

Death Train

The Sergeant, #1

by Gordon Davis, ...

Published: 1980



Table of Contents

Chapter 1 ... thru ... Chapter 41

* * * * *

Names, characters and incidents in this book are fictional, and any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons living or dead is purely coincidental.



“If the Sergeant doesn’t stop those trains, D-Day goes down the drain!”

The speaker was Colonel Fairbairn, special OSS advisor to General Omar Bradley, at a tense meeting of SHAEF only days before the planned Normandy invasion. Thus began yet another do-or-die mission of the man called The Sergeant—C.J. Mahoney (Code Name: Parrot), a big, brawling career G.I. Mahoney was an almost perfect killing machine with an incredible knack for languages... and the Army’s heavyweight champion foul-up.

His assignment was to stop the personnel and supply trains crafty General Erwin Rommel had lined up to checkmate the assault he knew would come on Omaha Beach. His first try failed when a key bridge wouldn’t blow. Now, with Gestapo Colonel Richter on his trail, it’s last-chance time as Mahoney and a handful of maquis steal an explosives-laden train and head for a fateful rendezvous in a tunnel of death!

Chapter 1

The night was blacker than Hitler’s heart. Mahoney, a big man dressed in a brown leather jacket and a black beret, crouched behind the bush, the magneto detonator in his hands. With him were Cranepool, Celestine, and Fleury; a company of German soldiers was nearby. It was June 3, 1944, and they were in the province of Sarthe not far from the city of Le Mans.

To their front was the radio tower. They couldn’t see it but they knew it was there. During the past four hours they’d been crawling all over it, running wires and tying on sticks of TNT. Now the work was done. There was no point hanging around to catch their breaths because a German guard might trip over the wires.

Mahoney looked at Cranepool and winked. Cranepool nodded his head. Mahoney twisted the handle of the magneto and the tower became adorned with explosions of light. They heard the blast a few seconds later and saw electricity crackling from the broken wires. The wires caught fire and the spiderlike steel structure came crashing to the ground.

Grass and bushes caught fire, and the figures of German soldiers could be seen silhouetted against the flames. Mahoney could hear them shouting orders and sounding the alarm.

“Let’s get out of here,” Mahoney said.

They picked up their carbines and ran into the woods, sweet smelling from a recent rainfall, Mahoney in front, crouched over, the others behind him. They moved quickly, making as little noise as possible, their eyes searching for German soldiers, their fingers on the triggers of their carbines. Mahoney and Cranepool were Rangers from the U.S. Army, parachuted into France two weeks ago to work with the French Resistance in spreading terror and chaos behind German lines, laying the groundwork for the Normandy invasion that everybody, including Hitler himself, knew was coming soon.

Fleury tripped over a fallen tree and went tumbling to the ground. Mahoney and the others stopped until he got up. Fleury was forty-four years old, a little over the hill for this sort of thing, but he knew the area like the palm of his hand, and he was a French patriot to the marrow of his bones.

“You all right?” Mahoney asked him.

“Yes.”

They plunged into the woods again, Mahoney staying close to Fleury, with young Cranepool behind them, and Celestine out on the right flank, which was the direction of Le Mans, headquarters for the German 25th Panzer Division. They made their way around the trees and through the bushes. There was no path and they couldn't have seen one anyway.

Then they heard the dogs. At first the howls were far away, but it didn't take long before they sounded closer. Dogs could move through the thickest forest like lightning, leaping over bushes and diving past trees. They were vicious and bloodthirsty; the Germans trained them that way. Mahoney had been ready to stop for a rest, but there could be no stopping now. Now he had to wonder how many of them would make it to the road, still a few hours away, where an old Citroen that was supposed to provide their means of getting away, was camouflaged in the nearby woods.

The barking came closer. Mahoney knew German patrols were being deployed to comb the woods for the criminals who blew up the radio tower. The Germans always referred to Resistance fighters as criminals and terrorists, and somehow that appealed to his imagination, but he didn't have time to think much about that now. If he and his companions could get away from the dogs, the chances were that they could slip through the German patrols scattered thinly throughout the forest.

The yelping dogs weren't far away now, and Mahoney could hear them crashing through the bushes. The time had come to stop and deal with them.

“Let's get the fuckers,” he said.

They turned around, looking toward the sound of the dogs. Mahoney stepped between Fleury and Celestine and told them to fix bayonets and spread out.

“No wild shots,” he cautioned them. “Make sure you're aiming at a dog and not one of us.”

They nodded, but he could barely make out their faces in the darkness. Cranepool looked wild-eyed and crazy; he was nineteen years old and already had killed too many people for a youth his age. Fleury, with his bushy mustache, had served with distinction in the First World War, and knew his way around a battlefield. And pretty dark-haired Celestine, only twenty-four, had drunk her

share of blood, too. Mahoney scrutinized her pale features, noting she was as grim and ready as any front-line soldier.

His people were in position, and now Mahoney had to take care of himself. He'd rather face a squad of *Waffen* SS bayonet killers than a pack of dogs. Dogs were smaller and could move faster, making harder targets, and the thought of a dog chewing on Mahoney's fine Irish tonsils wasn't very appealing.

He snapped the safety catch off his trigger guard and put the carbine on automatic. He stomped his big right foot behind him into the ground and rammed a round of ammunition into the chamber of the carbine. Now he was ready. Let the bastards come.

The dogs screamed and howled and exploded out of the underbrush. Mahoney saw their jagged furry movement and opened fire. The night bellowed with the sound of automatic weapons, their muzzle blasts illuminating the little forest clearing in jagged light. A dog flew over Mahoney's left shoulder, blood spurting from his neck, and another one fastened his jaws on Mahoney's right bicep. Mahoney swung around in a sharp violent movement and smashed the dog's head against a tree. Another pair of jaws grabbed him by the leg, and Mahoney cracked its skull with the butt of his rifle, moving quickly and getting set again as a second dog jumped at him. He pulled the trigger of his carbine, and it jammed. The fucking things always jammed when you used them on automatic, so Mahoney lunged at the dog with his bayonet, catching it in the gut. Mahoney ripped down with the point, and the dog shrieked in pain, wriggling furiously on the sharpened end. Mahoney flung the dog to the ground and kicked his head in.

Mahoney looked around but no more dogs were coming at him. Cranepool was machine-gunning one on the ground; Fleury was ramming his bayonet through the backbone of a dog chewing on his leg; and Celestine was rolling around on the ground, her hands around the throat of a dog trying to bite her jugular vein. Mahoney held his carbine by the barrel like a baseball bat and took a swing at the dog. The stock whacked the beast on the side of his head and splattered brains and blood everywhere. The dog went limp and fell to the side. Celestine let him go, his eyes wide with horror.

Mahoney knelt beside her. "You all right?"

With her sleeve she wiped the dog's blood from her cheek. "I think so."

"Get up," he told her. "We don't have time to fuck around here."

He grabbed her wrist and pulled her to her feet. She was a little unsteady but he let her go and looked at the others. Cranepool was wiping his bayonet on a dog's haunch and smiling peculiarly. Mahoney figured the kid lost his marbles on about his third *dead* German, but he was a good soldier. Fleury was breathing hard and loading up his ammo clip, an old soldier taking care of business. Mahoney turned to Celestine again, and saw that she was limping.

"What's wrong with your leg?"

"A dog bit me."

Mahoney dropped to one knee and looked. Sure enough her left calf had been mauled by one of the dogs. Blood was oozing down her ankle into her shoes. She was wearing a long gray cotton skirt and black socks that reached her knees. He knew what her legs looked like in the moonlight with nothing covering them. They had been flawless, but wouldn't be any more.

He took the medical dressing from inside his shirt and tore open the cardboard wrapper. Inside was the big square bandage with gauze ribbons on each of its four corners. He tied the bandage tightly against her calf so that it would stanch the flow of blood, but he knew it wouldn't help much. He decided to put on a tourniquet, and reached into his back pocket for his handkerchief.

"No-no," she said, realizing what he was going to do. "We don't have time."

"Shut up and stop moving around."

She stood still as he tied the tourniquet below her knee, working quickly and mechanically, his fingers grazing the smooth skin that he'd caressed at other more opportune moments.

"Okay," he said standing up. "Let's get rolling."

"Which way?" asked Fleury.

"Good question," Mahoney replied.

He wore a German Army compass on a leather thong around his neck, and took it out. Fleury came to his side and unfolded the map.

Mahoney squinted at the map. "Where are we now?"

Fleury pointed. "Around here."

Fleury held the map in the palms of his hands and Mahoney laid the compass on top of it, positioning it against the line that led to the Citroen. He read the number where the needle pointed and sighted an azimuth.

"That way," he said, pointing into a dark section of the woods.

He moved swiftly in the direction he'd indicated, tucking the compass into his shirt again. Fleury and Cranepool followed, Celestine behind them. When Mahoney glanced back and saw her limping along, he realized she couldn't keep up.

He stopped abruptly. "C'mere," he told her.

"Don't bother about me," she said. "I'll be all right."

"I said c'mere."

"Go ahead," she said weakly. "Don't worry about me."

He lunged back and grabbed her wrist, then pulled her along with him.

"Let me go!" she protested.

"Shut your mouth."

Mahoney dragged her beside him, carrying his carbine in his left hand. Fleury and Cranepool had their carbines at the ready, on the lookout for a German patrol. No more dogs could be heard; a good sign. Celestine stumbled and dropped her carbine. Mahoney scooped it off the ground and told Cranepool to sling it over his shoulder.

"Don't take away my rifle," Celestine said dazedly.

Mahoney realized she was weak from loss of blood. "Shut up and do as you're told."

He pulled her along beside him, and they made their way through the woods. Branches scratched their faces and perspiration plastered their clothes against their bodies. They tried to be quiet but you can't do that when you're moving quickly through the woods. Mahoney hoped the Germans hadn't found the car by the road. He also hoped the German patrols wouldn't find them in that big forest.

They stopped beside a huge boulder to listen to the sounds of the forest. They couldn't hear anything that sounded like a German patrol. Mahoney took out his

compass and checked his azimuth. He figured they were about two and a half miles from the road.

“How’re you doing?” he asked Celestine.

“All right,” she whispered.

“Liar.”

They moved out again. An owl hooted and they jumped across a brook. Mahoney would have liked to stop for a drink but you never knew what kind of diseases might be in water like that. They continued to plough their way through the woods, pausing occasionally to listen for Germans and to check their direction. Mahoney glanced at his watch; it was four o’clock in the morning. If they didn’t get out of the woods by sunup, they could expect to spend the evening in a Gestapo interrogation center—or in a cemetery.

They continued moving through the woods. Mahoney was glad there was no moon, because without one, it would be extremely difficult for a German patrol to spot them. He held the carbine in front of him in an effort to keep the branches away, but they came flying at him anyway, and he hoped one of them wouldn’t put his eye out.

Before Mahoney joined the army about ten years ago, the only woods he’d ever known were in Central Park. He was from Yorkville on the East Side, the son of a longshoreman, and he’d been an altar boy when he was young. He’d joined the army during the Depression because there hadn’t been much food in the house and he’d figured he was eating too much of it. There were no jobs so he went out to Fort Hamilton and signed up. He didn’t think he’d like the army very much, and in a way he was right. He didn’t like certain things in the army, like the inspections and the chickenshit, but there were other things he liked very much, such as the steady paycheck every month, the whorehouses near every army base, the camaraderie of the barracks, and the outlet it provided for his basically violent nature. If Mahoney had not gone into the army he almost certainly would have wound up in jail.

Now Celestine fell to the ground, wrenching Mahoney backwards. He bent down to look at her and saw her eyes half-closed. She gasped for air and tried to pull her hand away from Mahoney’s grip.

“Leave me here,” she said. “I know I’m slowing you down.”

“You’re not slowing me down.”

“I can’t go on, Mahoney.”

“That’s what you think.”

He picked her up and draped her over his shoulder. She was light and frail as a bird, which was deceptive because he knew what a little tiger she could be when you got her alone in the dark. He wasn’t about to leave a good piece of ass like her behind; moreover, you could rely on her in a tight situation.

He checked his compass again and they all moved out, Fleury on his left and Cranepool on his right. They climbed the hills and passed through valleys. They came to a river thirty feet wide and went right through it. Although it was May the water was quite cool. Though it felt invigorating at first, Mahoney knew it would feel shitty in a little while, because wet feet quickly became blisters and pain.

Suddenly he heard something. He held up his hand. “Hold it!”

They all stopped and listened. In the distance the faint sound of a motor vehicle could be heard. That meant the road wasn't far away, probably no more than a few hundred yards.

"Move out again," Mahoney said, "but slowly and quieter than before."

They stepped forward, trying to be silent, but to Mahoney's ears they sounded like a herd of elephants. They made their way around boulders and trees, listening for German patrols. Then the woods began to thin out a little.

Fleury pointed straight ahead. "The road's just over there," he said.

"I'll go check it out," Mahoney replied. "All of you stay here and take a break."

Mahoney lowered Celestine to the forest floor. Her eyes were closed and she was out cold. He loosened the tourniquet on her leg and looked at her face for a second, because he loved her in a way, and then took his carbine and hunched toward the road.

He moved slowly and silently, the way they'd taught him in the Infantry School at Fort Benning, the way the Indians used to walk, touching his toes down lightly first, then following with his heels. Every several steps he stopped and listened. He heard only insects twittering and the breeze trembling the branches of the forest. Finally he came to the road. He lay behind a bush and looked to his left and right, but could see no movement. He felt tired and would like to lie still for a while, and maybe light up the half of a French cigar that he had in his pocket, but there was no time for that. He got up and made his way back to the others, not worrying about being so silent now that he was certain there were no Germans about.

Fleury was kneeling over Celestine, and Cranepool was sitting against a tree, his knees in the air and rifle in his lap. Mahoney knelt beside Fleury.

"How is she?" he asked.

"She's lost a lot of blood. Look."

Mahoney looked at the bandage, and it was soaked with blood.

"A little person like her can't afford to lose much blood, because she doesn't have much to begin with," Fleury said.

"I know. Okay, let's move it out. We'll use the road from now on."

He picked up Celestine and carried her over his shoulder again. They moved toward the road, realizing the car couldn't be too far away and they soon would be on their way back to their camp.

They stopped and listened at the edge of the road, but could hear nothing. Mahoney was surprised that there wasn't military traffic on the road carrying troops trying to find them. Maybe the Germans thought they'd gone in some other direction, but Mahoney didn't see how they could think that. This road would be the most likely destination for saboteurs.

"Is the car to the right or left?" Mahoney asked Fleury.

"The left, I think."

"You don't know?"

"It's too dark—I can't see very well. After we go a little way I'm sure we'll come to a landmark of some kind."

"Let's hope so."

They moved onto the road and headed left. If they heard any vehicles they'd scramble into the woods to hide. They were in a single file with Fleury in front, Mahoney second, and Cranepool bringing up the rear. It was pitch black, and

Mahoney brought his watch close to his eyes. The luminous green hands told him it was four-fifteen. It was going to get light pretty soon. He hoped the car wasn't very far away.

"HALT!"

A searchlight came on, searing Mahoney's eyes. He broke for the woods, as weapons began firing. WHUMP went something against Celestine, the impact knocking Mahoney off his feet. A carbine fired near him and the searchlight exploded. It was dark again, and Mahoney landed on his side in the gravel beside the road. The Germans were shouting orders and bullets were whizzing over Mahoney's head. He looked at Celestine. Her waist was a mass of blood.

He grabbed for her pulse, and there was none. If he hadn't been carrying her on his shoulder the bullet would have smacked him right in the head.

He jammed the butt of his carbine into his shoulder and sprayed bullets in the direction where the searchlight had been. Then he scrambled on his hands and knees into the bushes at the side of the road. Once behind the bushes he began running in a zigzag pattern through the trees. He prayed the Germans didn't have any more dogs with them; he didn't hear any yet.

Germans shouted orders and fired into the woods. The bullets zanged into trees and ricocheted off boulders. Mahoney pumped his legs and ran as fast as he could. He wondered how Fleury and Cranepool were making out. Behind him he could hear Germans crashing through the woods. He knew it would be hard for them to find him in the darkness, and that they'd have to move more cautiously than he, because they didn't know where he was or who might be with him.

At least that was what he hoped as he charged through the forest like a wild animal.

Chapter 2

It was the morning of the next day. Philippe Montriveau was driving his truck on the road between St. Lo and St. Jean-de-Daye in a heavy rainstorm. It wasn't a good day for driving around, but Philippe had work to do. The back of his truck was loaded with cabbages and onions, for he was a greengrocer. He was seen on this road at this time nearly every day. The Germans never stopped him to ask for identification anymore, and in fact he sold his produce to many of the German military units in the area.

The windshield wipers slapped back and forth in front of his eyes, which were searching everywhere for signs of troop movements, new fortifications, and the effects of the Allied bombing of the night before. But he couldn't see much because of the rain. The cabbages and the onions in the rear of his truck was really camouflage; he was a member of the Resistance on his daily reconnaissance mission.

He rounded a bend and came to a long stretch of flat road. Then the road angled up the side of a small mountain. Philippe was a stout man with a mustache, wearing a cap on the side of his head. His pudgy hands gripped the wheel tightly as he steered around the side of the mountain, looking to his left at the gorge. A

railroad trestle was constructed across it, and Philippe wanted to see what condition it was in because he'd been told that it would be one of the Allied targets last night. He peered through the mist and rain, and what he saw sent a chill up his back.

The bridge had been hit in the bombing raid, but ghostlike figures were crawling around it, repairing the trestles and laying new tracks. It must be the German engineer battalion stationed near Chateau-Gontier. The bridge hadn't been damaged too much and the engineers probably would have the trains running before the end of the day. That meant German reinforcements could be rushed by train to the beaches of Normandy in case of an invasion, and Philippe knew the invasion was imminent.

As he pressed down on his accelerator, his rear wheels spun out on the slippery wet road. He wrestled with his steering wheel, and brought the truck under control again. It wouldn't do for him to drive off a cliff with the information he had now. He'd better take it slow and easy so he could get to St. Lo in one piece. Then he could relay the message about the bridge.

Carefully steering around the mountain, he wondered if the Allied bombers would be able to knock out that bridge in time. If they didn't, there'd be hell to pay on the beaches.

Chapter 3

In a driving rainstorm, a green U.S. Army jeep drove through the front gate of SHAEF Headquarters in Bushy Park outside London. At the wheel was Colonel Bruce Fairbairn of the OSS, a thin man of fifty with a clipped graying mustache. He wore a trench coat and visored officers' cap, and the rain pounded on the canvas roof of the jeep.

Fairbairn ground his teeth anxiously as he drove past the Nissen huts and tents. He'd just received the radio message about the railway bridge between St. Lo and St. Jean-de-Daye, and he had to get word to General Carl Spaatz of the U.S. Army Air Corps that the bridge had been rebuilt, and that a bomb attack must be launched against it without delay. Otherwise the Germans would be able to pour reinforcements into the Omaha and Utah beachheads, and place the entire invasion in grave jeopardy.

The jeep approached two long low hills that actually were two one-story buildings covered with huge nets of camouflage. Fairbairn had learned that Spaatz was at a high-level conference with General Eisenhower and the rest of the top SHAEF brass. Fairbairn believed that the information he had was important enough to call Spaatz out of the meeting.

He stopped the jeep in front of one of the buildings. Two U.S. Army MPs in white helmets and white gloves stepped forward and opened the door of the jeep. Fairbairn stepped out into the pouring rain. The MPs saluted smartly and Fairbairn saluted back, then ran to the building.

He went inside, took off his hat and trench coat, and marched toward General Eisenhower's conference room. Secretaries, clerks, and staff officers looked at him

curiously as he rushed through the corridors leaving a trail of raindrops on the polished floor behind him. Finally he arrived at the front door of the conference room. A sergeant was sitting at a desk beside the door.

"Yes, sir?" asked the sergeant.

"I've got to speak to General Spaatz right away," Fairbairn said.

"I'm sorry sir, but I'm afraid you'll have to wait until the conference is over."

Fairbairn rested his fists on the desk and leaned toward the sergeant, looking into his eyes. "It's urgent, Sergeant."

"I'm sorry sir, but I have orders that the conference isn't to be disturbed."

"I know that, but I wouldn't be here if it wasn't of the utmost importance. I think you'd better go in there right now and tell General Spaatz that Colonel Fairbairn has to speak with him right away, and *that's* an order, Sergeant."

The sergeant hesitated for a moment. "Yes, sir."

The sergeant got up and opened the door of the conference room, slipping inside. In the split second the door was opened Fairbairn could see the big brass crowded around the map table. He knew they were finalizing plans to invade Hitler's Atlantic Wall, but they weren't going to get very far if they didn't knock out the bridge between St. Lo and St. Jean-de-Daye.

After a minute that seemed like a half hour, the sergeant returned with General Spaatz, who appeared perturbed.

"What is it?" Spaatz asked Fairbairn.

Fairbairn took a map from his breast pocket and unfolded it on the desk. "Sir, I hate to bother you, but something very serious has come up and I thought I'd better tell you about it right away. My office has received a transmission from France that a certain critical bridge here," Fairbairn pointed to its location, "has been rebuilt by the Germans. In view of the pending invasion, I thought I'd better get word to you right away so that you could identify it as a target on the Eighth Air Force's next bombing raid in France. As you can see, if the bridge isn't knocked out, German troops could conceivably be brought to the beachheads rather quickly."

Spaatz bent over the map and looked at the position of the bridge. He realized that what Fairbairn said was true. The bridge would have to be knocked out, and for good this time.

"May I take this map?" Spaatz asked.

"Yes, sir."

"I'll get back to you on this."

"Thank you, sir."

Spaatz opened the door and returned to the conference room. General Eisenhower was standing around the large map table with General Bradley, Air Marshall Leigh-Mallory, General Montgomery, Admiral Ramsay, General Smith, and others. Group Captain Stagg of the Meteorological Committee, was continuing his discussion of the weather situation. He was predicting a virtual hurricane for June 5, the day the invasion was scheduled to take place.

Ike looked up from the map table. "What was it, Carl?"

"A report from the OSS. I'll have to talk with General Bradley about it immediately after the meeting."

"If it's important, you might as well talk with him now."

“Well it *is* rather important, sir,” General Spaatz said. He looked at the map Colonel Fairbairn had given him and then found the position of the bridge on the large map on the table.

“According to a radio transmission the OSS has just received,” Spaatz began, “this bridge here,” he pointed to it, “has been rebuilt by German engineers as of this morning. Therefore we’re going to have to knock it out again before the invasion, because as you can see, the railroad that goes over the bridge is a direct troop pipeline to the beaches of Normandy.”

As Ike and the others looked at the bridge, they all nodded and mumbled that it indeed was a strategic objective.

“Well,” said Ike, “you’re not going to be able to mount a bomb attack in this weather, Carl.”

“That’s why I thought I’d speak to General Bradley about it, sir. Maybe he can send in some of our demolition people to blow it up.”

Admiral Ramsay shook his head. “I don’t know how you’re going to send a demolition crew in if we can’t navigate small boats in this weather.”

Ike looked at General Bradley. “You have some of your Ranger personnel in France already, don’t you?”

General Bradley was a taciturn, grumpy-looking man. “Yes I do, sir,” he said in his deep voice.

“Do you think you can get word to them?”

“I think I can.”

“Good,” Ike said. “Take care of that bridge for us, will you Brad?”

“Yes, sir.”

Chapter 4

Mahoney sat in the only cafe in the small village of Aiglemont, drinking wine. He wished there was some whisky in the joint, but there wasn’t. There was only this damned wine, but it was better than nothing. He was afraid that if he stayed in France much longer, he’d become a wino for sure.

He’d had a hectic night running over hill and dale, but he’d eluded the Nazis and managed to return to his base in the nearby hills. Cranepool had made it back too, and had been sleeping like a baby when Mahoney left for town. Cranepool said he saw Fleury go down in a hail of bullets, and Mahoney already knew the fate of little Celestine.

Celestine was the reason Mahoney was in the cafe so early in the afternoon, sitting at a table in the corner and drinking burgundy wine. Mahoney had slept a few hours and then woke up thinking about her. He couldn’t fall asleep again so he came to the cafe. He realized that he’d liked Celestine more than he’d thought, and would miss her very much. He even was sorry about the time he’d punched her in the mouth, but he hadn’t really hit her that hard—and she’d thrown a bowl of beef stew at him first. She’d heard that he’d been fooling around with Odette, which happened to have been the truth, and had lost her temper. Fiery little thing, she was.

Mahoney knew that you shouldn't get too close to people at wartime, because you never knew when they were going to bite the dust. But he hadn't thought he'd been that close to Celestine. He'd just thought she was the best available female to screw. But now his heart ached whenever he pictured her sprawled on the road with her eyes closed and blood pouring out of her side.

He took another slug of wine, wishing it had more bite. His beret was hanging on the back of the chair next to the one he was sitting on, and you could see the thick unruly black hair that he always attempted, without much success, to part neatly on the left side. He had a ruddy complexion and his nose, which had been broken once in a barroom brawl in Wrightstown, New Jersey, just outside of Fort Dix, was only slightly crooked. He also had a scar on his left cheek, acquired in the battle for the Kasserine Pass in North Africa. It had been his first experience in actual combat, and he'd acquitted himself rather well although the battle was a humiliating defeat for the U.S. Army. He'd taken command of his company after all the officers were killed. He'd led a fighting retreat from an exposed position, killing numerous Germans and saving the lives of many American soldiers although he had a bullet in his leg, another in his shoulder, and a German had swiped him across the cheek with a bayonet during a bitter hand-to-hand confrontation.

Mahoney had been awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his exploits in the Kasserine Pass, and had been promoted to master sergeant. This brought him to the attention of his superior officers who noticed that he had a peculiar facility for learning foreign languages, a facility he himself had not known he possessed. Until, for instance, looking for a warehouse in Oran, he was forced to learn a few words of French here and there. Before he knew it he was able to carry on entire conversations with French people, and moreover, he was able to mimic perfectly their accent and pronunciation, which caused them to call him *Le Perroquet*, the parrot, an appellation that stuck and later became his official code name.

He also learned to speak German through certain of his black market dealings with German prisoners of war at the big camp outside of Oran. Mahoney was quite surprised by his ability to absorb foreign languages, because he'd always been a lousy student in school. Three times the nuns didn't promote him to a higher grade, and finally they'd expelled him from school altogether after a fight in one of the school corridors that he still insisted to this day that he didn't start. But those nuns were crazy anyway. A woman would have to be insane if she didn't like to get drunk and have fun.

His skill at languages was duly inscribed on his personnel records along with the circumstances that caused him to be awarded the DSC, and were duly noted by officials from the Ranger battalions, who regularly combed servicemen's records looking for unusual types like Mahoney. They offered him a transfer to the Rangers and told him he'd get a special paratrooper's pay and special training at the Ranger base not far from London. When Mahoney asked if he'd be able to get into London once in a while, they said he'd get regular passes, whereupon he signed on the dotted line.

However all did not go smoothly with Mahoney in the Rangers. On his first pass to London he got into a brawl in a Piccadilly pub with a British commando who made some disparaging remarks about the fighting skill of the American fighting man. Mahoney caused eighteen stitches to be sewn into the commando's skull,

while he himself sustained only a blackened eye and split lip. For this he was busted down to buck sergeant and not given any more passes for three months.

In the fighting in Sicily, Mahoney became a sergeant first class and also won the Silver Star for his participation in a Ranger raid on the German supply dump near Vizzini. At Salerno he became a master sergeant again. Then he was returned to England for special training in clandestine warfare behind enemy lines. Now he was in France drinking cheap burgundy wine. He hoped the war would be over soon so he could go back to New York and have some fun.

Mahoney raised his hand, and the waiter, who was sitting at a table near the door to the kitchen reading a newspaper, got up and came over. Mahoney asked for another bottle of wine in the flawless accents of the ordinary French man. The waiter went to the kitchen to get the wine. Mahoney looked around the cafe. The few people sitting at the gnarled old wooden tables were talking or reading newspapers. He wondered if any of them were informers, because Normandy was crawling with Nazi sympathizers and collaborators, but he felt safe, his papers were in order, and he had an alibi for why he was in that particular cafe on that particular afternoon.

The door of the cafe opened and Leduc walked in, looking around. Leduc spotted Mahoney and walked to his table. He was a tall thin man who chain-smoked foul-smelling Algerian cigarettes and who was a fearless fighter in the resistance unit to which Mahoney was attached.

Leduc sat down at Mahoney's table and scrutinized his face. "How drunk are you?" he asked.

"Not too much," Mahoney replied.

"That's good, because they want you at headquarters right away. Get going."

"What's the hurry?" Mahoney asked thickly. "I've just ordered another bottle of wine. We can finish it off and then go back together."

"An important message has come to you from England. You have to go back right now. Captain Montegnac will be very mad if you don't hurry."

Mahoney made an angry gesture with his hand. "Aw, shit." He stood up and put on his beret.

The waiter came out of the kitchen with the bottle of wine. "M'sieu, where are you going?"

"My wife just fell down the well," Mahoney told him. "I must be going."

"Ah M'sieu, I am so sorry to hear that," the waiter said, genuinely aggrieved. "I will pray for her."

"Put the cork back in that bottle. I'll be back for it one of these days."

"Yes, M'sieu."

Mahoney took the butt of his cigar out of the ashtray and lit it with a match. He missed his trusty old Zippo, but it would appear peculiar for a French peasant to be walking around with an American cigarette lighter. Sticking the cigar into the corner of his mouth, he followed Leduc out of the cafe.

It still was pouring outside. Mahoney buttoned his black oilskin slicker tightly around his neck and got into the old Renault Leduc had arrived in. Leduc sat behind the wheel and pressed the button that sent the old engine grumbling to life. They drove off through the main street of the village, which also was the only

street in the village. They passed the white houses and soon were in the countryside, but Mahoney couldn't see much because of the rain.

What the hell do they want from me this time? he wondered as he puffed his cigar.

"Phew, that thing stinks," Leduc said, fanning the air with one hand.

"Fuck you," Mahoney replied, scowling.

"You're in a pretty bad mood today, no?"

Mahoney didn't answer that one.

"I guess you must feel pretty bad about Celestine."

"Shut up about Celestine," Mahoney said.

"I understand how you feel, *Perroquet*. I have been in love in my life too, you know."

Mahoney pulled his beret over his face and closed his eyes. He thought he'd take a little nap for a half hour, because that's how long it would take to get to the camp at St. Pierre.

Chapter 5

The camp at St. Pierre was on the site of an old Carthusian monastery built in the fourteenth century and now abandoned for many years. It consisted of four crumbling stone buildings on the top of a mountain interlaced with caves. To reach the monastery you had to park your car at the foot of the mountain and ascend a narrow path that in certain spots was quite dangerous. The Germans didn't know that a Resistance unit was sequestered in the monastery, and even if they did know they couldn't do much about it. They couldn't mount a ground attack against the building because a handful of Resistance fighters could hold off a German Army on the narrow ascending path forever, and bombing would do no good because the caves were deep under the rock surface of the mountain. A parachute drop wouldn't work because there wasn't a very large landing area on top of the mountain, and an artillery bombardment would be as ineffective as bombs dropped from an airplane.

The only way for Germans to deal with the guerillas would be to surround the mountain and starve them out, but that would take a long time because food and ammunition had been squirreled away ever since the fall of France in 1940, and the tiny garrison there could hold out for years. But these measures hadn't been necessary yet, because despite the vast number of collaborators in Normandy, the camp at St. Pierre was still unknown to all except certain members of the Resistance and those American Rangers parachuted into France to work with them.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon when the Renault came to a stop at the foot of the mountain where the monastery was. Leduc looked in his rear-view mirror to make sure no one had followed him, then turned off the road and drove into the woods, where no one could see the car. He shook the shoulder of Mahoney, who had been snoring loudly.

Mahoney stiffened and opened his eyes, while reaching for the pistol concealed under his shirt. His big brown eyes saw Leduc, and instead of grabbing his pistol he took a fresh cigar out of his pocket, placing it between his lips. He lit the cigar and got out of the Renault, slamming the door behind him. Leduc locked the Renault and ran to catch up with Mahoney, who already was on his way to the path that led to the monastery.

The rain still was coming down in torrents, and Mahoney's feet still hadn't dried out completely since his trek down the path in the morning. As he ascended the path with Leduc, he wondered when the rain would stop. The constant rain and the death of Celestine were combining to make him more gloomy and irritable than he usually was. He wanted to see the sun again, and wondered how long it would be before he could sleep with another woman. Maybe another few days for both the rain and his period of mourning, he figured.

It took forty minutes of slogging through mud and stumbling over rocks to reach the top of the mountain. The old monastery was wreathed in rain and mist. Mahoney always felt strange about living in a monastery because he was a lapsed Catholic. He'd had sufficient Catholic training to feel guilty about having broken, at one time or another in his life, all of the commandments except the one that said to honor your father and mother, and the abandoned church was a constant reminder of his many spiritual transgressions. Sometimes at night when he'd drunk too much wine he'd see the old Carthusian monks wandering around the buildings and the grounds, their faces hidden by hoods and their arms folded like Chinamen with their hands tucked into voluminous sleeves. He imagined that the ghosts of those monks didn't want him living there, either. Sometimes in the echoing chambers of the decrepit buildings he thought he heard the monks chanting their daily prayers, and it scared the shit out of him. Once he was about to fall to his knees on the stone floor to pray to God, but Celestine had happened along, and they smooched it up a little in a dark corner.

Ah Celestine, Mahoney thought. They don't make many like you, kid, and that's a shame.

Now Mahoney and Leduc entered the monastery and made their way through the damp corridors to the room that Captain Montegnac used as an office. It also was the room where radio communications were transmitted and received. Inside, they saw that Captain Montegnac wasn't there, but old Topinard was sitting at the radio, listening through headphones to the crackling of the atmosphere.

"Where's Montegnac?" Leduc asked.

"He went out to take a leak."

Mahoney puffed his cigar and sat on one of the old wooden chairs in front of Montegnac's desk. He felt nauseous and sleepy. He could also use a meal—and had hoped to enjoy one in the little cafe—but now he'd have to settle for the standard beans and tinned meat ration served nearly every day at the monastery.

Montegnac returned to the office, a tall lanky man wearing gray slacks and a brown sweater. He was thirty-five years old and had a black mustache resembling the one worn by Charles de Gaulle. His face was long and somber, and reminded Mahoney of a horse.

"Ah, so here you are," Montegnac snapped at Mahoney.

"What's the problem?" Mahoney asked.

“There’s been a message for you from England.”

“What does it say?”

“Read it yourself.”

Montegnac lifted a piece of paper off his desk and handed it to Mahoney. The message already had been decoded by Topinard and Mahoney was glad because he didn’t feel up to going through that shit just then. He squinted his eyes and puffed his cigar as he read the message. It was addressed to Parrot and was from SHAEF Headquarters, sent via OSS transmitters to St. Pierre. It ordered Parrot to destroy the railroad bridge between St. Lo and St. Jean-de-Daye by no later than 1800 hours tomorrow, which was June 4. He was to report the success of his mission immediately upon its successful conclusion. That was all the message said.

Mahoney scratched his nose and read the message again. He looked at his watch and noted that 1800 hours tomorrow was less than twenty-four hours away. He held the slip of paper out to Captain Montegnac. “You read this?”

“Of course I read it.”

“Do you know what bridge they’re talking about?”

“Come here—I’ll show it to you.”

Montegnac led Mahoney and Leduc to the large map he had on the wall. He pointed his finger to the bridge. “There it is.”

Mahoney looked at the bridge and immediately saw its military significance. He looked at his watch again. “We don’t have much time.”

“We would have had more time if you hadn’t been getting drunk in Aiglemont,” Montegnac said drily.

Mahoney scratched his nose and looked at the map again. He thought Montegnac was a tight-assed chickenshit bastard, and someday when the war was over he was going to punch him right in the mouth.

“How many of your men are you going to let me have?” Mahoney asked Montegnac.

“How many do you need?”

“As many as I can get.”

“You mean if I had a thousand men here, you’d want them all?” Mahoney grinned. “Sure. The more the merrier, as they say in my country.”

Montegnac frowned. He didn’t know why the Americans sent him this brute, instead of a professional soldier. Mahoney belonged in a prison, not an army, but of course Montegnac had to admit that Mahoney had successfully completed every mission he’d gone out on. Montegnac thought for a few seconds.

“I can give you eight people, and with Cranepool and yourself, that makes ten,” Montegnac said. “That should be enough, don’t you think?”

“If you can’t give me any more, I guess it’ll have to be enough. Does anybody know what this bridge looks like?”

“I do,” Montegnac replied. “It’s a trestle bridge around two hundred meters wide built in a gorge around one hundred meters deep.”

Mahoney closed his eyes and did the computations in his head. “I’ll need about ten crates of TNT,” he said.

Montegnac raised his eyebrows. “Ten crates? Did you intend to blow up all of Normandy?”

“No, just that bridge. I like to do a thorough job, Captain.” Mahoney winked fiendishly at him.

“But we don’t have ten crates, Sergeant. We only have six crates, and I need two for another operation.”

“What other operation?”

“You don’t have to know.”

“Why don’t I have to know?”

“Because what you don’t know, can’t hurt me.”

Mahoney wanted to grab Montegnac by the throat. Montegnac was an officer in the French regular army and he was a stickler for abiding by rules and regulations even when they made no sense. He was a graduate of St.-Cyr, the French version of America’s West Point.

Mahoney calmed himself down, because he’d learned that Montegnac became more stubborn when faced with yelling and screaming, or the threat of physical violence.

