



OSS Commando:
Final Option

Charles W. Sasser

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CHARLES W. SASSER



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For my grandson Cassidy Cagle

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PROLOGUE

On 11 July 1941, with World War II threatening to erupt, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the nation's first peacetime intelligence organization, the Coordinator of Information (COI), under the direction of William J. "Wild Bill" Donovan, a hero of World War I. Six months after Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt placed COI under the military authority of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and renamed it the Office of Strategic Services (OSS).

OSS was the approximate equivalent of Britain's MI6 (Secret Intelligence Service) and its SOE (Special Operations Executive) branch. Its primary function, put simply, was to obtain information about enemy nations and sabotage their war potential and morale. Thus, wartime necessity gave birth to the predecessor of both the modern CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) and such military special operations forces as the U.S. Army Green Berets and the U.S. Navy SEALs.

During the first six months of 1944, while the Soviet Union tied down large numbers of German enemy forces

in the East, the United States and Britain concentrated land, naval and air forces in England in preparation for the invasion of Hitler's "Fortress Europa." A total of 47 divisions would be committed to Operation Overlord, along with some 6,000 naval vessels and 12,000 aircraft, making it the grandest invasion force ever assembled in the history of the world.

Hitler's generals knew an invasion was imminent; they didn't know where or when. If *Feldmarschall* Gerd von Rundstedt or *Generalfeldmarschall* Erwin Rommel, whom Hitler placed in command of defending France, were to break the secrets of Operation Overlord in time to allow them to precisely concentrate their defense of the Atlantic Wall, the Allied landing would face disastrous defeat and horrifying casualties. It might have been years before the Allies would mount a second invasion, thus providing Hitler time to consolidate his stranglehold on Europe, sue for peace, and end the war to his own advantage.

German spies were seeded into the British population, and they worked frantically to tap the invasion secrets in time. The Third Reich offered great rewards to whoever uncovered the Overlord plan or provided an Allied captive who knew it.

Shortly after midnight on 2 June 1944, a fleet of landing craft attached to Operation Hog's Breath, a mini-rehearsal involving the U.S. 29th Infantry Division, approached Slapton Sands, on England's southern coast. The unspoiled beach fronting a shallow lagoon backed by bluffs resembled Omaha Beach, one of America's designated landing sites when Allies invaded France. A flotilla of four LSTs (landing ships, tank) plowed along in wake of the main force. This convoy transported engineers along with chemical and quartermaster troops scheduled to offload after the "landing" in an orderly fashion with their trucks, amphibious tracks, jeeps and heavy engineering equipment.

The protected waters inside Lyme Bay lay as flat and smooth as cream rising to the surface of a pail of milk. The night was so dark, however, that U.S. Army Captain James Cantrell, riding the forward deck above the massive steel landing ramp of LST-505, could see neither the boat ahead nor the one aft. In full battle gear, including

helmet, pack and rifle, he listened to the muted, deep-throated growl of maritime engines giving distinctive voice to the night.

The OSS agent had been implanted more than a month ago with S&S (Service and Support) Company, 2d Battalion, 29th Division, following his last work in Rome. OSS Station Chief “Henry” in London had briefed him prior to the assignment.

“We’re listening to Rommel’s communications traffic,” he said. Breaking the Enigma Code had been a coup. “Rommel and Rundstedt are questioning whether Pas de Calais in the south may be a diversion while the real landing takes place elsewhere. They’re expressing a lot of interest in the Twenty-ninth Division and what it’s doing. It’s almost as though they’re using that division as a barometer to gauge the progress and intent of the invasion. We have to wonder if somebody in the Twenty-ninth might be leaking information to somebody he shouldn’t be talking to.”

“Ending a sentence with a preposition is something up with which I will not put,” James said.

“What?”

“Winston Churchill. Too bad he’s not an American.”

Being a wise guy was part of his nature. Gramps, short in stature, shorter than James, had said small men—no matter how capable—overcompensated, often with their mouths. Grams warned both of them that one day their bulldog mouths were going to overload their hummingbird asses.

