie to life, and he was too far gone to realize his empty tanks were going to kill him.

She pulled on the mouthpiece again, harder this time. She saw his brow wrinkle in discomfort, but he still would not let go. Well, at least he was alive, but Leslie was growing desperate. First, she knocked that absurd hatband off his head and pulled back the thick rubber hood of his diving suit. Something like eighty percent of a body's heat loss is through the head, and she was about to prove it. The assault of ice water made Michael's eyes flutter, so she grabbed a handful of his thick black hair and twisted hard. His eyelids fluttered again, and this time his lips opened to form a protest. When they did, she ripped the regulator out of his mouth, quickly cleared hers of water, and shoved it into his mouth as a replacement.

Michael's reaction was immediate as his oxygen-starved brain realized that air was entering his lungs for the first time in a long, long time. He coughed as he sucked hard on the regulator, leaning back and clutching the mouthpiece with both hands. His chest heaved as he devoured the air in deep gulps. She watched him take breath after breath, trying to be patient and wait, until she realized she was now the one who needed the air. She tried to ease his hands aside and take the regulator back; but his hands wouldn't budge. He was not fully awake yet; and he still held the mouthpiece as if it were his safety line, without realizing he was slowly killing her in the process. There was no way she could pull it out of his grip if he didn't want her to, because he was far too strong. No, she had to make him give it to her; so she placed her gloved hands on his, touching them gently, lovingly, stroking them. She prayed the feeling would pass through, and he would understand.

She was about at her wits' end when somewhere in the rear corners of Michael's brain, that loving sensation must have registered. His eyelids fluttered, and he

looked at her. Ever so gently, she used his own hands to pull the regulator out of his mouth; and he seemed to understand. He let her have it this time, long enough for her to take three quick gulps of air before she gave it back. He took a few more breaths, and she saw his eyes beginning to clear. He was coming out of it. His eyes darted around the conning tower and he sat up. He was groggy and confused; but when she reached for the regulator again, he let her take it without any resistance. They were over the hump now, and they traded the regulator back and forth as she watched him revive. She could tell from his eyes that he knew who she was, and he knew where they were.

It was a good thing that the compartment was dark and gloomy, because tears were running down inside her facemask. Not that she cared what he saw, but this was neither the time nor the place for her to deal with any of that.

She reached down, picked up his flashlight, and pointed it down toward the hatch that led down to the control room. That must have been how he got here, working his way aft from the bow torpedo room, and it was how they would have to get out. Holding the air tanks between them, she led the way; but as they reached the hatch, he suddenly stopped and turned back. He took the flashlight from her hand and began searching the deck where he had been sitting. Reaching down, he picked something up and tucked it into his vest. She could not tell what it was, but she saw his eyes light up inside the mask.

## Chapter 42

It was one week later that Michael stood at the railing of the BRUNNHILDE watching a Swedish Navy salvage team hoist the last of the U-boat's priceless cargo of gold bars and jewels onto their barge. Bucket by dripping bucket, they were lowered and set down ever so gently into the barge's hold. The Swedes were pros, but it took nearly six days of painstaking work to sift through the debris and empty the submarine's forward and aft torpedo rooms. The broken jewelry and smashed sheets of amber took the most time. Like archeology, each shard and small chip had to be carefully photographed, picked up, brought to the surface, and stored. With that delicate job done, the divers would soon make one last trip back down to weld the hatches shut and weld steel plates across the holes the two bombs tore in the hull. That would return the submarine to the private tomb she had been for the past six years. Michael agreed. The ghosts inside that old U-boat should finally be allowed to rest in peace, his and theirs.

"Looks like the work is nearly finished, eh?" Einar Person's bass voice rumbled as the Captain joined him at the railing. Michael offered no reply. Finished? Not by a long shot, he thought. "You caused quite a stir in Stockholm; I can tell you that," Person laughed as he leaned on the railing and pulled out his old meerschaum pipe. "Some very important people think you should be clapped in irons." Michael turned and looked at him, but offered no reply. "But there are others who think we should pin a big shiny medal on you and give you a parade. Then again, there are those who think it would have been better if you had never come up here in the first place."

“Which group are you in, Einar?”

“Me? Oh, part of all three,” Person answered as he struck a match and held it to the bowl of his pipe. “One thing is for certain; you will not be soon forgotten.”

Ever since he and Leslie climbed back on deck and dropped a wet bar of gold bullion and the tattered remnant of a U-boat Kapitan’s hat at Person’s feet, salvos of diplomatic cables had been flying back and forth between Stockholm, Moscow, Washington, Bonn, and Tel Aviv, and the shots were coming from some large caliber guns. Slowly it dawned on each of those governments that a former B-17 waist gunner from Wisconsin and his ragtag group of amateurs had put five national capitals under siege. Finding the U-582 lying five miles off the coast of Sweden, packed with a king’s ransom of gold, jewels, and art, was an uncomfortable reality that each of them had to deal with in their own way; not to mention four dead Soviet divers, a dead Israeli scientist, and the dead German Mate, Balck.