“I have a feeling,” Mahoney said softly, “that this bridge operation should take precedence over any other operation being mounted by this command. The message said *urgent* in case you didn’t notice. They wouldn’t have given me a deadline of 1800 hours tomorrow if it wasn’t urgent.”

“My message was marked *urgent* also,” Montegnac replied.

“But my message came after your message. In my book that means it supersedes your message.”

Montegnac raised his chin in the air. “You’re entitled to your opinion, and I’m entitled to mine. But I’m afraid that my opinion will have to carry more weight than yours because I’m in command here.”

Mahoney felt his self-control disintegrating. He pointed his big forefinger at Montegnac. “Someday I’m going to shoot you, you son-of-a-bitch!” he said through clenched teeth.

Montegnac stiffened his spine and raised his chin higher in the air. “I ought to court-martial you, Mahoney. In fact, I should have court-martialed you long ago. You’re continually challenging my authority here, you drink too much, you quarrel with everybody, and you’re always bothering the women, many of whom are married. You may be a master sergeant in the American Army, but in the French Army you wouldn’t last a week.”

Mahoney harumphed. “That’s interesting, because the French Army didn’t last a week against the German Army. And I think I also ought to mention that although other nations have signed armistices with the Germans, and some nations surrendered in the field, France is the only nation that has collaborated officially with the Nazis.”

Montegnac turned red, and then it appeared as though he was turning a pale shade of green. “You’re dismissed, Sergeant Mahoney,” he said in a voice that he was struggling to maintain on an even pitch. “I’ll send the eight *Frenchmen* you need to help you on your mission to your quarters within a half hour. You may pick up your TNT at the supply room.”

“I’ll need two vehicles,” Mahoney said.

“Leduc will take care of that for you. Is there anything else, Sergeant?”

Mahoney realized Montegnac was trying to put their relationship on a military footing, where he felt most comfortable and held the most rank. “No, sir,” Mahoney said.

Mahoney saluted, and Montegnac saluted back in his funny French way. Mahoney did a smart about-face and marched out of Montegnac’s office. Leduc, who was not officially in anybody’s army, didn’t salute, preferring to wink goodbye to Montegnac and old Topinard, who was sitting with his mouth hanging open at the radio.

Leduc followed Mahoney into the dark corridor. “You shouldn’t talk to him that way. You know how upset he gets.”

“Fuck him,” replied Mahoney, lighting the cigar butt held in his teeth.

“You could get more out of him if you were more conciliatory.”

“I’m not so sure,” Mahoney said. He made a fist and held it in front of Leduc’s face. “This is the only thing people respect.”

“I think you’re wrong.”

“Let me know what cars I can use, will you?”

“Very well.”

Mahoney watched Leduc walk the opposite way down the corridor. He liked Leduc and regretted the disparaging remarks he’d made about France and the French Army, but Montegnac’s phony aristocratic bullshit pissed him off. He figured Montegnac acted that way because he felt ashamed of France’s poor performance in the war so far, therefore compensating with an excess of staff officer foolishness, but unless French officers like Montegnac came back down to earth, the French Army never would amount to shit in this war.

Mahoney walked to his room through the old stone corridors of the monastery. If his mother could see him now she’d be overjoyed to know he was in such a holy place. She might even be moved to say a few prayers. Wind whistled through the open windows of the monastery, and Mahoney thought he heard those monks chanting again. It was the weirdest thing, the way he kept hearing them. Nobody else ever mentioned it—could he be the only one? Those nuns at St. Catherine’s School on the East Side really must have warped his mind, if he was hearing monks who’d died hundreds of years ago.

“Mahoney,” said a voice in the shadows.

Mahoney jerked his head around and saw Odette standing in a doorway. “What are you doing here?” he asked.

She was a busty blonde in her late twenties, a little on the heavy side. She had one of those French noses that made her look like a bird of some kind. “I was waiting to see you,” she said.

“What about?”

“I wanted to tell you how sorry I was to hear about Celestine. I know you cared for her very much. You must miss her quite a lot.”

Mahoney looked down into her blue eyes. She had been one of Celestine’s closest friends, and yet she’d made love to Mahoney when Celestine wasn’t around. The men and women garrisoned at St. Pierre lived every day with the knowledge that they might be dead before sundown, and that tension made them do things that they ordinarily wouldn’t do in civilian life.

“Yes, I miss her,” Mahoney said. “You must miss her, too.”

“Oh, I do,” she said, and a tear rolled down her cheek. “We’ve known each other ever since we were little girls. We went to the same convent school together.” She closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around Mahoney, hugging him tightly and resting her cheek on his stomach. “I’m afraid,” she whispered.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said, placing his big hands on her back.

“But—you know—Celestine was alive this time yesterday. I had a talk with her about her aunt, who is sick. And now Celestine is dead. I can’t believe she’s dead.”

Mahoney stroked her hair and tried to comfort her. “We’re all going to be dead someday,” he said. “Nobody gets out of this world alive. Celestine is lucky in a way. She doesn’t have to put up with this goddamned war anymore, but we do. If there’s really a heaven, Celestine is in it. She was a good person, maybe an angel even. May her soul rest in peace.”

Odette began to sob. “I feel so guilty,” she murmured.

“About what?”

“About you and me.”

“What about you and me?”

“You know.”

“You mean the times...?”

“Yes.”

Mahoney shrugged. “Well, Celestine and I weren’t married or anything like that. You shouldn’t feel too guilty about it.”

“But Celestine was my best friend, and you and she were supposed to be lovers.”

“Listen, these things happen, Odette. There’s a war on and everybody does crazy things once in a while. If it wasn’t for the war, you never would have let me seduce you.”

“I wouldn’t?”

“No you wouldn’t. You would have slapped my face and told me that I was a scumbag, because Celestine was your best friend, right?”

“I... I don’t know.”

“Yes, you would have. But the war is twisting everything around.”

“Sometimes I imagine that Celestine is looking down at me from heaven, and she’s mad.”

“Celestine was kind and understanding. She wouldn’t be mad.”

“Oh no? Remember the time she slapped me?”

“She didn’t slap you that hard.”

“She could be very jealous. You didn’t know her the way I did.”

Mahoney felt Odette’s warm body against his, and he started to get an erection. He wondered if he had time to knock off a quick piece before going to the bridge, and then cursed himself for having those thoughts when Celestine hadn’t even been dead for a full twenty-four hours yet, and he was in a monastery of all places. From afar he could hear the chanting of the bearded Carthusian monks who’d died so long ago. He pushed Odette away from him.

“Listen, I’ve got to get going,” he said.

“Where?”

“To blow up a bridge.”

“Right now?”

“Yes, right now.”

“Can I come?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to lose you, too.”

Mahoney pecked her on the forehead and then turned, walking away from her as fast as he could because he knew if he lingered he’d touch one of her luscious breasts, and then one thing would lead to another. He’d feel awful afterwards and a little tired probably. Boxers didn’t screw before fights and Rangers shouldn’t either before going out to blow up bridges.

He made his way to the part of the monastery where he and the others lived in the tiny little cells formerly occupied by the monks. Cranepool’s door was next to his and he knocked on it, but there was no answer. He knocked again, wondering where Cranepool was. The doors didn’t have locks so he pushed it open. He saw Cranepool lying face down on his cot. On the floor beside him was a letter of some kind.

Mahoney shook Cranepool’s shoulder. “Hey asshole—get up!”

“Leave me alone,” Cranepool moaned.

“Leave you alone?” Mahoney asked, shaking Cranepool again. “I’ll never leave you alone. You don’t deserve to be left alone. On your feet—you scumbag. We’ve gotta go blow up a bridge.”

“I’m not going,” Cranepool said into his pillow.

Mahoney grabbed Cranepool by the hair and yanked his head off the pillow. “You wanna bet?”

“Leave me alone!” Cranepool wailed.

Mahoney stared at Cranepool in disbelief. The young corporal never had defied him in this manner before. He’d always followed orders cheerfully and quickly. He never asked dumb questions. What possibly could be wrong with him?

Mahoney let go of Cranepool’s hair, and the corporal’s face fell back into his pillow. He lay motionless. Mahoney thought he heard a snuffle. He sat on the edge of Cranepool’s cot.

“What in the dogshit is wrong with you?” Mahoney asked, trying to sound gentle and understanding.

“Leave me alone,” Cranepool sighed.

“I’d like to but I can’t. We’ve gotta go blow up a bridge. I need you, Cranepool. Don’t let me down.”

“I want to die,” Cranepool said pathetically.

“You’re not being sensible, Cranepool. No sensible person wants to die.”

“I want to die,” Cranepool repeated.

“Why don’t you tell me what’s bothering you, asshole?”

“I can’t.”

“Why can’t you?”

“I just can’t.”

Mahoney thought he should whack Cranepool upside his head. Maybe that’d bring him to his senses. Then his eyes fell upon the letter lying on the floor. “You get some bad news, Cranepool?”

Cranepool nodded his head and said, “Uh-huh.”

“Somebody in your family die?”

“No.”

“When’d you get the letter?”

“About an hour ago.”

“How come you got a letter? I thought there were no planes flying.”

Cranepool groaned and rolled over, so he could see Mahoney. “The letter was dropped by mistake a few weeks ago with some supplies into another area and it took this long to get here.,,

“You mind if I look at it, or is it personal?”

“It’s personal but you can look at it if you want to,” Cranepool said weakly.

Mahoney scooped the letter up off the floor and started to read it. It was handwritten on pink stationery and after a few sentences he realized it was the basic Dear John Letter. Cranepool’s girlfriend Betsy back in Ottumwa, Iowa, had found herself another nitwit and had decided to marry him.

“Aw, I’m really sorry to find out about this,” Mahoney said consolingly, although he was neither sorry nor surprised. Soldiers got Dear John Letters all the time. Even he’d gotten a few, from women to whom he’d made false promises to marry. As far as he was concerned, Dear John Letters were a normal part of everyday Army life, similar to guard duty and pulling KP.

“Hey Cranepool,” Mahoney said jovially, slapping the pfc on the shoulder, “you’re not going to let a little thing like this get you down, are you?”

“I’m in love with her,” Cranepool replied in a tremulous voice, scrunching up his face.

Mahoney took a cigarette from the pack on the floor beside Cranepool’s bed and lit it up. My life is turning into a fucking soap opera, he thought. Why can’t these people keep themselves under control the way I do?

“Listen Cranepool,” he said, his voice more firm. “You’ve got to get over this, and right now. I need you to help me blow up a bridge.”

“I want to die,” Cranepool wailed.

“That’s liable to happen if you come with me on this bridge job. Let’s go.” He slapped Cranepool on the shoulder again. “Saddle up. We don’t have much time.”

“I can’t,” Cranepool said.

“Yes, you can.”

“No I can’t. I can’t move. The thought of Betsy kept me alive. Shoot me, Sarge. I don’t want to live anymore.”

“I’d be happy to shoot you, if it weren’t for two reasons. One, I need you for the bridge job, and two, I’d get court-martialed.”

“You could say I was going AWOL or something.”

“Nobody would believe it, Cranepool. You’ve got a good record. Guys like you don’t go AWOL. But I ain’t got such a good record. Guys like me shoot other guys in anger sometimes. Guys like me wind up in the stockade, where I have been twice already, by the way. Now come on, let’s stop fucking around. Let’s get this show on the road.”

Cranepool shook his head pathetically. “I can’t, Sarge. I just can’t.”

“You’ve got to forget about Betsy. She never loved you anyway.”

Cranepool bolted upright. “She did too!”

“Naw she didn’t. She probably was fucking other guys from the moment you left town.”

“She was not!”

“Sure she was. She was probably even blowing the milkman and stuff like that.”

Cranepool jumped to his feet and crouched in front of Mahoney, waving his fists around wildly.

“Stand up, Sarge. I’m afraid I’m going to have to punch you for what you just said.”

Mahoney grinned and stood up, the cigarette dangling out the corner of his mouth. “Some guy is probably fucking her up the ass right now,” he said.

Cranepool swung at Mahoney, who stepped to the side, grabbed Cranepool’s wrist, twisted it behind his back, and pushed his face hard against the stone wall.

“Now listen to me, you stupid piece of shit,” Mahoney growled into Cranepool’s ear. “Your girlfriend Betsy is a dumb cunt and you’re an asshole for wanting to marry such a dumb cunt. You ought to be glad that you’re rid of her. She’d probably give you a fatal dose of the clap if you married her. Listen, you want to get laid? I can work something out with Odette—you know who Odette is, don’t you? The one with the big tits? She’ll give you a great blowjob, *after* we come back from the bridge. Is it a deal?”

“Let me go!” Cranepool screamed, blood dripping from his nose.

Mahoney twisted his arm a little more. “Okay you dumb fuck—if you won’t listen to reason I’ll tell you what I’m gonna have to do.” With his free hand he took the Colt .45 from inside his shirt and cocked it next to Cranepool’s ear. “I’m gonna put a bullet right in your fuckin’ head, and then I’m gonna send a report back that you deserted in the face of the enemy and I had to shoot you. I’m gonna say that you were a coward and that they ought to bust you down to Private before they shitcan you.”

“No!” yelled Cranepool.

“Why not?” Mahoney said with a chuckle. “If you’re going to fuck me up, why shouldn’t I fuck you up too? Imagine what the folks in that ridiculous hometown of yours will say when they read in the local paper that you’re a disgrace to the human race? Imagine what Betsy will think? She’ll be glad she got rid of you. She’ll curse your name. She’ll throw up whenever she thinks of your ugly pimpled face. How does that grab you, you stupid piece of shit?”

Cranepool gulped. “You wouldn’t do that to me, wouldja Sarge?”

“Wouldn’t I?”

“I think you would,” Cranepool said, the realization dawning on him.

“You’re fucking-A I would. But listen to this one, dipshit. If you go back to being a good soldier and my right-hand man like you were this morning, I’ll put you in for some medals when all this shit is over. And you know Captain Di Pietro will back me up. Then you can go home to that shithole town of yours with all those medals on your chest, and Betsy will piss her pants. She’ll regret marrying that other guy. She’ll beg you to forgive her. And you can spit right in her eye and say: ‘Sorry bitch—it’s too late.’ How does that grab you, you dumb fuck?”

Mahoney loosened his grip on Cranepool a little. Cranepool knitted his eyebrows together and thought over Mahoney’s proposition.

“You’d really put me in for some medals, Sarge?”

“Sure I would, kid. You’re a good soldier. I had real respect and admiration for you until about an hour ago when I found you lying in bed like an old douche-bag. Have we a deal or haven’t we?”

“I don’t know.”

“Your choice is to be a dead coward or a live hero. If you do it my way, they might even send you back to the States on one of those War Bond tours with Lana Turner, and you might get to fuck her.” Mahoney didn’t bother to mention the possibility that Cranepool might wind up dead on the bridge job. No sense in confusing the poor kid.

“Okay, I’ll do it, Sarge.”

“Good man.”

Mahoney let him go. Cranepool turned around and wiped the blood off his nose, smiling sheepishly. Mahoney slapped him on the shoulder.

“Saddle up. We’re going to be leaving in a little while.”

“Okay, Sarge.”

“And burn that fuckin’ letter. You don’t need it anymore, got me?”

“Right, Sarge.”

Mahoney winked and walked out of the little room. He lumbered down the corridor to the next door and entered his own cell. Lighting the candle on the little table, he sat down heavily on his cot and took a deep breath. The shit you have to go through to fight a war. The Germans were bad enough, but the people on his own side were driving him out of his mind.

He rolled up his pant leg and looked at where the dog had bit him. The pant leg was ragged and so was his calf but the blood had coagulated and it didn’t hurt very much. Mahoney had learned in the Kasserine Pass that you had to ignore pain if you could. Otherwise it would stop you, and a man who was stopped was a prime target for the German sharpshooters.

This fuckin’ war, Mahoney thought to himself. He wished it could end soon so he wouldn’t have to worry so much about getting shot. He wanted to go back to New York and see his family. He also wanted to go to Times Square and have a good time.

But he had to admit to himself that there was something about the war that he liked. Never in his life had he been able to kick ass as he had since the war started. He’d always been an angry person and now he had a legitimate outlet for the dark side of his nature. They’d even given him the DSC and the Silver Star, and made him a master sergeant twice.

He rolled down his pant leg and looked at his arm. The fucking dog had bitten through his leather jacket and shirt, and there was some blood on the jacket, but it had protected him from serious injury. There was nothing like a good leather jacket, Mahoney always thought. The army ought to issue them to Master Sergeants.

He ran his palm over his cheek and felt the stubble. He hadn’t shaved for three days and it would be nice to take a bath, but there was that bridge to blow up. Ever since he’d landed in France there always was something to blow up. He barely found time to take a shit. And he was hungry. He couldn’t remember when he’d eaten last. Maybe he could run down to the mess hall and get some beans or something before he had to leave.

There was a knock on his door. "Come in," he grumbled.

The door opened and Leduc was standing there.

Behind him in the darkness were some guerillas carrying rifles and submachine guns at sling arms.

"We're ready to go," Leduc said.

"Okay-okay." Mahoney stood up and put on his beret. His mouth tasted as though a dead German soldier was buried underneath his tongue. He slung his carbine over his shoulder. "Do I have time to stop at the mess hall?"

"I brought you a piece of sausage and some bread."

"Good man." Mahoney stepped out into the hall and closed the door behind him. Cranepool was there armed to the teeth, plus Cerizet and Baudraye. Mahoney took the length of sausage and chunk of bread. "Where are the others?"

"In front with the explosives."

Mahoney grunted and bit off a piece of sausage as he headed down the corridor, with Cranepool and the others close behind him.

Chapter 6

The black Mercedes-Benz limousine drove past the barracks and came to a stop fifty yards from the ruined radio tower. The back door opened and Major Kurt Richter of the Gestapo stepped out. He was tall and lean, wearing his black SS duty uniform with black boots. A scar blazed on his right cheek from a wound he'd sustained in a duel during his student days at the University of Heidelberg.

Richter placed his hands behind his back and looked with disapproval at the radio tower. It would take at least a week to rebuild it, and normal communications would be disrupted until then. No engineers had been available to work on the tower today because they were repairing other facilities damaged by Allied bombing and guerilla raids. And even if engineers had been available, the materials to repair the tower might not be. Everything was in short supply. The Reich was in dire straits. But if the expected Allied invasion could be stopped cold on the beaches of France, Germany could focus its resources on the Russians in the East and have time to develop the wonderful new weapons Hitler was always talking about.

Colonel Franz Hohlfelder came out of the hut near the radio tower, waving his arms angrily. He was a heavyset man of forty and the commander of the Signal Unit in the area. Although Hohlfelder outranked Richter, Hohlfelder was in the Army and Richter the Gestapo. This meant that Richter had the authority to have Hohlfelder shot or worse, shipped to a concentration camp.

But today Hohlfelder was so mad he didn't care. He stormed up to Richter, who calmly came to attention and gave the Hitler Salute.

Hohlfelder didn't bother saluting back. He pointed his sausage-like finger at Richter. "You are supposed to prevent this sort of thing!"

"I?" Richter asked, lowering his arm slowly.

"Yes, you!" Hohlfelder's round Swabian face was red as a beet. His eyes were bloodshot and it looked as though he hadn't had much sleep last night. "You—the

fancy SS with your fancy uniforms—you're supposed to prevent this sort of thing! And what do you do? Nothing! The SS isn't good for a goddamned thing! You're useless! You all ought to be lined up against a wall and shot!"

Richter cleared his throat. "I think you'd better calm yourself, Colonel."

"Calm myself!" Hohlfelder exclaimed. "Why should I calm myself? What do I have to be calm about? My radio tower is lying before you in shambles. No one can tell me when it will be fixed. A modern army relies on modern communications, but this area has no modern communications and it is the fault of the SS!"

Richter raised his eyebrows. "The fault of the SS?" he asked softly. "Really? Why, my dear colonel—you sound as though SS men blew up your radio tower."

"They might as well have blown it up, for all the good they've done!"

"I understand we killed two of the terrorists."

"After the radio tower was blown up!"

"Where are they?"

Hohlfelder curled his upper lip. "What does it matter where they are? The damage has already been done!"

"Where are they?" Richter repeated.

"In the infirmary over there."

"Please take me to them."

"Take yourself to them—you son of a bitch!"

Hohlfelder turned around and marched back to the communications hut. Richter took out his little black notebook and made a little notation. When he returned to his headquarters at La Roche-Guyon, the notation would be typed up and placed in Hohlfelder's file. Hohlfelder didn't know, but he was digging his grave with his mouth.

Richter returned his notebook and pencil to his shirt pocket. He turned to the Mercedes-Benz and made a motion with his finger. Private Otto Piecke jumped out of the car and walked quickly to Richter.

"Yes, Major!" Piecke said.

"Come with me."

"Yes, sir!"

His hands clasped behind his back, Major Richter strolled toward the infirmary, Private Piecke following at a respectful distance. Richter realized that in a way, Colonel Hohlfelder was right. The guerilla raids were becoming a serious threat to the war effort. But it was so hard to find the guerillas. They melted into the ground, it seemed. The waiter who served him breakfast this morning at the hotel might very well have been one of the Resistance fighters who blew up this radio tower last night. Or the bridge in Crecy. Or the ammunition dump in Caulaincourt.

Richter and Piecke entered the infirmary. An orderly in a white uniform was standing near the door and nearly shit his pants when he saw the SS descending upon him. He snapped to attention and saluted. "Yes, sir!" he cried.

"Take me to the bodies of the guerillas shot near here last night, will you?"

"Yes, sir!"

The medic led Richter and Piecke into the infirmary, a long narrow building lined with beds on both sides of the aisle. All were filled and jammed together today, doubtless because of the casualties caused by the guerillas last night. The

three men marched downstairs, and the medic turned on the light in the operating room. Celestine and Fleury, dressed just as they were found on the road last night, were stretched out on two tables. Mahoney's tourniquet was still wrapped around Celestine's leg.

"Hmmm," said Richter, gazing at the bodies. "You have a doctor on duty, don't you?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Get him for me."

"Yes, sir!"

When the medic ran out of the room, Richter looked at Celestine. Her face was pale as chalk and her lips were twisted into a grimace of pain, but Richter could see that she'd once been pretty. She looked rather tiny and frail, almost like a little doll, reminding him a little of that French teacher he used to go with in Paris. Richter turned his gaze at Fleury and noted that he was old, too old to run around at night with a gun. No wonder he'd been shot. Probably couldn't move quickly enough, and the girl didn't know what it was to be a soldier. How could she?

A doctor in a white uniform entered the room. He had close-cropped blond hair and didn't bother to salute. Richter frowned. Technical personnel somehow thought they weren't subject to military regulations.

"Your name?" Richter asked.

"Captain Otto Sturzer."

"Captain Otto Sturzer *what?*"

Sturzer blinked. "I'm afraid I don't know what you mean."

Richter's eyes became cruel. "Haven't you learned how to say *sir* yet, Captain?"

"Oh. Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir."

"That's better." Richter looked at the bodies on the tables. "What can you tell me about these criminals, Captain?"

"What specifically would you like to know, sir?"

"What specifically can you tell me, Captain?"

"Well, the woman is about twenty-five years old and the man is around fifty. Both have died from massive hemorrhaging due to bullet wounds. The woman has been bitten on the leg by a dog, as you can see."

"Have you found any identification of any kind on their persons?"

"We haven't looked, sir. We were leaving that part for you, sir."

Richter frowned. "That will be all. You're dismissed."

"Yes, sir."

Captain Sturzer saluted and left the operating room. Richter turned to Piecke. "Search them."

"Yes, sir."

While Piecke searched through their garments, Richter sat on a chair against the wall. He took a cigarette out of a silver case embossed with a swastika and lit it with a matching lighter. He looked at the shiny operating room equipment and the bottles of medicine in the cabinets. He'd wanted to be a doctor once, but his parents couldn't afford to send him to medical school. It was hard to find a job in 1930, so he joined the Nazi Party. He considered it the smartest thing he ever did, but he hadn't joined solely out of pure opportunism. He really had hated the Jews

and still did. Anyone could see that they were trying to take over the world and pollute the pure Aryan race.

"I can't find anything," Piecke said, turning around.

"You looked in their underclothes, too?"

"Yes, sir."

Richter stood up and glanced at the bodies. "Write this down."

Piecke whipped out his notebook and pen. "Yes, sir."

"I want these two dragged behind a Kubelwagen through all the towns and villages around here as an example to the people."

Piecke wrote furiously. "Yes, sir."

Richter turned, walked out of the operating room, and climbed the stairs to the main room of the infirmary. He stepped outside into the pouring rain, putting up his collar, and strode purposefully toward his Mercedes-Benz, wondering what he could do to stop the depredations of treasonous French guerillas. There had to be some way! After all, they were nothing but a bunch of criminals and terrorists and you could tell by looking at them that they had inferior racial characteristics.

Piecke caught up with him and ran ahead to open the rear door of the Mercedes-Benz. Richter got into the back seat and unbuttoned his raincoat. Piecke sat in front beside the driver, who started up the car and backed up in the company area. Then he yanked the steering wheel and headed back toward the road.

Richter crossed his legs in the back seat and puffed his cigarette, while looking out the window at the rain. What would I do if I were in the Resistance? he asked himself. Where would I strike next? He decided that when he got back to headquarters he'd pore over the big maps and try to pinpoint likely objectives, the ones guerillas would most probably want to destroy to help aid the Allied invasion that should be coming before long.

Yes, that's the way to go about it, Richter thought with satisfaction as the car purred through the driving rain.

Chapter 7

One hundred miles away in another car, Mahoney felt revived by the sausage and bread. The bottle of wine hadn't hurt any either. But Mahoney was in a foul mood anyway. Of the eight guerillas Montegnac had given him, two turned out to be women, and one of them was Odette. She'd gotten herself assigned to the raiding party because most of the men had been engaged elsewhere. Odette claimed that she hadn't volunteered, and that Montegnac had assigned her out of the blue, but Mahoney didn't believe her. The other woman was Louise, a twenty-three-year-old who was married to some asshole baker in a village someplace.

Mahoney didn't like to go out on operations with women because he tended to worry about them. He didn't worry about men, because if they didn't watch their asses it was their own fault, but what did women know about guns and grenades? It was true that any woman, if pushed too far, might slug her husband with a frying pan, but guns and grenades? Mahoney thought about his kid sister Mary

Ellen carrying a gun. She wouldn't last two minutes in a pitched battle, but thank goodness she was back in New York where she wouldn't have to.

The night was black as the rear end of an eight-ball, and it was raining as though someone were dumping barrels of water on the car. Mahoney sat in the front seat beside Leduc, who was driving; Cranepool was in the back with two Frenchmen. The two women were in the car behind them, and Mahoney hoped there was no fucking around going on.

Mahoney patted his pockets and realized he was out of cigars. This was not a good omen for the success of the operation. "Anybody got a cigarette?" he asked.

"Here, Sarge," Cranepool said, holding out his pack of French cigarettes.

Mahoney took one and lit it with a match. The inside of the car was thick with smoke from all the cigarettes, and the partially opened windows didn't do much except let some of the rain in. Mahoney thought that the war would be easier to fight if it didn't rain so goddamned much.

"We'll be coming to the gorge soon," Leduc said as the car began to incline upwards.

Mahoney looked out the front windshield. He couldn't see anything except five yards of road and raindrops falling in the rays of the headlights. He puffed his cigarette and knew that no matter how things went, it was going to be a horrible night. He turned around and looked at the headlights of the car behind them. Turning forward again, he wondered how many of them would be alive in the morning, and whether he'd be one of the ones who'd made it.

The cars plowed through the rain and climbed up the mountain. Leduc pointed toward the window next to Mahoney. "The bridge is over there," he said.

Mahoney looked. "I can't see a fucking thing."

"There's a place where we can hide the cars, and we'll go the rest of the way on foot."

"Great," Mahoney said grumpily. It was going to be wet feet and blisters again.

The car leveled off and then started to descend the other side of the mountain. At the bottom Leduc flashed his taillights in a signal to the car behind them, and then turned off the road into the woods. The cars rumbled into the forest and came to a stop. The guerillas, dressed in black oilskin ponchos, poured out of the doors and camouflaged the cars with branches, so they couldn't be seen from the road. Then they assembled behind the vehicles. Mahoney looked at the two women who had on slacks and combat boots, and frowned. They looked back defiantly; they knew he didn't want them along.

"All right, let's saddle up," Mahoney said. "Baudraye, Cranepool, and Agoult—grab the boxes."

The three men went to the back of the cars and took the crates of TNT out. Mahoney had told Montegnac he'd need ten crates, Montegnac had promised him six, and he'd wound up with three. There always were shortages behind the lines, but they had to do their best with what they had.

In a single file they moved off into the woods, with Leduc leading the way. The rain was coming down unmercifully; you could hear it roar as it struck the trees and the ground. Mahoney promised himself that as soon as he got back to England he'd wrangle a furlough somehow and spend it in a fancy hotel with clean dry sheets and the craziest whore he could find.

They trudged up hills and across valleys. Occasionally they'd stop and transfer the boxes of TNT from the shoulders of the men who were carrying them to men who were empty-handed. At one of these interludes Odette volunteered to carry one of the boxes but Mahoney told her gruffly to get lost. They continued their long uncomfortable trek through the woods and after a while Leduc held up his hand and then touched his finger to his lips. They all crowded around him.

"The bridge is over there," he whispered, pointing straight ahead.

Mahoney looked but couldn't see anything. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"There may be guards," Mahoney said. "I'll go forward and take a look. The rest of you can take a break, but don't make any fuckin' noise."

As they sat on the crates or squatted on their heels, Mahoney moved off into the woods. At Fort Benning they'd had a real Indian from Arizona to teach them how to move quietly in the woods, and Mahoney had learned his lessons well. He raised his feet high and brought them down slowly. It'd take a while for him to get to the bridge, but at least he'd make it in one piece.

He crept over rocks and made his way through thick bushes, holding his carbine ready. It seemed to take forever, but finally he approached the spot where Leduc had said the bridge would be, and he heard the sound of a footstep. He froze. The foot came down again. Somebody was out there. The footsteps seemed to be moving away from him. Mahoney got down on the ground and crawled forward. Gradually through the rain and darkness he could make out the structure at the bottom of the bridge. Two guards were there, marching round and round with their rifles at sling arms. They weren't expecting anything and it would be a cinch to wipe them off the face of the earth.

Mahoney retreated into the woods, then crept back to the others. They got up as he approached.

"There are two guards," Mahoney told them. He looked at Cranepool. "Come with me and we'll take care of them."

Cranepool nodded. Mahoney looked at Leduc. "I'll give you a quick dot with my flashlight when the coast is clear. Then come with the others and the TNT, got it?"

"Yes, *Perroquet*."

Mahoney and Cranepool moved into the woods.

"You should have taken me with you last time," Cranepool whispered.

"Shut your fuckin' mouth, you asshole."

They crept through the woods and soon came to the bridge. Peering through the bushes, they saw the two German soldiers trudging around the spindly steel structure. Dressed in long raincoats and helmets, they were hunched over, obviously miserable in the pouring rain. But they wouldn't be miserable much longer. Mahoney pointed to the guard he wanted Cranepool to handle.

"You get that one," Mahoney whispered. "I'll go around and get the other. When I come out of the bushes, that'll be your signal to attack, got it?"

"Got it."

Cranepool took out his commando knife and Mahoney began crawling to the other side of the structure. He made his way slowly, slithering along the muddy ground like a snake. He was soaked to his skin on his legs, but the poncho had kept the top half of him fairly dry so far. Finally, he reached the other side of the

bridge, parted two leaves and looked at the guards. Each was halfway around the bridge from the other, and they weren't expecting anything. A child could knock them off.

Mahoney took out his commando knife and ran his thumb over the blade. It was razor sharp because he'd honed it only four days ago and hadn't used it since. As one of the guards was coming around to his side of the bridge, the other approached Cranepool's side. Mahoney tensed like a wildcat, holding the knife blade up in his right hand. The guard was only about ten yards away, and when he came abreast of him, Mahoney sprang up and streaked toward him. Across the clearing he could see Cranepool charging the guard on his side. Both guards turned toward the sounds and tried to unsling their rifles, but they didn't have a chance. Mahoney saw the terror on the German's face as he whacked the rifle aside with his left hand and stabbed the knife into the German's gut with his right. The German gasped, his eyes bulging with pain. Mahoney yanked out his knife, reared it back, and slashed the German's throat. Blood foamed out of the man's nose and mouth as his eyes rolled up into his head and he dropped to the ground.

Mahoney looked across the clearing and saw the other guard falling at Cranepool's feet. He returned his gaze to the man he'd killed and noticed something gleaming on his wrist. Bending over, Mahoney saw that the German was wearing a watch that looked like real gold with the name of a famous Swiss watchmaker on its face. Mahoney already had a watch, of course, but he thought he might as well have another one. He unstrapped it from the German's wrist and put it on his own. Then he noticed that the man was wearing a thick gold wedding band. It occurred to him that this German wasn't a poor man. He knelt on the ground and tried to pull off the ring, but it wouldn't come past the man's knuckle so there was only one thing to do. Mahoney took aim with his knife and chopped the finger off. Then he wiped the blood off the ring and dropped it in his pocket.

"Whatcha doing, Sarge?" Cranepool asked, as he approached.

"What the fuck's it to you?" Mahoney replied. He took out his little flashlight, pointed it toward the spot where Leduc and the others were, and hit the button once. Then he put the flashlight away. He bent over and wiped the knife on the pant leg of the dead German soldier, then jammed it into its scabbard.

Leduc and the others came through the pouring rain, two of them carrying crates of TNT. Leduc looked down at the dead German. Mahoney looked up at the bridge. He barely could see the top of it.

"Shit," Mahoney said.

"What's the matter?" Leduc asked.

"We really don't have enough explosives to do very much damage to this bridge. We'll stop the trains for a while, but German engineers should be able to fix everything in a few hours. The problem is that the bridge is constructed like a skeleton. We might blow out a few ribs, but all the others will still be there. With ten crates of TNT I could have demolished the whole fucking thing, but with three crates it's hardly worth the effort."

Leduc shrugged. "Maybe, but orders are orders. We might as well get started."

"I have an idea," said a voice from within the band of guerillas.

Mahoney looked in the direction of the voice. It was Bixiou, a short roly-poly man around forty years old who wore a gray cap cockily on the side of his head and had a black mustache.

“What kind of idea?” Mahoney asked impatiently. He was anxious to set the explosives and get the fuck out of there.

“Well,” Bixiou said, “if you want to blow up the bridge, we don’t have enough explosives to do that well, but if you stop and think for a moment, what is the purpose for blowing up the bridge in the first place?”

Mahoney frowned. “What are you driving at, asshole?”

“We want to blow up the bridge so we can stop the train, but maybe we can stop it more effectively with the explosives we’ve got at some other point along its route.”

Mahoney stopped frowning. “Like where?”

Bixiou pointed in an easterly direction. “There is a place where the train has to go through a tunnel.” He looked at Leduc. “You know, near Vernisset?”

“Ah,” said Leduc. “Of course. But if we don’t have enough explosives to blow up this bridge, we certainly won’t have enough to demolish that tunnel.”

Bixiou bit his lip. “I didn’t think of that.”

“Asshole,” Mahoney growled. He looked up at the bridge again, to determine where to place the explosives that they had.

“I have it!” said another voice.

“Now what?” Mahoney asked.

This time Agoult stepped forward. “I used to be an engineer on this railroad,” he said, pointing his forefinger at the sky, “and I just had a magnificent idea. I have remembered that there is an old railway garage in St. Jean-de-Daye, and in that railway garage is an old locomotive that they don’t use anymore, because it’s so old, but it still works as far as I know. Maybe we can get the train, drive it into the tunnel, and tie the explosives on the front of it. Then when one of the German trains comes from the other direction, it will go into the tunnel, smash into the old locomotive, and *KA-BOOM!* There will be such a big mess inside the tunnel that nobody will be able to get through for days!”

Mahoney thought about the scheme for a few moments. “Hmmm,” he said. “I think Agoult’s got something this time.”

“But what if we can’t steal the locomotive,” Leduc protested.

“If we can’t—we can’t, but at least we’ll have the possibility of stopping the train for quite a while. We don’t have that possibility here. I think we ought to do it.”

Leduc shrugged. “It’s worth a try, I suppose.”

Mahoney looked at Agoult. “Why didn’t you think of this before we came all the way in here?”

“How should I know?” Agoult said.

“Asshole.” Mahoney looked at the dead German sprawled on the ground. “Strip the uniforms and weapons off the guards, because they might come in handy.”

Two guerillas ran out and quickly undressed the Germans. When they finished the Germans’ bare skin looked white and ghostly against the dark mud.

Mahoney picked up one of the crates and heaved it onto his shoulder. “Back to the cars,” he said.

Cranepool lifted the second crate, and Leduc got the third. In a long line the guerillas followed Mahoney through the rain.

Chapter 8

It was four o'clock on the morning of June 5. In the ports of southern England, four thousand transport ships and eight hundred warships were gathered for the Normandy Invasion. Ashore behind barbed wire were five American combat divisions and five British divisions, packed cheek by jowl in tents, waiting for orders to board the ships and sail to France. The men had not been allowed to leave their encampment or even send letters to loved ones. Tension was high, tempers were short, and the food was even worse than what they ordinarily were accustomed to. Rain poured down on the soldiers, and they wished the invasion would get underway.

At SHAEF Headquarters at Bushy Park, Ike had called a meeting of all the top commanders. They stood around the map table as gale winds lashed the windows with rain. Ike had intended to begin the invasion today, and in fact some men already had boarded their ships, but he'd cancelled it due to the weather.

Group Captain Stagg of the Meteorological Staff stood with his hands clasped tightly behind his back. "Our calculations lead us to believe that present weather conditions will prevail for the remainder of the day," he said.