Gramps sometimes said a bulldog mouth was about the only thing a man had left. Times had been desperate on the farm in Oklahoma during the years of the Great Depression. Many of the Okies packed their sorry belongings into old Ford trucks, abandoned their dust-bowl acres to either the bankers or nature, and headed west to

California, in the land of milk and honey. James was about 10 years old when his family contemplated giving up and joining the migration. Before they set out, however, Grams's and Gramps's only daughter—James's mother—and James's father died after a team of mules bolted and crashed their farm wagon into a stand of blackjack oak. After that, Grams and Gramps decided they were too old for another move by themselves. They stayed on at the farm, eking out a hardscrabble living for themselves and their orphaned grandson.

"Four men in the Twenty-ninth Division are connected directly to Overlord planning," Henry resumed in that minister-preaching-at-a-funeral voice of his. "If one of the four is leaking, we've got to know which one.

"Wild Bill seems to have a pocketful of faith in you, boy, after Sicily, Salerno and Rome—so you either come through with answers or Colonel Branson will have your scrawny little Okie butt on the first Higgins boat team to hit the sands of Normandy."

Exciting prospect.

James had been an undercover SI (Secret Intelligence) agent to the 29th, where he joined a bunch of other new guys to meet the battalion CO, Lieutenant Colonel Branson.

"You new men have been assigned to me," Colonel Branson said by way of greeting. "The division has been in the ETO for eighteen months and we are *ready* for combat. You new meat *will* be ready too. This battalion *will* be in the leading waves in the invasion of Europe. You men *will* be part of a great force to end the war. Two out of three of you are *not* going home. Good luck."

Ooorauh!

More than one and a half million GIs were crowded into Britain, an area not much larger than the state of

Virginia. Some had been in invasion training for years. A sign erected by an American evangelist outside Dartmouth asked the question *Where will you spend eternity?*, in answer to which some wiseacre had scrawled across the bottom: *In England*. GIs kept waiting and they kept telling each other it wouldn't be long now; it *couldn't* be much longer. Nervous eyes shifted toward the Channel.

James made a point of getting acquainted with the four officers who were coordinating 29th Division Normandy operations, Operation Overlord, with General Eisenhower's SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force). He had worked himself into their confidences, wine and dined them, loosened their tongues, and all they wanted to talk about so far was "back home" and their wives or kids or girlfriends. He was going to puke into his blood pudding if he had to listen to one more dissertation about little Johnny taking his first step or of how Suzie Malt Shop put Lana Turner to shame.

He doubted likewise he was going to come up with anything knocking around in the middle of the night with Operation Hog's Breath and landing rehearsals. But since he was assigned to Colonel Branson, on paper at least, there was no way he could have begged off. Bored, he took a deep breath and fished out a four-pack of C-rat Lucky Strikes, tapped one out and stuck it between his lips. Light discipline had been imposed, so he couldn't fire it up yet. But he had it ready for when ash-and-trash offloaded on the beach following the "invasion."

Indeed, it seemed he had already spent eternity in England. But eternity was about to end.

Three sleek craft—each 100 feet long and painted flat black for nighttime camouflage—had minutes ago slipped through Allied picket ships into Lyme Bay. Swift predators, they were capable of raiding at lightning speeds of up to 40 knots while firing 20mm cannon and releasing deadly torpedoes. Back in April, German torpedo boats

attacked a landing rehearsal being conducted by the 4th Division in this same vicinity, killing more than 600 GIs. Although the U.S. Navy and the Royal Navy increased security patrols off England's coasts, German torpedo boats—*Schnellboote*—continued to make hit-and-run raids.

These particular *Schnellboote* were not out on random operations searching for targets of opportunity. They were on a mission for the Fuhrer.

In the near total darkness on the bow of LST-505, shadows of other soldiers flitted in and out of James's vision like pieces of the night shifting about. One of them appeared and leaned on the railing next to him.

"Captain Cantrell. Enjoying the night air, I presume?"

James identified the tall shadow only after it spoke. "Major Harris. You presume correctly, ol' buddy. I came topside to savor compelling communication and stimulating companionship."

"With yourself?"

"Until you showed up."