The CIA, FBI, State Department, US Navy, and the West Germans had chosen to ignore their expedition, because it was easier for a government to do nothing than to agree on something. Besides, everyone knew there was nothing there. The story that fellow Randall told in New York was preposterous. The U-boat had sunk off Poland; everyone knew that. Off Sweden? That was entirely too troublesome for NATO or Bonn to even contemplate. So, this entire fiasco must fade quietly away; but that did not happen. Instead, it blew up in their faces and splattered their morning coats with huge gobs of unwanted truth. What now? Some very rude questions were being asked from other quarters. They neither knew nor cared about the subtleties of international because it was painfully obvious there was more involved here than a long-forgotten German submarine.

“I imagine there are some very red faces in the Kremlin about now,” Person said. “Stalin and Beria must be in quite a snit. Obviously, that fellow in Bonn belongs to them, which explains the Russian trawler, the limpet mines, and four dead Red Navy divers. In his new position in NATO, he would have been a major asset of theirs for years to come.”

“They don’t have much of a sense of humor, do they?”

“None. And they will not appreciate you very much, either, so you must be careful.”

In the end, expediency won out. It was decided by the people who decide such things, that the incident never happened. The U-582 should fade back into history and be forgotten. The millions in gold? The Swedes decided to split it fifty-fifty with the Israelis, demonstrating it was easy to be generous with found money. The world was awash with surplus military hardware. With their share, the Israelis could buy battalions of tanks, batteries of field artillery, and squadrons of new jet fighters for their new Air Force. The equipment might be used; but it would prove highly effective in the hands of the right men. David Schiff would live, but he would remain in a Swedish hospital recovering from the same “fishing accident” that cost noted marine geologist Yuri Chorev his life.

The art and major pieces of jewelry posed a different problem. They would be carefully restored and studied by experts, piece by piece. If the Swedes could figure out where the item came from, they would see to it that it was quietly returned. If not, it would be donated to some appropriate museum. The Russian

art was another matter. The Swedes were not happy with the Russian bear's bad manners. The MVD had gone too far this time, and there must be a steep price exacted. After some thought, the Swedes had the perfect solution. They would give the Russian art to the Israelis, all of it, and let the Soviets bargain with them.

Michael could only smile. "The Russians aren't going to appreciate your efforts either, Einar," he said.

"Me? I'm just an old fisherman," Person protested innocently.

"An old fisherman?"

"We are a small country. It happens I am an old fisherman who formerly served in various positions in his country's Navy and who still is vaguely acquainted with some of the men running the Admiralty in Stockholm."

"Enough that they take the odd phone call from you?"

"They are Emma's people." The old man smiled and relit his pipe, but offered no reply. Michael stared at him for a moment, not wanting to ruin a classic performance, but not believing a word he said, either.

"No, you will not be quickly forgotten, my young friend," Person lamented as he took a deep draw on his pipe. "Neither will that German pig, Balck. No, indeed. We have no doubt he was an SS killer from the war." The American's eyes turned hard and cold, and his smile vanished. "Well, those same men in our government—the ones who wanted to pin a medal on you—they decided to give you a small present. It turns out that Interpol has been looking for a tall, fair-haired international hit man. He's wanted for a string of political murders from Spain to the Middle East, Italy, South America, and even Germany. They think he was someone's enforcer, and our friend Balck is a good match."

"Maybe someone's *strong right arm*?" Michael asked as his fingers touched that old silver cigarette case in his pocket.

"Perhaps." Person nodded. "The man they have been looking for was very skilled and very careful. All Interpol had was a vague description of a blond psychopath with steel-blue eyes who enjoyed killing people."

"That could be half the German Army."

"Yes, but when the coroner examined our friend Balck's body, they found his blood type tattooed in his armpit."

"All of the SS had those, didn't they?"

"Yes, but most of the former SS had them surgically removed years ago."

"Unless they didn't care who knew."

"Or they had no intention of ever being captured," Person replied as he lit the pipe again and looked out to sea. "We also discovered that Balck's sea bag had a false bottom. He had six different passports, if you can believe the audacity of the man. Two were Spanish, one was German, and the others were from Italy, Holland, and Bolivia; and he had seaman's union cards from most of those, each with a different name. Piecing it together, we think Balck shipped out of Cuba on an old Greek freighter last month for a run up the American coast. It stopped in Philadelphia and New York, and then went back to Cuba. Does that ring a bell?"

Michael stared at him, his jet-black eyes flashing.

"The freighter captain was found dead in a cheap Cuban hotel with his throat slit. I suspect the same thing would have happened here, were it not for that girl of yours."



Michael's expression quickly changed. He looked away, suddenly feeling guilty.

"My Emma thinks you are a damned fool, boy. I told her it was none of her business; but Emma can be very stubborn, as you know. She says a girl like that comes along once in a man's life, if he is very, very lucky. She also says you should grab her by the hand and run away from this business as fast as your feet will carry you. Run, and do not stop... That is what Emma says, anyway."

"And you are absolutely right, Einar," Michael turned and faced him. "It's none of her business, or yours."