Field Marshal Montgomery groaned, for he and his British divisions were anxious to get into battle. Yesterday he'd actually argued that the June 5 invasion should take place as scheduled, despite the weather forecast and the prediction that a major disaster would have resulted.

"However," Group Captain Stagg continued, "it is anticipated that a brief period of relatively fair weather will begin tomorrow morning and last approximately thirty-six hours. Then the severely bad weather will resume."

Ike scratched his cheek and appeared calm, but inwardly he was wrestling with the decision only he could make. If he staged the invasion tomorrow, the first units might get ashore successfully, but then it might become impossible to land more men and tanks. On the other hand, if he postponed the invasions again, he didn't know when the weather would clear. It might not be feasible to invade France for several more days, and he doubted that his men could remain in a high pitch of combat readiness for that length of time.

He looked at the map. There were so many imponderables. An intelligence report had stated that the German 352nd Infantry Division was on a training exercise somewhere near Utah Beach. There were other reports that Hitler's V-1 rockets would be flying soon. And there was that damned railroad down there that could funnel large numbers of German troops to the beaches quickly. He looked up at General Bradley.

"You get any word on this bridge yet, Brad?" Ike asked, pointing to it on the map.

"Not yet, sir."

"Can you inquire about what progress is being made?"

“Yes, sir.”

“Let me know by 1200 hours, will you?”

“Yes, sir.”

Ike looked at the map again. He decided that if the weather would clear tomorrow, he might as well take advantage of it. He couldn't keep postponing the invasion forever. It was now or never.

He looked up from the map and into the faces of his commanders. “The invasion will take place tomorrow,” he said. “I want the paratroopers to land at 0100 hours, and the first assault troops to hit the beaches at 0600 hours. Are there any questions?”

No one said anything; the details of the invasion had been chewed over too many times already.

“Return to your units and prepare for battle,” Ike said.

Chapter 9

At that moment, in a mansion at La Roche-Guyon, Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, the renowned Desert Fox of the famed Afrika Corps, was humming a song and shaving in front of a mirror. He wore a towel wrapped around his lean waist, and he was in a good mood. In a few hours he would be off to Paris to buy his wife a pair of fancy French shoes, and then he'd continue on to Ulm in Germany, to celebrate his wife's birthday on June 6.

He'd thought it quite a coincidence when he'd learned that one of his subordinates, General Erich Marcks, commander of the LXXXIV Corps, which was responsible for the defense of the Normandy coast between Caen and Cherbourg, would also celebrate his birthday on June 6. However the great Field Marshal had no way of knowing that another significant event also was going to take place on June 6.

In fact, he'd met yesterday with his weather advisor who'd told him that there would be no good invasion tides until June 20. The weather man thought this because he believed the Allies would attempt to invade only in the morning during a high tide. It was incomprehensible to him that the Allies would attempt such a dangerous landing during low tide.

Anyway, Rommel felt safe to be leaving his post for a few days. He was commander-in-chief of the defense against the Allied attack, and had been personally appointed to this position by Adolf Hitler himself. He believed that his defensive measures were proceeding rather well, although, as the result of the intricacies of the German General Staff procedures, he didn't have clear-cut command of the Panzer forces in his sector, or the Waffen SS. And Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, who was commander-in-chief of Army Group West, could cancel any of Rommel's orders that he wished, since Rommel technically was subordinate to him.

Rommel intended to talk with Hitler about these matters after his wife's birthday celebration. Hitler liked Rommel and Rommel was sure he could convince Hitler to let him have command of the Panzers, and permit him to operate clear

from the authority of von Rundstedt, who was living in Marie Antoinette's Fontainebleau Palace near Paris, far from the realities of the Atlantic Wall.

Rommel finished shaving and dried off his face. He was a short man covered with scars, for he'd been fighting since the early days of World War I and had been wounded numerous times. But his deepest wound was an unseen one in the depths of his heart, for he still was angry and confused by Hitler's abandonment of the Afrika Corps in the second battle of El Alamein. Rommel had wanted reinforcements and permission to fall back for a shorter battle line. Hitler said no retreat and no reinforcements. That had been the end of the Afrika Corps, a splendid organization of fighting men, and Rommel had been flown back to Germany just before the front collapsed.

There were those on the German General Staff who said Rommel was finished. They said he didn't deserve to be a Field Marshal because he'd never commanded a unit larger than a division. They said that his defeat at El Alamein had broken his will, that he'd become a defeatist, that he was incapable of devising the brilliant strategies that had made him famous throughout the Reich and respected even among the Allies.

Rommel put on his green field uniform. His field marshal's baton lay on his bed. Around his neck, was the medal called the *Pour le Merite*, which he'd won as a young lieutenant in the First World War. It had been Germany's highest honor for heroism.

Rommel was determined to prove to everybody that he wasn't finished, as they had thought. He was determined to crush the Allied invasion on the beaches. He'd get control of those Panzers somehow and run them right through the Allied beachhead just the way he'd run them through the British lines at Tobruk. He'd rip apart the landing armies and grind them into the sand. Then the second battle of El Alamein would be forgotten, and he'd be a hero to the German people once again.

The telephone next to the bed rang. Rommel picked it up. "Rommel here," he said in his clipped military manner.

"Your car is ready, sir," said the voice on the other end.

"I'll be down in five minutes." Rommel said.

"Very good, sir."

Rommel hung up the phone and stood in front of the mirror, placing his visored hat squarely on his head. How can anyone doubt me, he wondered, after all I have done? I'll show them who Germany's greatest military field commander is. And then after that, who knows? Hitler won't live forever, and his successor might very well be a military man, one who has proven himself in the cauldron of frontline combat.

But Rommel knew that the key to victory over the Allied invasion armies was the ability to move men and material to the beaches quickly. He decided to draft a directive before he left that would order all local commanders to exert every effort to guard and clear transportation networks in their districts.

Returning to his telephone, he lifted the receiver and dialed the number of his adjutant.

Chapter 10

While General Eisenhower was holding his four a.m. conference at SHAEF Headquarters at Bushy Park, and Field Marshal Rommel was dictating orders to his adjutant at La Roche-Guyon, two old Renaults were driving through the deserted streets of St. Jean-de-Daye. The wind howled around the cars and the rain was falling almost horizontally in the rays of the headlamps.

In the front car, Cranepool and Baudraye were dressed in the uniforms of the German guards killed at the bridge. Mahoney sat in the front seat, smoking a cigarette, and Leduc was driving. They were approaching the huge railroad complex where the old locomotive was supposed to be.

Leduc turned onto a narrow side street and then into an alley. He stopped the car and the second car stopped behind him. The guerillas got out, unloaded the crates of TNT, hid their weapons under their ponchos and raincoats, and then lined up. Mahoney, Cerizet, and Sommervieux picked up the crates and shouldered them, forming a single file, with Cranepool and Baudraye on either side. Baudraye was from Alsace and spoke German perfectly. He would be the mouthpiece for all of them, and if there was any trouble they'd have to rely on their guns.

They marched out of the alley and down the street. Mahoney hoped they looked like a standard French work detail guarded by two stalwart German soldiers. Now he was glad that it was raining, because under the raincoats you couldn't see how badly the uniforms fitted Cranepool and Baudraye, and the rain had washed away most of the blood.

Mahoney looked at both his watches. It was four-fifteen. He hoped they could get inside that train garage before daybreak. He realized that ever since he'd been parachuted into France he'd been running from the daylight. He was starting to feel like Count Dracula.

They turned a corner and straight ahead was the huge railway terminal complex. It was surrounded by barbed wire, and through the rain and darkness you could see lights shining in some of the buildings.

They approached on a street that led directly to a gate in the barbed wire fence. At the gate were two German guards in a little guardhouse. One of them came out as the column approached.

Baudraye told the column to stop, then turned to the guard. "Work detail," he said.

"What kind of work detail?" the guard asked.

"Repair work."

"Where are your papers?"

"What papers?" demanded Baudraye, highly indignant. "I don't need any papers to get in here!"

"Oh yes you do!" insisted the guard.

"Oh no I don't!"

Mahoney glanced around. There were no German soldiers in sight and he stepped out of line and brought the crate of TNT down hard on the German's helmet. The German was stunned; his knees buckled and before he could

straighten them up again Leduc's commando knife was streaking toward the German's jugular vein, while Baudraye calmly placed his hand over the German's mouth. As the German shouted into Baudraye's hand, his throat was torn in half. He fell to the ground and meanwhile Cranepool was charging the other guard coming out of the guardhouse. The German raised his rifle to aim a shot but he was too slow for Cranepool, who was a crackerjack killer with rifle and bayonet. Cranepool whammed the man in the face with his rifle butt, and the German saw stars. That would be the last thing he'd ever see, because on his way to the ground he received Cranepool's bayonet in his heart.

The guerillas broke ranks and quickly dragged both German soldiers into the guardhouse. They propped one up near the window so that it appeared he was alert, and lay the other on the floor. Mahoney was pleased with his little band of fighters, because he didn't have to tell them to do it. They were experienced veterans of behind-the-lines combat and knew what to do without being told.

Mahoney, standing at the door of the guardhouse, noticed that one of the Germans had a nice gold wrist watch. He was about to take it when Baudraye snatched it from the German's wrist in a movement so fast it was a blur.

"All right, let's get moving," Mahoney growled.

They returned to their formation and Baudraye opened the gate. They marched inside the railway terminal complex and Cranepool closed it behind them. Agoult led them in the direction of the old railway barn, and Mahoney hoped no one would find those dead German guards for a long time. Once more he was glad for the storm and rain. It would inhibit people from snooping around, and make it difficult to see very far.

They marched through the railroad yard, seeing the various huts and hopping over tracks. No one else was outside because of the terrific downpour. They passed some parts of the yard that had been bombed recently, and Mahoney's heart sank as he thought that damaged tracks might prevent them from getting out of the yard. In the distance he heard the long mournful whistle of a train, and imagined they might even have a collision before getting out of the yard. He began to wonder whether he should have simply blown up the bridge as he'd been ordered and returned to St. Pierre for some screwing around with Odette. But no, he told himself, that wouldn't have accomplished anything; somehow he had to fuck up the railroad more permanently.

They came to a building that looked like a huge barn in need of paint and repair, leaning like the tower of Pisa. Mahoney thought it might collapse at any moment and hoped that didn't happen while they were inside. He looked around; there were no guards in sight.

"I know the way in," said Agoult authoritatively.

He led them to a side door and turned the knob. The door didn't open. Evidently it was locked.

"Get out of the way," Mahoney said.

Everyone parted in front of the door and he took a few steps backwards. Then he lunged forward and dug his shoulder in. The door shattered easily and he went flying into the musty old railroad barn. It smelled of grease; rain dripped through holes in the roof. In the darkness he could see the shapes of old railroad cars that reminded him of ancient prehistoric beasts.

The others followed him into the barn.

"The engine's over here," Agoult said, moving into the shadows. "Or at least it was last time I was here."

Agoult led them into the barn. They had to watch the ground carefully so they wouldn't trip over the tracks. The scurrying of rats and mice was the only sound they heard. Finally they approached a huge rusting hulk of machinery in a far corner.

"This is it," Agoult said proudly.

Mahoney looked at it, and doubted that it could move. "You mean this piece of shit?"

"Yup."

Mahoney kicked it, and a piece of metal fell off the side of the engine and fell to the ground.

"What the hell was that?" Mahoney asked, looking down on it.

"Just a useless piece of metal." Agoult climbed up to the cab, brushing cobwebs out of the way. "It's a beautiful machine," he said. "A little old, but still beautiful.

Mahoney wiped his finger against the engine and it came back caked with rust. "This thing's all rusted up. I don't think it'll be able to move."

"It's not rusted inside."

"How do you know?"

"Because it told me so."

"It told you so?"

Agoult touched his ear. He was thirty years old and had a long jaw covered with gray stubble. "They talk to me," he said.

"How come I can't hear anything?"

"Because you're not a railroad engineer, and I am. Or at least I was before I joined the Resistance."

They all climbed into the cab. Agoult stood before the dials and worked the levers and wheels. "This machine's just fine," he said. He wiped off the dials with his sleeve. "Looks good."

Mahoney sniffed the rust and oil that hung in the air like fog. He was beginning to doubt the success of this operation. He thought he should have blown up the bridge while he had the chance. This fucking piece of junk didn't look like it was going anywhere.

"A fine machine," said Agoult.

"A fine machine where?" asked Mahoney.

Leduc nudged Mahoney in the ribs. "Leave him alone. He knows what he's doing."

Agoult looked in the coal burner and checked the water. He worked the levers and pressed some buttons. Jumping to the ground, he walked along the side of the engine and examined fittings and connections. Then he climbed up to the cab again where the others were.

"All we have to do is get some coal and water," he said. "Everybody come with me."

They jumped down from the engine and Agoult led them to the back of the barn, where the coal was kept in bins and there was a tank of water. He told them to fill hods with coal and pails with water and carry them back to the engine. They did

this while Agoult supervised the pouring of water into the boiler and coal onto the floor of the cab. He told Cranepool to get some wood and the others to keep bringing water and coal.

Agoult started a fire in the boiler with the wood Cranepool tore out of the wall of the barn, and then shoveled on the coal. Mahoney smiled when he saw the flames crackling inside the furnace. Maybe something was going to happen after all.

Finally they had the boiler half full and a fire was roaring inside the furnace. Agoult told them that was enough, that they'd get whatever else they needed outside. He said he knew where everything was. All they had to do was take it and hope nobody thought anything suspicious was happening.

Agoult closed the petcocks and looked at the dials. He turned some knobs and pulled some levers.

Mahoney thought Agoult looked like he knew what he was doing.

"Everybody aboard!" Agoult said.

Those who weren't in the cab climbed on. Agoult pushed a lever and steam shot out of the smokestack of the train. Mahoney noticed that some steam came out the side of the engine, too.

"What the hell is that?" Mahoney asked.

"Don't worry about it," Agoult replied, smiling happily.

"Is it supposed to do that?"

"Well, no. But this is an old engine."

"Oh shit," Mahoney groaned.

"Are we all set to go?" Agoult asked.

"I don't know," Mahoney replied. "You tell me."

"Get everybody ready, because we're pulling out of here."

Mahoney looked at the others. "Okay, you heard the man. We're gonna start moving and if anybody tries to stop us, give 'em some of this." He tapped his carbine.

"Here we go!" said Agoult.

He pushed a lever and pressed a pedal. Needles wiggled nervously on the dials. The locomotive began to inch forward. Mahoney couldn't believe it was moving. The old hunk of machinery screeched like a cat in heat and shivered like a dog shitting razor blades. Then there was a horrible *thunk* sound and it came to a sudden halt.

"I knew it," Mahoney said. "This fucking piece of junk isn't going anywhere."

"Wait a minute—wait a minute!" Agoult shouted, jumping up and down with excitement. "It's nothing. I assure you it's nothing."

He picked up an old rusty wrench affixed to the old rusty wall and jumped down from the cab. Walking sideways next to the engine, with steam blowing out all around him, he looked into the machinery as though he'd lost a diamond in there. Then with a sudden movement he reached in with the wrench and twisted something. Another *thunk* was heard. Agoult jumped up to the cab and returned to the engineer's area. He shifted a lever and the locomotive screeched as it moved forward again. This time it kept on going. Mahoney couldn't believe it. It passed among the other old wrecks of locomotives and railroad cars, blowing billows of steam up toward the high ceiling. It came to an old railroad car blocking its way, and pushed it onto another track. The locomotive was making terrible squeaking

sounds, as though it needed oil. Agoult found an empty coal car and backed up to it, hitching it to the locomotive. Then he steamed to the section of the garage where the coal bins were, pulled a thick iron chain that made a chute come down. Coal poured from the bin into the empty car, coal dust filled the air, making everyone cough and darkening their faces. The din of falling coal was terrific. When the coal car was filled Agoult let the chain go and the chute rose straight up in the air where it was before.

Agoult climbed down from the cab and took an oilcan as big as a gallon milk can from a shelf on the wall. He proceeded to oil the fittings of the engine, opening little petcocks and squirting the thick amber fluid in. He also oiled the fittings around the wheels.

When the oilcan was empty he filled it from a green barrel and resumed oiling the locomotive. When he finally had oiled all the fittings, he filled the oilcan again and carried it up to the cab.

"We're all set to go," he said. "All we need now is more water, and we can get that outside. I think everybody should hide except for Baudraye and Cranepool, so no one will be suspicious."

Mahoney told the guerillas to hide in the coal car, and not to peek out. He would stay in the cab with Agoult, Cranepool, and Baudraye, and pretend to be the assistant engineer. He told the guerillas in the coal car to come out fighting if they heard him firing his carbine.

The guerillas climbed into the coal car. As Odette and Louise went up the ladder, Mahoney admired their rear ends. Lurid thoughts entered his mind, and he wished he could be alone with them someplace.

"Here we go," said Agoult.

He shifted the lever and the train moved again through the murky darkness of the huge garage. The engine made considerably less noise now and Mahoney was beginning to have faith in Agoult. They steamed around the garage, pushing other cars and locomotives out of their way, and finally came to the huge doors. Agoult stopped the train and Mahoney jumped down from the cab, walking ahead and pushing open the creaking wooden doors.

It still was raining hard in the railway yard, but morning had come and everything was blue and gray. There was no movement out there and Mahoney thought that the deserted railway yard looked like the end of the world. He was glad for the rain, because that kept activity in the yard to a minimum.

He got out of the way and Agoult chugged the locomotive out of the garage. Then he stopped while Mahoney closed the doors. After he jumped back into the cab Agoult got the locomotive moving again. Cranepool and Leduc stood at both sides of the cab and Mahoney took his position beside Agoult, who was pushing levers and twisting knobs frantically.

"Oh-oh," said Agoult.

"What's wrong?" Mahoney asked.

"Look."

Mahoney poked his head out the window, and saw that the length of track ahead of them had been blown apart by an Allied bomb.

"It won't be easy getting out of here," Agoult said, "but we'll do it somehow."

He backed up and then moved forward on another track. After going for a while on that one, they came to another bombed-out section of track, and had to back up again. Finally they came to a water tower, and Agoult got out of the cab to stick the rubber hose into the tank of the locomotive to fill it up. Then he returned the hose to its hook, and climbed back up to the cab again.

“We’re ready to go,” Agoult said. “Shovel some more coal into the furnace, will you?”

When Mahoney opened the furnace door he had to squint because of the heat and light. He shoveled in more coal as Agoult piloted the locomotive out of the railroad yard.

Chapter 11

Major Kurt Richter stood in the pouring rain at the foot of the bridge between St. Lo and St. Jean-de-Daye and looked at the two naked guards sprawled on the ground.

“This is just the way we found them,” said Captain Hess, the officer of the day for the guard mount in that area.

“Hmmm,” said Richter, frowning. Private Otto Piecke stood behind him, holding a black umbrella over Richter’s head.

“Evidently they were killed shortly after they came on duty.” Hess said.

“Hmmm,” said Richter.

“One can’t help wondering what the terrorists wanted,” Hess said. “They didn’t damage the bridge one bit, and I can’t imagine they killed these two guards just for their uniforms. They could have got uniforms some other easier way, I’m sure.”

“When did you say they were found?”

“At four o’clock, sir.”

Richter looked at his watch. It was nearly eight o’clock now. The message concerning this latest atrocity had arrived at La Roche-Guyon at five, for it had come through many command channels. Richter had been asleep, and it had taken him an hour to get dressed and have breakfast. Another two hours had been required to navigate the muddy, bombed roads between La Roche-Guyon and this bridge. Now he was here, baffled by what he found.

He pushed the umbrella out of the way and looked up at the bridge. He’d been told that the bridge had been bombed and rebuilt by engineers yesterday. It was an important bridge from a strategic point of view and Richter didn’t know why the terrorists hadn’t attempted to demolish it. Had something scared them away? Had they lost their nerve?

He looked at Captain Hess. “Are you absolutely sure there are no explosive charges on any of the trestles of this bridge?”

“Absolutely sure. The engineers have crawled all over it and found nothing.”

“Hmmm.” He looked down at the naked guard lying at his feet. The rain had washed away all the blood and the skin of the corpse was pale and shriveled. There was a nasty gash on the man’s throat and it reminded Richter of a butchered pig he’d once seen in a market owned by a friend of his when he was a

boy. His eyes fell on the finger that had been chopped off, lying a few feet from the body.

“Brutal swine,” Richter murmured.

“What can you expect from a bunch of criminals, sir?”

“Hmmm. You’re right of course. Well, that will be all for now, Captain Hess. Please contact my office directly hereafter if any other incidents of this nature occur.”

“Yes, sir.”

Richter turned to Piecke. “Take this down.”

“Yes, sir.” Piecke’s pen quivered between his fingers.

“I want the nearest SS detachment to arrest one hundred Frenchmen living in this area and execute them in a public place as punishment for the murders of these fine German soldiers, and as a warning against this sort of thing happening in the future. Got that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I also want all units within the vicinity of this railroad line to post special guards along its length and report any suspicious activity.”

“Yes, sir.”

Frowning and kicking a stone out of his way, Major Richter marched back to his Mercedes-Benz as Piecke followed behind him, trying to hold up the umbrella and continue writing down the information at the same time. Not able to watch his footing, he tripped over a boulder and fell to the ground, the umbrella knocking off Richter’s hat on its way down.

“Idiot!” Richter screamed, bending over and picking up his hat, which had become muddy.

“Sorry, sir,” Piecke shuttered. “I beg your pardon, sir. Please forgive me, sir. I didn’t mean it, sir.”

“Dolt!”

“A thousand pardons, sir,” Piecke said humbly, climbing up from the mud.

Richter wiped off his hat with the sleeve of his raincoat, grumbling about inefficiency and stupidity. He returned the hat to his head and walked quickly to the parked Mercedes-Benz, wondering whether, if he got rid of Piecke, he’d wind up with somebody worse—though it was hard to imagine someone worse than Piecke.

Richter opened the rear door of the Mercedes-Benz and dove inside. When is this damned rain going to stop? he asked himself as he unbuttoned his raincoat and rearranged himself on the seat.

“There’s been a message for you, sir,” said Grunwald, his driver.

“Let me see it.”

“Yes, sir.”

Grunwald handed over the piece of paper on which he’d written down the message. Richter read it, the muscles in his jaw working as he did so. Two guards had been found with their throats slashed in a guard house at the big railway terminal in St. Jean-de-Daye. No damage had been reported in the yard and nothing else unusual had occurred there, as far as was presently known.

While Richter stared at the message, Piecke crawled sheepishly into the front seat beside Grunwald.

“Where would you like to go, sir?” Grunwald asked.

“Shut up—I’m thinking.”

“Yes, sir.”

Richter absentmindedly fingered the paper. He wondered if the incident at the bridge was linked in any way to this murder. Could some lawless guerilla band possibly have designs on the railway network in this part of France? This seemed likely to him, because railroads would be of strategic significance when the Allied invasion finally came. Though the actual date of the invasion and its landing area could not be determined by him, the railway network fell within the purview of his command. Thus, he’d better do something about it fast. Because if the guerillas staged some spectacular feat of sabotage, Major Richter could very well find himself being court-martialed for inefficiency and transferred to a concentration camp someplace, where he’d have to look at Jews all day long, and what could be worse than looking at Jews all day long?

Whatever the guerillas were up to, evidently it had something to do with the railroad at St. Jean-de-Daye. Richter decided he’d better proceed there forthwith. He leaned forward in his seat. “Grunwald—take me to the railway terminal in St. Jean-de-Daye. You know where it is, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then get going.”

“Yes, sir.”

Chapter 12

The old locomotive sped through the French countryside, with Agoult at the controls. The wind blew so hard Mahoney thought it might be a hurricane. He pulled his beret down to his ears and puffed a cigarette. His hands were filthy from shoveling coal. A train coming from the opposite direction passed them with a big *swoosh*, its wheels clanging along the tracks.

“How much farther to the tunnel?” he shouted to Agoult.

“About forty kilometers.”

Mahoney looked at his watch. It was ten o’clock in the morning. The locomotive wasn’t going too fast and he estimated that it would get to the tunnel in around two hours. That was an awfully long time, and a lot could go wrong. The locomotive might break down or they might run into a German roadblock or something like that. Sooner or later some German some place would have to realize that this locomotive was not on official business. Mahoney hoped that would come later than sooner.

Cranepool lost his balance and fell to the floor of the cab. He was supposed to be on lookout at the other window, but he’d been dozing and the old locomotive had given a shudder that knocked him on his ass.

Mahoney looked at Agoult. “What the hell was that?”

“A bad length of track. Maybe it had been bombed recently and repaired too quickly.”

Cranepool got to his feet and yawned. “I’m tired,” he said.

“Maybe you should take a break,” Mahoney told him. “Climb up on the coal car and give the uniform to Sommervieux, then get some sleep, got it?”

“Yes, sergeant. Thanks a lot.”

“Get moving and cut out the bullshit.” Mahoney looked at Leduc. “You might as well take a break, too. Change uniforms with Baudraye.”

“No, that’s all right,” Leduc said. “I got enough sleep last night, but you and Cranepool didn’t. Maybe you should take a break.”

“Maybe you’re right.” Mahoney figured he could trust Leduc to keep everything under control in the cab. Leduc had been a Resistance fighter since the earliest days of the movement, and had dealt competently with numerous tight situations. “If anything comes up, give a shout.”

Mahoney followed Cranepool up the ladder into the coal car. They saw the others dozing amid the piles of coal in the huge car. Cranepool awakened Sommervieux and told him to take his place in the cab. Then Cranepool sleepily removed the German uniform he’d been wearing, happy to be getting out of the damned thing. He gave it to Sommervieux, who cursed Hitler and all Germans everywhere as he put it on. Sommervieux climbed out of the railroad car and descended the ladder to take his place in the cab of the locomotive.

Mahoney found a level place on the coal and lay down upon it, wrapping his poncho around himself in an effort to keep dry. But he knew it wouldn’t do any good. He’d get wet anyway, and they’d all be lucky if they didn’t die of pneumonia. Fortunately, with the wind blowing as hard as it was, the walls of the coal car protected them from most of the rain. Mahoney had the old combat soldier’s ability to fall asleep under any circumstances, and within minutes after closing his eyes, was in slumber land.

Cranepool, however, did not possess this ability, although he too was a seasoned combat soldier. He didn’t mind the hard lumps of coal jutting into his body, but the filth of the coal car disturbed him. He was afraid that he’d inhale a lot of wet coal dust and get some kind of terrible lung disease. His mother, back in Ottumwa, Iowa, always had kept their home spotless, and he was used to that high level of hygiene. In basic training, at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri, he didn’t mind all the cleaning he had to do in the barracks, because he truly believed that cleanliness was next to godliness. Therefore he was most uncomfortable in the filthy coal car and could not fall asleep. He tossed and turned uncomfortably and wished he could pass out.

Meanwhile, watching him intently from the other side of the coal car, was Louise, her pretty features smudged with coal. Louise had been infatuated with Cranepool for the past two weeks, ever since she’d been assigned to the guerilla garrison at St. Pierre. To her he was Clark Gable and Gary Cooper all rolled up into one: the quintessential good-looking American guy. She was attracted to his languid easygoing manner and his shyness whenever she spoke to him. He’d told her that he had a girlfriend somewhere in America whom he wanted to marry. Many times Louise was tempted to run her fingers through his blond hair, even though she herself was married to a baker who resided in the town of Rouget.

The truth was that Louise had not been a particularly faithful wife. Her husband was fifteen years older than she and though she’d loved him when they were married, she subsequently got occasional cravings for men her own age.

She'd never had a great deal of willpower, so whenever she found herself alone with a man she found attractive, she could not resist his advances if he made them. And if he didn't make any, she flirted until he did.

An average man with no moral feelings would most probably not turn away from the very considerable charms of Louise. She had a nice figure and a rear end that maybe was more than she needed, but many men found it attractive. It was a good thing that this was so, because the war and all its dangers had caused Louise to seek refuge in sex even more than usual. She knew that she could be killed at any moment, and figured she should enjoy herself as much as she could.

So now she found herself staring thoughtfully at Cranepool, who was shifting about uncomfortably on the coal. She thought that maybe she should go over and ask if she could do anything to make him more comfortable. Looking around, she noticed that all the others were still. The brute Mahoney was snoring like a foghorn. What an animal he was, she thought, although she'd heard rumors that he was an exceptionally good lover. But what woman would want to make love to a gorilla like that when she could have a sweet poetic young man like Corporal Cranepool of the United States Army?

Louise crawled across the coal car to the side of Cranepool. She looked at his boyish face and wrinkled brows, and her heart expanded with love. "Are you all right?" she asked.

He twitched and opened his eyes. "Huh?"

"I asked if you were all right."

He looked around. "You mean me?"

"Of course, silly. Who else would I mean? You look uncomfortable. Is there anything I can do?"

"I don't think so," he said.

"What seems to be the trouble? The coal too hard for you?"

"It's not the coal—it's the filth."

"Ah, you sweet boy. You don't like dirty places."

"As a matter of fact I don't. It's disgusting."

She moved closer to him. "You poor child. You're used to the finer things of life—I can see that."

He became cross. "What do you mean—*child!* You're no older than I am!"

"Yes I am, but not much older."

"I'm not a child!"

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that. No, you're not a child." She placed her hand on his cheek. "You're a man."

"That's right, and don't you forget it!"

"I won't, but I'll bet there are things that I know that you don't."

"Like what?"

She moved closer to him. "You want me to show you?"

"Yeah."

She reached over and grabbed his joint, caressing it through the material of his pants.

"Hey!"

He pulled back, but she held onto him.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

“What are you doing?” he whispered, trying to push her hand away.

But she wouldn't let go. “You don't like this?”

“What if somebody sees you!”

“So what if they do?”

“But...”

She smiled, because she could feel him getting harder and stiffer. “Nobody can see us.”

“I... ah...”

“You act as though nobody ever played with your little doodle before.”

“But I... but I'm...” He wanted to protest that he was getting married, but he'd just got that Dear John letter from Betsy so that wasn't a legitimate excuse anymore.

“You want me to stop?” Louise asked innocently.

“Um... ah... I'm...” Cranepool said, his head spinning with fatigue, lust, and general confusion.

“I know,” she whispered into his ear, as she unbuttoned his fly.

“What do you know?” he asked weakly.

“This,” she replied, as she moved down and touched her tongue to the tip of his doodle.

Chapter 13

The operations center of the St. Jean-de-Daye railroad center was located in a two-story wooden building not far from the main gate. The control center was on the second floor, where wide windows permitted a long overview of the activities in the yard. On the first floor were various administrative offices including the office of Lieutenant-Colonel Niekish, a diminutive man with a Hitler-style mustache, who was commandant of the railway complex.

Niekish was sitting at his desk, smoking a cigarette in an ebony holder, when the door was flung open and Major Richter stormed in, Private Piecke close behind.

“Why did you move those bodies!” Richter screamed.

“Who are you?” Niekish asked calmly.

“I am Major Richter of the Gestapo! Why did you move those bodies without authority?”

“But my dear Major,” Niekish said, “I am the authority in this railway yards and I do as I see fit.”

“Not with unusual crimes, you don't! You should have left those bodies there until an official from the Gestapo came here to finish conducting the investigation!”

“What was there to investigate? Two of my guards were knifed by terrorists. That's all. Things like that happen all the time, as I'm sure you're aware. If the Gestapo was more effective, things like this wouldn't happen at all, but well, we have to do the best we can.”

"I see," said Richter, taking out his notebook. He wrote a few remarks about Lieutenant-Colonel Niekish, then returned the notebook to his shirt pocket. "Where are the bodies, please?"

"At the hospital."

"You should have not removed them without authorization."

"I told you that I am the authority here. I saw no point in leaving the bodies in the guardhouse. They would have been demoralizing to the other guards who occupied it. It is, in case you didn't know it, a very small guardhouse."

"I see." Richter sat in a chair in front of the desk, while Piecke stood behind him. "Who found the bodies?"

"The guards on the next shift."

"Bring them to me immediately!"

"I'm afraid I don't know where they are."

"You don't know where they are!"

"That is correct. They've gone off duty."

"You should not have let them go off duty, because I would like to question them."

"What for?" Niekish asked, for he was becoming perturbed by this arrogant SS officer. Like many Wehrmacht officers, Niekish loathed the SS. "The guards filed their report. I have it here. You may look at it if you like."

Richter accepted the report. "Evidently you are not aware that a clever and spirited interrogation often can elicit facts that do not show up in routine reports."

"Evidently," Niekish said drily.

Richter read the report. The guards were found with their throats slashed, just like the guards at the bridge. Was it possible that the same terrorists had committed these heinous deeds? It was possible, but not probable. All terrorists used knives and slashed throats when they were afraid of making noise. But was there an overall connection between both crimes? Were terrorists planning to sabotage the railroad?

Richter handed the report to Piecke, then leveled his gaze at Niekish. "Has anything else occurred at this yard that you know of?"

"No," replied Niekish. "Not that I know of."

"Were you here when the dead guards were found?"

"No. I didn't arrive until eight-thirty."

"Who was in charge here then?"

"The Officer of the Day was Lieutenant Boehm."

"Get him for me, please."

"I imagine he's asleep."

"Wake him up."

Flashing a look of hatred toward Richter, Niekish picked up his telephone and called the Bachelor Officer Quarters in St. Jean-de-Daye. He told the person who answered that he wanted to speak with Lieutenant Boehm. The person said he'd go get him. After an interval, during which Major Richter and Lieutenant-Colonel Niekish glowered at each other, the person returned to the telephone and said that Lieutenant Boehm was not in his room. Niekish asked where he was, and the person said he didn't know.

Niekish hung up the phone. "Lieutenant Boehm is not in his quarters, I'm afraid."

"Hmmm," said Richter. "It appears that nobody around here is where he should be."

"If we'd known you were coming," Niekish said sarcastically, "I'm sure everyone would have made himself available."

The sarcasm was not lost on Richter, but he didn't let it show. "Is there anyone in this headquarters right now who was on duty then?"

"I believe there may be somebody upstairs. I'll take you there if you like, and you can make the inquiry yourself."

"That would be most helpful."

"Follow me please, Major—what did you say your name was?"

"Richter. Kurt Richter."

"Ah, yes."

Niekish arose from his desk and took his jacket from a hanger in the closet. He put it on and walked to the door, opened it, and entered the hall. Richter and Piecke followed him down the corridor and up a flight of stairs to the control room of the railway yard. There technicians and engineers, some in the Wehrmacht and some of them French civilians who were collaborating with the German occupation authorities, sat at consoles where little red lights were blinking, or talked on telephones.

They all became extremely self-conscious when they perceived that an officer of the SS had descended upon them.

"Excuse me gentlemen," Niekish said, "but I'd like all of you to meet Major Kurt Richter."

Richter nodded to them, while they shifted uneasily in their chairs and tried to smile.

"Major Richter would like to ask you all a few questions," Niekish said.

All eyes focused on Major Richter. Little red lights flashed on the consoles. Outside the windows you could see the rain falling on the bleak railroad yard.

Major Richter cleared his throat. "Were any of you on duty here at six o'clock this morning?"

Three hands went up into the air. Two belonged to German soldiers, the other to a French civilian.

"Hmmm," Richter said. "You are aware of course that two guards were found murdered by French terrorists at approximately that time. Those guards went on duty at around four o'clock in the morning, so that means they were killed during those two hours. I would like to know if any of you perceived anything unusual in this yard during that period, or during the hours afterwards."

The two soldiers and the Frenchman looked at each other, then turned to Richter and shook their heads, murmuring *no*.

"Are you quite sure?"

They nodded that they were.

"I find that most strange," Richter said. "It must be assumed that the terrorists killed those guards to gain entrance to the yard. It must further be assumed that they gained entrance to the yard in order to do something. Are you sure you don't know of anything unusual that happened?"

The Frenchman spoke up. He had a black mustache, wore a shirt and necktie, and had on a sleeveless sweater because it was a bit chilly in the building. “Only routine things happen in this yard, Major. Trains come and trains go. Lately we’ve had engineers here repairing tracks and buildings that have been bombed. Fortunately this building hasn’t been hit yet, but who knows what might happen in the next bombing raid?”

“No unusual movements of trains?” Richter asked. “No peculiar groups of men moving through the yard?”

“No, Major.”

Richter looked at Niekish. “These yards should be searched from one end to the other. Explosives might have been planted at crucial places. We must find them before they go off.”

Niekish smiled thinly. “It would be awfully difficult to ask men to search the yard for explosives if they might explode at any moment.”

“Then use Frenchmen. I don’t care how you get it done, but do it.”

Niekish’s cheeks were turning red. “Yes, Major Richter.”

Richter looked at the German soldiers and the Frenchman again. “Are you sure you don’t recall anything unusual happening here this morning?”

The soldiers and the Frenchman looked at each other, then turned to Richter and shook their heads slowly.

“Nothing important happened,” said the Frenchman.

Richter’s ears perked up like those of a fox. “Nothing *important* happened?” he asked. “Why don’t you let me be the judge of what is important and what is not. To what are you referring?”

The Frenchman smiled and shrugged in a self-effacing way. “Well, there was the business about the old locomotive that left the yard this morning.”

“Old locomotive? What old locomotive?”

“No one seemed to know where it came from or where it was going, but there were two German soldiers on board and we figured it was being used for some military purpose, and that the military had neglected to inform us.”

Richter recalled that the two guards at the bridge between St. Lo and St. Jean-de-Daye had been stripped of their uniforms. Could it be that the two soldiers on this locomotive were really terrorists wearing the uniforms of those guards?

Richter turned to Niekish. “Do you mean to tell me that locomotives can leave this yard without your authorization and you don’t do anything about it?”