Major Paul Harris was an engineering officer from Chicago, and at six feet tall was nearly a half foot taller than Captain Cantrell. Harris was one of four men in the 29th who were privy to the Operation Overlord plans. James had cultivated a friendship with him because of that. During the past month a genuine bond had formed between them, based partly upon a fiery rivalry on the basketball court. While Cantrell, the new redhead from Oklahoma, might be small, he proved athletic and quick, and so far, led the one-on-one series by three games. Major Harris called it embarrassing, *damned* embarrassing, to be beaten like that by a farmer, and a *short* farmer at that. So the games went on, Harris declaring he wasn't going to cry uncle until he either took the lead or they crossed the Channel.

"I understand," Harris said, chuckling over a running

bon mot between them, “that you have to avoid throwing bones on the floor in Oklahoma restaurants because they may not have dogs.”

“Not true,” James countered. “We *have* to throw them on the floor because a dog’s not allowed to eat at the table no matter how good his manners are.”

They laughed and then gazed into the blackness, leaning on the rail shoulder to shoulder. They listened together to the gentle ripple of seas cutting past the prow of 505 and the other LSTs as they made their slow passage. For an instant, the moon broke out from behind clouds, then disappeared again even more quickly than it had appeared.

“There’d better be more moon than this when we land in France, else we’ll end up in Holland,” James probed. He felt guilty for keeping at the big engineer, but it was his job to uncover a leak if there was one, and time was running out. So far, Harris had refused to take the bait.

“You’ll be praying for a night blacker than this when Jerry opens up with his big coastal guns,” Harris said. “You’ve been in combat, James?”

“Yes.”

“Is that where you got the limp?”

“Yes.” James left it at that.

Harris went silent for a moment, as if deep in thought. “I suppose I’ll be charging into the belly of the beast soon enough,” he said finally.

“The landings, when they come, will probably be at dawn,” James said, still digging. “We have to be able to see the enemy.”

Harris grunted. “Salerno was at night.”

“It’ll have to be soon. There’s lots of talk.”

“Scuttlebutt has been going around ever since the twenty-ninth off-loaded in England. Opinions are like assholes. Everybody’s got one and they all stink.”

“You’re up there in the S-2 shop where decisions are

made,” James said bluntly. “What do you hear? When does the bullshit stop and the main feature start?”

Major Harris stood away from the railing. “Loose lips sink ships,” he said. “Have you seen Dobbs?”

“Last I saw of him, he was down in the hold running around like a chicken with its head cut off.”

Captain Rick Dobbs was not one of the four. He and Harris had known each other slightly in college, then kindled a friendship after the 29th was activated for the war.

“Ol’ Dobbs is the excitable sort,” Harris said. “He asked me to come topside where he’d meet me to watch the landing.”

“What we can see of it in the dark.”

Further conversation was cut short by a tremendous explosion. A gigantic fireball bounced off the ocean surface nearby, at its vortex the distorted black outline of LST-418, which was leading the follow-up convoy. The shock wave jarred Harris to his knees. James hung on to the railing to prevent being tossed overboard.

The ocean was lit by the eerie blush of a ship on fire, exposing other landing ships staggered out in battle formation. Among them raced sleek, black boats like a pack of feral dogs among defenseless sheep.

One of the *Schnellboote* barreled its way at full speed toward LST-505, its big engine throbbing and foam wake glittering like slavers around fangs. Almost immediately, a torpedo ripped into LST-505 amidships.

In blinding flashes, explosions tore out the LST's guts. James and Major Harris were jarred off their feet and James's unsecured helmet skidded across the deck. The ship shook so violently that they couldn't hope to regain their feet. The deck warped in one direction, then back in the other. Riding her felt like a great wolf was shaking its prey to break its spine. The two army officers crawled on hands and knees up a steep incline to reach the railing.

"She's going down!" Major Harris cried.

"What was your first clue?"

The landing craft lurched and titled in the opposite direction, sending the two men sliding wildly toward the railing. James thought he was going overboard, and he grabbed for anything he could. His head slammed violently against a steel upright, detonating a concussion behind his eyes.

When he regained consciousness, trying to shake himself out of the fog, struggling to his hands and knees,

he became aware of Major Harris by his side, tugging on him.

"C'mon, Okie. We gotta get off this tub."

"Did you call a taxi?"

"It's at the curb."

James lurched to his feet with Harris's aid. For the second time, the ship's death throes propelled them away from the railing. Together, leaning on each other for stability, they made their way toward the port side. Harris wore his Mae West, but James had neglected to put his on.