"Well, I am making it my business. I was up here on deck when she took on that blond bastard. You do not have the slightest idea what that girl did for you, what she did for all of us, or the courage it took, do you?" Person said as he laid a gnarled fist on the railing. "We all dearly love you, Michael. Emma says she wants a big Swedish wedding, and if you do not treat that girl right, you may find yourself swimming back to port."

"All right, Einar, you made your point. Is that all?"

"No." Person slipped his hand into his jacket and pulled out a stack of small, brightly colored booklets bound by a thick rubber band. "Since you will not take my advice, these are the passports and seaman's cards I told you about, the ones Balck had. The face is his, but the names are Juan Ignazio, Mario Crespari, Otto Bauer, Sigfried Koppelman, Gunter Johanssen, and Wilhelm Wangel."

"You're giving them to me?"

"Well, we could give them to your CIA, but they have been insufferable boors about this entire thing," Person smiled. "We know they would just sweep them under the rug, so Stockholm figured a clever, resourceful fellow like you might be able to retrace the fellow's steps. No telling where they might lead you, or what you might find when you get there; but our people think you might be just the man to try."

"Thanks," Michael said.

"Oh, do not thank me," Person shook his head and chuckled. "It was not my idea to give them to you. In fact, I was the one who voted against it. I think you are a marked man now, and you've done enough. I would rather they put it in the hands of professionals."

"Like it's been for the past six years?"

"I said professionals, not the bureaucrats and the foreign ministry types," Person corrected him. "No, you should not go running off around the world chasing some old Nazis. You should be walking into the sunset with that lovely girl draped over your arm."

"What did you say about a lovely girl?" Leslie asked as she walked up behind them. She was using a crutch, walking slowly with a large bandage around her right thigh.

"That she has big ears," Michael turned and answered.

"Yes, but every now and then they come in handy."

"How are your thigh and hip?" Person asked.

"I'll live. The doctor put in a few stitches, but I've had worse."

"A few?" Person snorted. "It was eighteen, and you should be in the hospital."

"I'm fine, so, what are you two doing?" she asked. "Conspiring against me again?"

"Quite innocently," Person answered. "We were merely discussing what each of us would do after we reach port. What about you, my dear? Are you returning home?"

"I don't know," she said as she turned to face Michael. "That depends."

"I think I understand," Person said as he looked at them. "If I may be bold enough to suggest one last thing, the two of you should take the time to put this whole bloody story down on paper, all of it; and then lock it up as if it were gold, and let them know you have it. You will be amazed at how much that will improve everyone's behavior."

"Is that the voice of experience?" Leslie asked.

"Perhaps," the old Captain conceded. "And that same experience tells me that the time has come for me to leave you two alone. Remember, if you ever need a friend, either one of you, anytime, anywhere, you send a wire to old Einar," he said with a wink as he turned and walked away. "I have long arms."

When they were alone, Leslie turned and leaned on the railing. "I'm no fool, Michael. You aren't going home with me, are you?"

"I will, but not right away." She crossed her arms and turned away, hurt, so he put his arms around her and pulled her close. "It's not like that, Les. I'll catch up with you: I promise I will."

"Promise? Promise me what, Michael?"

"That I'll come back, that I'll catch up with you at your Daddy's place."

"And then what?"

"Whatever you want, Les."

"You are so infuriating, Michael Randall! What is *whatever* I want?"

He stared at her. "Jeez, Les, you're not making this easy, are you?"

"No, I'm not, and if you expect me to be there when you arrive, you need to spell it out in itty-bitty little words that even a simple country girl like me can understand."

"A simple country girl?" he started to laugh, but a sharp, angry glare from her eyes cut him off. "Okay, okay, Les, I love you. I love you very much and I want to marry you. Is that what you want?"

"Is that what I want?" Her expression didn't improve very much. "If that's supposed to be a proposal, it didn't sound very romantic to me."

Michael got down on one knee and repeated, "I love you, and I want to marry you. Is that okay?"

She looked down at him for a long moment, then said, "Yes, that is *okay*," as her face broke into a broad smile.

"Good," he said as he got back up. "Like I said, I'll catch up with you in South Carolina. I will; I swear I will. Until then, I have a few things I have to do. I don't know how long it will take, but I will catch up."

"Michael, let me come with you. I can help."

"Not where I'm going, Les," he answered as he felt the weight of the silver cigarette case in his pocket growing heavier and heavier. "This is personal."

## PART VII

**Bonn, Germany**  
**August 1951**

### Chapter 43

All the way back to Tallinn in that wretched spy trawler, Sergei Varentsov lay on his bunk staring at the ceiling. He knew that when Serov got his hands on him, he was finished. It would be the Lubyanka, and not for a tour. Well, he had failed at everything else, but he swore he would not fail at this one last thing. He would kill Neptune, personally and with his own hands, while he looked the bookkeeper in the eyes and watched him die. Call it a last vestige of his professional pride, self-preservation, or simple revenge; but if he did not destroy that little worm, Neptune would gnaw at his guts until it drove him mad.