Niekish knew he was on the spot now, and he wished the Frenchman had kept his big mouth shut, but he’d take care of him later. “Under normal circumstances that would not have happened,” he explained, “but lately, with all the bombing and repair work, it’s been difficult to keep track of things.”

Richter narrowed his eyes. “You are an officer in the German Army, are you not?”

“Of course I am.”

“Then bombing and the other circumstances of war should be *normal* to you, should they not?”

“They are normal to me,” Niekish replied heatedly, “just as chaos is normal in war. And besides, you’re behaving as though there was something sinister about that old locomotive when in fact you have nothing to substantiate that belief.”

Richter narrowed his eyes even more. "Lieutenant-Colonel Niekish—let me remind you that between the hours of four and six o'clock this morning, two guards were killed at this railroad complex. It must be assumed that they were killed by French terrorists. It must further be assumed that the terrorists gained entrance to the yard for some illegal and anti-German purpose. Who knows, Lieutenant-Colonel Niekish, whether that old locomotive was part of that illegal and anti-German purpose?"

Niekish thought Richter was a thoroughly absurd human being. "Well, Major," he said. "I'm afraid I don't know and can't imagine what that purpose could be. Do you?"

A muscle in Richter's jaw twitched. "No," he said, "but I intend to find out."

Chapter 14

Colonel Bruce Fairbairn of the OSS was sitting in his office at Bletchley mansion when the phone on his desk began to ring. He picked up the receiver and said, "Fairbairn here."

"General Bradley wishes to speak with you, sir," said his secretary.

"Put him through."

"Yes, sir."

There was a click and then the deep voice of General Omar Bradley could be heard. "Fairbairn, do we have any word on that bridge yet?"

"Not yet, sir."

"General Eisenhower just called me about it, and he's very concerned. Do you think you can find out anything?"

"I can try."

"Get back to me as soon as you can on this, will you?"

"Yes, sir."

Fairbairn hung up the phone and left his office. He walked quickly down a corridor and then descended a flight of stairs to the huge radio room complex. Men and women sat at radio transmitters, sending and receiving messages. At another end of the room technicians were monitoring German messages and decoding them with the top-secret Ultra Machine. The room was particularly busy now that the invasion had definitely been scheduled for 0600 hours tomorrow morning.

Fairbairn stopped next to the transmitter of Ruth Buchanan, who sent and received messages from the part of occupied France that included the stronghold at St. Pierre. She was a twenty-six-year-old brunette from Manchester, New Hampshire, and she held a master's degree in electronics from the University of Michigan.

"Ruth," Fairbairn said to her, "have you heard anything from the Parrot yet?"

"Not yet."

"I'd like you to put through an emergency call to St. Pierre right now, and inquire about the status of that bridge. I'll wait here for the answer."

"Yes, sir."

Ruth replugged some wires and put on her headphones. She turned the dial of the transmitter to the frequency that St. Pierre was supposed to listen to, and began tapping her key. Fairbairn leaned his shoulder against the wall and crossed his arms. He knew that the Parrot was Master Sergeant Clarence Mahoney of the 15th Ranger Battalion. In fact, he had given Mahoney some of his training here at Bletchley, which might have accounted for the fact he didn't like Mahoney very much. He thought Mahoney was nothing more than a gangster who might be good for missions requiring daring and ruthlessness, such as clearing a beach of booby traps, or staging a surprise attack on a small German military unit, but he didn't think Mahoney was suited for action behind enemy lines, despite Mahoney's skill at languages. He thought Mahoney was too unstable, and that he might someday make a mistake that would cost many lives. But Fairbairn had to admit that Mahoney had successfully completed every mission assigned him so far, astonishing though that was. Mahoney had received the assignment to blow up the bridge because he was the closest U.S. Ranger to it. Though Fairbairn hoped Mahoney would be able to carry this mission through, he still had serious doubts about Mahoney's effectiveness.

Ruth finished transmitting the message and sat listening to the airwaves, her pencil poised over a notepad. Fairbairn watched her intently, hoping St. Pierre would say that the mission had been successful and the bridge was no more. Then he proudly could report that fact to General Bradley, who would report it to Ike.

Ruth began writing on the pad. Fairbairn looked over her shoulder and read:

Bridge still there. No word from Parrot.

Fairbairn bit his lower lip. He looked at his watch.

It was almost two o'clock in the afternoon; the airborne landings were scheduled to take place in only eleven hours, and the seaborne invasion five hours later. Where the hell was Mahoney?

Chapter 15

Mahoney opened his eyes in the coal car. The rainstorm had soaked him to his skin because he'd become uncovered while he was asleep. He looked at his watch and realized he'd only been out for a little more than a half hour. Then he glanced across the coal car and saw a very strange thing.

It looked as though two people were humping underneath a poncho. He recalled that Cranepool had laid himself down to sleep over there when they'd both climbed up from the locomotive. Mahoney had fallen asleep instantly, but Cranepool was getting laid. The big question was who was he getting laid with?

Mahoney was wondering how to determine whom Cranepool was humping, when he became aware that the locomotive was slowing down. Why was the locomotive slowing down? He thought he'd better find out. The noise he made getting up from his bed of coal evidently inhibited Cranepool and his paramour, because they stopped moving. Mahoney slung his carbine over his shoulder and stumbled toward the ladder, passing snoring men. He looked behind him and noticed a length of Odette's blonde hair peeking out from underneath her poncho.

That meant Cranepool was screwing Louise. You leave people alone for a few minutes, and they start fucking, Mahoney thought.

He climbed down the ladder, aware that the train was decreasing its speed even more. The wind and rain whipped him as he lowered himself to the floor of the locomotive. Sommervieux shoveled coal into the furnace, Leduc was standing guard, and Agoult was working the levers in the control area.

“Why are we slowing down?” Mahoney asked Agoult.

“Because we’re going to stop. We have to switch tracks and there’s a place where we can do it straight ahead.”

Mahoney looked out the side of the cab, but couldn’t see very far ahead in the rain. “Why do we have to switch tracks?”

“So we can get in the same lane as trains coming from the other direction. Don’t you remember we want to cause a crash in the tunnel?”

“Suppose we have a crash before the tunnel?”

“The tunnel’s only about two miles ahead. We’re almost there.”

“Maybe I’d better wake the others up, then.”

“That’s a good idea.”

The train slowed more and came to a creaking halt. Agoult jumped out of the cab and ran forward to operate the switch. Baudraye poked his head over the edge of the coal car. “Why are we stopping?”

Mahoney looked up at him. “To change tracks. Wake up the others and tell them to get ready for trouble.”

Baudraye’s head disappeared again, and Mahoney heard a commotion in the coal car. He hoped they’d catch Cranepool and Louise *in flagrante*, but if he knew Cranepool, that young maniac would have had his dick buttoned up in his pants and his carbine ready as soon as he realized the locomotive had stopped.

Mahoney looked out the side of the cab and saw Agoult up ahead pulling down on a lever that was as tall as he. The tracks became crisscrossed as he pulled on the lever. When it was all the way down, Agoult ran back to the cab and climbed in. He pushed levers and twisted knobs; the locomotive inched forward, gathered speed and moved onto the track that would carry trains coming from the other direction. After it passed the crisscross Agoult brought it to a stop, jumped down from the cab and ran back to push the lever the other way so that the tracks returned to their normal position. Then he ran back to the locomotive and got it rolling again. Soon it was speeding through the rain, on the wrong track this time.

“Hey Agoult,” Mahoney said, “what if a train happens to come from the other direction?”

“We’d all better jump off this real quick. Shovel some coal into the furnace will you? Don’t just stand there like a mushroom.”

Mahoney lifted the shovel and opened the door to the furnace. White and yellow flames filled the small shimmering area. He remembered a biblical character—he thought it might have been Daniel—who had been thrown into a fiery furnace like that and come out some time later without a scratch. Now that was impossible, Mahoney figured, as he began to shovel in the coal. There was no way that such a thing could happen.

Meanwhile, Cranepool was scrambling down the ladder of the coal car, his carbine slung on his back, his beret tilted rakishly over his eyes. "What did we stop for?" he asked above the roar of the engine and whistle of the wind.

"You scumbag," Mahoney said.

"Huh?"

"You heard me."

"Why am I a scumbag?"

"Because you are."

"What did I do?"

"You know very well what you did, you scumbag."

"No, I don't," Cranepool said, perplexed. He looked upon Mahoney as a father or older brother and took everything he said quite seriously, perhaps too seriously, considering Mahoney's tendency to babble pointlessly at times such as this. And then it occurred to him that Mahoney might be referring to what had transpired in the coal car between him and Louise. "Do you mean Louise?"

A drop of water dripped from Mahoney's beret to his nose. "Yes." Actually Mahoney truly was annoyed, not because he disapproved of people having sexual intercourse, but it irritated him to think that somebody else might be doing it and having fun while he wasn't. "Scumbag."

"But we're in love!" Cranepool protested.

"I think I'm gonna start calling you Cesspool."

"But we're in love!"

"Didn't she tell you she was married?"

Cranepool blinked. "Married?"

"Yes, married."

"She didn't tell me she was married."

"I didn't think she did. But she is."

"Who is she married to?"

"Some asshole. He's a baker or a cook or something like that."

Cranepool felt sick to his stomach. Whenever he fell in love something like this happened. "Maybe she can get divorced."

"She's a Catholic, asshole. Catholics don't get divorced."

"But you're a Catholic and you got divorced, didn't you Sarge?"

"I'm different."

"What makes you so different?"

"Because I don't give a shit about that stuff, but here in France they take it seriously."

Cranepool looked glumly at Mahoney. "Gee Sarge, what am I gonna do?"

"That's your problem, Cesspool."

"I think I'd better go talk to Louise about this."

Cranepool turned and grabbed the ladder, putting his foot on the bottom rung. Mahoney grabbed him by the collar and pulled him down.

"Hey, whataya think this is—the Kate Smith Hour?" Mahoney asked harshly. "We've got work to do here. Stick your head out that window there and keep your eyes peeled for trouble. Got it?"

"Got it."

Cranepool looked out the window and got a faceful of rain. He squinted and peered through the gray day for signs of trouble, thinking of Louise. Why didn't she tell me she was married? he asked himself, not bothering to consider they hadn't had much time to talk up there in the coal car.

Mahoney moved to the other side of the cab and looked out the window. He felt better now that he'd hollered at Cranepool a little. It had got his blood moving and awakened him a bit. Now he felt ready to fight, should that become necessary. He had a funny feeling that it would become necessary, and fairly soon, too.

Chapter 16

In the operations room in the train station at St. Jean-de-Daye, the French collaborator in the sleeveless sweater, whose name was Graslin, looked at the blinking red lights on the console in front of him. "Isn't that strange?" he murmured.

"Isn't what strange?" asked Corporal Haider of the German Army Transportation Corps, sitting beside him.

"According to my control board, the tracks between Vernisset and Athanase have just been switched."

Haider leaned over and looked at the lights. "I wonder what's going on?"

"Maybe water from the rain got into the wires and made a short circuit. The tracks might not have been switched at all."

"You're probably right, because who would have switched them?"

"Nobody would do anything like that."

Graslin looked at the lights. "Do you think I should tell Lieutenant-Colonel Niekish?"

"What for?"

"He said to report anything unusual."

"Maybe you should, then."

"But this is probably nothing. He might get mad. You know how he is at times."

"I know, but I think it'd be better to have him mad at you for telling him than not telling him."

"Maybe you're right. Maybe I'd better put it in writing just to make sure."

"Good idea."

Graslin took a sheet of paper and wrote the information on it. He signed his name and wrote the date and time underneath it. As he arose from his chair he glanced at the red lights again. "Look!"

Haider turned to Graslin's console. "What is it?"

"The tracks are switching back to the way they were before."

"Isn't that strange. You don't think..."

"What?" asked Graslin.

"No, it couldn't be," Haider said.

"What couldn't be?"

"Well, do you remember that business about the old locomotive?"

"Yes."

“Maybe this has something to do with the old locomotive.”

“I still think it’s probably a short-circuit in the wires. There’s been an awful lot of rain, you know.”

“I know, but I think you’d better tell Lieutenant-Colonel Niekish anyway.”

“I’ll go down to see him right now.”

Downstairs, in his office, Lieutenant-Colonel Niekish was in a foul mood. He’d been that way ever since his encounter with Major Richter that morning. Niekish loathed the SS. It seemed improper to him that an SS officer of junior grade should treat him like a subordinate when he had served Germany faithfully in two wars and had been awarded the Iron Cross Second Class in the Second Battle of the Somme. He was thinking dark thoughts and sipping a cup of coffee that was ninety percent chicory when Graslin knocked on his door.

“Come in!” Niekish said.

Graslin entered the office. “I’m sorry to bother you sir, but something unusual has happened and I thought I’d better report it immediately.” He shifted his feet nervously and waited for Niekish to say something.

Niekish placed his coffee cup in the saucer. “What happened?”

“I received an indication on my console board that the tracks between Vernisset and Athanase have been switched.”

“It’s probably a short circuit because of all the rain,” Niekish said.

“That’s what I thought, but I talked it over with Corporal Haider and we decided I should tell you anyway, in view of what the SS Major told us this morning. I put it in writing. Here.” He dropped the piece of paper on Niekish’s desk.

Niekish looked at the piece of paper. “Is that all?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You may return to your post.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Graslin left the office and Niekish looked at the piece of paper. He was certain that it was a short circuit caused by the excessive rainfall, but he thought he’d notify Richter’s office in La Roche-Guyon anyway. He picked up his telephone and told his secretary to put him through to La Roche-Guyon.

It turned out that Richter was not in his office, so Niekish left the message with one of Richter’s aides, who said he’d give it to Richter as soon as he heard from him.

Chapter 17

The old locomotive rumbled through the wind and rain. Mahoney smoked a cigarette and looked out the side window, hoping no train would come from the opposite direction and crash into them. He looked at both his watches: it was four-thirty in the afternoon. He was hungry and was sure the others were, too. At least they had cigarettes to smoke but it wouldn’t be long before they ran out of them. Then the situation would really become difficult.

Agoult turned back to Mahoney. “The tunnel’s just up ahead!” he shouted.

Mahoney took the cigarette out of his mouth and craned his head out the window of the cab. Sure enough through the wet gray afternoon he saw the mountain looming up in front of them, only it really wasn't a mountain; it was more of a huge round hill. The railroad couldn't go over it and couldn't go around it so they'd cut right through it, and if Mahoney had his way, it would be totally destroyed before many more hours passed.

Mahoney picked up a lump of coal and threw it at Cranepool, who turned around suddenly; the kid's basic reflexes were terrific.

"Go up in the coal car and tell the others to get down here," Mahoney said.

Cranepool climbed the ladder and relayed Mahoney's message. Agoult pulled a lever and the locomotive slowed down. The locomotive plunged into the darkness of the tunnel. Mahoney looked ahead and couldn't see the light at the other end.

"Hey!" he called to Agoult. "How come I can't see the light at the other end of the tunnel?"

"Because there's a curve," Agoult replied.

Agoult pulled another lever, and the locomotive slowed down more. Cranepool returned to the cab, and soon the others arrived. It was damp and musty-smelling in the tunnel. Smoke and cinders from the smokestack flew past their heads. Louise smiled at Cranepool. He looked away from her. Mahoney saw the interaction and felt like laughing.

The train came to a stop.

"Well, here we are," said Agoult. "Is this good enough?"

"Can you see us from the other side?" Mahoney asked.

"They can't see us from either side," Agoult said.

"Okay everybody!" Mahoney shouted. "Unload the explosives and bring them to the front of the train! And hurry, because we don't have all day!"

The three crates of TNT were unloaded quickly. They were carried to the front of the locomotive and the wooden tops were pried away. Mahoney told the others to lay the three open crates of TNT in front of the train, while he took some wire and hand grenades and connived a booby trap. When the train came from the opposite direction it would trip the wires and set off the hand grenades, which in turn would detonate the TNT. The collision and explosion ought to clog up the tunnel for a week at least, and prevent this railway line from being used to ship men and supplies to the Normandy beaches.

Mahoney put the finishing touches on his little demolition job. He'd received special demolition training at Fort Benning and it had been the most interesting subject he'd ever learned in the Army. He loved to see things get blown up, and if you knew what you were doing you could make every little stick of TNT or dynamite go a long way.

He checked his work one more time, and it was perfect. Then he pulled the pins from the hand grenades, arming them.

"Let's get out of here," he said.

They took their weapons in hand and followed Mahoney out of the tunnel and into the rain again.

When he said, "I think we might as well get rid of the German uniforms now," Leduc and Baudraye removed their uniforms, throwing them behind some bushes.

Then Mahoney looked around, trying to find a good spot to hide and wait to see the big explosion.

“What are you looking for?” Leduc asked.

Mahoney told him.

“You mean we will have to stay here!” Leduc said.

“That’s right. Otherwise how are we going to know whether or not the tunnel is destroyed?”

“But Mahoney, it will be very dangerous to hang around here.”

“I’m not saying it won’t be. You don’t have to stay if you’re afraid.”

“Afraid?” Leduc asked, puffing out his chest. “I am not afraid.”

“Glad to hear that. I think we should look for a ridge or some other natural hiding place on the other side, so we can watch the approach of the train when it comes and see it enter the tunnel.”

Leduc nodded in assent. Mahoney rearranged his rifle sling on his shoulder and led the way over the steep hill beside the tunnel. It was slow going, because they had to be careful they wouldn’t fall down the hill. They held onto bushes and rocks to steady themselves. It took them fifteen minutes to reach the other side. There, Mahoney spotted some boulders and bushes fifty yards from the tunnel entrance, and about twenty yards from the tracks themselves. He told them to take positions behind the boulders, and they did so.

Now began the long wait for a train. Mahoney sat with his back against a boulder and lit another cigarette. He took a sip from his canteen and wished he had something to eat. He hoped the train wouldn’t take too long to arrive. Turning his head, he saw Cranepool and Louise behind a boulder, engaging in an urgent whispered discussion. Mahoney grinned as he puffed his cigarette. He looked at his watch; it was a little after five. Odette sat down beside him.

“Have you got an extra cigarette?” she asked.

“Sure.” He took out his pack and offered her one. She was wearing brown cotton slacks and he could perceive the fine shape of her leg. He lit her cigarette with a match, and wished once again that the train would hurry and come. Then he could eat something and maybe do certain things that might take his mind off the war for a while.

He noticed a wicked little gleam in her eye and figured she probably was thinking the same thing.

Chapter 18

The radio on the dashboard of the Mercedes-Benz began to squawk the call letters of Major Richter. Piecke lifted the microphone off its hook and handed it to the major in the back seat. The limousine was making its way through a storm on a road near Tours, on its way back to La Roche-Guyon.

Richter pressed the button on the microphone and spoke his call letters. He depressed the button and heard the voice of his secretary at La Roche-Guyon coming from the loudspeaker behind the dash.

“Major Richter,” said his secretary, an SS corporal named Schultz, “you said to call you if any new intelligence came in concerning that stolen locomotive, and although I don’t have anything yet, I’ve just received a message from Lieutenant-Colonel Niekish from the railroad yards at St. Jean-de-Daye—do you know who I’m referring to, sir?”

“Of course I know!” Richter said testily. “What is the message, you idiot!”

“He called to report something he considered unusual, sir. He said that the railroad tracks between Vernisset and Athanase have been switched under mysterious circumstances, and then returned to their normal position. He said to tell you that although the switching was unauthorized, the signal might have been caused by a short circuit due to the rain.”

“Hmmm,” said Richter. “Anything else?”

“No, sir.”

“Be certain to call me if any other information of this nature comes in.”

“Yes, sir.”

Richter returned the microphone to Piecke, then took out the railway map he’d obtained from Niekish and began to study it. He located the length of track between Vernisset and Athanase and realized that it was on the same line as the bridge where the two guards had been found. If I were a terrorist, he said to himself, and I wanted to sabotage a railway line, why would I steal a locomotive and drive it in that direction, and then switch over to the other side of the track?

“Hmmm,” Richter said, studying the map. He placed his finger on the bridge between St. Lo and St. Jean-de-Daye. And if I were a terrorist, he continued, why would I kill two guards at this bridge and not do anything to sabotage it? Richter pondered this as the car sped through the rain, the windshield wipers slapping back and forth. “Hmmm.” He arranged possible alternatives in his mind and finally came up with only two: Either the terrorists had been scared away, or they decided they could do more damage to that railway line at another point.

All right, Richter thought, if I assume that band of terrorists was the same one that killed the guards at the railway terminal at St. Jean-de-Daye, and assuming they stole an old locomotive, and further assuming they drove it in a westerly direction and then switched over to the track coming from the opposite way, what would they be up to?

Suddenly the answer came to him, and sent a chill up his back. If everything he’d assumed so far was true, then they only could be up to one thing: *they were planning to ram a train coming from the opposite direction!* Something had prevented them from blowing up the bridge, forcing them to take other measures. The rail line certainly had strategic importance. His assumptions possibly could be completely correct.

That meant he had to take appropriate measures himself. Like what? He didn’t want to do anything too dramatic, because if he were wrong, he’d look like a fool, but on the other hand, if those terrorists actually rammed a train, and he didn’t do anything about it, he’d not only look worse, but he’d also be in trouble with his supervisors in Berlin.

“Hmmm,” he said.

“Did you say something, sir?” Piecke asked.

“Keep quiet and stop bothering me!” Richter answered.

“Yes, sir. Sorry sir.”

Richter drummed his fingers on the armrest affixed to the door. He heard a gigantic squish as the car drove through a huge puddle. He decided that he should determine whether or not a train might be headed west on the line that he believed the terrorists were seeking to sabotage.

“Piecke,” he said.

“Yes, sir?”

“Get me Lieutenant-Colonel Niekish at the rail terminal in St. Jean-de-Daye.”

“Yes, sir.”

Piecke lifted the telephone off the dashboard and began talking to the radio operator in La Roche-Guyon. Richter took out a cigarette and lit it up. He blew smoke at the ceiling of the limousine and unrolled the window a few inches. He thought about his native town of Munich and wished he could be there right now, eating wiener schnitzel with his mother and father, and drinking Rhine wine in the dining room. Maybe afterwards they could go out and hear a speech by a local party leader, or maybe Richter could even give a speech himself, now that he was a party leader of high rank, too. He’d come a long way since he was a student at the University of Heidelberg, and he still had a long way to go, for he was an ambitious man. Once he had even received a personal phone call of congratulations from Heinrich Himmler himself for his efficient round-up of Jews in Brittany.

Piecke handed back the microphone to Richter. “I have Lieutenant-Colonel Niekish,” he said.

Richter took the microphone and pressed the button. “Colonel Niekish?”

“Speaking,” Niekish said wearily.

“I’m calling in reference to your report about the switching of tracks between Vernisset and Athanase. Can you tell me if a train is scheduled to pass through that district within the next four hours?”

“Let me check the schedule,” Niekish said. There was silence for a few moments, and Richter puffed his cigarette, tapping his foot nervously on the floor. “Ah, yes,” Niekish said. “The three-fifteen from Lyons should be passing that district in about an hour and a half.”

A chill went up Richter’s spine. “I see,” he said. “What kind of train is it?”

“A supply train. There’ll be some oil cars for the 372nd Panzer and some repair parts, plus the usual foodstuffs.”

Richter’s eyes bulged out of his head. “Oil cars!”

“Is there anything wrong, Major Richter?”

“That will be all, Colonel Niekish. Thank you very much for the information.”

“You’re quite welcome, Major Richter, and by the way, I wouldn’t worry too much about that rail switching if I were you,” Niekish explained. “The signal we received was caused by a short circuit in the wires. There’s been so much rain, you know.”

“Over and out,” Richter replied, handing the microphone back to Piecke. “Stop this car!” Richter said to Grunwald, his driver.

“Yes, sir!”

Grunwald pulled over to the side of the road and yanked up the emergency brake. Richter looked at his map, trying to figure out which SS detachment might

be closest to the train route. Perspiration dotted his brow. He realized the situation had taken a turn for the worse. If the terrorists rammed a train loaded with oil cars, there could be a terrible catastrophe and conflagration. Then his finger came to rest on the town of Tours. There was an SS company there, about one hundred and sixty men. If he could get them to stop the train and board it, and if he could board the train farther on near Chateau-Renault, then he could personally take charge and foil any attempt the terrorists might make to sabotage the train.

"Give me that microphone again," he said to Piecke.

"Yes, sir," Piecke said, lifting it off the dash and handing it to Richter.

Richter took out his little black information book and found the call letters of the SS company in Tours. He pressed the button in the microphone and told the operator to put him through to the company. There was some static over the airwaves, and then the radioman in the SS company answered the call.

"Let me speak to your commanding officer immediately," Richter said. "This is Major Richter calling!"

"Yes, sir," said the radioman.

There was a click and then a new voice came on. "Lieutenant Heilbronn speaking, sir."

"Heilbronn, do you know who I am?"

"Yes, sir."

"I want you to round up all your men and have them board the three-fifteen train from Lyons, when it comes through your town. Is that clear?"

"I'm sorry, sir," said the voice coming from the dashboard, "but I only have one platoon of my men in garrison right now. The others are out on assignments all over the province right now and it would be impossible to get them back."

"Very well. Take what you have and stop that train, do you hear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Board it with your men and take a field radio with you, understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"I will meet the train somewhere near Chateau-Renault. Be on the lookout for my car, will you?"

"Yes, sir."

"If you see anything suspicious, stop the train. Be on the lookout for a locomotive coming from the opposite direction, is that clear?"

"A locomotive coming from the opposite direction?"

"Yes."

"I'll watch for it, sir."

"Good. Carry out your orders, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir."

Richter handed the microphone back to Piecke. "Grunwald, get moving to Chateau-Renault."

"Yes, sir."

Grunwald let the emergency brake go and shifted into gear. He accelerated down the muddy road, sending stones and mud flying in all directions. Richter stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray, and thought that if he could stop the terrorists from sabotaging this crucial rail line, it might merit another personal

phone call from Heinrich Himmler, and he might even get a promotion. And if he couldn't stop them, it would be a very serious black mark on his record.

"Hurry, you fool!" he shouted at Grunwald.

"Yes, sir," replied Grunwald, depressing the accelerator pedal a bit more. As the big black limousine thundered over the road, Richter was hoping he could catch some of the terrorists alive so that he could torture them and perhaps extract some important information about when the invasion would take place.

If he could do that, he'd get a promotion for sure.

Chapter 19

In the radio room at St. Pierre, old Topinard sat with the headphones on, listening to the airwaves and reading a copy of *Liberation Soir*, which was published by a Resistance group in Paris. Suddenly dots and dashes flew into his ears. He dropped the newspaper and began writing on the pad. The message was brief, and the sender signed off.

Topinard decoded the message. It was from the OSS in Bletchley and said:

Request immediate information on Parrot and the progress of his mission.

Captain Montegnac wasn't at his desk. Topinard, who thought he might be in the mess hall, debated whether to leave his radio and deliver the message. This was the third such message from Bletchley that afternoon. The big shots certainly were nervous about something. Topinard decided he'd better give Montegnac the message. If anybody called during the brief period of time that he'd be away from his desk, they'd surely call back.

Topinard took the headphones off and left the radio room. Walking swiftly down the corridor of the old monastery, he was the prototype of a French *bourgeois*: a roly-poly little man wearing a black sweater and a black beret. He, along with everyone else at the outpost, was wondering what had happened to Mahoney. Had he been captured or killed? Topinard couldn't imagine Mahoney as a prisoner of the Germans. That American maniac never would let himself be taken alive. He seemed like a volcano about to explode. Topinard was intimidated by Mahoney, who had never threatened him in any way or even said a harsh word, although he'd said numerous harsh words to Captain Montegnac. The two of them had hated each other from the moment they first met, and relations between them had been verging on open warfare ever since.

Topinard entered the mess hall and saw Montegnac sitting among some other Resistance fighters at the long table, dipping a piece of bread into his bowl of stew. Topinard approached and handed him the message. "This just came in for you, sir."

Montegnac looked at it, frowning. He was annoyed that Mahoney had not made contact with St. Pierre since he left the outpost last night. "Radio back that we don't have any word yet, and that we'll notify them as soon as we do."

"Yes, sir."

Topinard turned and walked out of the mess hall. Montegnac bit a chunk off his piece of bread. Bletchley was putting pressure on him, and he didn't like that. And

it was all Mahoney's fault. When I see that son-of-a-bitch again, I'll shoot him, Montagnac said to himself.

Chapter 20

"Anybody got a fuckin' cigar around here?" Mahoney asked.

Everybody shook their heads just like he knew they would. The rain was coming down worse than ever and his feet had been wet for so long he thought he'd get trench foot before long. What a miserable life! He looked around at the other guerillas, who were as gloomy and soaked as he. Taking out a cigarette, he snuggled against the boulder and lit it with a match, then wrapped the book of matches in cellophane and returned them to his shirt pocket.

He puffed the cigarette and looked at the railroad track that headed west before it disappeared into the wind and rain. If it were nice out, this operation wouldn't be so bad, he thought. All the shit happens to me. If he were back home in New York right now, he wondered, where would he be on a day like this? Probably in a whorehouse on Eighth Avenue, drinking whisky and sucking the boobs of the best-looking hooker on the premises.

He blew smoke through his nostrils and shivered at the sensation. He wished that goddamn train would hurry up and come, because the longer they had to stay here, the longer they were sitting ducks for any SS patrol that happened along. His watches read 5:30. In a couple of hours it would get dark, which would be most welcome. Mahoney loved the dark; it always made him feel safer.

He debated whether or not to stay at the tunnel with Cranepool and send the rest back to St. Pierre.

He couldn't imagine why he'd need the others, but he had to stay to find out if their trick actually worked, so he could report the success or failure of his mission to the folks at Bletchley. What a name to give a place! *Bletchley*. It's like the sound a person makes when he's throwing up, he thought.

Puffing the cigarette, he decided that if the train didn't come within the next hour, he'd dismiss the French people and stay behind with Cranepool. Actually he really didn't think he'd need Cranepool for anything, but if he was going to be miserable, he thought Cranepool ought to be, too.

Rank has its privileges, he thought with a grunt. And one of them was the right to make other people suffer alongside you even when it wasn't necessary. He looked at Cranepool, who was sitting cross-legged on the ground about ten yards away. Louise was kneeling in front of him, gesticulating wildly with her hands. It looked like they were having an argument, and he grinned. Put a man and a woman together, and pretty soon they'll be fucking, he thought. Then as soon as they stop fucking, they'll start fighting.

"What's so funny?" Odette asked drowsily from under the hood of her poncho.

"Shaddup," he replied. "I'm trying to think."

"Who told you that you know how to think?"

"I said shaddup!"

Mahoney strained his ears, trying to overhear the argument between Cranepool and Louise. Cranepool felt betrayed and taken advantage of by Louise. "You should have told me that you were married!" he said accusingly.

She brushed back her damp hair from her cheek.

"There was no reason for me to tell you."

"I thought you really cared for me, but you were just playing games with me," he said bitterly. "I don't mean anything to you at all."

"Yes, you do mean something to me. I love you very much, you foolish little boy."

"I'm not a little boy. I'm older than you."

"You're not older than me."

"How old are you?"

"I'm not telling you, but I know that I'm older than you. And I also know that even if you were older than me, you'd still be a child, because all you Americans are."

"That's an insult," Cranepool shouted. He was a very patriotic young man and he considered her remark a slur on the national honor of the United States of America.

"It's the truth," she retorted.

"Women like you don't know what the truth is."

She raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean, *women like me?*" she asked, a sharp edge to her voice.

"You know what I mean."

"I'm afraid I don't. Please explain it to me."

"Married women like you who cheat on their husbands."

Louise put her hands on her hips. "How dare you talk to me that way!"

"The truth hurts, doesn't it?"

With an angry scream, Louise pounced on him, kicking, punching, scratching and biting. Cranepool was unable to protect himself, because he couldn't hit a woman. Then she tried to kick him in the balls but he moved his leg in the way. Baudraye and Bixiou, who had been sitting nearby, tore them off each other.

"Now, now," Bixiou cooed.

"Save it for the Germans," Baudraye said, struggling to hold Louise back.

Mahoney got up and came stomping over, a little smile playing on his face. "Hey whatsa matter with you two!" he shouted. "Are you nuts or something!"

"She hit me," Cranepool complained, his voice choked from the headlock of Bixiou.

"You poor thing," Mahoney said with false compassion. He looked at Louise. "Leave him alone, understand?"

"He said bad things about me."

"You probably deserved them. Hereafter I want you two idiots to stay away from each other. You," he pointed to Louise, "go over there," he pointed to the far left side of their line, "and you," he looked evilly at Cranepool, "go over there." He pointed to the far right side of their line. "Got it?"

"Yes, Sergeant," Cranepool said dejectedly, wiping some blood from a deep scratch on his nose.

Mahoney looked at Louise. "Any questions, Cleopatra?"

“No.”

“Good.” Mahoney turned around and sat down again. He took out another cigarette and lit it up, then turned to Odette and grinned. “Ain’t love grand?”

Chapter 21

Private Piecke stood in the middle of the tracks and waved his arms. Far off in the distance, its one light gleaming like the eye of a monster, the three-fifteen from Lyons could be seen heading in his direction. Major Richter had ordered Piecke to go out and stop the train, and Piecke hoped the train engineer would stop when he saw him. Otherwise Major Richter would get awfully mad, and Piecke was afraid of Richter when he got mad.

Piecke had come to realize that he’d made a terrible mistake in enlisting in the SS. He’d thought that the food would be better than in the Wehrmacht, and that he’d have more prestige, and although he’d been right on both these counts, he still wished he was in the Wehrmacht. There were too many crazy people in the SS, and they scared Piecke. You never could know what they’d do next. He’d seen SS officers and noncoms shoot French people like it was nothing. One moment the French person was alive and the next moment he or she was dead. He’d seen Major Richter do this many times.

Piecke also had been in the dungeons of Gestapo headquarters on the Avenue Foch in Paris, and had seen things that still gave him nightmares. He could hardly believe his eyes, and he knew if he told any of those things to his family and friends back in Düsseldorf, they’d never believe him. Piecke had never cared much for Jews, but he’d never realized things would go as far as they had. Although he was a staunch nationalist, sometimes he found himself yearning for the good old days of the Weimar Republic.

As the train chugged closer through the rain and mist, Piecke jumped up and down, frantically waving his arms. From the back seat of the Mercedes-Benz, Major Richter watched him, a cruel smile on his face. He thought Piecke a complete idiot, and was considering transferring him to one of the punishment battalions on the front lines of the Eastern Front. He would have done it long ago if he’d had a decent replacement for Piecke, but there was a manpower shortage in the SS as everywhere else, and you had to take whoever personnel in Berlin assigned.

Piecke, noticing that the train was slowing down, waved his arms jubilantly and stepped off the tracks. The train decreased its speed further as it came closer. Piecke could see the boxcars and oil cars, and the SS soldiers in the cab and sitting on the boxcars immediately behind the coal car. Steam hissed from the wheels as they ground to a stop. A young SS lieutenant, his pistol and holster hanging from his waist, jumped down from the train.

Major Richter got out of the Mercedes-Benz and walked toward the lieutenant, who threw the Hitler salute. Richter returned it. “Lieutenant Heilbronn, I presume?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Any problems so far?”

“Nothing whatever, sir.”

“Good, You have a field radio with you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Where is it?”

“With my runner in the cab.”

“Good. Well, we might as well be moving along.” He turned to Piecke. “You stay with Grunwald. Keep your ears open for radio calls, understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Get going.”

“Yes, sir.”

Grunwald and Piecke ran back to the Mercedes-Benz. Richter marched to the cab of the locomotive with Lieutenant Heilbronn, who stood politely to the side as the major climbed the ladder. Richter strutted around the small cab of the train, smiling with satisfaction at the proud-looking young SS men. It was good to be among his own again; he considered the SS to be a true elite guard, the finest police and military organization the world had ever seen, with the very best racial characteristics, too—except for an occasional mistake like Piecke. Now he saw the clear-eyed young private with the field radio, which was similar to the American walkie-talkie. The engineer and his assistant wore the fatigue uniforms of the German Army. Richter was glad there were no Frenchmen on board, because he didn't trust them.

“May I speak, sir?” asked the engineer, who was around forty years old.

“Speak.”

“I hope we don't have to stay here too long, because according to my schedule I should be in Vernisset by six-nineteen.”

“Then get moving. What are you waiting for?”

The engineer looked at his assistant, and they both started pulling levers and turning knobs. The locomotive huffed and puffed as it began to move. Richter turned to Heilbronn. “Tell your men to keep their eyes peeled straight ahead. I'm expecting an act of sabotage by local terrorists.”

“Yes, sir.” Heilbronn turned to one of his men and told him to pass along the orders that Richter had given him. The soldier climbed up to the coal car and walked back to tell the others.

The train gathered speed and headed east toward Vernisset. Richter held onto the window and watched the scenery whiz past. Now that he was on the train, he was certain everything was under control. He was ready for those terrorists and he'd show them a thing or two.

Chapter 22

“Did you just hear something?” Mahoney asked Leduc.

“Like what?”

“Ssshh,” Mahoney said. He sat straight and cupped his hands to his ears. Very faintly he could hear the chugging of a train, and it was coming from the direction of Athanase. “It’s coming,” he said.

“I can’t hear anything,” Leduc said.

“You will,” Mahoney got to his feet. “All right everybody—the train is coming!” he shouted. “Keep your heads down and don’t move around too much.

When it comes close, pay attention to me and be ready for anything! Any questions?”

Nobody said anything.