"Go on!" James urged his friend. "I'm right behind you."

"You'll drown. We'll go over together. We'll use my Mae West."

James was still groggy from the blow to his head. Hazy, surreal scenes flitted before his eyes: flames pumping into the night from the ship's every crack, fissure and loose fitting; black smoke; fiery debris exploding in the air; frightful blazes hissing and coiling like giant serpents.

Screaming, shouting men darted madly about like hell's denizens. A sailor sat on the side rail, staring down into the sea as into eternity, balancing himself, gathering courage, his legs flapping before taking the plunge into the oily drink. Other grotesque, terrified faces reflected in and out of the firelight. It occurred to James that many of the doughs—most, perhaps—might be trapped in the hold below.

LST-418 was burning off 505's port bow as it sank, illuminating a great swath of dark water. Heavy machine guns thudded as a British corvette escort sped into the vast circle of firelight, answered in arcing green retorts by a German torpedo boat's 20mm deck gun.

Then, from 505's own deck, erupted the clatter of an automatic rifle. James had heard that sound in Italy—a German MP-40. To his surprise, four black-clad figures burst out of the smoke, running in a staggering gait across

the uneven deck toward the two GI officers. All were armed with MP-40s. *Krauts! Why had the crazy bastards boarded a sinking ship?*

One fired at a seaman perched on the railing preparing to jump. The stubby weapon blossomed and cackled. The bullet's impact slapped the hapless victim out of sight, into oblivion.

James sprang clear of Harris and went for his holstered Colt .45. Like all OSS operators, he was a crack pistol shot, but the pitching of the ship threw him off balance. He snapped a quick shot—and missed the first Jerry in the pack.

There was no time for a second shot. The four raiders were upon them like stink on billy goats. For some unknown reason, they held their fire instead of mowing down the Americans.

James parried and feinted, trying to set up a “gutter” defense, but he was punchy from having busted his head. The first man jabbed him viciously in the gut with the muzzle of his weapon, doubling him over in pain and sending his .45 flying from his hand. He followed up by clubbing James with the steel-framed butt of his submachine gun. Right on the same damned place where he had struck his head before.

James dropped to the deck like a sack of fertilizer. To his astonishment, the German grabbed him by his combat pack instead of finishing him off and started dragging him forward alongside the railing. James was too dazed to resist. Everything seemed to be unfolding in slow motion through a haze that was part smoke and part mental fog.

“*Kommen Sie sofort!*” another German shouted. “*Ein hier Harris!*”

“Harris?” James’s captor exclaimed. He took a second, closer look at James’s uniform name tag strip, then dumped him immediately, no longer interested.

James struggled to regain equilibrium for the second

time. He pushed himself painfully to his hands and knees and attempted to shake the cobwebs from his head. Fortunately, as Gramps always said, he was as hardheaded as a Missouri mule.

His vision returned in time to see Harris being forced down a rope ladder to a torpedo boat riding the seas directly below. A kidnapper kicked Harris in the face to hurry him along. Harris looked up at James, his expression frozen with fear, and then disappeared down the ladder with his abductors scrambling after him. Hitler's men were escaping with a pipeline to the secrets of Operation Overlord.

The torpedo boat was already pulling away, its powerful engine roaring and its foaming wake lapping against the LST's gray hull by the time James reached the dangling rope ladder. Harris was not in sight. *Too late.* A black-clad raider at the stern of the *Schnellboote* looked up in the firelight, saw James, and unleashed a rattling volley from his MP-40. Slugs shrieked past his head or ricocheted off the steel hull of the landing craft.

The *Schnellboote* dug its prop deep into the ocean. The stern squatted, the prow reared, the black boat streaked forward out of the firelight and was immediately absorbed into the night. Heavy Allied machine guns still gabbled here and there, but there was no return enemy fire. The speedboats were gone, their mission accomplished.

James was disgusted with himself, and barely caught the steel railing as the sinking tank ship listed dangerously to starboard. Knocked out twice in less than three minutes, he had not realized what was happening until it was too late—and now he had allowed Germans to whisk away

Major Paul Harris, whose knowledge of the Allied plan to invade Europe might well doom Operation Overlord.

Damn! Damn!