Bonn! That was where Neptune was and where Varentsov had to go if he wanted to kill him. It was a simple enough task, but he no longer had the vast Soviet consular and East German spy apparatus behind him. He was alone and on the run, and an army of MVD “finders” and hit men would soon be on his trail. True, this was the last place they would expect to find him, and they were notoriously slow of foot to begin with; but the MVD was large and persistent. Once they began moving, they would come at him with the sophistication of an avalanche. For a few days though, Varentsov had the edge. Serov would peg him for a coward who would bolt for England or the United States to defect. Eventually, after he turned over all the obvious rocks and came up empty-handed, Serov would send his best men racing to Germany, but he would be too late. Varentsov would have come and gone.

Yet the great Serov was half right. Varentsov was indeed a coward, and a monstrous one. He intended to defect as fast as his feet would carry him; but if he expected the Americans to take him in, he had to bring them something of value. If he arrived empty-handed without something to trade, they would throw him out like yesterday’s garbage. That was why he had to kill Neptune. There were secrets that only the two of them shared, such as precisely which documents the German turned over to the MVD; which NATO battle plans, which ship deployments, which codes, and which technical manuals. The possibilities were endless; and if only he knew what damage Neptune had caused, he could command a very high price—a new home, a new face, a new identity, and a fat bank account. But if that damned German talked first, then the value of Varentsov’s life would be zero. That was why the Russian came to Bonn, to kill Neptune for self-preservation, as well as for the pure pleasure of it.

Escaping from Tallinn had proved embarrassingly simple. Clearly, the fiasco off the coast of Sweden was a closely held secret, because there were no armed guards waiting to grab him at the dock. Perhaps Serov was still figuring out how to break the bad news to Beria? When he did, Varentsov would hear the explosion in Germany. Once he reached the airport in Tallinn, his red and gold MVD officer's badge and his natural arrogant bluster did the rest. He took a short Finn Air flight to Gdansk, Poland, with a quick connection on a Romanian flight to Bucharest. Those were followed by fast hops to Belgrade and Vienna, changing planes each time, an overnight train to Frankfurt, and a commuter train to Bonn. That was how he came to be sitting at a bus stop in a quiet, bourgeois suburb, looking to all the world like a prosperous German banker waiting for his morning tram ride downtown. Varentsov actually felt relieved. His fear had fallen away and his head was clear. For the first time in years, he was in control of his own destiny. There would be no party watchdogs, no minders, and no Inspectors General leering over his shoulder, waiting for him to screw up. Freedom! So this is what it feels like, he smiled. What a heady feeling. No wonder the MVD had been constantly outmaneuvered by the Western intelligence services. Not even a world-class sprinter can run very far or very fast with his feet cast in cement work boots.

The morning had dawned cool and summery bright. The Russian was dressed in an expensive dark blue suit, a quiet burgundy tie, and a proud, smoke-gray Homburg hat, the kind he had always pictured himself wearing. Yes, Varentsov felt every inch the proper German burgher as he sat on the wooden bench with his face hidden behind his morning newspaper. Unlike the shop clerks, minor civil servants, and schoolteachers around him, Varentsov wasn't waiting for the bus. He was waiting for Neptune. Like every other middle-aged German male, Neptune's daily habits were rituals. They never varied. At precisely 7:45 each morning, he marched out his front gate with his meticulously groomed Schnauzer pulling him down the street by its leash. They would pass this bench, turn at the corner and continue at a brisk military pace for one mile, then turn and march back. It was precisely measured, and so regular you could set your watch by it.

It had to be, because today was the day. Two days ago, Varentsov spotted changes in the normally soft security ring around the Admiral's house. The stream of official sedans and uniformed visitors dropped to a trickle. The perimeter guard of uniformed German police, whose main job had been saluting and keeping the traffic moving, were replaced by hard men with cheap civilian suits, short hair, and dark sunglasses. Even more ominous, the Admiral had new visitors, some German and some obviously American. They were CIA or NATO Counter Intelligence, no doubt about it, which meant the game was up, and Neptune's cover was blown. They would be pulling at every loose end and threadbare spot in his legend, tearing apart his files and records, and reviewing his travels over the past three years, trying to figure out what the man had done to them. Varentsov smiled. In a few minutes, he would have the perfect solution to their problem.

The Russian shifted his newspaper, glanced up the street, and saw Neptune coming down the sidewalk at his usual militarily precise pace, chin up, arms swinging, with the dog pulling him along. Varentsov waited. Up the street, he saw the 8:00 AM bus picking up its usual passengers at the next stop. Traffic was thickening, and their little corner was filling with people waiting for the bus.

Exactly as it should be, Varentsov told himself; except for that black sedan following a discreet fifty yards behind the Admiral. What rotten luck, Varentsov thought. Obviously, the American CIA had turned the heat up. That made the operation infinitely more risky, but Varentsov was not about to back away, not when he finally had that Fascist traitor Neptune in his sights.