“Load up your weapons and keep your mouths shut!” Mahoney said. Then he dropped down behind the boulder and checked his carbine. He ejected the ammo clip and rammed it in its slot again. Working the bolt, he fed a round into the chamber. He made sure the safety was on, then loosened the pins on his hand grenades, so he’d be able to pull them out easily if he had to. He glanced at Odette and saw she was doing the same thing. Leduc was checking the clips of ammunition in his pockets. He was a thin man with a nose like somebody’s finger. Mahoney suddenly felt a surge of comradely affection for him, because he always did what he was told, and could be relied upon in a pinch.

Everybody could hear the chugging of the locomotive now. The sound rumbled across the valleys and through the forests. Mahoney cautiously raised his head and looked east, but couldn’t see anything yet. The horrible weather cut down on his visibility. He, like the others, was soaked to the skin, but the mission would be over soon. The train would go into the tunnel, trip the wires, set off the explosives, and ram into the old locomotive. That should be the end of this railway line for a while, and then they could return to the monastery at St. Pierre. They’d have a big supper and he’d fall asleep dreaming about bearded Carthusian monks chanting their daily prayers.

About a quarter of a mile away, the train sped through the rain toward the tunnel. The SS men were scanning the surrounding area, watching for suspicious movements. Richter was beginning to worry that nothing would happen and he’d look like a fool for ordering out the SS and stopping the train. Colonel Spengle at La Roche-Guyon would reprimand him, and all the other officers who were jealous of him would laugh up their sleeves. Richter shuddered to think of it.

“Cold, sir?” asked Heilbronn.

“Yes,” Richter replied. “Filthy weather, eh?”

“It has to stop sooner or later, sir.”

“Let’s hope so.”

Richter thrust his head out of the window and looked straight ahead. Droplets of rain peppered his face and he squinted, but it looked as though the train was headed for some kind of tunnel.

He pulled his head back in and turned to the engineer. “Is that a tunnel straight ahead?”

“Yes, sir. Quite a large one too.”

“Ah.” Richter was reaching for his pack of cigarettes, when suddenly a thought struck him. What better place to ambush the train than in that tunnel! If the terrorists stole that old locomotive in St. Jean-de-Daye and switched it on to these tracks, *it might even be sitting in that tunnel at this very moment!*

“Stop the train!” Richter screamed.

Heilbronn looked at Richter as though he’d lost his mind.

Richter rushed forward and grabbed the frightened engineer by his shoulders. “I said stop this train!”

“Yes, sir,” said the conductor, his lips trembling.

He pulled the appropriate lever and sparks flew from the wheels as they skidded on the iron of the tracks.

“What’s wrong, sir?” Heilbronn asked as the train slowed down.

“I think there might be an ambush waiting for us in that tunnel up ahead,” Richter replied, spittle flecked on his lips.

Heilbronn poked his head out the window and saw the tunnel. He agreed that it would be a good place to stage an ambush. “Should I send a patrol forward to search the tunnel, sir?” he asked, drawing his head back in.

“Yes, and do it right away.”

There were four SS men in the cab; Heilbronn ordered them to go ahead and reconnoiter that tunnel. He told them to go all the way through to the other side, and then fire two shots to signal that the tunnel was clear.

The train came to a stop about a hundred yards from the tunnel. Richter took the field radio from an SS man, and then the four SS men jumped to the ground. With their submachine guns at the ready, and rain pounding on their helmets, they advanced cautiously toward the mouth of the tunnel. Richter nervously watched them go, half wishing there was an ambush awaiting them, and half wishing there wasn’t.

Meanwhile, behind the boulders approximately halfway between the train and the tunnel, the guerillas were gathered around Mahoney, who was watching the scene unfold. “Oh-oh,” Mahoney said, sliding down and facing the others.

“What’s wrong?” asked Leduc.

“They’re on to us.”

“What!”

“You heard me. Shaddup while I think.”

Everyone crowded around and looked at Mahoney, who closed his eyes and wrinkled his brow. He had to do something before those four Germans got into the tunnel and found the locomotive.

He opened his eyes. “We’ll have to take that train,” he said grimly, “and we’ll have to take it fast.”

“Take the train?” Agoult asked.

“That’s right.” Mahoney pointed his finger at Agoult. “And you’re going to drive it into the tunnel.”

“Drive it into the tunnel!”

“You heard me. It’s the only way to blow the damn thing up. You, me, Cranepool, and Leduc are going to charge that train and take over the cab. The rest of you will cover us. Agoult, you’ll get that train moving and drive it full speed ahead into the tunnel. At the last moment we’ll jump off, and let the train keep going. Maybe you can jam the controls so the others can’t stop it. Do you think you can do that?”

Agoult took one of the hand grenades out of his pocket. “I think this would jam the controls.”

“Good,” Mahoney replied. “All right, we’ll wait until those four SS men are in the tunnel, so they’ll be four less for us to worry about. When I say *hit it*, it’s up and over and at ‘em. Any questions?”

No one said anything.

“Okay, get ready to hit ‘em.”

Mahoney and the guerillas huddled behind the boulders, rechecking their weapons. Their mouths were dry and hands tensed in anticipation of the shooting that would take place soon. Mahoney knew that the success of his entire mission would depend on what occurred within the next half hour. There were more SS men on that train than he had guerillas, but he’d have the element of surprise on his side. He figured his side had a fifty-fifty chance of coming out on top.

The four SS men entered the tunnel. Mahoney wanted to make sure that they were pretty far in before he launched the attack, but not so far as to be able to find the booby traps and perhaps disarm them. He’d give them a minute—that should be enough. Looking at his two watches, he measured the second hands clicking around the dials. Cranepool, Leduc and Agoult were crowded around him, their knuckles white on their carbines. The others had taken positions behind the boulders, ready to begin firing when Mahoney gave the signal.

The second hands crept around the dials and finally returned to where they’d begun. Mahoney took a deep breath. “*Hit ‘em!*” he screamed.

He leapt up over the boulders, saw the train in front of him, and began firing from the waist as he charged the cab. Leduc, Cranepool and Agoult were behind him, firing from the waist also. Behind the boulders, the other guerillas sprayed the train with lead. SS men, standing on the boxcars looking toward the tunnel, were taken by surprise. Some fell down, clutching their bodies. As the sound of the gunfire echoed across the valley, the SS men who hadn’t been hit dropped to their bellies and tried to return the fire, but the guerillas had them pinned down.

Mahoney pumped his legs hard as he ran to the train. A face and submachine gun appeared at the window of the cab and Mahoney opened fire on it. His bullets tore the face into sausage meat, and another head popped up from behind a wall of the cab. Cranepool let him have it, and the SS man went spinning backwards, his blood spurting at the sky as he fell down into the space between the cab and the coal car.

Richter cowered behind the wall of the cab, his teeth chattering. He had his service pistol in one hand and the field radio strapped around his shoulder. He’d never been in a combat situation before and couldn’t believe this was happening to him. His life actually was in danger for the first time ever, and he was frozen with fear.

Mahoney jumped onto the cab, saw Richter, and kicked him in the face. Richter went flying out of the cab and down the embankment on the far side of the train. When Cranepool, Leduc, and Agoult piled into the cab, Agoult went directly to the controls and pushed the lever forward. The train began to move. The others stood at the back of the cab, their weapons ready to shoot anything that came toward them over the coal car. A head with a German helmet appeared and received three bursts of carbine fire. The head disappeared and the helmet went soaring into the sky.

Agoult rammed the lever all the way forward, and in response the wheels screeched and blew sparks off the iron rails. The train moved forward and gathered speed. Mahoney watched the cars behind him through the sights of his carbine. Agoult saw the tunnel coming up fast.

"Jump!" he bellowed.

Mahoney, Cranepool, and Leduc leapt off the train and went rolling down the gully. Agoult took out a hand grenade, propped it against the lever, and pulled the pin. The train was thundering toward the tunnel, and he let go of the handle of the grenade. It popped into the air as Agoult dove out the side of the cab. The grenade exploded, demolishing the inside of the cab.

The train roared into the tunnel full speed ahead. The four German soldiers inside panicked; some ran toward the train, others away from it, but they didn't have a chance. The train plowed into them, knocking them onto the tracks and rolling over them.

Three SS men were on the train, wondering what was going on. They were between boxcars and they assumed that their own people still had control of the train. One of them thought he'd try to move forward and make contact with Lieutenant Heilbronn, not realizing that Lieutenant Heilbronn was no more than a bloody, spongy mass.

As the train sped forward it tripped Mahoney's wires. The grenades erupted, detonating the TNT, and the locomotive smacked into the blast, carrying the oil cars with it. There was a huge, thunderous explosion. The whole mountain shuddered. Fissures appeared in it and bolts of lightning came shooting out, carrying with them rocks and pieces of steel. After a series of avalanches, the mountain imploded, falling inward on the railroad tracks and covering them with an impenetrable wall of earth, rocks, and steel.

Mahoney was on his knees in a ditch, watching the spectacular demolition. His heart filled with joy because he knew that nothing would move through that tunnel for a few weeks at least, maybe longer. In fact, if the Germans wanted to reopen that line of the railroad, they'd have to build an entirely new tunnel.

Mahoney walked backwards to where the train had been stopped, and saw his guerillas out on the tracks, taking submachine guns and ammunition from the dead SS men.

"We lose anybody?" Mahoney asked.

Baudraye looked up from the body of a dead SS man. "Bixiou is dead, and Cerizet is hurt very badly."

Mahoney looked around and could not see them. "Where are they?"

"Behind the rocks."

Mahoney trudged to the rocks and went behind them. Odette and Louise were bending over Cerizet whose stomach was a sea of blood.

"How is he?" Mahoney asked.

Odette looked up and shook her head. Mahoney bent down and felt Cerizet's pulse. It was weak and unsteady. Cerizet's eyes were closed and he was unconscious. Mahoney glanced to his side and saw Bixiou, who'd taken a bullet between his eyes, which were as wide open as they'd been the second he'd been shot.

Mahoney looked at Cerizet again. "Can we move him?"

“He’s bleeding very badly,” Odette said. “We’ll have to make him a stretcher.”

Cranepool, Leduc and Agoult showed up, with Agoult limping. He’d landed wrong when he fell from the train and had sprained his ankle. Mahoney lit up a cigarette and thought that they’d better get moving fast, because that explosion was sure to attract attention.

“Cranepool,” he said, “help me make a stretcher.”

They moved into the woods and with their bayonets chopped down two young birch trees, trimming off the branches until the trees were two long poles. Then they arranged Agoult’s poncho between the two poles, tied it on, and moved Cerizet onto the makeshift stretcher. Mahoney looked at his watches: it was seven-thirty.

“Leduc, c’mere,” he said.

Leduc came over as Mahoney took out his map of the area. He placed his big forefinger on their approximate position and looked at the little towns nearby.

“Where do you think we should go?” he asked Leduc.

Louise said: “Rouget, my hometown, is close by. We could go there. They have a little hospital and a doctor for Cerizet.”

“Anybody else got a better idea?” Mahoney asked.

They shrugged or shook their heads.

“Okay, then it’s Rouget,” Mahoney said, folding the map and stuffing it inside his shirt. “Cranepool, grab the other end of this stretcher, will you?”

Cranepool grabbed the front end, and they picked up Cerizet and the stretcher. Leduc and Louise led the way. They moved toward the railroad tracks, crossing them and going down the incline on the other side, heading in a northerly direction toward the peaceful little village of Rouget. As they entered the woods, Mahoney glanced back at the ruined tunnel. Little trails of black smoke rose from the mountain into the sky, and the mouth of the tunnel was heaped with rocks blown out by the explosion.

Mission accomplished, Mahoney thought, as he followed Cranepool into the woods.

Chapter 23

Pretending to be dead, his eyes opened to slits, Major Richter watched them enter the woods. His head felt split open and the flesh on his face was torn by the kick he’d received from Mahoney. His nose was broken and his two front teeth had been knocked out, filling his mouth with blood. When he could no longer see the terrorists he spat out the blood and shuddered in horror. The scum had almost killed him, but he would live. He’d pretended to be dead and they hadn’t bothered to check his pulse, the ignorant stupid fools. They should have shot him again through the temple to make sure; that’s what he would have done. But this game isn’t over yet, Richter thought grimly. I still have a few cards to play.

He remained on the ground for several more minutes, making sure that the terrorists were far away. He thought of the big monster in the black beret who’d kicked him out of the cab. He’d never forget that man’s face, so ugly and gnarled it

was, with fire spurting out of his eyes, it had seemed. He fervently hoped that someday he'd meet that man again. He'd rip him apart and feed him to the carrion crows.

Coughing and spitting blood, Richter remembered with shame how he'd cowered against the wall of the locomotive cab, paralyzed with fear, unable to do anything, a disgrace to the high ideals and great traditions of the SS. Fortunately, there was no one alive to tell the story except those terrorists, and they'd never be in a position to do that. Richter's awful secret was safe. But now he wanted revenge against those terrorists who'd shamed him and smashed his face. Somehow he'd get them. There had to be a way.

He stood up and dusted himself off. He ran his hands over his face, and it was raw with pain. He couldn't breathe through his nose and when he touched it he nearly screamed. His nose bone was protruding through the skin. It was too horrible to contemplate; he almost fainted at the thought of it.

"I've got to get moving," he said. "I've got to get help."

He limped toward the field radio lying twenty feet away, and picked it up. He depressed the button and pressed the receiver to his ear, but nothing happened. Cursing, he shook the radio and held it up to his ear again. It still wouldn't work. In a rage, he hurled it to the ground, where it bounced off a rock and went rolling down the hill.

Richter let out a scream of curses. He wanted to beat people over the head with hammers and slice them up with knives. He wanted to stomp on their faces and kick their balls. He swore that if he ever got out of this alive he'd kill a hundred, no, a thousand Frenchmen by the most agonizing methods possible.

Contemplation of that gave him enough energy to start moving. He thought he'd walk backwards to Tours and get help there. Maybe he could find a road and catch a ride.

He looked back at the section of woods where the terrorists had fled. He made a mental note of their direction, so that he could plot their likely destination afterwards.

"You won't get away from me," Richter said aloud, "and then I'll kill you all!"

Chapter 24

Rouget was a little town with a population of less than a thousand, nestled amid the forest and farmlands in the province of Mayenne. Its citizens worked on the farms in the area, or were merchants in town. They lived in two-story homes made of stone or wood, most of them painted white, and spent their leisure hours in one of the town's three cafes. On Sundays, everyone who could walk went to Mass at their town church, the prelate of which was Father Henri, a member of the Resistance.

Mahoney and his guerillas arrived in town at ten o'clock in the evening, and Louise led them to the rectory of the church. When they knocked on the door it was opened by Sister Marie, who admitted them quickly into the rectory. Sister Nathalie, who also happened to be in the rectory at the time, held her palms

against her cheeks and looked horrified when the pale and dying Cerizet was carried in by Mahoney and Cranepool.

Sister Marie was a pretty young nun with a cute, upturned nose. "I'll go get Doctor Lambert," she said, taking her waterproof cape off a hook and dashing toward the door.

"I'd better get Father Henri right away!" said Sister Nathalie, a pudgy nun in her late thirties, who waddled toward a door.

Cranepool and Mahoney lay Cerizet on the floor. Mahoney felt his pulse, which had become weaker. In fact, Mahoney himself was feeling weak, for he hadn't eaten anything since early that day.

Sister Nathalie returned with Father Henri, who was fifty years old with a husky build and a bald spot on top of his head. He knelt beside Cerizet, looking at the blood-soaked bandage over his stomach.

"Sister Louise has gone for the doctor," Sister Nathalie said.

"Good," Father Henri stood up. "Who's in charge here?" he asked, looking at the guerillas.

"I am," said Mahoney. "Do you have a radio?"

"Yes—downstairs."

"I have to send a message to London right away."

"Yes, of course. The rest of you might as well come with me, too. Sister Nathalie—stay with the sick man."

"Yes, Father."

Father Henri led them through a door, and down a spiral staircase to a small chapel with an altar and a large sculpture of crucified Jesus behind it. Father Henri crossed himself as he passed the altar, and so did the Frenchmen in the guerilla group. Mahoney realized he was supposed to be a Catholic too, so he crossed himself also. To the right of the altar, against the wall, a white marble statue of Mary was mounted against a background depicting a biblical setting in a city that might have been old Jerusalem. When Father Henri pressed a hidden button underneath the plaster background, the whole scene swung to the side like a huge door, revealing another flight of stairs.

"This was built around three hundred years ago," Father Henri said, "to protect local villagers against marauding bands of lawless hoodlums."

He led them down the stairs to a room about fifteen feet square with a radio on a table, surrounded by six chairs, in the corner. On the other side of the room were four double-bunks.

Mahoney sat at the radio, turned it on, put on the headphones and dialed a frequency that he knew Bletchley listened to at this time of night. Waiting for the tubes to warm up, he took out a cigarette and lit it up. He was tired and had a headache. His stomach was one big cramp. Finally the radio was ready for transmission. He addressed the message to *Falcon*, which was Colonel Fairbairn's code name, and his message said:

Destruction of bridge not feasible. Destruction of tunnel between Vernisset and Athanase accomplished approximately two hours ago.

He signed off with Parrot, his code name, and took off the headphones.

"Did you get through all right?" Father Henri asked.

"Yes," replied Mahoney. "Do you have anything to eat around here?"

“Yes, but not enough for all of you. I’ll have to go out to get something.”

Louise said: “I can go to my husband’s bakery and get some bread.”

“Good idea,” said Father Henri.

Cranepool didn’t think it was such a good idea. He looked away from Louise angrily. She noticed his reaction but didn’t dare say anything in front of the others, although most of them knew what was going on by now. She left through the secret door, and on her way through the parish, Louise saw the doctor and Sister Marie bending over Cerizet.

“How is he?” asked Louise.

The doctor, who had a fedora on the back of his head and a mustache like a walrus, looked up. “Very bad,” he replied.

“Will he live?”

“I don’t know.”

Louise made the sign of the cross and left the rectory. It was still raining outside, but not as hard as before. She pulled the hood of her poncho as low down over her face as she could because she didn’t want anybody in the town to recognize her if she could help it. They all knew that she was in the Resistance, and it was possible that someone might report her to the Gestapo, for there were collaborators in Rouget just as there were collaborators in most of the towns and cities in France.

She made her way through the streets of the town, so familiar to her and yet so strange. She’d been born here and baptized by Father Henri who’d also given her her First Communion. Father Henri had married her too, and she’d always been a good Catholic until she went into the Resistance. Separation from her husband, an excess of hormones, and the fact that death was always lurking around the corner, all combined to turn her into an adulteress. She felt certain she would die before long and wanted to have as much fun as she could before then. She also wanted to kill as many Germans as possible, for she was a patriot and wanted to see the Germans expelled from her country. She hated Marshal Petain and Pierre Laval, the rulers of her country who had set the pattern of collaboration with the Germans.

She turned onto the street where her husband owned the bakery. It occupied the front portion of their white house, halfway down the street. A little wood sign near the front door said Bakery, but the lights were out this time of night. Her husband Jacques would be sleeping now, for he had to get up early in the morning to start baking that day’s bread and pastries. She had been his helper, but he’d hired an apprentice after she’d gone off with the Resistance. He’d pleaded with her not to go, but she told him she had to do it for France.

She carried the key to her house along with some other keys on a chain around her neck. She removed it and inserted the key into the door at the side of the house, opened it up and entered her kitchen. It still smelled the same way, and the fragrance of meals cooked in the room made her dizzy with nostalgia. She’d been a happy little housewife once, but that had been long ago.

Closing the door, she pulled the blinds and turned on the light. How strange it was to live in a place that you could call home, she thought, for she’d been living the guerilla life for two years, always on the move, sleeping in barns and open

fields, risking her life for France, and there'd been so many men. Too many, she sometimes thought.

She heard a rustle of footsteps from the bedroom, and then the door was opened by Jacques, who she hadn't seen for a year and a half. He had a pistol of World War One vintage in his right hand.

"Louise!" he shouted, his face lighting up with joy. "You've come back to me!"

He rushed toward her and embraced her, but she felt strange, because she'd betrayed him many times. She hugged him and let him kiss her, letting the stubble on his cheeks scratch her face. He was big and fat, almost twenty years older than she. At that moment she didn't love him anymore, and had married him only because there was a limited choice of eligible men in little Rouget.

He moved back and looked down on her, beaming with pleasure. "My little sweetheart," he said. "My angel. Have you come back to me for good?"

She shook her head. "I'm afraid not."

"No?" he asked sadly.

"No."

"Why?"

"You know why."

"Yes, I know," he said. "Because you love your country more than you do your husband. Sometimes I think I should be there with you, but who'd run the bakery? What would the people of this town do for bread? It's true that it says in the Bible that a man should not live by bread alone, but it doesn't say he shouldn't have any bread at all. So here I stay alone, missing you very much. Are you going to stay the night?"

"No," she replied. "I've come for some bread, and then I must be going."

"So soon?"

"I'm afraid so."

"You can't even stay a little while? An hour?"

"No, Jacques. There isn't time."

"Where are you going?"

"I can't tell you."

"Can you come back later?"

"No," she said, although she knew she could if she wanted to, but she didn't want to. She'd rather be with Cranepool, the young blond American with the pale blue eyes, with whom she was smitten.

"Aw Louise..." Jacques complained.

"I'm sorry, but I dare not take the chance," she lied.

"No one will ever see you."

"You never know who might tell the Germans. Everyone in this town knows I'm with the Resistance."

"They won't see you."

"We can't know that for sure."

"I'll kill anyone who says you're here."

"It'll be too late for me then, won't it? How selfish you are, Jacques. You want me to risk my life for a few hours with you. What kind of a husband is that?"

He stepped back and looked contrite. "You're right—it is selfish of me. But I've missed you so much, Louise. I think of you all the time. I need you, Louise. There's

been no one else for me.” He peered into her eyes. “Has there been anyone else for you?”

“Of course not,” she replied, not batting an eyelash.

“I’m so glad,” he gushed, clasping his hands together.

“I’m in a hurry, Jacques,” she replied, heading toward the bakery. “I must get some bread.”

“What for?”

“I can’t tell you.”

He followed her through the curtain that separated the kitchen from the bakery. “Why can’t you tell me?”

“You know why.” She passed the table where he rolled the dough and went to the racks, where the long thin loaves of bread were kept. There were a dozen loaves left over from the day, plus a tray of pastries. She began putting all these into an empty flour sack. “I’ll need to borrow your raincoat, Jacques.”

“My raincoat? Why?”

“To keep the bread dry, silly.”

“But I need my raincoat. It’s been raining all the time.”

“It will be returned to you in the morning.”

He watched her dump the bread and pastries into the sack. When he’d married her she’d been a sweet young girl and very affectionate. Now she was like somebody else. “I don’t think I know who you are any more,” he said.

“I wouldn’t worry about it if I were you,” she replied. “I’m sure you have much better things to worry about.”

“Nothing is more important to me than you, Louise.”

He gathered her up in his arms again and kissed her on the lips. She felt nothing for him but put up with it. After the war was over she’d figure out some way to deal with him. The Church said she couldn’t get a divorce, but it didn’t say that she’d have to live with him.

“I’ve got to go now,” she said, pushing him away.

“Oh, Louise,” he whined.

“Bring me your raincoat.”

“Yes, Louise.”

As he ran out of the bakery, she tied the top of the flour sack. She was sure that Cranepool would love the pastries, because he was so much like a child. He was mad at her because she hadn’t told him she was married, but she’d smother him with kisses and make him happy again.

Jacques returned with his oilskin raincoat and she wrapped the flour sack with it, and then slung it over her shoulder.

“I’ve got to be going now, Jacques. I’ll see you another time,” she said, looking into his damp eyes.

“When?” he asked.

“How should I know?”

“Make it soon,” he said urgently.

“I’ll do the best I can.”

She returned to the kitchen and he followed at her heels like a big dog. “Let me come with you,” he said. “I can carry the bread for you.”

“Do you know what will happen to you if you are caught with me?”

“Nobody will see.”

“You never know. There is a price on my head, and they will assume you’re in the Resistance, too.”

“Maybe I’d better not go with you after all.”

“Now you’re being sensible.”

“Let me kiss you goodbye, my dear.”

She raised her face to him and he kissed her again, but she turned away quickly and opened the door. “I’m sorry, but I’m in a hurry,” she said.

He looked hurt. “Goodbye, my love,” he said.

“Goodbye.”

She closed the door and walked briskly down the sidewalk toward the church, feeling sorry for her husband, but what can you do when you don’t love somebody who loves you?

I can’t be expected to sacrifice my life for him if I don’t love him, she told herself. People like him have to learn that they can’t have everything that they want. She couldn’t wait to see Cranepool again. She’d feed him pastries and kiss his earlobes. That ought to dispel the bad mood he was in.

Turning a corner, she nearly bumped into Picard, a wizened old man with a white mustache and goatee, who rented houses to some of the families in town. They did not say anything to each other; Louise kept walking along, hoping the old man hadn’t recognized her.

But he had, and he was most surprised to see her in town, because he knew she was in the Resistance. I wonder what she’s doing here, he thought. Like many Frenchmen in Normandy, he was a secret collaborator with the Germans and an agent of the Gestapo. He hated the English, hated the Jews, hated the Communists, and admired Adolf Hitler, who he considered the greatest man Europe had produced in the twentieth century.

Picard stopped and looked over his shoulder at Louise. What does she have in that bag over her shoulder, and where is she going? he wondered. Then he noticed she was wearing boots and slacks, like the women in the Resistance. Is she here on some sort of terrorist business? He knew that her husband’s bakery was nearby. Had she been to see her husband?

Picard decided to follow her. He ducked into a doorway and waited until she was too far away to notice him, then came out of the doorway, but she was nowhere to be seen. She must have turned a corner somewhere, or cut through somebody’s yard to another street. He ran quickly to the corner and looked around, but couldn’t see her. She had given him the slip. Crafty little devil, he thought. He wondered if the matter was of sufficient importance to report to his contact at Gestapo headquarters at La Roche-Guyon.

He clasped his hands behind his back and walked home, the rain dripping from the wide brim of his fedora. He seldom had anything to report to La Roche-Guyon, and this might give him the excuse to check in and let them know he still was on the alert.

As he neared his home he saw Doctor Lambert walking quickly on a street perpendicular to the one he was on. The doctor was carrying his little black bag and appeared to be deep in thought. If somebody in town was sick, Picard would

like to know, because he was the town busybody and felt he had to know everything that was going on.

“Doctor Lambert!” he called.

The doctor stopped as Picard crossed the street. He appeared ill at ease, and Picard couldn’t help wondering why.

“Good evening, M’sieu Picard,” Lambert said, touching his fingers to the brim of his hat.

“Somebody sick?” Picard asked, looking at the doctor’s black bag.

“Um... yes,” Doctor Lambert answered uneasily.

“Who?”

The doctor smiled. “I don’t think it’s a good ethical practice to discuss my patients with people outside their families.”

“You don’t have to tell me about the illness,” Picard persisted. “I’m just wondering who’s sick.”

“M’sieu Picard, I’m afraid that information is privileged.”

Picard ran the fingers of his right hand across his chin. “You’re behaving most peculiarly about this, doctor.”

“I think your curiosity about other people is most peculiar, M’sieu Picard.”

Picard looked at Doctor Lambert sideways. “You’re not doing anything you shouldn’t be doing, are you, Doctor?”

Doctor Lambert tipped his hat. “I’m afraid I must be going, M’sieu Picard,” he said. “Good evening.”

Picard frowned. “Good evening to you, Doctor Lambert.”

Lambert turned and walked toward his home. Picard watched him go, then moved in the direction of his own house, wondering if Doctor Lambert had been out performing an abortion or some other illegal activity. Otherwise, why was the good doctor being so secretive? What he’d said about ethical practices was surely nonsense. Doctor Lambert almost certainly would have told him who was sick if he hadn’t been doing something wrong.

Picard walked home slowly, his hands clasped behind his back, rain dripping from his hat. He remembered seeing Louise, and suddenly his mind made a connection between her and Doctor Lambert. Was Louise in town with other members of the Resistance, and had Doctor Lambert been called out to treat one of them? Was that bag Louise was carrying filled with provisions?

Picard quickened his pace. He thought he’d better report all of this to La Roche-Guyon, and let the Gestapo decide whether or not it was of sufficient concern to take action on.

Chapter 25

It was eleven o’clock p.m. At an airfield in Cottesmore, England, the men and officers of the 101st U.S. Airborne Division were checking their equipment and preparing to board the planes that would fly them into France. They’d received intensive training for this all-important jump; many were veterans of the famous jump in Sicily, where they successfully blocked the advance of the Hermann

Goering Division to the beachhead. Now their mission was to perform a similar function in protection of the Normandy beachhead.

So important was their mission that Ike himself was there, shaking hands, slapping backs, and wishing them good luck. As the men and officers reached out eagerly to grasp the hand of their famous commander-in-chief, Ike moved easily among them, talking to them calmly, telling them to remember their training, obey their officers, and fight like the devil.

Though a light drizzle was falling, morale was high. The 101st Airborne was one of the U.S. Army's elite fighting units, and every man there knew it. They showed no fear; in fact, they appeared eager to get into the fight. Ike was pleased to be among them, proud to be their leader. With men like this, the Normandy invasion could not fail.

A young lieutenant with the general staff insignia on his lapels elbowed his way through the crowd of paratroopers, waving a piece of yellow paper in his hand. "I've got an important message for the General," he said breathlessly.

The paratroopers made way for him and finally the young lieutenant found himself facing Ike. He saluted snappily and handed over the message. "General Bradley wanted you to see this right away, sir," he said.

He nodded and accepted the message. He unfolded it and read:

Word has just been received by the OSS that the railroad line we discussed at our meeting this morning has been knocked out of action by American Rangers operating in conjunction with elements of the French Resistance.
General Omar Bradley

Ike breathed a sigh of relief. That railroad line and a hundred other little matters like it had been deviling him, but now at least it had been taken care of. He folded the message and tucked it into the pocket of his raincoat, then dismissed the young lieutenant, who saluted, did an about face, and fled.

Ike reached out and shook the hand of a young Pfc with a freckled face, thinking that the Pfc and other paratroopers on Utah Beach would have a far greater chance of survival now that the railroad line was inoperable.

"Good luck, soldier," Ike said.

"Thank you, sir," replied the Pfc.

Ike turned and gripped the next hand offered him.

Chapter 26

At La Roche-Guyon, Major Richter walked down the corridor of the SS headquarters building to the office of Colonel Spengle, his superior officer. Richter's face was bandaged and there were eight stitches on the bridge of his nose where it had been broken. The doctor in the hospital had to remove that shattered bone, and told Richter that he'd require extensive plastic surgery if he ever wanted the nose to be straight and normal-looking again.

Richter was in a filthy, brutal mood, because he'd considered himself a rather handsome man, and now, without his front teeth, he looked like a vampire whose nose had been tied into a knot. And on top of everything else, Colonel Spengle wanted to see him? At this time of night, it couldn't be about anything good. Richter knew he was in for a hard time. He squared his shoulders manfully and approached Colonel Spengle's big oak door. Raising his knuckles in the air, he rapped three times.

"Come in!" said a deep booming voice from within.

Richter opened the door and entered the office. Colonel Spengle, who had white hair and wore a monocle, sat behind his desk. The office was large, with walls paneled in shiny dark wood, and maroon drapes covering the windows. On the wall behind Spengle was a huge heroic portrait of Adolf Hitler in party uniform, a dagger hanging from his waist.

Richter marched to Colonel Spengle's desk and threw his arm into the air. "Heil Hitler!" he said.

Spengle lazily showed the palm of his hand. "Heil Hitler. Sit down, you idiot."

Richter sat in one of the leather chairs in front of the desk and readied himself for the worst. He'd expected a promotion from Himmler, but now he was afraid he might be shipped to a concentration camp.

Spengle leaned forward and folded his hands on his desk. He'd been a sergeant in the Army during the First World War and after the Armistice had joined a *Freikorps* unit because he couldn't find a job. He joined the Nazi Party in 1921, along with many other *Freikorps* men, and had participated in the famous Beer Hall Putsch of 1923. He'd been shot in the leg during that fiasco, and thus became one of the heroes of the Party. Hence his current high rank.

"You bungler," he said cruelly to Richter.

Richter sat erect and didn't reply because he didn't know how to.

Spengle pounded his fist on his desk. "What do you have to say for yourself?" he demanded.

"I did my best, sir," Richter replied, slurring his words because of his lack of front teeth.

Spengle pounded his fist on his desk again. "Your best! If that was your best, I'd hate to see your worst! There wouldn't be a soul alive in Germany today if you were doing your worst!"

"I'm sorry, sir."

Spengle pounded both of his fists on the desk this time. "You're sorry? What in the hell do I care if you're sorry! Your sorrow doesn't help anything at all! That railway tunnel won't be repaired for a month at least, and maybe longer! And it's all your fault! When the High Command finds out about it, they're not going to blame you! They're going to blame the entire SS! You have disgraced the uniform you wear! I regret the day I ever met you! I ought to have you shot!"

"If you like, I'll do the honorable thing, sir," Richter said, referring to suicide, and as a fanatical SS officer he would not have hesitated to do it if ordered.

Spengle pointed his finger at him. "You're not going to get off that easy, you stupid swine. You're going to pay for this in the appropriate manner."

Richter gulped. He thought Spengle was threatening him with incarceration in a concentration camp. He decided he'd better start defending himself. "I took the

action that I considered necessary sir, in view of the circumstances. It is true that I failed, but my SS detachment was vastly outnumbered by terrorists.”

“How many of them were there?” Spengle asked.

“I’d say there was a hundred at least,” Richter lied.

“A hundred? That sounds rather improbable.”

“But it’s true, sir.”

“Then you should have had more SS men with you.”

“I didn’t realize there would be so many terrorists.”

“As an SS officer, you’re supposed to anticipate all possibilities and probabilities.”

“I tried to get more SS men, but there weren’t any available.”

“You should have contacted me, and I would have made them available.”

“If I had contacted you and asked for a hundred men to chase a locomotive that may not have been stolen, you would have court-martialed me,” Richter said vehemently.

Spengle leaned back in his chair and sighed. “That’s true.”

“There’s an old saying that a schoolboy’s hindsight is better than a general’s foresight,” Richter said. “It’s easy to say what should have been done after the event, but much harder to know what to do before it happens. I took the best measures I could under the circumstances. We fought a good fight. But we were outnumbered and overrun. It is only through a miracle that I survived.”

Spengle grunted. “Some miracle. Let me see your service revolver, please.”

Richter’s heart sank, because he realized at that moment *that he’d never fired it*. Withdrawing it from its shiny black leather holster, he handed it to Colonel Spengle and tried to think of an appropriate lie.

Spengle took the pistol, opened the chamber, and sniffed. He sighted down the barrel, and his face grew grave. “This pistol hasn’t even been fired,” he said.

“I had a submachine gun, sir.”

“Where did you get it?”

“From one of the fallen SS men.”

“You waited for someone to fall before you returned the enemy fire?”

“The SS man standing next to me was one of the first to be killed in the ambush. Everyone in the cab dropped to the floor for protection. His submachine gun happened to be beside me, so I picked it up and used it to fight back, but it was futile, for we were so greatly outnumbered.”

“There’s something very strange about all of this,” Spengle said.

“In what way, sir?”

“In many ways. Why, for instance, weren’t you killed with the others?”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to ask the terrorists that, sir. But as you can see with your own eyes, I am not without injury.” Richter thrust his face forward so that Spengle could see better.

Spengle recoiled from the hideous sight. “It looks like you’ve been beaten up. How could they have gotten that close? It seems that they would have shot you before they got that close.”

“I can’t answer for the motives of the enemy, sir.”

“But you’ll have to answer for your own, and from the basis of what you’ve told me, one might deduce that you behaved in a cowardly fashion under fire.”

“What!” Richter screamed. “Me? A coward? How dare you, sir!”

Spengle raised his hand in the air. “Calm down.”

“I’ve never heard such a ridiculous thing in my life!”

“I’m sure you’ve heard much more ridiculous things. But I’m not the one who’s accusing you, because to do so would be to imply that there is cowardice in the SS, and it is not in my best interest to do that, particularly in view of the fact that you are my subordinate officer and anything you do reflects upon me. My concern is that someone else—perhaps in the army—will accuse you, and therefore I want you to dream up a more convincing story than the one you told me.”

“You could say that upon inspecting my service revolver you found that it had been fired recently and repeatedly.”

Spengle thought for a few moments, then nodded. “That’s true.”

“A doctor can say that I was grazed by a bullet.”

“It’s best not to draw too many people into an alibi like this. Maybe you should stick to the story that you were overrun.”

“Very well, sir.”

“But there’s one way you can redeem yourself to me and to the world.”

“How’s that, sir?”

“By catching the terrorists.”

Richter smiled and pulled his map from under his black SS jacket. “I’ve been thinking the same thing sir,” he said, “and here’s my plan.” He spread the map out on Colonel Spengle’s desk. “When I last saw the terrorists, they were headed this way,” he indicated the direction on the map. “As you can see, there are many towns in that way. I propose that I be permitted to take an SS detachment of considerable size and search those towns, spreading terror everywhere we go. I think that very well might turn up the guerillas, don’t you think so?”

Spengle adjusted his monocle. “Tell me, Richter—is there a town called Rouget in that direction?”

Richter brought his face closer to the map. “Why yes—here it is, sir.” Richter pointed to the town.

Spengle looked down at the location of the town. “We’ve just received a communication that there has been suspicious guerilla activity in that town this very evening. It may be that the people you’re looking for are in Rouget even as we speak. I suggest that you take your SS detachment to that town first and see what’s going on.”

“I’ll be ready to leave as soon as my detachment is here,” Richter replied.