There wasn't much he could do about it now. He hooked an elbow around the railing to anchor himself and free his hands. Two cigarettes remained in the C-rat pack of Lucky Strikes. He stuck one between his lips, tossed the remaining cigarette and pack, and struck a match on the metal crab buckle of his web harness. Light discipline no longer mattered, not with blazing LSTs lanterning the bay.

Self-possessed, almost detached, he drew the calming smoke deep into his lungs while he casually shucked his web gear, combat pack, boots and woolen uniform shirt. A soldier still in full combat gear, his back smoldering and smoking, darted out of nowhere and dived headfirst off the boat.

Damn! That was gonna hurt.

James took another long drag off the Lucky and climbed over the railing in his stocking feet. "Luck!" he said to his cigarette and jumped feet first with it still clenched between his teeth. LST-505 was on her way to the bottom. There was nothing he could do for the troops trapped below decks. It was every man for himself.

The plunge drove him deep into the dark, cold water. He floundered to the surface, the shock having cleared his head somewhat. Something banged against him. He grabbed it. An empty gas can full of five gallons of air.

LST-505 remained under steam, blazing like a viking's funeral pyre as it turned quickly to port. Soon it had made full circle and was bearing straight down on James. Fire and smoke spewed from every opening.

"Oh, cow shit!" And with that, he dug his stroke deep into the ocean and swam for his life, dragging his gas can along with him by its handle. It was his lifeline if he had to stay in the drink for any length of time.

He wished he could walk on water like Jesus on the

Sea of Galilee. The LST's widemouthed prow loomed above him. He was a goner. Why wasn't his life flashing before his eyes?

He let go of the can and dived underwater as deep as he could, kicking frantically and grabbing at handfuls of water. Massive pressure created by the passing boat pushed him even deeper and sent him tumbling. The gas can came with him, bumping him. His nostrils stung from salt water.

When he surfaced, the ship's wake glistened white in firelight, so near he could have reached out and almost grabbed the rudder. He snagged the can that had surfaced with him and held on to it with a drowning man's grip. The world grew quiet and peaceful as the ship departed on its own helmless course, flaming slowly away across the sea.

Then James watched it sink quickly. Light was extinguished by enveloping darkness. From now on, he vowed, he was going to waterproof his cigarettes for just such occasions.

There had been little time for launching lifeboats. Trapped belowdecks, scores of soldiers and sailors on LSTs 505 and 418 went down with their boats. Others leaped into the sea. Many of these soon drowned, weighted down as they were by water-logged woolens, boots and combat gear. Numbers perished from hypothermia in the cold Channel waters.

Captain James Cantrell clung to his gas-can flotation device, bobbing in the gentle waters of the bay. Although he knew a search would begin, he expected little help before daylight. The most urgent quest would be for the four officers of the 29th Division who possessed secret information about the actual cross-Channel invasion. In the meantime, for all he knew, for all he could see or hear, he was completely alone in the sea on an overcast night, the darkest he could recall since Cousin Raymond and he had trapped a skunk in a cave on the Illinois River in the Cookson Hills. That had been one stinker of a night, but it looked like tonight might rival it.

His battered head felt like it was stuck in a loading chute with a bunch of wild steers stomping on it. Salt water stung his wounds. Long before dawn, his teeth began chattering uncontrollably and his fingers turned so stiff he could barely cling to his flotation. He couldn't have smoked a cigarette even if he had a dry one.

Hanging on to an empty gasoline can and hoping somebody came along before he froze to death or drowned, he had to appreciate the irony of his predicament. The OSS had recruited him off the homicide investigations detail of the Oklahoma City Police Department. The OSS recruiting agent had called himself "Elmer." It seemed nobody in this outfit ever used anything other than a first name, which was probably phony. Elmer said the OSS approached James because he was an "out of the box" thinker who would fit well into a creative organizational culture. He was certainly proving that tonight, wasn't he?

"What's OSS?" James had asked.

"Office of Strategic Services."

"I'm not good at working in an office. I prefer getting out in the barnyard. See these boots? That's cow shit on them."

"Take my word for it, Cantrell. You'll be out in the barnyard while contributing firsthand to the war effort."

"My outfit—the Forty-fifth NG Division—is being activated."

James was a reserve captain in the 279th/45th; Army National Guard checks helped pay his way through college.