The Russian's practiced eye continued to study each angle. This was no suicide mission for him. It would be a close thing, but he could make it work. Neptune would arrive at the bench with the bus. The polite crowd of waiting passengers had queued up on the sidewalk and would converge on the bus when its doors opened. The black sedan would hang back even farther, and give the bus a wide berth. Yes! It could work! Neptune was fifty meters away, now thirty, now ten, as the bus swung over to the curb. The commuters on the bench rose and gathered their belongings. Varentsov rose with them, politely joining those waiting nearby on the sidewalk, and in the swirl of bodies, Neptune found himself surrounded and screened from the men in the black sedan. That was the moment the Russian had been waiting for.

Varentsov slipped his hand inside his jacket, pulled out his fountain pen, and stepped directly into Neptune's path. The bus came to a noisy halt next to them, its diesel engine rumbling and its air brakes sighing. Varentsov bumped into Neptune and the two men found themselves face to face, only for the briefest of instants, but that was all it took. He had not seen Neptune in weeks, but it was astonishing how the German had aged. His face was deathly pale. Dark, droopy rings had formed under his eyes, and he looked badly frightened and distracted. As Varentsov raised the fountain pen, he almost felt pity for the harmless bookkeeper—almost, but not quite.

Startled as the Russian jostled him, the Admiral took a half step backward as he looked up into the Russian's face. His mouth dropped open. "What? Varentsov? My God, what..." he tried to say, but his voice was silenced by a soft "Phissst!" below his chin. He blinked as a wet, stinging mist squirted into his eyes and mouth. It made him cough and that only made him inhale even more of the bitter-tasting gas. Somewhere in the dusty corners of the brain of a minor East German Communist Party clerk named Rudolph Friesemann, that bitter taste triggered a memory from a long-forgotten class they forced him to sit through. He coughed again; his red eyes bulged, and he gasped as he suddenly realized what was happening to him. A gut-wrenching pain exploded in his chest. He stumbled backward, eyes wide open as the pieces fell into place, and he knew he was already dead.

It took only seconds, and looked perfectly innocent. Two men bumped into each other at a crowded bus stop. One of them stumbled. The other took his arm and helped him to the bench, then boarded the bus with the others. The doors closed with a soft, pneumatic hiss. The bus pulled away from the curb and merged into the early morning traffic, leaving the street corner empty once again, except for an ashen-faced man sitting on the bench, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, with his chin resting on his chest.

Varentsov glanced back through the rear window of the bus. It was a significant risk, but he could not deny himself the pleasure of seeing Neptune sitting on the bench, dead; not that anyone could tell, until he finally toppled. How long would his body remain upright? A few more minutes were all the Russian required. One? Maybe two? After that, the Admiral's CIA "minders" would get nervous. They would get out of the car, look around, and try to appear casual as they walked over to the bench to check him out. All they would find however, was a dead man with every sign of a fatal heart attack sitting on a bench with a yapping Schnauzer at his feet. Not even the best coroner in Germany would find anything amiss; that was why prussic acid had long been an MVD favorite.

After two more buses, a meandering walk in the park, and a short cab ride, the Russian stepped into a Deutsche Post telephone booth in the lobby of a small neighborhood Gasthaus many miles away. He dialed a telephone number no one would find in the Bonn phone book. Officially, the number did not exist at all, but he knew it would ring in a corner office on the fourth floor of the American Embassy.

"Ja?" a bored male voice answered on the second ring.

"Give me McAllister," Varentsov asked confidently, in his badly accented English.

"Who?" the voice answered.

"McAllister, Philip W., the CIA Station Chief, born in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He has a jagged scar on his right thigh, a souvenir from Anzio. He carries a Colt revolver on his hip that his friends call a proper weapon for a Texas *cow poke*... is that sufficient?"

There was a long pause as the other man considered the call, the unlisted number, and the accent. "Look, I'm a bit busy right now. Who is this?"

"He has a plump wife, two spoiled brats in the International School, and a blonde mistress named Greta he sees at the Gasthof Adler on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. Since this is Wednesday, this must be you, is it not, Mister McAllister."

"All right, this is McAllister. What's the joke?"

"No joke, McAllister. I am Varentsov, Sergei Grigorovich Varentsov, Head of Section S of the MVD's First Directorate. I believe you are familiar with the name?"

"All right, all right, let's say you really are Varentsov. What do you want?"

"What do I want? I was the case officer for your precious Admiral Eric Bruckner, and even that fool was smarter than that. Note that I said *was*, because he had a fatal heart attack just a short time ago, did he not?"

There was a long, nervous pause as a hand went over the mouthpiece and he heard an animated conversation going on in the background.

"Yes, if you do not believe me, check with the people you had following him." Varentsov told him. "You will find I am telling you the truth."

There was silence at the other end of the line as McAllister thought it over. "Okay, okay. What do you know about it? Are you telling me the MVD had him killed?"

"No, no... I did, McAllister. I killed him with my own hands, and if you want the whole story, every sordid little detail, then meet me at the embassy gate and I will tell you all about it."

“At the embassy gate?”

“Yes, I intend to walk straight through; and I do not wish to be stopped.”

“Here? You’re coming here, Varentsov? Why?”

“Oh, that should be obvious, McAllister. I am going to defect, to you personally, and that should make your career. So, ten minutes and do not keep me waiting.”