Spengle reached for his phone. “Let me see what I can scrape together for you,” he said.

Chapter 27

In the sub-basement of the church in Rouget, Mahoney lay on a blanket spread on the floor and smoked a cigarette. He’d slept for almost two hours but had been awakened by strange sounds that turned out to be Louise and Cranepool fucking surreptitiously in a corner. Mahoney found that he couldn’t fall back asleep again.

He'd never been able to relax when he knew somebody else was getting laid. It always made him think he should be getting laid too, and that led to thoughts of who to lay, what personality deficiencies of his were preventing him from getting laid, etc.

Mahoney thought about Odette, sleeping on the other side of the room. Why shouldn't I crawl over there and knock off a piece? he asked himself. But there were many reasons why he shouldn't, the first of which was that Celestine wasn't even cold in her grave yet, and he really ought to get some sleep, because it would be a long journey back to St. Pierre tomorrow. They couldn't use open roads, so they'd have to hike cross-country, which would be grueling and time-consuming. If he was smart he'd just close his eyes and go back to sleep.

But he wasn't smart. He thought that if Louise and Cranepool could do it, so could he. He stubbed out his cigarette butt on the floor and rolled onto his stomach. Sniffing the air, licking the film off his teeth, he crawled slowly and silently among the others, who were snoring and twitching in their sleep. Agoutt had a big smile on his face and Mahoney wondered what he was dreaming about. Louise let out a little love cry and Mahoney bit his lower lip. Noise like that drove him mad with lust. He was annoyed that she and Cranepool had made up earlier in the evening, because Mahoney had intended to plunk her himself. She had the cutest ass in all of France, he estimated, but Odette wasn't so bad. Good old Odette. He wondered where he'd be without her.

As he approached her she was lying on her back with her head on her rolled up jacket and her legs spread wide. Drawing closer, he could see her blond curls and pert mouth. Her breasts rose like two mountains and he began to get an erection. He hoped she wouldn't give him any trouble, because he felt sexually ravenous, and he might be compelled to use a little force. There was something about women that scared the shit out of him because they had the power to make him do crazy things he wouldn't ordinarily do if he had his wits about him.

He lay on his side next to her and placed the palm of his hand on her cupcake.

She opened her eyes instantly and reached for her carbine.

"Calm down," Mahoney whispered.

She looked at him. "It's you!"

"Were you expecting someone else?"

She grabbed his hand and threw it off her. "What do you think this is!"

He moved closer and nuzzled her neck with his shaggy face. "*Cherie*," he cooed.

She pushed his forehead back. "Take your hands off me," she said sternly.

"Whatsa matter?"

"You treat me worse than a dog, and now you want to get friendly? Forget it."

When have I treated you worse than a dog? I don't know what you're talking about."

"You've been treating me like a dog ever since we left St. Pierre. Get away from me. I hate you."

He kissed her ear. "But *cherie*..."

"Don't *do* that to me."

He kissed her ear again. "Don't do what to you?"

"*That!*"

She tried to push him away without much conviction. This is just like war, he thought. You have to keep trying until you wear down their resistance. He stuck his tongue into her ear and cupped one of his big hands over one of her big breasts.

“You bastard,” she whimpered.

“Be nice.”

“You make me sick.”

“I love you, *cherie*.”

“You men are all alike. You’re only nice when you want something.”

“That’s better than never being nice at all.”

“You’re disgusting.”

“I don’t deny it, but I’ve always been nuts about you.”

“Hah!”

He wormed his hand under her sweater and squeezed her succulent breast. His dong was throbbing in his pants and an artery in his neck was pounding. “I’m crazy about you,” he said, fastening his mouth on hers.

She tried to keep her lips closed, but he forced his tongue inside and then she opened up all the way. He rolled onto her and felt her arms creep around his shoulders. Thank goodness she wasn’t putting up much resistance. He didn’t like to use pressure if he didn’t have to.

After the kiss, he moved away and began unbuttoning her pants.

“I don’t know why I’m letting you do this,” she said.

“Because you’re crazy about me,” he said.

“Me? Crazy about you? Don’t be silly. You’re nothing more than a gorilla. You have no manners and no sense of decency.”

He drew her pants off and lay them beside her. She wore black silk underpants and he wondered where she got them. Placing his fingers in the waistband, he pulled them down. “I admit I’m not an officer and a gentleman,” Mahoney said, “but I’m good at some things.”

“Like what?”

“You know.”

“Murder? Mayhem? Being nasty and insulting? Humiliating that poor Cranepool whenever you feel like it?”

“Don’t worry about Cranepool,” he said, pulling off her underpants. “He’s doing all right for himself. Hold up your arms.”

“What for?”

“Do as I say and stop talking so much.”

She raised her arms and he took off her sweater. Now she was naked and pink in the darkness. He unbuttoned his shirt.

“I’m so weak with you,” she sighed.

“I never thought of you as being weak, *cherie*.”

“Oh but I am... with you.”

Mahoney might have mentioned that she behaved no differently with the other men she liked, but decided this wasn’t the appropriate time or place for that kind of conversation. He pulled off his pants and lowered himself onto her. She felt marvelous.

“You’re so hairy,” she whispered, running her palms over his back.

He kissed her lips as she dug her fingernails into his back. She spread her legs and squirmed like a snake.

"I love you," she moaned.

"I love you, too," Mahoney replied, sticking his thing between her legs.

Chapter 28

Lieutenant General Hans Speidel, Rommel's Chief of Staff, was sleeping soundly in Rommel's opulent chateau in La Roche-Guyon, when the telephone on the night table began to ring. Speidel opened his eyes, grunted, and looked at his watch. It was one-thirty in the morning of June 6. He snatched the telephone off the receiver.

"Speidel here," he mumbled into the telephone.

"This is General Pemsel," said the Chief of Staff of the German Seventh Army, the force responsible for the defense of Normandy. His voice was stern and steady, but there was a note of anxiety in it. "Commanders in the 716th Division have reported widespread airborne landings, both by parachute and glider, in their sector, sir."

"Are you sure?"

"My commanders are," Pemsel said drily. "They report heavy fighting."

"How many airborne invaders are there?"

"It's hard to say. There's been a lot of confusion, but the picture should become clearer in a little while. For safety's sake, I think we ought to move up the Panzers."

"So soon?" Speidel asked. "Before we know the nature of the enemy's intentions? No, I don't think so, General Pemsel. This may be nothing more than a diversionary attack. The full weight of the enemy forces may be coming at another point. I think I'd better notify Paris of these developments and request further instructions."

"If only Rommel were here," General Pemsel said. "He'd know how to handle the situation."

"But he's not here. After I call Field Marshal von Rundstedt, I'll go straight down to my office. I'll be there if you need me."

Speidel rolled out of bed and planted his feet on the floor. He rubbed his eyes and wondered if the Allied invasion finally was taking place. He had mixed feelings about it. Although he was a loyal German officer, he hated Hitler and secretly wished for military setbacks that might force a coup against Hitler's regime.

He picked up his phone again and told the operator to put him through directly to the headquarters of Army Group West in Paris. When a staff officer answered the phone, Speidel told him about the airborne landings in Normandy.

"We're remaining very calm here," Speidel said, "until we know more definitely what's going on. It's entirely possible, you know, that people are mistaking bailed-out air crews for paratroopers."

Chapter 29

At four o'clock in the morning, a German military convoy rumbled down the road towards the little town of Rouget. Major Kurt Richter sat in the back seat of a black Mercedes-Benz limousine smoking a cigarette. Driving the limousine was Corporal Grunwald, his driver; sitting next to him was Private Piecke, Major Richter's aide. Mounted on each of the limousine's front fenders were fluttering flags decorated with black swastikas.

Following the black limousine was the 53rd *Waffen* SS Infantry Battalion, numbering approximately five hundred men, being carried in thirty trucks. Behind the trucks was a Panzer company consisting of twelve Panther tanks.

The convoy bore down on the unsuspecting village, sleeping peacefully in the summer night. The people therein had no idea that hell on earth was about to descend on them.

Richter stubbed out his cigarette and lit another one. His stomach was cramped with anxiety and his hands trembled in anticipation of what he would do when he reached Rouget. He'd level the town and dig it up if that's what was necessary to find those terrorists who'd blown up the tunnel. And if he found that big brute who'd kicked him in the face, he'd literally skin him alive in an SS torture dungeon. That surely would be fitting and sweet revenge.

Of course, the terrorists might not be in Rouget, but even that wouldn't stop Richter from annihilating the town. An example had to be made to the French people, and Rouget would provide it. Then Richter would move on to the next town and destroy it also. And then the next one, and the next one.

Nobody kicked Major Kurt Richter in the face and got away with it. There'd be hell to pay in this district of France. Blood would flow like water, and hereafter Frenchmen would think twice and maybe three times before joining the Resistance.

The convoy passed noisily through the French countryside. The SS troopers dozed on their benches in the trucks, their rifles held between their knees. They'd been awakened and ordered out of their beds to go on this operation, and they weren't happy about it.

Waffen SS troopers were a special kind of soldier, because they comprised the front-line fighting arm of the SS, rather than the German Army. They considered themselves an elite within Germany's armed forces, just as airborne divisions and Rangers considered themselves an elite in the American Army. The major difference was that the *Waffen* believed in the racial ideology of the Nazi Party, and in fact all of them were party members, in contradistinction to the soldiers of the German Army, most of whom were not party members.

The *Waffen* SS had proven themselves to be superb and disciplined fighters in the front lines of the Russian campaign. They attacked hard and could defend the most difficult position. Even when overrun they maintained cohesion and fought like wild animals. When they ran out of ammunition they fought with bayonets, and if they lost their bayonets they fought with hands and teeth. But their brilliant combat record was blemished by their tendency to commit atrocious crimes

against unarmed people whom they considered racially inferior. They excelled at rape and robbery, not to mention arson and wholesale slaughter.

When the convoy reached Rouget at four o'clock in the morning, the rain had stopped. As they drove down the main street Richter ordered Grunwald to stop the limousine in front of the very first house. Richter got out, smoothing the front of his black jacket, licking his lips in anticipation of the vengeance he would soon wreak.

The convoy stopped behind his limousine, and he motioned for the troopers in the first truck to dismount. The officers and men got down and strolled to him, adjusting their rifles and cartridge belts. Richter told a young captain, the highest ranking among them, to take as many men as he needed and break into the house, find the oldest responsible male inside, and drag him outside.

The young captain gave the Hitler salute, then gathered four of his men and marched toward the door. They didn't bother to knock—they merely shot the lock away and stormed inside. Lights went on upstairs and soon screaming could be heard. The SS men appeared, dragging out a man in his fifties by the collar of his pajamas. The man, bleeding from his nose and mouth, was in a state of shock. Women in nightgowns came out onto the porch, their hands clutching their cheeks in horror.

An SS sergeant threw the man at the feet of Major Richter, who drew his polished black boot back and kicked him in the face. The man went sprawling onto his back, new blood pouring from his nose.

Who's the mayor of this filthy little town?" Richter demanded.

The man got up on one elbow and wiped some blood away. "Jean Goupil," he said in a quavering voice.

"Where does he live?"

He gave Richter the address and directions. When he was finished, Richter took out his pistol and aimed it at the man's head. He screamed in terror. Then Richter pulled the trigger. As the man's head blew apart, the women on the porch shrieked hysterically. Richter turned to the SS captain and told him to mount up. The SS men returned to their truck and Richter got into his limousine with an order to Grunwald to drive to the mayor's house. Grunwald shifted into gear and the long grim procession rolled toward the center of town, passing the women in nightgowns weeping over the dead man.

As the convoy rumbled more deeply into the town, the noise of the tanks and trucks awakened people. They turned on their lights and peered out their windows, crossing themselves fearfully when they saw the insignia of the SS on the vehicles. When it passed Doctor Lambert's house, he saw the tanks and soldiers and he dressed quickly running out the back door of his house.

The procession stopped in front of the two-story stone house that belonged to the mayor. Richter got out, motioning for the SS men in the first truck to join him. The same blond SS captain and the platoon jumped down.

"Get me the mayor," Richter commanded.

This time, the SS captain selected six men and marched to the front door. Lights already were on inside; adults and children looked at the approaching SS men through windows. As the SS men broke down the door and entered, the people at the windows fled. Sounds of screaming and commotion issued from the

house until minutes later when the SS captain reappeared, dragging a man in his forties by the hair. Behind them followed a group of women and children, quiet now under the guns of the SS.

The captain threw the man at Richter's feet. He looked up at Richter, his face bruised, fury in his eyes.

"On your feet!" Richter screamed.

The man stood up and held his head high.

"Are you the mayor of this filthy little town?" Richter demanded.

"I am the mayor of Rouget," the man said.

A muscle worked in Richter's jaw. "Your name?"

"Jean Goupil."

"I have received word that a group of terrorists came to this filthy town last night. Where are they?"

Goupil blinked his eyes. "I know of no such terrorists."

"Maybe you'd better think about your answer a bit more carefully."

"There's nothing to think about, Herr Major. There are no terrorists in this town as far as I know."

"You're sure?"

"Quite sure."

"We'll see how sure you are." Richter looked at the trembling women and pointed to the oldest one. "Is that your wife?"

"Yes, Herr Major."

Richter looked at the SS captain. "Shoot her."

"No!" screamed Goupil.

Richter whacked him in the face with his pistol. Goupil dropped to the ground, the women and children screaming and begging as the SS men separated Goupil's wife from them. She, however, did not scream or beg. There are some people who can face terror with dignity, and she was one of them. She closed her eyes and crossed herself, biting her lower lip as the SS captain took aim at her with his pistol and pulled the trigger. A red dot appeared on her white nightgown and her legs buckled. She fell in a heap to the ground.

Richter kicked the sobbing Goupil in the ribs. "If you insist on defending the terrorists, I'll kill them all before your filthy French eyes!"

Goupil got on his knees before Richter. "But I know nothing about terrorists who arrived last night," he pleaded above the wails and cries of his family. "Kill me if you wish, but please don't kill my children."

Richter smiled. "I fully intend to kill you, don't worry about it. But I'm also going to kill your family if you don't tell me about the terrorists!"

"No terrorists arrived last night to my knowledge!" Goupil yelled, his voice becoming hysterical.

"Hmmm," Richter said. "What about terrorists in this town in general? Surely you must have some here? Tell me where they are, because I'm sure the ones who arrived last night went straight to them."

Goupil closed his eyes and clasped his hands in front of his breast. He was faced with the moral dilemma of his life: he knew that Father Henri, Doctor Lambert, the two nuns, and about forty others in the town were in the Resistance. If he told the SS major who they were, his family would be saved but the

Resistance fighters would be killed. On the other hand, if he refused to tell the major who they were, he and his children would be killed. His wife already was dead, bleeding only a few feet away from him. His mind was a chaos of conflicting emotions as he wondered who to save.

Richter prodded Goupil's chest with the toe of his boot. "I asked you to identify the terrorists in this town, scum."

With Richter's boot against his chest, Goupil made up his mind. There could be no bargaining with animals like this. There could only be opposition and struggle no matter where it led.

Goupil hung his head. "I know of no terrorists in this town."

Richter laughed. "Come now, mayor. A town of this size would have to hold a few of the dogs, and since you're the big man here, you'd have to know who they are. I think you'd better tell me, because your children are rather charming—in fact I've grown quite attached to them just in the short time I've known them. I will kill them and you without hesitation if you continue to be stubborn. And then I shall raze this town to the ground."

Goupil closed his eyes. "I know nothing," he whispered.

"I'm giving you one last chance, because I am by nature a generous man. Tell me who the terrorists are, or else."

A shudder passed over Goupil. "I know nothing."

Richter's face hardened as he turned to the SS captain. "Shoot them."

"Yes, sir."

The children, who had been shrieking uncontrollably ever since their mother died, were now beyond reason. When the SS men stepped back and aimed their weapons, the children paid no attention as they huddled together like little birds, wailing hysterically.

"Fire!" said the captain.

The SS men opened fire. The impact of the bullets sent the children flying in all directions to land on the ground like broken dolls, blood staining their nightclothes.

Goupil closed his eyes tightly and shivered on his knees before Richter. The monstrosity of the crime was almost too much for him to bear. He tried to push all thoughts out of his mind, and crossed himself, whispering: "Have mercy on our souls, oh Lord."

"Did you say something?" Richter asked, aiming his Luger at Goupil's head.

Goupil didn't reply; he kept his eyes closed and prayed with all his strength.

"Oh, I thought you said something," Richter said with a toothless grin, pulling the trigger on his pistol.

The bullet crashed through Goupil's head, splattering blood and brains everywhere in all directions. Goupil's misery ended, Richter turned and faced his limousine.

"Piecke—get out here!" he bellowed. "And bring your field radio with you!"

Piecke, in the limousine, was pale as a sheet. He'd watched the slaughter and now was paralyzed by an overwhelming sense of horror. He had young nieces and nephews in Germany and imagined them being shot like that. It was beyond human comprehension that such things could happen to innocent children.

"Piecke—I said get out here!"

“You’d better get moving,” Grunwald said under his breath.

“I can’t,” Piecke mumbled.

“He’ll kill you too. You know what he’s like. And if he kills you it won’t prove anything or help anything, so you’d better go out there while you still have the chance.”

Piecke turned and looked into Grunwald’s eyes. “I’m frightened,” he whimpered.

“You think I’m not?”

“Piecke!” screamed Richter. “Come out of there *at once!*”

Piecke’s trembling hand grabbed the field radio. He opened the door as though in a dream and stepped outside. Then he squared his shoulders and walked unsteadily toward Richter, who stood with his legs spread apart and his fists on his hips. Piecke’s lips trembled and it occurred to him that Richter was not merely an expression of evil in the world, but the devil incarnate!

“What’s wrong with you, Piecke?” Richter demanded.

“Nothing, sir.”

“What took you so long to get out here?”

Piecke struggled to make his tongue and mouth work properly. “I don’t know, sir.”

Richter frowned. “You’d better wake up, Piecke. Or else. Give me that field radio.”

“Yes, sir.” Piecke handed it over.

Richter held it to his ear, pressed the button and said: “Attention all units—destroy the town and leave no one alive!”

The message was received by each of the infantry commanders and the captain who led the tank section. Any other army in the world would have balked at such hideous orders, but not the *Waffen* SS. The officers passed the word along, and the men and tanks moved into action. The men dropped to their knees and began firing submachine guns and rifles into the houses and at the crowds who’d gathered on their lawns. The people screamed and scattered, panic-stricken, in all directions. Inside the tanks, the crews battened down their hatches and swung their cannons into position. The lead tank fired first, its artillery shell landing directly on the mayor’s stone house, which exploded in a deafening roar and collapsed in a shambles to the ground.

Richter smiled and rubbed his hands together. “Very good,” he said. “A direct hit.”

The air was filled with the chatter of submachine gun fire and the thunder of explosions. Like an ocean wave, fear and terror swept across the little town of Rouget.

Chapter 30

Underneath the cathedral, Mahoney slept peacefully, his nose burrowed between the breasts of Odette. Suddenly, the secret door opened. Mahoney snapped awake, reaching for his carbine. Odette was scrambling for hers too, and

nearly everyone else in the subterranean hideout grabbed for their weapons, ready for the worst.

The door opened wide and Father Henri entered, carrying a kerosene lamp. Behind him was Doctor Lambert, carrying his little black bag.

“Get up, everybody!” Father Henri said. “The Boche are here!”

Mahoney got to his feet, covering himself with a blanket. “Here in this town?” he asked.

Doctor Lambert stepped forward. “There are a few hundred SS troops and twelve Panther tanks. They passed my house and were headed toward the center of town. I heard a shot of some kind. I think they’ve already killed somebody.”

Mahoney thought for a few moments. “They might simply be passing through, or they may intend to bivouac here for the night. It might be a good idea if we all got dressed and ready, just in case. That shot you heard might have been nothing more than the backfire of a tank engine. They do that sometimes, you know.” He reached for his pants as the others pulled on their clothes. Just then they heard the muffled sound of an explosion.

Doctor Lambert pointed at the ceiling. “Did that sound like the backfire of a tank engine to you?”

“No,” Mahoney admitted, lifting his shirt off the floor. “It sounded like artillery. Is anybody dressed yet?”

Leduc stepped out of the shadows. “I slept with my clothes on.”

“Go upstairs and find out what’s going on, will you?”

“Yes, *Perroquet!*”

As Leduc left the room, Mahoney buttoned on his shirt. That explosion definitely had been artillery, and his mind snapped into its fighting mode. He no longer was the lusty chaser of women or a barroom brawler. He had become a soldier, with strategies and countermeasures stacked neatly in his mind. Snatching his beret off the floor, he planted it on his head over his eyes, and then donned his brown leather jacket. Taking out a cigarette and lighting it, he looked around the room. Tension hung in the air, but everybody was ready. He looked at Louise and saw her buckling on her cartridge belt. Cranepool was in the shadows, pacing back and forth like a tiger, his carbine held in his right hand. Footsteps sounded in the corridor, and Sister Nathalie and Sister Marie entered the underground chamber. They wore their black and white habits, and their cheeks were flushed with excitement.

“The Germans are killing everyone!” said Sister Nathalie.

“They’re blowing up all the houses!” added Sister Marie.

“Are you sure?” Mahoney asked.

“I saw them with my own eyes!” said Sister Marie.

“I wonder what they’re so mad about?” he said.

Leduc returned accompanied by Father Henri and twenty Frenchmen. “It’s true,” he said. “It’s the SS and they’re destroying the town.” He turned to one of the Frenchmen. “Tell him what you told me.”

The Frenchman was twenty years old, with black curls hanging over his forehead. “I saw them kill the mayor and his family,” he said. “A German officer with a bandage on his nose told the mayor that he knew the town was harboring Resistance members who’d arrived sometime last night. He ordered the mayor to

tell him where the Resistance members were, and the mayor refused. That's when the officer told his men to shoot the mayor and his family."

"The children, too?" Father Henri asked.

"Yes."

Father Henri crossed himself and pressed his lips together. Like all Catholics, he believed in the forgiveness of sins, but how could anyone, even Jesus Christ himself, forgive such a terrible crime?

Mahoney had something else on his mind. "I wonder how they knew we were here."

Everybody shrugged their shoulders or shook their heads. The room became crowded as more men and a few women arrived.

"The only people who knew," Mahoney said, "were Father Henri, the two sisters, and that's all, isn't it?"

"What about Louise's husband?" Leduc asked. "Remember that she went out and got some bread from him?"

All eyes turned on Louise.

"It wasn't him," she said. "I know it wasn't him."

"How do you know?" Leduc asked harshly. "You haven't seen him for a long time, so you can't say for sure which side he's on these days?"

"I know him," she said emphatically. "He would never betray Frenchmen, and certainly not me."

"Are you sure?" Mahoney asked.

"Yes, I'm sure."

"He's probably just as sure of you, and we know how wrong he is about that."

Her eyes flashed with anger. "That has nothing to do with anything!" Mahoney didn't avert his gaze. "Then how do the Germans know we're here?"

Leduc cleared his throat. "Did anyone see you going to your husband's bakery?" he asked.

"No," she replied, and then she remembered seeing old Picard on her way back to the church. "Ah yes—I bumped into Picard on my way back here."

"Who's Picard?" Mahoney asked.

"A landlord and a busybody," Louise replied.

"Did you speak with him?"

"No—I didn't even think he saw me."

Doctor Lambert went limp. "I just remembered something. On my way back home after treating Cerizet, I saw Picard on the street. He came over and asked me questions. Now that I think of it, he seemed very suspicious."

"Oh-oh," Mahoney said.

"It must have been this Picard," Leduc said.

"Yes," Father Henri agreed. "I've suspected he was a collaborator for a long time. He makes no secret of his sympathies for the Vichy Government and his admiration for the Germans."

Mahoney puffed his cigarette. "That man is a threat to us. I want him killed. Who'll do it?"

Louise raised her hand. "I'll do it. The Germans are here because of me. It's my duty to execute him."

"It's not your fault that the Germans are here," Mahoney said. "They're here because of the fucking war, but you can kill him if you want to. I don't want you going alone, though. Take somebody with you."

Louise looked at Cranepool pacing back and forth in the shadows. "Can I take Corporal Cranepool?"

"No, you can't take Corporal Cranepool," Mahoney snapped. "You'll take Baudraye."

Baudraye stepped forward with the German submachine gun he'd stolen at the railway tunnel. He was nearly as tall as Mahoney, and considerably heavier around the waist. A cigarette dangled from the corner of his mouth, and Mahoney thought Louise would be safe with him.

"What are you two waiting for?" Mahoney asked. "Get the fuck going."

Louise and Baudraye headed for the door. Louise made a little wave at Cranepool, who attempted to smile, but he wasn't in the mood for cutesy stuff. He knew that his ass was going to be on the line pretty soon, and that was all he could think about.

"All right," Mahoney said, stubbing out his cigarette butt in a tin ashtray, "the next problem is those tanks. We've got a chance against the SS soldiers, but not unless the tanks are knocked out. Do we have any anti-tank weapons?"

"I have two American rocket launchers," Father Henri said, "plus two crates of rockets."

"Get them for me."

Father Henri picked up his cassock and ran to another door. As he opened it Mahoney glimpsed a long dim corridor lined with crates and stacks of rifles. Two of the Frenchmen helped him drag out the crates and rocket launchers.

The rocket launchers were the standard G.I. issue 2.8 rocket launchers, better known as bazookas. They came in two pieces and you just screwed them together. You put it on your shoulder, aimed through the sighting mechanism, and pulled the trigger.

"They look brand new," Mahoney said.

"They've never been used before," Father Henri admitted.

"Well they're gonna get used now, because those tanks have got to go."

Quickly and efficiently, Mahoney organized two anti-tank units. The first consisted of him, Cranepool, and Agoult; the second would have Leduc, Sommervieux, and the young Frenchman with the black curls, whose name was Philippe.

"All right," Mahoney said, "the rest of you load up with hand grenades and try to knock out those tanks. Throw the grenades in the treads or where the turret joins the body of the tank. If the Krauts open their hatches, lob the grenades in. Take your rifles and submachine guns and kill as many of the bastards that you can. And don't be shy about it, because they're going to kill every man, woman, and child in this town if we don't stop them. Are there any questions?"

"Can I go too?" asked Doctor Lambert.

"You'd better stay here and run a hospital, if you can. This is where we'll bring the wounded, if we have time. Any other questions?"

Everybody looked at each other grimly, but no one said a word.

"Okay," Mahoney said. "Let's get this show on the road."

The guerillas loaded up their equipment and filed out of the room. They were solemn, for they knew death was waiting for them up out in the streets. Father Henri watched them go, his heart filled with apprehension. There always will be wars, it said in the Bible, but it was hard to realize it until war erupted in your backyard.

Doctor Lambert bent over the still unconscious Cerizet and took his pulse. He'd already removed the bullet from Cerizet's stomach, but a lot of blood had been lost. He didn't think Cerizet would last another day, and he knew there'd be a lot more like him very soon.

Father Henri, Sister Marie, and Sister Nathalie looked at each other, consternation on their faces.

"We must be strong," Father Henri told them. "We are going to be on the cross with Jesus for the next several hours, and maybe even longer than that. We must steel ourselves to behave like Jesus."

"Father," said Sister Marie, "would you let me go too?"

Father Henri looked down at her pretty young face. "You mean go up there and fight?"

"Yes."

"But I need you here."

"You have Sister Nathalie—you don't need me. I should take my place with the others and fight for our town."

"But you're only a child, Sister Marie. You don't know anything about guns. You're not a soldier, and they'll kill you."

"Men and women younger than I are up there," Sister Marie answered, "and they're not soldiers either, but we have no soldiers so everyone must fight. And besides, I know how to fire a gun. Philippe taught me."

Father Henri didn't know what to say. He knew it was morally wrong to fight and kill, but yet it could be considered equally wrong in certain situations *not* to fight and kill. Christ said to turn the other cheek, but he didn't turn his own cheek when he threw the moneylenders out of the temple. "I won't tell you to go and I won't tell you not to go, Sister Marie," he said softly. "It's a matter for you and your conscience to decide."

"Then I'm going," she said.

She dashed into the tunnel and plucked a carbine from the wall. Slung bandoliers of ammunition around her shoulders, she ran out of the tunnel and past Father Henri, then stopped suddenly and turned around to him.

"Pray for us, Father Henri," she said.

"That's what I'm doing right now, Sister Marie."

"You too, Sister Nathalie."

Sister Nathalie was an emotional woman, and she burst into tears as young Sister Marie moved swiftly out of the room.

Chapter 31

Richter stood beside his limousine, watching sheets of flame shoot into the sky. War surely is the most beautiful spectacle in the world, he thought as tanks fired at homes at pointblank range. The tanks continued firing until the homes were rubble; then they rolled over the stones and charred bodies and commenced firing at the next home.

Bodies of men, women, and children lay everywhere. SS men stormed into houses, herded out occupants, and shot them in the street. Richter's eyes darted everywhere, not missing anything, exulting in the great victory. He felt like Genghis Khan and realized what it was like to be a great warlord. I am the King of Death and this city is mine, he thought. For the first time in his career he wished he'd taken a commission in the army instead of the SS, because this was much more to his taste than pulling out the fingernails of suspected spies in the dungeon of La Roche-Guyon, or shooting recalcitrant Frenchmen in the head.

Children screamed and the sound of machine gun fire echoed through the night. Piecke sat beside Grunwald in the front seat of the Mercedes-Benz, feeling as though the top of his head was missing. He realized he was having a nervous breakdown of some kind, but didn't know how to stop it.

"You'd better pull yourself together," Grunwald said, placing his hand over Piecke's. "This is no joke. If you want to go crazy, this is no place to do it."

Piecke shook his head, tears streaming down his cheeks. "It's too awful," he said.

"I don't like it any more than you do," Grunwald said, "but the way I look at it, better those Frenchies than me."

"But it's so wicked, so wrong, so terrible. Things like this shouldn't happen."

"Of course they shouldn't, but they do. You can't stop it and neither can I. All we can do is try to save our own skins."

Piecke looked at him, his lips trembling. "But is it worth it, Grunwald?"

Grunwald wrinkled his nose. "Is what worth it?"

"Our skins."

Grunwald chortled. "I don't know about you, fellow, but my skin is worth anything."

Piecke covered his eyes with his hands. "I can't take it anymore!"

"Stop that!"

"It's too much for me!"

"Quick—take your hands down before Richter sees you. He's crazy and he's a trigger happy son-of-a-bitch. Look at him out there—he's having the time of his life. You'd think he was in a Paris whorehouse with his pockets filled with francs."

Grunwald grabbed Piecke's wrist and pulled down one of his hands. Piecke dropped the other one. He had no strength left. "I want to die," he moaned.

"Stop talking like that."

"The blood... the dead children... the pregnant women... the old men..."

"*Piecke!*" screamed Richter.

"He's calling you," said Grunwald. "You'd better get out there."

"Out where?"

"Where Richter is over there. Get moving you damned fool!"

Piecke thought he was a robot as he opened the door of the limousine. He stumbled toward Richter, carrying the radio with him.

“Give me the radio,” Richter said, too excited to notice the turmoil in Piecke’s face. Piecke handed over the radio, and Richter brought it to his ear. He pressed the button and spoke the call letters of the tank commander, who soon came on the airwaves.

“There’s a church at one hundred and twelve degrees—I can see the steeple in the glow of the fires. Is it visible from where you are?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’d like to head in that direction—can you do that?”

“We can go in any direction you like, sir.”

“Good. Get moving.”

“Yes, sir.”

Richter handed the radio back to Piecke. “Stay here in case I need you, idiot,” he said, looking at the steeple in the distance.

How beautiful it will be to see that church come crashing to the ground, Richter thought. Like many Nazis, he held a particular hatred for the Roman Catholic Church. He was personally responsible for sending a lot of priests and nuns to concentration camps. Now he rubbed his hands in anticipation, then reached for his silver cigarette case. He was observing a group of SS men firing their rifles into the windows of a house, when suddenly one of them dropped to the ground, his hands grasping his stomach. Richter held his cigarette case in the air, transfixed, as another SS man fell, blood spurting from his neck. A bullet whizzed over Richter’s head, and he lowered himself quickly to the ground.

“They’re shooting back!” he screamed. “After them!”

Piecke looked at Richter squirming on the ground, covering his head with his hands. Taking out his service revolver, Piecke cocked it and aimed it at the center of Richter’s back. Something prompted Richter to look up, and his eyes bugged when he saw Piecke with the gun.

“Piecke—what do you think you’re doing!” Richter screamed.

“I’m going to kill you, sir,” Piecke said, a faraway tone in his voice.

Richter began trembling from head to foot. “Put that gun away this instant!”

“I’m sorry sir, but I’ve got to shoot you because, you see, you are the devil incarnate.”

Richter reached for his pistol, as Piecke squeezed the trigger. A shot rang out and Piecke’s jaw was shot away. Piecke closed his eyes and toppled to the ground, dead as a doornail. A young SS lieutenant came running up, the barrel of his pistol still smoking.

“Are you all right, sir?” he asked Richter.

“Yes, I’m all right,” Richter replied, looking about him cautiously.

“I saw him try to shoot you sir, and I managed to get him first.”

“You’re a sharp-eyed officer—I can see that. And you’ve saved my life. You won’t be sorry, Lieutenant. What’s your name?”

“Lieutenant Wendt, sir.”

“You’ll be a captain soon.”

“Oh, that would be wonderful, sir.”

“Return to your post.”

“Yes, sir.”

The lieutenant double-timed back to where he was, and Richter looked at Piecke lying on his side, the lower part of his face a mass of blood and grease. He must have been crazy, Richter thought. But at least I'm finally rid of him. Maybe now I can get a decent aide. He tried to kill me... how very strange.

Richter was aware that bullets weren't flying over his head anymore. The SS men must have pushed back the few townspeople with weapons. No one could stand up to the SS, he thought as he rose from the ground. He looked around and saw the tanks moving slowly in a column toward the church, demolishing all structures in their path.

Nothing can stop us, Richter thought triumphantly. Soon this town will be no more.

Chapter 32

Mahoney, Cranepool, and Agoult ran through the back streets of Rouget, heading toward the fighting in the center of town. Mahoney carried the bazooka slung over his shoulder in two pieces, a German submachine gun held at the ready in his hands. Behind him Cranepool and Agoult were each carrying an end of the crate of the anti-tank rockets; their pockets were filled with hand grenades, which were also festooned from their lapels. Bandoliers of ammunition were slung from their shoulders.

They moved quickly and silently through the alleys of the town. Whenever they had to cross a street, they hid in the shadows for a few seconds to make sure the way was clear. Multitudes of people were fleeing the center of town, their faces distorted by panic and terror. Many were dressed in nightclothes, hair messed, holding their children's hands, and running wildly to safety.

The three guerillas made their way toward the sound of the gunfire and the explosions. It was almost dawn, and the cloudy horizon was taking on a murky glow, but at least the rain had stopped. Mahoney held his submachine gun tightly as he plowed through bushes and leapt over fences. He was anxious to get into position and do something about those tanks. If they could be stopped, the SS men could be contained and the town saved.

As they approached the center of the town through an alley between two houses, their narrow field of vision showed a tank and some SS men moving away from them. Mahoney thought fast and decided to break into one of the houses facing the tanks so he could fire down at the tanks from the second floor without any trajectory problems.

Motioning to Cranepool and Agoult, he led them to the rear of a house that was stone on its first story and wood on its second. The back door was locked but he kicked it open with his big foot and entered a large kitchen. He heard a sound and swung his submachine gun toward it. Next to the sink crouched a woman and two small children.

"Please don't shoot," the woman begged. It was too dark for her to see that Mahoney and the two with him weren't wearing SS uniforms.

"We're French," Mahoney said. "You'd better take your children and get out of here."

"I'm afraid," she said trembling.

"I'm not going to argue with you lady, but you and your children are going to be dead if you don't get out of here fast."

"Where shall we go?"

With his machine gun, Mahoney pointed toward the outskirts of town. "That way." He looked at Cranepool and Agoult. "Follow me," he said, leading them up the flight of stairs to the second floor. They entered a bedroom at the front and peered cautiously out the window. On the street below them they could see the SS tanks and troopers moving at an angle away from them. Mahoney spotted the church steeple in the distance but it didn't occur to him that this was their destination.

"We'll do it from here," Mahoney said. "Open this fuckin' crate."

Cranepool and Agoult pried the wooden slats off the top of the crate as Mahoney unslung the bazooka. He screwed both halves together and pulled out the sighting mechanism. Then he looked around the bedroom. The covers had been flung violently off the bed; he imagined that its occupants had fled quickly. His eyes roved across the bedroom to the dresser, and opened wide when he perceived a box of cigars sitting on top of it.

"Holy shit!" he said.

"Whatsa matter!" Cranepool replied, alarmed.

"Cigars!"

Mahoney stormed across the room, grabbed a handful of the cigars, and stuffed them into his shirt. He took another one, tore off the cellophane wrapper, and stuck it into his mouth. Lighting it slowly, he sucked the delicious smoke into his mouth and sighed as he exhaled it. He felt as if he could take on the entire German Army now, single-handed.

"We got the crate open," Cranepool said, lifting out a rocket. From the street below came the sounds of explosions and gunfire.

Mahoney stomped to the window, got on one knee, and put the bazooka on his right shoulder. He looked through the sighting device and adjusted it while Cranepool loaded a rocket in the back. Cranepool tied the rocket's wires to the terminals on the back of the bazooka, and then tapped Mahoney on his beret, signifying it was ready to fire.

"Get another rocket ready," Mahoney said out of the corner of his mouth, "because we're gonna fire two quick ones and then get out of here before they can spot us and zero in. And I hope you both know enough to stay out of the back blast."

Cranepool and Agoult stood to the side, and Mahoney put the crosshairs on a Panther tank in the middle of the column. Steadying himself, he took a deep breath and pulled the trigger. An electrical current ran through the wires and into the rocket setting it off. A huge swoosh filled the room; the back blast blew the bed to smithereens.

Mahoney could see the rocket fly out the front of the bazooka and streak down toward the tank. He bit down on the cigar and twisted his head to the side in an effort to make the rocket home in on the tank. It headed directly to its target and

Mahoney smiled as it made contact. The rocket exploded through a turret of the tank and in a split second the four crew members were incinerated. Smoke poured from gaps in the tank's hatches; then it crumpled to the side, out of action.

While the tank smoked and burned in the street, SS men ran around shouting orders. Cranepool inserted another rocket into the back of the bazooka and tied the wires to the terminals. Mahoney took aim at the tank that had stopped cold behind the one he'd hit, and pulled the trigger. Again, Mahoney watched the rocket's descent. It roared through the armor just below the turret and set off its ammunition. The tank burst apart, sending bits of metal and the limbs of its crew members flying everywhere. An SS man not far away pointed his finger at the house Mahoney was firing from. Cannons on turrets rolled around to face the building.

"Let's get out of here!" Mahoney yelled. In a flash, he unscrewed the bazooka and clamped the two halves together, slinging them over his shoulder. Cranepool and Agoult grabbed up the crate of rockets and they all ran down the stairs. As they reached the kitchen an artillery shell hit the front of the house. There was a blaze of light; the house shook, and timbers fell from the ceiling. Mahoney, Cranepool, and Agoult dodged the debris and made their way to the door. Mahoney kicked it open and as they fled outside, four SS men came around the corner, but he saw them before they saw him. He opened fire on them, sending forth a hail of bullets that cut them down.

"This way!" he shouted, leading them across the backyard and over the fence. Holding their heads low, they sped past lilac bushes and little gardens to another fence, hopped it, and found themselves in another yard. They kept moving in the same general direction as the tanks, because Mahoney wanted to head them off. Jumping into another yard, they heard an explosion from the direction of the street, which sounded as if another tank had been hit. Seconds later they heard yet another explosion; Mahoney hoped that four tanks were out of action and only eight left to go, although he realized that eight tanks could wreak an awful lot of destruction.

"Stop here!" Mahoney said.

They stopped and crouched behind a newly whitewashed fence, Mahoney chewing his cigar from one side of his mouth to the other. Cranepool's face was flushed but he didn't seem tired at all; Agoult was breathing a little hard but he too seemed all right; Mahoney felt strong as a bull.

"You two stay here and take a break," he said.

"I'm gonna go reconnoiter the street. Don't go anywhere—get it?"

"Got it."

"Good."

Mahoney puffed his cigar and stood up cautiously. The dawn was brighter now and the town looked gray and eerie. The air was heavy with the acrid smell of gunpowder and burning buildings. Like a cat he jumped the fence, hugging the shadows as he moved toward the street that the tanks had been travelling on. Getting on his belly he crawled beneath bushes between two houses until the street came into view. Still puffing the cigar, he observed the tanks and SS men moving in the same direction as before, blowing up houses and rolling over them. They weren't killing civilians anymore because all the civilians had fled from the

center of town. Three tanks were out of action; the other bazooka crews must have got one of them.

The SS men and tanks were scattered all around in a poor defensive position, and Mahoney could see some of the soldiers being picked off by guerilla fire. Occasionally he'd notice a detachment of SS men rush off in a particular direction as though they knew some guerillas were there, but the guerillas would fall back, move to a new position, and attack again. Mahoney wished for a hundred more men and six more bazookas, because the SS force could easily be surrounded. They didn't seem to be using any sensible military tactics in their rampage through the town.

Just then there was an explosion, and another tank blew up. Mahoney smiled. Four down and eight to go. One of the other explosions he'd heard before must have missed. You had to make every shot count in a fight like this, because you wouldn't get many chances. He looked ahead, trying to find a good spot to set up his bazooka crew, and zeroed in on a row of houses behind the houses that faced the street. Any one of them might be good, but then he thought they'd be too far away and he might miss. It wasn't good to be too cautious. He'd have to bring the bazookas right up on the line. Scanning the street he saw a big clump of bushes between two houses near a curve in the road. The bushes wouldn't provide much protection but they'd be good camouflage. It looked like an ideal spot. He figured out how many houses away the bushes were, and plotted a route to get there.

When he had everything arranged in his mind, he raised his submachine gun and took aim at a patrol of Germans firing into the houses across the street. He squeezed the trigger and the Germans did a funny little dance. One twisted lazily in the air, blood spurting from his chest, another tried to hold in the guts that were spilling out of his pants. A third ran away and a fourth dropped to the street, looking around for the source of the submachine gun fire. A fifth stood in the middle of the street, staring with wonderment at the bloody stump where his right arm had been.

Mahoney snorted with satisfaction as he backed out of the bushes. When he was clear he got up and ran in a crouch across the yard. Jumping the fence, he landed a few feet from Cranepool and Agoult, who swung their submachine guns toward him.

"It's me, you assholes," Mahoney grunted as he trudged toward them. "Saddle up. We've got some more tanks to wipe out."

The violent rapping sound of an explosion came from the street, and Mahoney thought it might be another tank knocked out by one of the other bazooka crews.

"Hurry up," he said, "because if we don't get going there might not be any tanks left for us."

Cranepool and Agoult hoisted the crate of rockets, and Mahoney led them in the direction of the position he'd chosen.

Chapter 33

In another part of town, Picard the landlord sat on a chair on the second floor of his house, looking out his bedroom window at the smoke and fire on the horizon. He was dressed in his pajamas and bathrobe, with his nightcap still on, for he'd awakened at the sound of the very first shots and had been watching from the window ever since. He saw the first explosions and the first fires, and had watched them spread. The Germans were wreaking havoc in the center of town, but Picard thought they were justified, for many of the town's residents were opposed to the German occupation and did not appreciate the achievements of the great Adolf Hitler.

Picard thought he heard a noise downstairs, but with all the explosions and gunfire, he supposed he might be hearing things that weren't there. Squinting his eyes and peering through his glasses toward the center of town, he wondered how his two houses in that section were faring. Actually, he didn't care if his property was damaged a little; it was about time that the fools in this town were taught a lesson. He'd sacrifice everything he owned if he thought it would help the Germans stop the Jewish-Bolshevism that threatened to engulf the world. And he knew that one day the Germans would congratulate and reward him for his part in the fight for a united Europe under the great Hitler.

Now hearing the sound of footsteps behind him, he turned to see Louise and Baudraye enter his bedroom, their pistols drawn. Picard blanched and stood up.

"Louise, my dear, what are you doing with that gun?" he asked in a quavering voice.

"You die," she said, pulling the trigger.

Chapter 34

Mahoney jumped the fence and as his feet landed he heard another explosion that sounded like a direct hit from a bazooka. He hoped this was so because the tanks worried him more than the SS men. Cranepool lowered the crate of rockets down to Mahoney, who waited until Cranepool and Agoult landed beside him, and then he handed the crate back.

From the yard behind the clump of bushes he'd picked out, the explosions and gunfire sounded as though the battle was getting hotter. Mahoney, chewing his cigar stub, led them across the yard to the bushes, where they got down on their bellies and crawled. Though the branches scratched their faces and the backs of their hands, they finally reached a point where they could see the street.

The two front tanks had been knocked out by bazooka fire; the remaining Panthers were trying to move through houses and yards across the street, blasting a path before them. It was clear to Mahoney that they were trying to move in a specific single direction, although he had no idea why. The sun had risen higher but the morning was still gray because of the heavy clouds. According to Mahoney's count, five tanks had been knocked out. In a way it was amazing that his guerilla bazooka teams had done so well, but in another way it was understandable— because the Germans just weren't using sound military tactics.

They were simply plowing through the town, not protecting their flanks or rear very well, and not fighting strategically.

Mahoney coupled the two halves of the bazooka together. While he sighted through the crosshairs, Agoult handed a rocket to Cranepool who fed it into the rear end of the bazooka. The tanks and SS men were all facing the other way so Mahoney thought this shot was going to be a piece of cake. He aimed at the rear of the tank directly in front of him, pasting the crosshairs on the center of its mass. The tank was rumbling slowly over the stones and wood of a ruined home as Mahoney pulled the trigger. The bazooka went light on his shoulder for a moment as the rocket shot out. He watched it go—and cursed as it sailed over the tank and exploded some distance in front of it.

“Son of a bitch!” he cursed.

While Cranepool loaded him up again, Mahoney noticed some SS men looking back in his direction. “Oh-oh,” he muttered, aiming lower this time.

The rocket swooshed forward and Mahoney gritted his teeth, hoping it would land squarely. It hit the rear deck of the tank and exploded, knocking the tank forward and melting the flesh off the bones of the crew inside. While smoke billowed from the huge hole, Mahoney noticed an SS man pointing in his direction and shouting.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here!” Mahoney said, backing out of the bushes, dragging the bazooka with him. The SS men in the street started firing; bullets whizzed around Mahoney’s head and one of them brought down Agoult. Mahoney got low to the ground, yanked a hand grenade off his lapel, pulled the pin, and lobbed it into the street. As it exploded in front of the SS men Mahoney scrambled out of the bushes with Cranepool close after him. They left the bazooka, rockets, and Agoult behind because to linger was to die. When they were clear of the bushes they ran to the rear of the house, pressing their backs against it. Mahoney peeked around the house. The SS men were advancing steadily toward the bushes, firing as they came. He took another hand grenade, pulled the pin, and tossed it into the bushes. It landed near the rockets and went off with a deafening roar, detonating the rockets and letting fly a hail of shrapnel that cut down several of the advancing SS men.

“Now!” Mahoney shouted.

He and Cranepool ran across the yard and jumped the rear fence. They sped between the houses, then came to a street on which there were seven SS men. Mahoney and Cranepool dove to the sidewalk, both of them scrambling for hand grenades. They pulled the pins and threw them. The SS men dodged to the ground, but the grenades were already exploding, shaking the pavement and making mincemeat out of the Germans. Mahoney and Cranepool kept running. When they paused to catch their breaths, they heard whistles blowing and Germans shouting all around them.

“I think they’re after us,” Mahoney said.

“Certainly sounds that way,” Cranepool agreed.

“Maybe we’d better split up.”

“If you say so, Sarge.”

“Lay low for awhile and then when things are quiet come out again.”

“Right.”

“Good luck.”

“You too.”

Mahoney ran to the left and Cranepool went to the right. They didn't know where they were going but they were going anyway. The main thing was to keep moving in a zigzag pattern, making a low silhouette. Mahoney jumped a fence and landed behind three Germans facing the other way. As they turned around he opened fire. He got them all, spraying them with hot lead, sending them spinning through the gray morning, their blood splattering the grass.

“I've got to get out of here,” he said under his breath, jumping over the bodies of the dead Germans. He ran between two houses and peeked out the corner at the street. There wasn't a soul out there that he could see. Holding his submachine gun high in front of him, he raced across the street to a back yard on the other side. Stopping behind a house to catch his breath, he wondered how Cranepool was making out but was sure he was okay because the kid seemed to live a charmed life. Mahoney, however, wasn't so sure about his own life. He'd stopped too many bullets in his career already, and the fatal one might come at any moment.

He decided it might be best if he kept moving. He hopped the fence into the adjacent yard, and the next one into the yard after that. Crouching low against the fence, he took out a match and lit the butt of his cigar. Puffing nervously and sniffing like a rabbit, he perked his ears and listened for scary sounds but there were none; he appeared safe for the time being.

Observing the rear of a house, he decided it might be a good idea to go in and get something to munch on, maybe even hide until the SS men passed through this area. He'd told Cranepool to lay low for a while and maybe he should take his own advice.

He crept toward the house and entered through the rear door, finding himself in a good old-fashioned French kitchen with a big black wood stove. The sink was across the room and beside it was the ice box. Mahoney closed the door silently behind him and listened for a few moments, but could hear nothing. He tiptoed across the room and opened the door to the icebox. To his intense satisfaction he saw a long length of smoked sausage and a half loaf of bread. Removing these from the refrigerator, he wondered where to sit and dine; he certainly didn't want to be suddenly surprised by a patrol of SS men while he was eating in the kitchen.

Then he had a brilliant idea: there must be a cellar in the house, and in the cellar there must be some wine. He could hide in the cellar and drink some wine, then smoke a cigar and return to battle after the SS men passed through this neighborhood.

Keeping his head down, so that his movements couldn't be seen by someone looking in the window, he wandered around the kitchen opening doors. He saw only other rooms, pantries, and closets. Finally he opened a door that concealed a flight of stairs going down to the cellar. The musty odor of the dirt floor wafted to his nostrils as he descended, all the while congratulating himself on his cleverness.

On a rack against the wall lay some bottles of wine. He took one down, pulling out the cork with his teeth. Though he wasn't a wine connoisseur and wouldn't know a great wine from a fair one, he sniffed the bottle. He could tell he didn't

have a bad wine, not at all. He crawled among some barrels stacked on the floor, hiding himself from anyone who might look down the cellar stairs. Pleased with himself, he bit off a chunk of bread and proceeded to dine. Glancing at his watches, he saw that it was seven o'clock in the morning. Chewing the bread, he wondered how the fighting was going at the center of town. He swallowed the food in his mouth and took a bite of the sausage, washing it down with a swig of wine. He was anxious to finish quickly and then get back into the fight.

Chapter 35

General Hans Speidel sat in Rommel's office, poring over maps of the Normandy beaches. Scattered and confused reports had been coming in throughout the wee hours of the morning saying that airborne landings were taking place all across Normandy from Cherbourg to Caen. Though the width of the sector under attack indicated that the airborne operation was not one of purely local significance, it was so difficult to know precisely what was going on. One unit commander on the Cotentin Peninsula reported that straw dummies had been parachuted into his sector. Speidel didn't know how to respond to all the conflicting information; after all, he was only a staff officer, not a strategist or commander of armies. He thought it might be best to wait and not take drastic action until the enemy's intentions were clearer.

The phone on his desk rang, and he picked it up: it was General Max Pemsel, the Chief of Staff of the German Seventh Army.

"We are undergoing a colossal naval bombardment here," General Pemsel reported.

"Colossal?" General Speidel asked. "What kind of military word is *colossal*? Can't you be more specific?"

"Speidel!" Pemsel screamed. "The situation is serious and deteriorating rapidly! We are blanketed with artillery fire throughout the entire Seventh Army Sector! I've received a report that a vast armada of ships is lying offshore! *Move in the tanks, Speidel!* It looks like this is the invasion!"

"Move in the tanks in the face of that artillery barrage?" Speidel asked. "Can't you see how dangerous that will be? The tank corps will be decimated, Pemsel. And besides, I think it might be wiser to hold back the tanks until we know where the enemy's main thrust is coming."

"It's coming right here in the Seventh Army Sector!" Pemsel yelled, losing control of himself.

"It may look that way to you from your vantage point," Speidel said calmly, "but it doesn't look that way at all here. This may be nothing more than a feint to make us divert our forces from the point where the enemy's main spearhead action will take place."

Pemsel struggled to regain his control. "I can assure you, General, that this is no mere feint but a major action!"

"General Pemsel, surely you've studied the strategies and philosophies of von Clausewitz, have you not?"

“Von Clausewitz?” Pemsel asked, bewildered.

“Yes, von Clausewitz. You may recall that he once said that the most important single requirement for successful field command is the ability to remain calm and make rational decisions in the face of the most confusing circumstances, is that not so?”

“What does that have to do with anything that’s happening right now?”

“Everything, my dear General. I suggest you make an effort to assess your situation and then report back to me, is that clear?”

“But...”

“Is that clear, General Pemsel?”

“Yes, sir.”

“That is all. Carry out your orders.”

Speidel hung up the phone. He thought he’d handled that situation rather nicely, all things considered. Besides, he’d already called Paris and von Rundstedt’s chief-of-staff General Blumentritt had told him to hold fast and await further developments. So that’s what Speidel decided to do. The enemy’s intentions should become clear soon, and then intelligent action could be taken against them.

At that very moment, as General Speidel returned his gaze to the maps, the first soldier of the U.S. 4th Infantry Division was setting his foot on Utah Beach.

Chapter 36

Sister Marie joined a group of armed men and women and ran with them toward the fighting. As the sound of gunfire and explosions came closer, she became afraid. But she kept moving forward, her black habit fluttering in the breeze, because she felt she had to help defend her town. When the ground shook with a particularly terrific explosion, she imagined herself being blown apart, her blood and bones flying everywhere. She sucked in her breath, trying to overcome the fear of death, remembering that even Jesus had a moment of doubt and shame on the cross, until he gathered his strength and died bravely. I must try to be strong too, she told herself.

They came to a barricade caused by the stones and rubble of ruined homes, behind which were townspeople, firing at a detachment of SS men taking cover behind wagons and military trucks. The tanks were a few hundred yards away, blowing up houses, and the SS detachment was supposed to be guarding their rear.

Sister Marie knelt behind the barricade and loaded her carbine. She’d received training from Resistance members in the mountains outside of Rouget, because she’d known that a day like this would someday come. Looking around, she recognized men and women, and some young children, from her school. But there was no time for greetings and pleasantries. There was time only to fight.

On one knee, she pulled the butt of the carbine to her shoulder and rested the front of the stock on the rubble. Sighting down the barrel, she took aim at an SS man peeking around the side of a truck, and began squeezing the trigger. She

could make out the SS man's face; he was young, probably no more than her age. But her finger froze. Dots of perspiration appeared on her forehead. Then she gritted her teeth and tried to pull the trigger the rest of the way; but something was preventing her finger from moving in that direction. A split second later the SS man ducked behind the truck.

Sister Marie lowered her rifle. Her mind was awl; though she wanted to help defend the town against the threat that was unequivocally evil, she couldn't kill another human being when she was put to the test. She felt dazed, and didn't know what to do with herself. Bullets whistled over her head and she sat down behind the barricade, laying her carbine on her lap. A dead man was lying a few feet from her, blood oozing from his chest, his eyes staring at the morning sky. Sister Marie knew it was Langlois, a farmer whose son was in her school. Langlois had been killed by the Boche, but yet she could not kill the Boche herself. She thought that if she'd shot the SS man at the truck, she might save, in the long run, the life of someone else she knew in her town but she couldn't do it. Though she knew the SS committed the most horrible atrocities against the French—even killing babies—and that maybe by killing an SS man she could prevent the death of a child, she still couldn't kill.

"Here they come!" shouted a man a few feet from her.

Sister Marie turned around to look. Sure enough, the SS men were attacking, firing their bayoneted rifles as they advanced toward the barricades. There seemed to be many more of them than the French, and as if in a dream, she raised the carbine again and took aim. Now she knew that her life was on the line and only she could fight for it. Sister Marie lined up the sights of her carbine on the chest of an SS man directly in front of her. His helmet pulled low over his eyes, he stopped momentarily to fire a shot from his shoulder, then ejected the cartridge and advanced again. As bullets ricocheted off the rubble in front of her, he came closer. Then she squeezed the trigger the way the Resistance fighters had taught her. She squeezed it more, the carbine trembling in her hands, tears running down her cheeks.

Then she went limp, closing her eyes. I can't do it, she thought. I just can't do it. When she opened her eyes the SS wasn't there anymore. He was writhing around on the ground; someone else had shot him.

"Get down, Sister Marie!"

Someone jumped on her, covering her with his body. A series of explosions went off in the street; the Resistance fighters were throwing hand grenades. The shrapnel zinged through the air and zapped into the barricade. The man released her; he was Saulnier, another farmer.

"You've got to keep your head down, Sister Marie," he admonished her.

"I'm sorry... I..."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm all right."

"Maybe you ought to go back to the church, Sister Marie."

"Yes... yes..."

Now the SS men who weren't dead or wounded had retreated to the safety of the trucks. "We've stopped them!" Saulnier shouted, waving his beret in the air. A cheer went up behind the barricades, but Sister Marie felt numb all over. She

wanted to throw up and she wanted to die, because she realized that she'd almost killed somebody. She got on her knees and crossed herself.

Her place was in the church, she decided, and taking off her bandoliers, she handed her ammunition and her carbine to Saulnier. "I'm going back to the church."

"Be careful, Sister Marie."

Sister Marie crouched low and moved back from the barricades, feeling cleansed by the decision she'd made. After putting a row of houses between herself and the Germans in the street, she stood erect, then continued away from the sound of battle until she could safely head toward the church.

She walked on a deserted sidewalk, holding her hands clasped in front of her, singing a hymn. Her experience in the street left her feeling light-headed and strange. A true believer since she was a little girl, she'd always been pious and she'd always had faith, but never had her faith been threatened as it had today. Somehow she didn't feel secure anymore. Life and religion were turning out to be more complicated than she'd supposed.

Turning a corner, she saw a pile of rags on a lawn halfway down the street. She wondered what they were doing there; then a chill passed over her as she approached them. They were not rags, but people. Dead people.

She neared them apprehensively, the fingers of her right hand over her mouth. A man and a woman and two children lay crumpled against each other, covered with blood. She wanted to close her eyes and pass by, but she couldn't. She was drawn to the dead bodies like a magnet. Kneeling down beside them, she crossed herself. And then she saw the face of one of the children. It was little Josette, who sang so sweetly in the choir. Little Josette was this dead stained thing lying on the lawn.

Sister Marie started to tremble all over with rage. She balled her fists and gritted her teeth. This crime was too much for her to bear or rationalize. Little Josette had been one of her favorite pupils, a sweet angelic child, and she had been brutally murdered by the vicious beasts of the SS.

Her head was spinning; she didn't know what to do. Something told her to hurry back to the church, and something else told her to return to the barricades and make the Boche pay for the life of little Josette. Pounding her fists on the ground, she began to wail. If an SS man had been lying on the ground in front of her she would have choked him to death.

"What are you doing there!"

Sister Marie looked up and saw three SS men come from behind a house, heading straight for her. She got up and began to run.

"Halt!"

She picked up her skirts and ran as fast as her legs could carry her. A bullet whistled over her head, and then another. She ducked behind a house and ran through the alley to the backyard. Looking around excitedly, she saw the backs of several homes. She knew that her only chance was to run into one of them and hide. She sped toward the nearest one, opened the rear door and entered the kitchen.

No sooner was she inside, than the three SS men ran into the yard. They looked around but couldn't see the nun they'd been chasing.

“She must have gone into one of these houses,” a corporal said, “or maybe she moved on to the next street. You go to the left,” he ordered, “you go to the right,” he said to the other SS man, “and I’ll search the street.”

While the SS men moved in their respective directions, Sister Marie ran to the first door she saw, opened it, and started down the flight of stairs leading to the cellar. The cellar was dark and musty, and she smelled tobacco smoke. She decided to hide behind some barrels in the corner, when suddenly from the shadows, a huge form lunged at her. She started to scream but a hand covered her mouth before any sound came out.

“Calm down,” said a deep voice.

Her panic stricken eyes looked up and she saw the swarthy features of the big American Ranger, the one they’d called Mahoney, looming above her. She nearly fainted in his arms.

“Do you recognize me?” he asked.

She nodded her head.

He removed his hand from her mouth. “Is there anybody after you?”

“Three SS men,” she stuttered.

“Come on behind the barrels with me, asshole. I’ll bet they saw you come in here, too.”

“No... I don’t think they did.”

Mahoney harumphed and took her hand, leading her to a narrow space behind the barrels. They lay down, their bodies touching. Nearby was the loaf of bread, the length of sausage, and bottle of wine Mahoney had intended to make a meal of. He’d only had two bites of the sausage before Sister Marie showed up. At first he’d thought she was an SS man; and she didn’t realize how close she’d come to getting Mahoney’s bayonet jammed through her heart.

“What are you doing out of the church?” Mahoney asked, as they huddled together behind the barrels.

“I... I wanted to go out and help the others fight for our town.”

“What happened?”

“I... I don’t know.”

“You look a little weird, kid.”

“I... I...”

“I never met a nun in my life who wasn’t all fucked up, if you’ll pardon the expression. Want some wine?”

“No... no...”

Sister Marie was trembling all over and her eyes were blinking like a sparrow. Her emotions had gone through the grinding machine during the past hour, and she thought she was losing her mind.

“Are you all right?” Mahoney asked.

“I saw little Josette,” she replied, her voice unsteady.

Mahoney narrowed his eyes as he looked at her. “Yeah?”

Sister Marie gritted her teeth. “The Boche killed her.”

“I think you’d better have some of this wine.”

Sister Marie grabbed the lapels of his jacket. “They killed her!”

“Ssshhhh.”

“They killed her,” she said more softly.

“Have some wine.”

“I don’t want any wine.”

“It’s good for you.”

She looked into his eyes. “But they killed her.”

Mahoney shrugged. “She’s not the first and she won’t be the last. I think you’d better have some wine.”

“I don’t want any wine!”

“Not so fuckin’ loud, you asshole.”

She covered her mouth with her hand. “I’m sorry.”

“I never met a nun who wasn’t a banana.”

“I’m not a very good nun,” she admitted.

“You’ve got a lot of company.”

She began to cry. Mahoney realized that she was distressed about something and he’d better try to soothe her, despite his natural tendency to dislike nuns and blame them for everything bad that ever happened to him. Examining her features, he noticed that she was an awfully pretty nun. He’d never seen a nun like her at St. Catherine’s on the East Side of New York.

He placed his hand on her shoulder. “Take it easy.”

“I have no right to wear this habit,” she sobbed.

“Sure you do. I’ll bet you’re kind and understanding and all that stuff. I can tell just by looking at you that you’re that way. I’ll bet you’ve done a lot of good things in your life. When you die you’re going to be right up there with the angels, kid.”

She shook her head. “No I’m not.”

“Why not?”

“Because I have murder in my soul. I am a hypocrite, the worst kind of hypocrite in fact, because although I know I should not kill, I want to murder a German soldier with my bare hands. I want to gouge out his eyes with my thumb. I want to choke him and then kick his face.”

“You’d make a good soldier, kid. You can be in my outfit anytime.”

“I’m no good,” she said.

“Cut it out, will you? I can’t take this anymore.”

“I’ll go if you want me to.”

“You don’t have to go anywhere—just shut your fuckin’ yap for a little while, okay?”

Suddenly they heard the sound of the door opening upstairs. They both stiffened. Sister Marie reached out for Mahoney and pulled herself closer to him, because she was frightened and wanted to hide in his huge bulk.

“Don’t move or say a word,” he whispered into her ear.

She nodded to indicate she understood. One of the SS men had entered the house and was looking around the kitchen. He took a few steps inside, holding his rifle and bayonet before him, looking around. The house was still. He ought to search it but there might be a guerilla with a gun hidden somewhere, or maybe a bunch of them, and they might take him by surprise. He didn’t like being all alone like this, away from his comrades. It had only been one nun and she probably wasn’t in this house anyway.

He backed up and left the house, closing the door behind him. Mahoney heard his footsteps through the ceiling and figured he was gone, but he thought he’d

better remain still to make sure, and besides, he liked holding Sister Marie against him. He thought she was a knockout with a face as pretty as any movie star, and her body felt firm and curvaceous. His brain became inflamed when he realized that she was a beautiful young virgin, and that he had her alone in a cellar, and he could take her if he wanted to because she clearly was half out of her mind and wouldn't put up a fight. He hugged her and kissed her pale cheek.

She shuddered and held him tighter, for she too was sexually aroused. Normally she was able to overcome her sexual feelings—in fact, she seldom had them at all anymore—but she'd been knocked off her branch by the events of the past hour, and now her mind was tumultuous with strange thoughts. She wanted to escape from her mind and the vision of little dead Josette. She wanted to flee from the world and thought she could do so in the arms of this huge strong man holding her so firmly and kissing her so sweetly. He rolled her over onto her back and she thought yes, I don't care, the world is coming apart at the seams and I might as well come apart with it. She felt his strong muscular body and wondered if maybe, in some strange way, it could save her from the savage world.

She moved her legs apart, and Mahoney sank between them, his heart beating like a tom-tom. It's really happening, he thought excitedly, she's really going to let me do it—a nun—*wow!* And he was determined to take it as far as it would go. He put his hand down and raised her habit, running his palm along her black stockings and feeling her supple legs. She opened her mouth and he thrust his tongue inside, his head swimming with lust, and he thought holy shit, I'm going to do it to a nun!

A nun.

A wife of Jesus Christ the Savior. Mahoney went cold, as though somebody had laid him in a vat of ice cubes.

A nun—how can I do it to a nun? Mahoney wasn't much of a Catholic anymore but he still believed in God in a vague kind of way and he realized that God would put him right in the fucking broiler for this one.

Sister Marie was gasping and writhing beneath him. Mahoney raised himself up. She looked up at him wide-eyed, her lips quivering with fear and desire, and he saw that the poor kid had gone half crazy. If he didn't do the right thing she was going to be all crazy and he'd be in the broiler for eternity. It would be as hot as the furnace in that old locomotive he'd been riding in yesterday, maybe even hotter.

"Sister Marie," he said softly.

"What?"

"I think we'd better pray, Sister Marie."

"Pray?"

"Yes. You know. To God."

She thought for a moment, then remembered everything, the seven sacraments and the Apostle's Creed, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection, and Hail Mary-full-of-grace, and how she'd better grab hold of herself with all her strength while she still had a chance.

"Pray with me, Sister Marie," Mahoney said, getting onto his knees.

"Yes—yes of course," she stuttered.

She knelt in front of him, and they faced each other, holding their hands in prayer. She looked at his broad shoulders and gnarled face and wondered if he was an angel who'd shown her purgatory and then led her back again.

"Say the words, Sister Marie," he said, struggling to prevent himself from throwing her to the ground again and ravishing her. "I think I've forgotten them."

"Don't be silly—you haven't forgotten them, Sergeant Mahoney," she replied, her full composure returning. "Please say it with me."

"I'll do my best," Mahoney grumbled.

He clasped his hands together and intoned the words with her:

"Our Father, who art in heaven Hallowed be thy name..."

Chapter 37

Cranepool ran like a young leopard through the streets of Rouget, heading for the sound of the fighting. He'd eluded the SS men and now he was moving up to the front again. He was a crazy kid and remarkably naive about many things, but he knew his way around a war. Like a bloodhound he headed for the sound of explosions and gunfire. He wondered what had happened to Mahoney but was certain his old sergeant would handle himself okay. Mahoney would be back on the line even before he was. Cranepool thought Mahoney was the greatest man he'd ever met in his life, but he hadn't met General Patton and Franklin Delano Roosevelt yet.

Cranepool jumped over a fence and ran through an alley. He came to a street, looked around, and saw a battle. A group of townspeople were fighting the SS from behind barricades. Cranepool double-timed down the street and lowered his head as he drew closer. Then he dove between two Frenchmen and landed behind the barricade, slowly raising his head and peering around.

The Germans had devastated a huge area in that section of the town, and it reminded Cranepool of an enormous city dump he'd once seen on the outskirts of Davenport, Iowa. The six remaining tanks were bunched together, moving in a direction away from where he was. SS men were fighting from various vantage points within the ruined area, charging the French who fell back, regrouped, and counterattacked. Bodies of men, women, and the SS were scattered throughout the area. "What a fuckin' mess," Cranepool thought, pushing his beret more firmly on his head.

Ahead was a large group of SS men broken down into three platoons. As he watched, one of the platoons came out of the rubble and charged the barricades, the other two platoons covering them. The French ducked behind the barricades, looking at each other fearfully. They'd had no military training, and didn't know how to deal with the problem. And they couldn't fall back because there was no place to fall back to.

Cranepool realized that if he didn't take command pretty soon he'd have an SS man standing on his chest. "Hey—let's go!" he screamed. "Fix bayonets! The right flank open fire on the enemy in the trenches—the left flank open fire on the Germans coming at us! Let's go!"

The French people didn't move. They looked at each other and shrugged. They didn't know Cranepool from Adam.

Cranepool gnashed his teeth. He knew he'd have to show these people how to do it, and he'd have to set the example for them that Sergeant Mahoney usually set for him.

"Like this!" he screamed, jumping up with his submachine gun, opening fire. "Let's go!"

His first burst caught the front wave of advancing SS men and sent them flying in all directions. But the *Waffen* SS were top-flight soldiers and they kept on coming. Cranepool fired burst after burst into their midst, before the SS platoons covering the attack spotted him and took aim. Bullets whizzed all around and ricocheted off the stones in front of him, but he held his ground and kept firing. He knew from his experience in Italy that you didn't win a battle by hiding behind walls—you won it by pouring lead into the enemy and backing them down. "Let's go!" he shouted. "We can take them!"

The Frenchies looked at Cranepool and figured if he could do it and not get hit, so could they, which was exactly what he wanted them to think. As they came up from behind the barricades, the left flank began shooting at the Germans, and the right flank opened up on the advancing platoon.

The fire was withering, and the attack stopped cold. The attacking SS men took cover behind the bodies of their own dead. Cranepool ducked down behind the barricade, licked his lips, tore a grenade from his lapel, pulled the pin, and heaved it at the Germans. The grenade toppled lazily through the air and landed in the midst of the Germans. One of them picked it up and tried to throw it back, but it exploded in his hand, sending his arms and legs flying in all directions, launching his head straight up in the air. Cranepool threw another grenade, and then another. The stout Frenchman beside him threw one too, and so did another Frenchman down the line. The SS who were still alive retreated back to their two covering platoons, beyond the range of hand grenades.

If only I had one sixty-millimeter mortar, Cranepool thought, firing his submachine gun at the retreating SS men and bringing one down. I could lob a few rounds right on those bastards and wipe them all out.

As the SS men dived behind the rubble where their comrades were, a great shout of victory went up from behind the French barricades. They were commanded by a young lieutenant, who felt he needed some support. He called his captain at the other end of the field and asked for a tank, a machine gun crew, and a mortar team. He said he was facing a nasty pocket of enemy resistance, and if he could wipe it out there would be no more Frenchmen in that part of town.

The request was received by a blond SS captain named Schroeder, who was sitting with Major Richter in a command post dugout on the other side of the battlefield. Schroeder said he'd send the support over immediately, switched off, and then switched on again to effect the troop movement. When he said the word "tank," Richter's ears perked up.

"What was that you said, Captain?" Richter demanded.

"I'm sending reinforcements back that way, sir," Schroeder said, pointing in the direction of the emplacement where Cranepool was holed up with the Frenchmen.

"You're sending a *tank* back there?" Richter asked incredulously.

“Yes, sir.”

Richter became stern, which made him look ridiculous with the white bandage on his nose, and when he opened his mouth you could see the gap between his teeth. “Countermand that order!” Richter said. “I want those tanks to keep going where they’re going!”

“But sir...”

“Don’t *but* sir me—I know what I’m doing.” Richter had a vision of the tanks bursting through the walls of the church, and wouldn’t let it go. “I said countermand that order, Captain!”

Schroeder thought for a few moments, then set his jaw. “I’m afraid I can’t do that, sir.”

“What was that?” Richter screamed.

“I can’t countermand that order, sir.”

“Why not?” Richter demanded.

“Because I have three platoons pinned down over there,” Schroeder pointed, “and they need support.”

“They need support?” Richter scoffed. “Why do they need support? Are they afraid of a band of ragged Frenchmen?”

Schroeder stiffened his spine. “Don’t you dare call my men cowards!”

“Don’t you dare raise your voice to me!” Richter shrieked.

Schroeder looked at Richter and thought the major was completely mad. Richter hadn’t made a rational military decision or given a sensible order since they’d arrived in the town. Schroeder decided to reason with Major Richter, and if Richter wouldn’t wake up, Schroeder would have to shoot him and carry on himself.

“Sir,” Captain Schroeder began, “we’ve already lost six tanks and over a hundred men because we have not been proceeding strategically in this operation. We started fighting in the center of town, completely surrounded by the enemy, and we’ve been surrounded ever since. Instead of meeting all resistance head-on and wiping it out immediately, we’ve been moving in that direction,” he pointed to the church, “knocking down houses. I had to fight with you to send those three platoons to protect our rear and now I have to fight with you to support those platoons as the result of the enemy buildup to our rear. I don’t think...”

“That’s enough!” Richter shouted. “I don’t care what you think! You don’t understand what I’m trying to do here!”

“All I’m saying sir is that you’ll be able to do what you want much more easily if you let me wipe out the pockets of resistance in this town. They’re inflicting too many casualties upon us. You’ll be able to meet your objectives much more easily if you’ll just let me handle the strategic situation.”

Richter touched the bandage on his nose. “Do you really think so?”

“Absolutely, sir.”

“Very well then. Take whatever men you need, but I don’t want you to take the tanks.”

“But the tanks will be crucial, sir.”

“I think they’re on a crucial mission right now,” Richter retorted. “Are you saying that disciplined battle-hardened SS men can’t defeat French rabble without the aid of tanks?”

Schroeder hesitated for a few moments. "Tanks are very useful, sir."

"I know they're useful. That's why I'm deploying them the way I'm deploying them. The tanks stay where they are. Is that clear?"

To avoid a serious confrontation with Major Richter, Schroeder decided to try and deal with the problem with men and heavy weapons. He pressed the button on his field radio and countermanded the order regarding the tank, but left the rest of the strategy intact.

Meanwhile, behind the barricades, Cranepool and the French were rejoicing. Someone found a bottle of wine and they were passing it back and forth. Cranepool had rallied them and given them a taste of victory, and now they were ready to fight harder. He had seen Mahoney do the same thing many times, and now he'd done it himself. He was proud.

The stout man beside Cranepool handed over the bottle of wine, and Cranepool took a swig.

"*Vive L'Amérique!*" the stout man said.