McAllister sat with a puzzled expression as he lowered the telephone back into its cradle. Finally, he turned toward the stranger from Langley.

“That really was Varentsov?” the other man asked. “Well, I’ll be damned.”

“They were right. And he’s coming here, to the goddamned embassy, if you can believe it, to the front gate.”

They stared at each other, both men shaking their heads.

“I figured the Russians were jerking our chain again.”

“Their Washington attaché told me the word came from Serov himself.”

“Well, it looks like he was telling the truth.”

“They carried out their part. They put Schermayevsky and Davidov on the plane from Moscow to Vienna last night, just like they said they would. No strings; they said they were paying in advance. Talk about tying Washington’s hands.”

McAllister shook his head. “So it doesn’t matter what we think, does it? That poor bastard is bought goods, and we’ve got to deliver.”

“They knew the White House couldn’t turn the deal down. How could they?” the man from Langley said. “It had to be approved by Beria, you know, maybe even Stalin himself. Two top Jewish dissidents in return for our tossing back some rumple-suited creep from their Department of Dirty Tricks. It was no contest.”

“It makes you wonder what Varentsov did,” McAllister mused. “But the truth is I don’t think we even want the guy.”

“The truth is, I don’t think we want the two Jews, either; so make the damned call. Let’s get this done.”

Reluctantly, McAllister picked up the phone and dialed the number they gave him. “Boris? Yeah, it’s me,” he spoke quietly, knowing there was no need for social niceties. “Your package is on the way... no, he’s coming here, to the Embassy. He said he’ll be at the front gate in ten minutes. Just one thing though, when you do grab him, keep it quiet for Chris’ sake... Yeah, Ciao to you, too,” he mumbled into the receiver and hung up.

McAllister walked over to the window and stared down at the empty courtyard. His tour in the land of good beer, schnitzel, and cuckoo clocks was about over, and for the first time he was sick of it all and looking forward to retirement.

“You know, there used to be some honor in what we do,” the other man said quietly.

“Yeah, the whole thing leaves a bad taste in my mouth.”

“Yours?” the man from Langley said with a cynical snort. “Imagine what it’s going to leave in Varentsov’s.”

## PART VIII

**Sucre, Bolivia**  
**December 1952**

### Chapter 44

It was Christmas Eve. Another successful dinner party was nearing its end, as Martin Bormann cast a benevolent smile down the long banquet table at his guests. It was summer here, but a roaring fire danced in the stone hearth behind him, filling the high-beamed dining room with a cheerful, homey red glow. To his left stood a fifteen-foot Christmas tree, covered with hand-made Bavarian ornaments. To his right, through the long bank of French doors, lay the snow-covered peaks of the Andes shining in the bright moonlight. And to add just the right touch to the occasion, a recording of the Vienna Choir Boys singing Christmas carols played softly in the background. Who said Germans could not stage good theater?

Ah, Christmas! This wasn't July. No need for forced smiles or unctuous flattery. No greasy spics with their fat wives all decked out in gaudy costume jewelry, too much makeup, and expensive dresses that did not fit. No cat fights between overweight Bolivian whores yelling at each other in Spanish. No need to count the silverware to see how much was missing this time. Tonight, all of his guests were German-speaking men in their fifties and sixties grown thick around the middle and gray on the temples. Still, it was easier to buy their loyalty than to have them constantly conspiring against him. That was why they were here, to be flattered, cajoled, and paid off.

Bormann reached for his champagne glass. As he pushed his chair back and rose to his feet, the room fell silent. Looking around at their familiar faces, Bormann doubted a larger collection of cranks, sadists, and mass murderers had ever been gathered at one spot, except on the patio of Adolf Hitler's mountaintop retreat at Berchtesgaden. They came here from dozens of countries around the globe to pay homage to him and to receive their envelopes. Leeches, he thought as he raised his glass to salute them. Vermin, he smiled. Pickpockets, he nodded to each side of the table. Whores! From the beginning, all they wanted was a larger share of his money and a larger share of his power. Now, they all knew who was in charge. Some of them had always known, and now they all feared him.

"*Frohe Weihnachten*, and a very merry Christmas, to you, my friends," he began, his round red cheeks beaming. "I can think of no more fitting end to another successful year, than to have you here with me to share our many successes. Truly, you do me honor."



It was much the same speech he gave last year and perhaps the year before, not that any of these cretins would remember. He owed them nothing. Looking down at their blank faces, he realized how very far he had come since that terrible night when he fled on foot through the flames and rubble of a dying Berlin; but those hard days were long gone. He never expected these "*Alte Kämpfer*," the Old Guard, to give him the respect he was due; no, that was too much to expect. If they wouldn't give him their respect, he would take their fear. It had taken him many years of long, hard effort, but the shadowy empire he presided over now spanned two continents. He stood alone at the pinnacle of his power, and he relished the moment.

When he stopped speaking, he raised his glass. The men on both sides of the table rose as one and pounded their fists on the table, over and over, until their loud, drunken voices broke into a resounding chorus of the "Horst Wessel Song," the old Party Anthem. Bormann smiled and sang along with them, their voices and fists now shaking the rafters, thinking how pathetic these old fools looked.