"*Vive La France!*" Cranepool replied.

The Frenchman slapped Cranepool on the shoulder. "You're a fine fellow—I can see that!"

"So are you!"

"Let's drink to that!"

"Good idea!"

They passed the wine bottle back and forth; then the man on the other side of Cranepool requested it politely, and Cranepool handed it over. The stout Frenchman held out his hand.

"What's your name?" he asked Cranepool.

"Just call me Cranepool," the young corporal answered, shaking the stout man's hand. "What's your name?"

"Jacques."

"Hello, Jacques."

"Hello, Cranepool."

Jacques looked at him. "You're a helluva guy, you know that?"

"I am?"

"I was looking at you when you stuck your head up and started firing your gun. It took real courage to do that. The bullets were flying all around you, and you didn't give an inch. You've got a lot of guts, young man."

"Well," Cranepool said modestly, "sometimes you've got to do what you've got to do."

"Where are you from in America?" Jacques asked.

"A little town in the Midwest. I'm sure you've never heard of it. It's even smaller than this town."

Jacques dug his elbow into Cranepool's ribs and winked. "I bet you've got a girl waiting for you back there, eh?"

Cranepool shook his head. "As a matter of fact, I don't. I had one, but she married somebody else."

Jacques looked sad. "Ah, what a pity, Cranepool. A fine young man like you. But some women are like snakes you know. Some women can't be trusted."

"I guess that's true, Jacques, but some of them are okay."

“Don’t worry,” Jacques said, patting him on the shoulder. “I’m sure you’ll find another one.”

“I already have,” Cranepool said happily.

“Already?”

“Yes—a French girl. She’s fabulous.”

“What’s her name?”

“Louise.”

“Ah—no kidding!” Jacques said. “Louise is my wife’s name!”

“What a coincidence!”

“What’s her last name?” Jacques asked.

Cranepool wrinkled his brow. “You know—I never asked her!”

Jacques laughed heartily. “In wartime everything is confused, I suppose.”

“But she gave me a picture of herself,” Cranepool said, reaching inside his jacket.

“Let me see it.”

Cranepool handed the wrinkled old photograph to Jacques, who took one look and nearly collapsed. He was staring at a photograph of his wife!

Cranepool however, didn’t catch his reaction because he’d turned around to see what was happening with the SS men. Figures were running across the rubble, apparently reinforcements for the SS men who’d launched the previous attack. As they came closer Cranepool perceived that they comprised a machine gun crew, a motor squad, and a rifle squad.

“Oh-oh,” Cranepool said. “We’d better get the fuck out of here.” He looked quickly to his right and left. “Get ready to fall back!” he shouted. “The Krauts are bringing up heavy weapons!”

Cranepool checked over his equipment and tried to plan a reasonable path of retreat. So preoccupied with this was he that he didn’t notice Jacques next to him, staring at the photograph, his face white as a sheet. Jacques’s heart was pounding and there was a terrible roaring in his ears. His beloved little Louise was unfaithful to him, and the pain was nearly unbearable. He turned the photograph over and read the inscription:

*To my darling Cranepool
With all my love forever
Louise*

“Mind if I take that back?” Cranepool asked, snatching it out of Jacques’s fingers.

“Sure,” Jacques said weakly, seeing the photograph disappear.

“Get ready to move out.”

Cranepool moved back and forth behind the barricade, giving orders, checking equipment, and taking command. Jacques watched him through heavy lidded eyes and thought of killing him, but Cranepool was so young, so good-looking, so brave, and so vital, that he couldn’t do it. His heart wrenched as he realized that it was reasonable for Louise to fall in love with such a young man, in preference to the old elephant he’d become. Louise was still young, and he shouldn’t have married someone so much younger than he, though he had been madly in love

with her, and still was. He pictured her naked in the arms of Cranepool, doing all the things she'd done with him when they'd first been married, and almost keeled over from the pain.

"Hey Jacques—whatsa matter?" Cranepool said.

"Nothing."

"You don't have your stuff together yet. Come on—let's go—we're pulling out!"

Cranepool moved away. Jacques's head felt as though it was filling with hot tar. A tear rolled down his right cheek, and he grabbed his rifle in his right hand. Looking around, he saw the others waiting for Cranepool's signal to move out. He stood up and climbed over the barricade, and then began to run, screaming at the top of his lungs, toward the Germans.

Cranepool saw the movement in the corner of his eye and looked at him going. "Hey!"

Jacques howled in misery as he ran toward the Germans, his rifle in his right hand. They opened fire on him and sent him spinning backwards, his blood squirting spirals all around him, as he went down in a gory heap.

Cranepool blinked. He couldn't believe his eyes! One moment he'd been talking to the guy, and the next moment he was dead. I wonder what the fuck was the matter with him, Cranepool thought.

"Are we ready to move out?" somebody asked.

"In twos just the way I told you," Cranepool shouted, "*move out!*"

The tiny group pulled back to another line of rubble, and then disappeared behind a row of houses before the machine gun and mortar squads had time to set up.

Chapter 38

Mahoney was high up in the steeple of the church, standing behind the bell, viewing the battle through binoculars. A huge area about five hundred yards in diameter was leveled in the center of town, and from his vantage point he could see what the enemy's plan of battle was. The SS were headed toward the church. That's the way their tanks, and most of their men, were facing. Mahoney couldn't understand what military significance this part of town had, unless the SS knew that the church had become the base of operations for the defense.

He frowned, looking back and forth at the enemy line. The situation was deteriorating rapidly. The bazooka crews had been already knocked out of action, most of the hand grenades were gone, and the regular ammunition was running low. There weren't enough townspeople to maintain a stable battle line against the SS, and their guerilla actions weren't sufficient to defeat the Germans. Most of the town's occupants who hadn't been killed had already fled, leaving behind only the hardcore patriots and Resistance fighters, who couldn't get away now because the SS was pressing them too closely.

Mahoney knew he could get away. He could take Cranepool and his people from St. Pierre—those who were left of the original combat team—and move them out, leaving the citizens of the town to defend themselves, but he couldn't bring himself

to do that. Am I going to die defending a town I never heard of before in my fucking life? he wondered.

There was no good reason, moral or military, why he should fight for the damned town, but somehow he couldn't bring himself to tuck in his tail and run away.

"Aw shit," he mumbled, descending the spiral staircase into the church. The sick and wounded were cramped side by side in the pews and on the floor. Doctor Lambert went from one to the other, tying bandages made of torn sheets, offering encouragement in place of medicine he didn't have. Father Henri administered last rites to the dying and Sister Marie helped Sister Nathalie in caring for the sick.

Mahoney wandered through the church, his submachine gun slung over his shoulder, a cigar sticking out of his mouth, trying to figure out how to hold off the Germans. Somehow they had to knock out the remaining six tanks, but there seemed to be no reasonable way to do that. He had no artillery or anti-tank weapons, and no explosives whatever, except for the few remaining hand grenades. He didn't even have gasoline for Molotov Cocktails. The situation looked grim. I'm gonna die in this little fuckin' jerk town, he thought.

The front door of the church flung open, and Cranepool entered at the head of his little band of fighters. The kid was smiling and looking proud as he strutted up to Mahoney. "Hi, Sarge."

"Where the fuck have you been, asshole?"

"On the other side of town. We had us a little war going on, but it got too hot and we had to get out."

"It's gonna get pretty hot here too in a little while."

"We can hold em, Sarge," Cranepool said confidently.

"I'm glad you think so."

"I gotta go downstairs and get some more ammo. I'll be right back, okay?"

"Don't take too long, because I might need you for something."

"I told you I'd be right back."

"Yeah, but for you *right back* could mean next Tuesday, asshole."

"I'll be back in five minutes."

"We'll see." Mahoney looked at his watches.

Cranepool walked away cockily and approached the altar. The hidden door was wide open now, and he went down the stairs to the basement, where he found more of the wounded. He knew many had died already, but he wasn't going to let that get him down. He believed that high morale could win battles, and he wasn't going to let his drop one bit. Besides, Sergeant Mahoney had been looking a little mournful up there, and Cranepool would have to help his old buddy see the sunny side of the situation. Cranepool didn't realize there was no sunny side to the situation.

Entering the hallway where the arms and ammunition had been stored, Cranepool saw that there were no grenades left, and only a half crate of ammunition.

He heard footsteps and turned to see Louise entering the tunnel. "I heard you'd come down here," she said. "I've missed you so much!"

They enveloped each other in their arms, kissing passionately, hugging feverishly. She lay her head on his chest.

"I'm so glad you're all right," she said.

"Shit—nothing'll ever happen to me," he replied. "Sergeant Mahoney said I lead a charmed life, but I was afraid something might have happened to you."

She looked up into his eyes. "Were you really thinking about me?"

"Yes."

She rested her head on his chest. "I'm so glad. I've been thinking of you every moment. I've never been so much in love in my life."

"Neither have I," Cranepool said. "I thought I was in love before, but it's never been like this."

"Ah, what a shame, *cheri*, that we love each other so much, and that we shall be dead soon."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"The Boche outnumber us and they have tanks. We're running low on ammunition, and we won't be able to stop them."

"Sure we can," Cranepool said confidently. "Something will happen—you'll see."

"But what could happen, *cheri*?"

"Something will come up."

She kissed the button of his shirt. "If we die, at least we'll die together."

"We're not going to die. Stop talking that way."

She looked up into his eyes. "Wouldn't you like to die with me, *cheri*?"

"If I had to die, I'd rather die with you than anyone else, except maybe Sergeant Mahoney."

She wrinkled her nose. "Sergeant Mahoney? I can't imagine why you think so highly of him. He's such a swine—no manners or refinement at all. And he's so cruel to you—I don't know how you can put up with him."

Cranepool grinned. "Sergeant Mahoney and me have been through a lot together."

"I don't envy you that."

"He's really a great guy; you just don't know him as well as I do. He's the best soldier I've ever seen in my life, and I've seen a lot of them. He's a tough son-of-a-bitch, that Mahoney."

She frowned. "I think you love that filthy pig more than you love me."

"He ain't no filthy pig. You just don't appreciate old Sergeant Mahoney."

"He treats Odette like a dishrag. It's disgusting."

"He has a strange way of dealing with women, I admit."

"He's an animal!" she said with vehemence.

"You just don't understand him, Louise."

She pushed him away and looked coldly at him. "Yes, I do think you love him more than you love me."

"I don't love him," Cranepool said, holding out the palms of his hands, "but I like him. He's my sergeant."

"I'll bet you and he go to bed together, like queers."

"Now wait a minute..."

"I wouldn't be surprised—I know you love him more than you love me."

"That's not true," Cranepool protested. "I love you more than anybody."

"Hah!"

"I do."

"I don't believe you," she said, crossing her arms and raising her chin in the air.

"I really do love you," he said sincerely, "and in fact, at the barricades I was showing everybody your picture."

"You were?" she smiled a little.

"Yes."

"What did they say?"

"They said you were very pretty."

"You're just making that up."

"No, I'm not."

"I don't believe you," she said.

"But it's true!" he insisted. Then a strange memory fluttered into his mind. "You know, something very weird happened up there on the barricades."

"What was that, *cheri*?"

"There was this guy who climbed up over the barricades and ran straight at the Germans for no reason at all. It was as though he'd gone crazy or something. They shot him down, and you know, I think that's what he wanted to happen."

"That is strange," she agreed.

"Yeah, I can't stop thinking about it."

"Did you get his name?"

"He told me his name was Jacques, but I didn't get his last name."

A sudden chill passed over her. "Jacques, you say?"

"Yes."

"What did he look like?"

"He was a big fat guy, around forty-five years old. It was the strangest damn thing, because he'd seemed so normal to me. We'd had some wine and I showed him the picture of you, and then, when I was trying to figure out a way to pull back from the position, suddenly this guy is up and over the barricades, running at the Germans and screaming at the top of his lungs."

Louise clasped her hands to her face and began to shriek.

"Hey—whatsa matter!" He reached out to touch her.

"Get away from me!"

"What'd I do?" Cranepool asked, bewildered.

Louise leaned against the wall and sobbed loudly. "Oh my God!" she wailed.

"Have you gone nuts, Louise?"

"Oh, my God!"

Mahoney stuck his head into the tunnel. "What's goin' on here?"

Cranepool shrugged. "I don't know!"

Mahoney looked at Louise. "What'd you do to her?"

"I didn't do anything to her."

"Then why's she cryin'?"

"I don't know why she's cryin'!"

"Did you hit her?"

"Of course I didn't hit her!"

"Then why's she cryin'?"

"I told you I don't know!"

"You musta done something."

"I didn't do anything!"

Mahoney pointed his forefinger at Cranepool. "Your problem, asshole, is that you don't know how to handle women."

"But I didn't do anything!"

"You must've done something—you're just too stupid to know what it is."

Louise removed her hands from her face, looked at both of them, shrieked, and ran from the tunnel.

Mahoney shook his head. "Crazy fuckin' broads."

Cranepool started to run after her, but Mahoney grabbed him by the shirt and stopped him cold. "Where you goin' asshole?"

"I've got to talk to her!" Cranepool yelled, squirming and trying to get away.

Just then there was a terrific explosion and the entire church shook. Cranepool and Mahoney dropped to the floor of the tunnel and looked around.

"Oh-oh," Mahoney said. "They've come within range of the church."

"What are we gonna do, Sarge?" Cranepool asked as a stream of dirt fell from a crack in the ceiling.

"There ain't a fuckin' thing we can do."

"There must be something, Sarge."

"There ain't. I already thought the whole thing through. We're stuck here. But you can leave if you want to."

"Are you leaving?"

"No."

"Then I'm not leaving either."

There was a commotion in the outer room. The wounded were being carried down the stairs to the basement to get away from the bombardment. Another shell hit the building with a big boom, and it shook again.

"Those fuckin' tanks," Mahoney said through his teeth.

Father Henri and Leduc came down the stairs.

"They're shelling the church!" Father Henri said excitedly.

"It looks that way," Mahoney agreed.

"Can't you do anything?"

Mahoney shrugged. "I'm afraid not."

"But they'll destroy the church!"

"It'll be worse when they get closer." Mahoney held Father Henri by the shoulders. "I think you'd better prepare everybody for a very serious situation."

"A serious situation...?"

"The most serious, if you know what I mean."

Father Henri's jaw dropped open. It finally occurred to him that Mahoney was referring to their total annihilation.

Leduc stepped forward. "Perhaps we can stop the tanks with hand grenades."

"We won't be able to get that close. The tanks are fitted with machine guns and supported by infantry."

"Maybe we can hit them on the flanks."

"You can kill some infantry that way, but you won't be able to get within throwing distance of the tanks."

A shell missed the church and landed in the graveyard beside it, sending headstones and old bones flying into the air.

Mahoney looked at Leduc. "When they get closer, they're going to blow this building down."

"We can't let them get any closer!"

"We can't?" Mahoney asked. "How're we gonna stop them?"

Leduc pinched his lips together and shook his head. "I don't know."

They all looked at each other solemnly. The end was in sight. When those tanks rolled closer they could fire at the church at pointblank range; it was only a matter of time.

Mahoney didn't know whether to stage a last futile attack on the German position, or organize a last futile defense of the church. He looked at Sister Marie bending over a wounded boy no more than thirteen years old. We're all going to be dead soon, Mahoney thought, unable to imagine that the sun would rise tomorrow and he wouldn't be around to see it. He wondered where Odette was. There were a few things he wanted to apologize to her about.

"Sergeant Mahoney," said Father Henri, "did you say you might be able to stop the tanks if you could get close enough to them to throw hand grenades?"

"It would be a possibility if we could get close to them, but we can't get close to them."

"There might be a way," Father Henri said, pointing his index finger into the air.

"What do you mean?"

"That tunnel there."

Mahoney looked at it. "What about it?"

"It's an escape tunnel we dug long ago when the war first began. We thought we might need it sometime to escape from this hideout."

"Where does it go?"

"It goes to a basement of a house in the general direction of where the Germans are."

Mahoney grabbed Father Henri by the arm. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"How long would you say the tunnel is?"

"A couple of hundred meters at least."

Mahoney closed his eyes and tried to think. If the tunnel was two hundred meters long, it might lead right to the middle of the German position. All the houses in that area were knocked down, but perhaps they could somehow break through to the surface and knock out those tanks. It wasn't much of a chance, but it was the only chance they had.

He looked at Leduc. "Get me ten good men and all the hand grenades you can find. Hurry, we don't have much time."

"Yes, *Perroquet*."

Mahoney turned to Cranepool. "You go help him."

Leduc and Cranepool ran off up the stairs to the main floor of the church. Mahoney looked at Father Henri. "I think you'd better pray for us."

"Oh I will—right now. Sister Nathalie and Sister Marie will help, too."

Father Henri walked away quickly and gathered together Sister Nathalie and Sister Marie. Mahoney knew the prayer wouldn't mean a damn thing but at least it would keep those three out of trouble. Doctor Lambert came close, kneeling beside a patient on the floor.

“How’s it going, Doc?”

Doctor Lambert shook his head sadly.

“Yeah, I know how you feel.”

Mahoney took out a new cigar and lit it up. Well, he thought, I guess this is gonna be it. We’re either gonna stop those tanks or we’re gonna be rat food.

This is probably gonna be my last cigar, he thought as he blew smoke into the air.

Leduc and Cranepool returned with ten men and handfuls of hand grenades.

“Put the grenades on the ground,” he told them.

They did and he counted nineteen hand grenades. He divided them into four piles. “Okay,” he said, “Leduc, Cranepool, me, and you,” he pointed to one of the Frenchmen, “will take these grenades, and when we come up out of the hole we’ll run to the tanks and try to throw the grenades into the treads. If the hatches are open, try to drop the grenades inside. The rest of you will try to cover us. Any questions?”

Nobody said anything. They stood stolidly; they knew what the odds were. They also knew they were the best odds they could get.

“Everybody got enough ammo?” Mahoney asked.

They all nodded.

“Anybody got a flashlight?”

Leduc took one out of his shirt.

“Let’s get this show on the road.”

They moved into the tunnel, Mahoney and Leduc in front. It was long, winding, and dark, and smelled like decay. Shells burst above them, shaking loose dirt from the ceiling which fell onto their berets and shoulders. Mahoney hoped the tunnel was long enough to put them deep into the German position. He’d hate to come up out of the ground and find himself looking down the barrel of a cannon on a Panther tank. Looking at the dirt walls, he wondered if he’d soon be in his grave. Well, he thought, I’ve lived a pretty good life, I think.

They came to the end of the tunnel. There was a trap door on the ceiling a foot above Mahoney’s head. He reached up and pushed it, but it wouldn’t budge. He pushed harder, and it moved a little.

“There must be a lot of rubble on top of this trap door,” he said. “We’ll have to blow it away. I’ll need one hand grenade from every man.”

Leduc, Cranepool, and the Frenchman each handed him a grenade, and he pulled one from his own lapel. He took off his favorite leather jacket, tied its arms to the latch on the trap door, and fastened the four hand grenades to it. Then he stuffed his other grenades into the pale blue cotton shirt he was wearing. He slung his submachine gun and bandoliers of ammunition over his shoulder and loosened the pin on one of the hand grenades on his leather jacket.

“Okay,” he said. “The rest of you go around that corner down there and get down. I’ll pull this pin and then run as far as I can.”

“You’ll only have four to six seconds,” Cranepool said.

“You think I don’t know that, asshole?”

Leduc reached into his shirt. “I have some string,” he said.

“You’re a good man, Leduc,” Mahoney said, taking the ball of string.

Mahoney tied the string to the pin of one of the grenades on his jacket, and then they all backed up in the tunnel until they were around a bend. Mahoney held the string in his hand and looked around the bend at his favorite leather jacket hanging from the trap door. He thought he'd never find another jacket like that one but in a little while he'd probably be someplace where he needn't need a leather jacket at all.

He turned to the others. "As soon as I pull the cord, it's up and out of this tunnel. I'll go first, Cranepool will be second, and Leduc third. I want you to come up out of that hole firing your weapons and fighting like wildcats. Those of you with grenades should head straight for the tanks and plant them fast before anybody knows what's going on. Any questions?"

Nobody said anything. They all knew it was a suicide mission with little hope of success, but they had no alternatives left. It was a basic matter of do or die.

"Okay," Mahoney said. "Get ready."

They got down on the dirt floor. Mahoney pulled the string, then jammed his fingers into his ears. The seconds passed like days, and then there was a huge explosion. The tunnel shook and dirt poured through cracks in the ceiling as a cloud of smoke and dust swirled back at them.

Mahoney carried his submachine gun in one hand and ran through the smoke to the light that streaked through the hole where the trap door had been. Chewing his cigar, he braced himself and leapt up to the hole, grabbing the edges and pulling himself out. He grabbed the submachine gun, looked up, and found himself staring at the barrel of a cannon of a tank only thirty yards in front of him! That tank was flanked by the five other tanks the SS had left, and Mahoney realized with horror that he'd come up in the worst possible place—

directly in front of the advancing tanks and troops.

"Get back!" he shouted into the hole.

But Cranepool was already climbing out. Leduc, who was next, took one look and ducked his head. Bullets began to whiz like angry gnats around Mahoney and Cranepool.

"Let's get the fuck out of here!" Mahoney screamed.

He turned around and ran in a zigzag pattern toward the church. The machine guns, mounted on the tanks, fired at them; the tanks aimed their cannons at them. The SS troops fired, and Mahoney knew he was going to die. "Oh Lord," he said, "if you get me out of this one I'll go to Mass every Sunday and I'll stop fornicating for evermore."

Ahead of him were some houses, and beyond them he could see the stone wall that surrounded the church. The air was filled with a hail of death and then his right leg exploded and he toppled head over heels to the ground.

They got me, he thought, writhing on the ground. He looked down and his thigh was a mass of blood and torn flesh. He rolled over onto his stomach, grabbed his submachine gun, and fired at the tanks even though he knew it would do no good. He realized that he'd come to the end of the line.

Cranepool dropped to the ground beside him. "You all right, Sarge?"

"Make a break for it back to the church, Cranepool. I'll try to cover you."

They were lying behind a small pile of rubble.

Cranepool looked over it and saw a patrol of SS men advancing. He raised his submachine gun and fired at them until his clip was empty. They scattered, dropped to the ground, or fell back. Cranepool jammed a new clip into his submachine gun.

“Cranepool!” Mahoney said. “I told you to get the fuck out of here!”

“I’m takin’ you back with me, Sarge.”

“You’ll never make it with me! I said get the fuck out of here! That’s an order!”

Cranepool gritted his teeth as bullets whizzed all around them. A German threw a hand grenade, which exploded ten yards away from Mahoney and Cranepool, causing a rain of battlefield debris to fall down upon them. One of the tanks fired its cannon, but the round fell far behind them.

“I said get out of here!” Mahoney said.

“I’m not leavin’ without you, Sarge,” Cranepool answered.

“That was an order, goddamn you!”

“You’re wounded and you don’t know what you’re saying.”

“I’ll court-martial you, you son-of-a-bitch!”

“Shut up, Sarge. I’m tryin’ to think.”

But Cranepool really didn’t have much to think about. He had to get them out of the deathtrap they were in, but first he’d have to create some kind of diversion. He pulled all the hand grenades off his shirt, loosened all the pins, and laid them on the ground in front of him.

“What do you think you’re doing, asshole!”

“Keep your head down, Sarge.”

Cranepool raised himself a bit and hurled the grenades two by two as fast as he could. Then he hugged the ground as it shuddered with the violent explosions.

“Let’s go Sarge!” Cranepool yelled after the last grenade went off.

In front of him the air was thick with dust and smoke from the explosions. Cranepool picked up Mahoney, draped him over his shoulder, and began to run toward the houses. His legs were unsteady, because Mahoney weighed two hundred and forty pounds, but Cranepool was a strong young man who’d been doing hard work on a farm all his life.

“You fuckin’ asshole!” Mahoney yelled. “Let me down!”

Germans shouted orders and fired at the figures fleeing through the dust and smoke. Bullets of all types sliced the air around them, and Mahoney was sure he’d get one of them right up his ass.

Cranepool jumped over a stone wall about three feet high in front of one of the houses, falling to the ground and bringing Mahoney down with him. A group of Resistance fighters behind the fence were making their last stand. Cranepool rolled Mahoney onto his back and looked at the leg.

“How’re you feelin’, Sarge?”

“What a fuckin’ asshole you turned out to be!”

“I’ll put a bandage on it.”

“That was the dumbest thing I ever saw in my life!”

While Mahoney fulminated, Cranepool took out his field dressing, tore off the wrapping, and covered Mahoney’s wound with it. The wound was big and messy, but it was coagulating.

“You’ll be all right, Sarge,” Cranepool said as he tied on the bandage.

“You fuckin’ asshole.”

Cranepool finished tying the bandage, then looked over the stone wall. The SS tanks and troops were massed in front of them, and it looked as though they were preparing to make a final assault on the French positions. Cranepool looked behind him. There were only a scattering of houses, and then the church. It looked like the battle was just about over.

Mahoney raised himself up and looked at the Germans, his cigar still clamped in his mouth. He quickly reached the same conclusion. The Germans would overrun them soon, and they couldn’t retreat because there was no place to go. He looked to his sides and saw the Resistance fighters firing volley after volley at the Germans. They were caught up in the heat of the battle, trying not to think of their prospects for survival.

Mahoney raised his submachine gun and tucked it into his shoulder. He took aim and fired a burst at the German position. What the fuck, he thought, nobody lives forever and I guess my number is coming up.

Cranepool, however, thought of no such thing. As he fired his submachine gun, he thought that somehow he and Mahoney would be saved. He had no rational basis whatever for thinking that, but the kid was simply optimistic most of the time, regardless of the gravity of the situation.

Then the tanks began to rumble forward, with the SS infantry in close support. The Germans were making their final push.

Chapter 39

Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's villa in Ulm was filled with flowers, for it was the morning of his wife's birthday. The gifts were stacked on the drawing room table, and Rommel, in his red striped bathrobe and slippers, watched his wife open the box containing the shoes he'd bought in Paris.

His wife's name was Lucie, and when he married her she'd been a dancer. She had black hair and mysterious eyes set in a square face that was attractive in a peculiar, masculine way. She took one of the shoes out of the box and said *EEK* with delight, for they were shiny and black, with an open toe in front and a strap in back, the very latest fashion from Paris, just what she needed.

She placed one shoe on the floor, bent over, and slid her foot into it, but it wouldn't go. "Oh Erwin," she wailed, "the shoe doesn't fit!"

"It doesn't fit?" he asked. "But you sent me an outline of your foot, and I showed it to the shoe salesman. He said it was your size."

"It's not!" She kicked the shoe off again and pouted. "The salesman cheated you! He sold you the wrong size!"

As Rommel rushed forward to comfort Lucie, there was a knock on the door.

"Come in," he said.

His housemaid Karolina entered the room. "Herr Feldmarschall Rommel is wanted on the telephone," she said.

Rommel walked through the sliding door to the phone in the smoking room, thinking that it probably was Hitler's adjutant calling from Berchtesgaden to notify Rommel that the Fuehrer would see him that afternoon.

"Rommel here," he said, picking up the phone.

"This is General Speidel," said the voice at the other end, "and I'm afraid I have bad news, sir. The enemy invasion has begun."

A shiver passed up Rommel's spine, and he gripped the phone more tightly.

"The invasion has begun? How? When? Where?"

"Well," Speidel said, "the picture isn't completely clear..."

"*Where!*" screamed Rommel.

"Well sir, it appears that there have been seaborne landings at various points between Caen and Cherbourg, and airborne landings also in that same area."

Rommel was surprised. He had thought that when the invasion came, it would take place in the 15th Army Sector near Calais. "*When?*"

"We've been receiving reports since one-thirty this morning, sir."

"Why wasn't I notified?"

"We didn't want to disturb you, sir, until we knew the enemy's intentions."

Rommel closed his eyes. He didn't think the Allies would launch their invasion at low tide, but they had. They had outsmarted him and he wasn't even there to do anything about it.

"Speidel," Rommel said calmly, struggling to keep his emotions under control, "what have you done so far?"

"We have offered resistance to the enemy, sir, and have been trying to discover where his main thrust will come."

"Have you sent in the Panzers yet?"

"No sir."

"*Why not?*"

"Because these landings might be a feint."

"They may be, but they may not be. Now listen to me carefully, Speidel. We've got to stop them on the beaches before they become too firmly entrenched. Therefore I want you to rush all units in your command to those beaches immediately. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Also, I want you to make immediate arrangements for men and equipment throughout France to be brought up to the coast today, and especially to the area where the landings already have taken place. Do you think you can handle that?"

"Well, there's been a problem, sir," Speidel said.

"What kind of problem?"

"We'll have difficulty moving men and equipment in by rail, which is the most effective method, because I've received a report that the rail line in this sector has been sabotaged."

"Call the engineers and have it fixed, you fool!"

"I've already conferred with them, and they said it might take a month to get the line running again."

"A month!" growled Rommel.

"Yes sir, there's been quite extensive damage to a tunnel near the town of Vernisset."

Rommel ground his teeth together. ‘Then you’ll have to scour your area for units that can be brought up to the line immediately. I don’t care how small the units are or what they’re doing—I want them moved to the beaches at once! Is that clear?’

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m leaving immediately for France. Try to hold things together until I get there, will you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And remember, the principle to follow is to attack and attack again, is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“That is all,” Rommel said. “Carry out your orders.”

“Yes, sir.”

Rommel slammed down the receiver and thought that everything that could possibly go wrong had in fact gone wrong. His command had been taken by surprise; he himself had not been at his post; no one had ever taken bold or imaginative action in his place; and he couldn’t even rush massive reinforcements to the beaches because the rail line was sabotaged. The Fuehrer would not be happy when he found out about all that.

Rommel rushed back to the drawing room, where Lucie was opening her birthday packages. She saw the flush in his cheeks and excitement in his eyes. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I must return to the front immediately. The Allies have launched their invasion at last.”

She frowned but didn’t say anything, because she’d been married to him since 1916 and was accustomed to dramatic changes in plans brought about by military necessity. He kissed her and said he was sorry. She told him she understood.

Rommel ran upstairs to put on his uniform and prepare to leave for the front. He hoped he would get there before it was too late.

Chapter 40

Major Richter stood with his hands on his hips, watching his tanks and SS men advance. He knew that there weren’t many guerillas left and their ammunition must be running low. He’d roll his tanks right over them and grind their bones into the dirt; then he’d destroy that church and the rest of the town. It would be a lesson to all the citizens in the area that they should never harbor terrorists.

Richter took his hands off his hips and rubbed his palms together. Perhaps he could take a few prisoners and torture them, thereby gaining significant new information. He took out a cigarette and lit it, blowing smoke out the side of his mouth. His tanks and men were advancing steadily toward a stone fence, behind which some terrorists were attempting to fire back and stop them. But nothing can stop the mighty SS, Richter thought.

The door opened to the limousine hidden safely behind a wall which was still standing. Grunwald came running out and rapidly crossed the twenty yards separating he and Major Richter.

“Sir!” Grunwald said. “You’re wanted on the radio!”

Richter turned and marched back to the limousine. He dropped into the front seat and picked up the microphone. “Major Richter speaking,” he said.

“This is Colonel Spengle,” said a voice coming from the dashboard. “Where are you Richter?”

“In the town of Rouget, sir. However we should be finished here within two or three hours and then we’ll move on to the next town.”

“I’m now giving you new orders, Major. You are to move immediately to the town of La Madeleine, and once there you are to seek out the enemy and destroy him, for the Allied armies are storming the Atlantic Wall even as I speak!”

Richter’s jaw dropped. “What!”

“You heard me. Get moving. Are there any questions?”

Richter blinked. “The Allies are storming the Atlantic Wall...” he said in a daze.

“That’s correct, Richter. Move out immediately. Once again—are there any questions?”

Richter looked at the steeple of the church of Rouget. “But sir—we’re not quite finished here...”

“Forget about what you’re doing there, you idiot! The whole disposition of this war has been changed drastically—can’t you see that? Move out, I said!”

“But sir...”

Spengle made his voice as deadly as the blade of the SS dagger he wore at his waist. “Richter, if you don’t move out immediately, I’ll have you shot. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Are you sure?”

Richter closed his eyes. “Yes, sir.”

“I don’t want you to spend one more minute in that town, under penalty of death. Now move out!”

“Yes, sir.”

Richter hung up the telephone, his heart pumping black sludge through his body. He looked at the church steeple. They were so close, but orders were orders, and he’d never disobeyed an order in his life. Puffing his cigarette, he got out of the limousine and raised his arm to call to Grunwald, who came running over.

“Yes, sir?”

“Tell Captain Schroeder to report to me immediately.”

“Yes, sir.”

As Grunwald ran toward the tanks and men, Richter looked at the ground and kicked a stone that was in his path. Well, there’ll be other days, he thought. We’ll defeat the Allies in the west and then I’ll come back here and finish off this town once and for all.

Grunwald and Schroeder ran toward him from the direction of the fighting. “Captain Schroeder,” Richter said in a low voice that cracked as he spoke, “order your men to fall back and get into formation, because we must leave immediately for the town of La Madeleine. The Allies have attacked the Atlantic Wall.”

Captain Schroeder didn't bat an eyelash. "Yes, sir."

Captain Schroeder ran back to his tanks to pass along the order, and Major Richter sat heavily in his limousine, looking at the swastika on the dashboard. We'll push them back into the sea, he thought, because if we don't... well, it is totally unthinkable and completely unacceptable that we would not stop them... if we fail we'll probably lose the war, and we cannot lose the war.

Richter looked in the direction of the fighting. The tanks were already pulling back. This is only a temporary setback, Richter thought. With Adolf Hitler as our Fuehrer, victory will be ours in the end.

Chapter 41

"They're pulling back!" Cranepool shouted.

Mahoney looked down the sights of his submachine gun and noticed that they were indeed pulling back. He'd been firing his gun like a madman, expecting an artillery shell from a tank to blow him to shreds at any moment, and now the tanks were retreating. What the hell was going on out there?

Cranepool threw his hat in the air and cheered. The Frenchmen behind the wall waved their rifles and fists and shouted for joy.

"Stay alert!" Mahoney warned them. "They might be regrouping for another attack!"

Cranepool and the French fighters realized that probably was true, and settled down again, watching the movements of the tanks and SS men. They were pulling back and the trucks moved forward to meet them. The tanks formed a column pointing west. If Mahoney didn't know any better, he'd think they were going to leave town. As they moved back, some of them kept firing to prevent the guerillas from attacking.

The scene shimmered before Mahoney's feverish eyes. His leg was aching and he wanted to go to sleep, but he struggled to remain conscious. He was sure that this was some kind of trick, and yet he could see the SS men loading onto their trucks. Then the procession began to move slowly west. The six tanks were in front; behind them was a long black Mercedes-Benz limousine. Whoever their commander is, he sure travels in style, Mahoney thought. Then the rear guard raised their guns and ran to their trucks, which were formed in a column behind the Mercedes-Benz. They jumped up and were helped in by their comrades. The convoy gathered speed and moved out of town.

Behind the stone wall, the French were jumping up and down and hugging each other. Mahoney looked at the departing convoy and couldn't believe his eyes. Why were they leaving when they had victory within their grasp? It didn't make sense.

The people from the church poured outside, cheering and dancing. A group of them began to sing the *Marseillaise*. Mahoney looked at the church and saw the huge gaping holes in the walls. It couldn't have lasted much longer, but now the Germans were far down the road, and you could barely see them through the cloud of dust they'd raised. Mahoney closed his eyes and went limp. He thought he might be dying. He opened his eyes and saw Cranepool bending over him.

"I'll get the doc," Cranepool said.

The young corporal loped into the church, and Mahoney chewed the cigar in his mouth. It had gone out, so with unsteady hands he took out his matches and relit it. He took a puff, which made him feel better. He looked down at his leg, wondering how badly he was hurt. If the bullet had landed a few inches to the left it would have hit him right in the balls, and that would have been worse.

Cranepool led Doctor Lambert out of the church and pointed to Mahoney lying against the wall. The doctor rushed over with his black bag and knelt beside him, examining the wound as Cranepool paced back and forth nearby like an expectant father.

"It doesn't look serious," Lambert said. "I'll have to take the bullet out, but that should be no problem." He looked up at Cranepool. "Help me carry him inside, will you?"

Cranepool called some Frenchmen over, and together they carried Mahoney into the church, laying him on a pew. Father Henri came over to see how he was and congratulate him for his leadership in the defense of the town. Leduc shook his hand. Odette wandered over and wrinkled her nose.

"Too bad they missed," she said, then smiled, bent over and kissed him.

Mahoney puffed his cigar, his arms crossed on his chest. Things were looking up. A few minutes ago he was sure he was going to die, and now everything was okay. People were treating him like a hero. Maybe somebody could get him some brandy.

He reached out to grab Cranepool's sleeve, when somebody shouted: "Hey—listen to this!"

It was a young Frenchman a few pews away, listening to a radio. He turned up the volume, and Mahoney heard the announcer's voice:

"Under the command of General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Allied naval forces supported by strong air forces began landing Allied armies this morning on the coast of France..."

"Well, whataya know about that," Mahoney, puffing his cigar, said with a smile of satisfaction. "Hey Cranepool, see if you can get me a bottle of brandy from someplace, will you?"

"Sure thing, Sarge."

Cranepool moved toward the cellar, and Mahoney blew smoke into the air as he listened to the radio broadcast. It sounded as though the troops had landed safely and were moving inland without too much trouble. That meant the Krauts were on the run, and Mahoney would soon be in Paris.

Now he had something to look forward to because he'd heard that the whorehouses of Paris were the greatest in the world. And while the people around him danced and sang, he calculated how much back pay the Army owed him.