Michael Randall's journey to Bolivia had been a long and hard one, too. It took him five months to backtrack the entry stamps and work permits in Balck's passports and seaman's pay books. They took him back and forth around the globe, paying clerks in seedy hotels, cops on the take, corrupt union officials, and anyone else who might have seen Balck or talked to the man. Most knew who he was, and the fear in their eyes were like the footprints in the snow that led Michael to South America, to Bolivia, to La Paz, to Sucre, and to a recluse living in a large, new house high on a mountainside.

As soon as he set foot in Sucre, Michael sensed this was not a place that took kindly to inquisitive strangers, so he moved slowly and cautiously. For days, he lay around the old town square in a faded serape, tattered blue jeans, a dirty snap-brim hat, and thick sandals; watching and waiting; learning the rhythm of the place. His skin was now a deep, coffee-brown, cracked and wrinkled from months at sea and under the hot southern sun. He had grown a drooping moustache and dirty black hair that hung to his shoulders. Sitting against an adobe wall with the worn, woolen serape wrapped around his shoulders, he could easily pass for one of the locals, except for the eyes. They were a glistening jet-black, just like the *Indios*', but his were hard and angry enough to melt steel.

As the days passed, all the talk in Sucre was about the party that the great "Patron" had planned for Christmas Eve, and it was hard to miss the trucks of wine, meats, pastries, and decorations that streamed through town and up the mountain. The semi-annual parties on Christmas and in late July each year were no secret; neither was the reputation of Señor Perez's tall, blond-haired aide. The rest was not hard for Michael to figure out. It took him three days of careful, exhausting climbing—climbing at night and hiding in the crags by day—as he worked his way around and up the mountain to a steep ridge that looked across a ravine to the rear of the chalet.

There was a thin quarter moon riding low in the western sky. He attached the telescopic sight to the long-barreled hunting rifle he had bought in La Paz and crawled forward into the shadow of a large boulder. The raucous party was still going on, and the house was still brightly lit on all four floors. He brought the rifle

to his shoulder and scanned the lower rooms one by one, examining the busy kitchen, the sitting rooms, the crowded dining room on the first and second floors, and the guard stations at the front corners. Satisfied, he turned the sight on the uppermost rear balcony and waited.

In Sweden, Michael knew he had hurt them badly when he found the U-boat and Leslie killed Kruger. Those were major blows, crippling body blows; but the evil thing they were growing was still alive and the time had come to crawl in after it and bring this to an end. There were debts to pay and scores to settle, and Michael knew in the bottom of his soul that fate had chosen him as the instrument to do it.

The moon had finally set and the hour was growing late. He heard a choir singing Christmas carols in German, and the boisterous chorus of an old Nazi marching song; and he saw men walking back and forth in front of the windows, but never the right one. Finally, the party began to break up. He could hear the loud voices and laughter as dozens of hired cars picked up their passengers and set off on the long drive downhill. He watched it all through the telescopic sight, waiting patiently on the cold rocky ground for a good shot; but one never came. That was all right. He was well concealed. He had food and water and he was content to sit here for another day or two if he must. All he needed was one good shot.

Finally, the lights came on in the top floor. There was a bedroom and an office with a large fireplace and the largest balcony and best view of the mountains, so it had to be Bormann's personal quarters. The glow of the fireplace grew brighter, and soon he heard the loud melodies of Wagner rolling across the valley on the chill night air. Wagner, Michael snorted in disgust. He hated Wagner.

Glancing down at his watch, Michael saw it was almost midnight. Merry Christmas, Martin, he thought. Your time has come.

When the last of his irritating guests and all of his best wine were finally gone, Bormann climbed the grand staircase to the chalet's upper floor and entered the solitude of his corner study. Still dressed in his tuxedo, he placed a new recording of *Die Valkyrie* on the phonograph, the one that Franco sent him on his last birthday. It was by the Berlin Philharmonic, pre-war, of course; and he turned the volume up high, the way he liked it. He plopped his heavy frame into his red-leather armchair and let the powerful overture echo through the house. The music soared, and it carried him along with it.

Bormann took a sip of his fiery Napoleon brandy and leaned back in the chair. It had been a good year; no, it had been his best. The Americans were bogged down fighting the Communists in North Korea. Stalin had become an unstable dictator with rockets and nuclear bombs. De Gaulle was fanning the flames of nationalism in France, undermining NATO, and destroying any hope of Western unity. The Communists in China were ruthlessly consolidating their power. England was sinking into socialism. Even the old political tensions of the left versus the right in Germany had everyone searching for friends.

Yes, it was a marvelous year. Bormann could count six South American governments rattling around with the loose change in his pocket. He enjoyed close personal ties with Franco in Spain, Salazar in Portugal, Stroessner in Paraguay,

Perón, the Shah of Iran, Batista in Cuba, and a basketful of Colonels in Greece, Turkey, South Korea, Egypt, Syria, and Chile. The sun may have set on the British Empire; but it was just beginning to rise on Martin Bormann's. The key of course was money. By carefully transferring assets, ownerships, patents, and cash, his vast financial network controlled more than a hundred corporations, a rocket factory in Egypt, two Swiss banks, steel mills in Germany, arms factories in Portugal, chemical plants in Spain, and a fleet of Greek oil tankers. His subsidiaries owned arms factories in Czechoslovakia, the Philippines, and Brazil, and many, many more stretching from South America to Europe, the United States, the Middle East, and Hong Kong. He owned neither throne nor flag, and his face would never grace a coin, but Martin Bormann could reach out and kill any man on the face of the earth.

Still, the victories seemed hollow without Heinz Kruger standing at his side to share them. Bormann had hoped the young Sturmbannführer would succeed him one day, but Kruger always took excessive risks. Bormann had yet to receive a satisfactory explanation about what happened in Sweden, but he would; it was only a matter of time. If he invested enough people, money, and time, eventually he would learn everything there was to learn about Sweden, the U-582, his gold, and that meddling American. Then, the appropriate punishments would be handed out.

Bormann drained the brandy snifter and realized the music had stopped. The phonograph needle was riding around the last groove of the record with a soft *chick... chick... chick*. Forcing his bulky frame out of the soft armchair, he walked to the phonograph, turned the record over, and heard the first loud, pounding notes of *The Ride of the Valkyries* fill his study.

In a rare buoyant mood, he refilled the brandy snifter and walked to the bank of tall, floor-to-ceiling windows that lined the outside wall. The curtains were open, as he preferred; and he paused to take in the breath-taking view of the dark valley and the snow-capped Andean mountains beyond. He tipped his head back, tossed the fiery red liquid down the back of his throat, and was savoring the glow of the raw alcohol as the tall window in front of him exploded in his face. The glass shattered into a thousand glittering shards. A powerful blow punched him in the center of his chest, knocking him over backward onto the carpet like a floppy rag doll. He lay stunned, but alert on the floor. He tried to get up, but he could not move. He opened his mouth and tried to call out, to summon the guards; but only a bubbly moan came out. His face was cut and bleeding from dozens of slivers of glass, but he felt no pain. What could have possibly happened? Could someone have thrown something through his window? Yes, something had broken the window and struck him in the chest. A rock? Yes, that must be it.

He managed to lift his head a few tottering inches off the carpet and look down. The cold night wind blew through the gaping hole in the window, lifting papers off his desk and tossing them around the room like autumn leaves. The maid would have to pick them up, he thought as his eyes dropped lower, to his chest, where he saw a neat red hole in the center of his crisp white dress shirt. That was when the awful truth crashed down on him. No, this could not be happening, he thought as he ordered his body to rise. No! No! Not now, he groaned, as his head dropped

back on the carpet and a soft moan escaped his trembling lips. Then his eyes turned dull and lifeless, and they blinked no more.

Michael saw the man's round face and receding hairline in the scope, and had no doubt who it was. He took a deep breath and let half of it out, relaxed, and gently squeezed the trigger. The recoil of the large-caliber hunting rifle drove the stock into his muscular shoulder, but he felt nothing. The window glass shattered and the man was blown backwards into the room. As he told Earl Hodge, he usually hit what he was aiming at with a rifle, and he had not missed.

The sharp Crack! of the rifle slowly faded away into the night, and as Michael exhaled, he heard a voice call to him on the wind, "You can't let them get away with it, Mikey... You can't let them get away with it." He spun his head around, knowing it was Eddie's voice, but there was no one there. Eddie had been right, though. They did not get away with it, not Heinz Kruger and not Martin Bormann.

Michael held his breath again and listened, his ears straining for any sound; but there was none—no shouts, no barking dogs, no whistles, and no alarms. There was nothing to hear in the clear mountain air except that damned recording of Wagner blaring on and on. It was as if no one else had heard the rifle shot; as if this had been a personal matter between him and Bormann, and it was settled the only way it could ever be settled.

He pulled back on the rifle's bolt with a loud Click! He watched the gleaming brass casing flip out on the rocks, and laid the rifle on the ground next to it. He had no use for it any longer. He threw his backpack over his shoulder and turned toward the trail, knowing he had to put as much distance between himself and the chalet before first light as he could, because he now had places to go and things to do. There was an oyster dredge in Rock Creek, South Carolina, that needed a helping hand; and a long overdue rain check to redeem, if she would still have him.

Before he set off down the mountain trail, he turned his head for one long, last look at the chalet. "Burn in hell, you bastard," he said with a satisfied smile, "Burn in hell!"

Reaching into his pants pocket, his fingers found that old, battered, silver cigarette case. He pulled it out and stared at it for a long moment, then tossed it on the rocky ground next to the rifle and the brass shell casing, knowing all of his debts were now paid in full. Tomorrow morning, Bormann's flunkies would find the bastard's body and begin their frantic search of the hillside. They would find the rifle and find these two pieces of shiny metal lying next to it. Eventually, they would figure it out and get the message. Next time, maybe they would be a bit less arrogant, a bit less cocky. Next time, maybe they would be a bit more careful around windows at night; because they will never know who might be out there, watching and waiting in the dark.

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