Elmer consulted a file. Apparently, he had done his homework. "Let's see . . ." he pondered, shuffling through documents. "You grew up on a dirt farm in Sequoyah County, where you attended a one-room school. McKey, wasn't it? Your parents were both killed in a farm accident during the Great Depression. Your grandparents raised

you. Both were first-generation immigrants, she from France, he from Germany. You grew up speaking both languages fluently. Is that correct so far?"

"Does it say in there that I had to learn both because Grams hated German and wouldn't speak kraut and Gramps thought the French were a bunch of sissies and refused to speak French?"

Elmer looked interested. "How'd they ever get together?"

"World War I. Go on."

"You're a graduate of Oklahoma A and M, class of 1940, with degrees in animal husbandry and engineering. That's some combination."

"It means I can build my own hay barn."

Elmer grinned. "Let's see . . . You were captain of the baseball team *and* the boxing squad. A member of Phi Beta Kappa. President of the class your junior and senior years before you threw away your degree and ran off to be a copper in Oklahoma City. How am I doing?"

James shrugged, but he was impressed. The police department hadn't conducted as thorough a background check as this before it hired him.

"Cantrell, OSS thinks you have the necessary qualifications to become an extraordinary operative. You're athletic, worldly, scholarly, self-reliant and adventurous." Elmer peered up at the wiry 25-year-old with orange hair spiking out all over his head. A prominent splash of matching freckles across James's pug nose lent him a cocky, slightly belligerent look. "It beats me," he only half-kidded, "how so much can fit into such a small package."

"It requires a bigger package to hold bullshit than dynamite," James retorted. When was he ever going to learn to hold his mouth? "Like Winston Churchill said, 'Attitude is a little thing that makes a difference.'"

"I like a man who grins when he fights." Elmer approved, also quoting Churchill.

The Office of Strategic Services, as James soon discovered, was a rambling octopus composed of adventurers, globetrotters, mercenaries and other swashbucklers and opportunists distributed into a TO&E (table of operations and equipment) covering eight major departments: Research and analysis (R&A), Research and Development (R&D), Morale Operations (MO), Maritime Units (MU), X-2 for counterespionage, Secret Intelligence (SI), Special Operations (SO) and Operational Groups (OG).

Because he spoke both French and German in addition to English, James was deemed suitable for multiple branches of OSS, including Secret Intelligence, Special Operations and Operational Groups, and therefore schooled in each. He feared the war would be over by the time he completed training.

SI instruction was held at “the Farm,” a sprawling country estate about 20 miles north of Washington, D.C. There, James and his fellow neophytes were taught the importance of cover, intelligence-gathering methods, and use of “cut-out” individuals to work as intermediaries between OSS agents and their sub-agents. Training culminated in students practicing an undercover “scheme” in the nearby cities of Baltimore and Philadelphia, during which they pretended to be spies in a hostile country.

Operational Groups and Special Operations teams were the most military units in OSS. Recruits retained whatever military rank they had previously held. Training on a lavish 18-hole Congressional Country Club course known as Area F, prospective operators learned what to do and what not to do behind enemy lines in order to avoid giving themselves away. They also drilled with various weapons, practiced close-up and hand-to-hand “gutter fighting,” and learned to make explosives from basic household supplies. They ran various training missions ranging from parachute jumps to exiting from submarines.

James acquired his limp after the invasion of Sicily on

his first assignment with an SO team. The detachment consisted of three men: James, an Italian American named Luna and Colonel Guido Benedetto, formerly of the Italian army. Wearing civilian clothing over their uniforms as a disguise and armed only with concealed .45-caliber pistols, they sneaked through enemy lines near Acquarossa in Italy. Their mission was to destroy a critical railroad tunnel.

Two hours after insertion, a German patrol guided by a civilian spotted them and opened fire. James unloaded his .45 at the civilian, killing him. Luna took a slug in the spine that paralyzed him. Wounded in the shoulder, Colonel Benedetto thought further resistance futile and decided to surrender.

Although James was wounded in several places himself, including his right leg, he ignored the German surrender demand. He rolled down a hillside while chewing and swallowing the communications code he was carrying. He barely had time to hide his civilian clothing and money before enemy troops surrounded him and he had to give up.

The Germans took him to an Acquarossa farm whose owner had earlier befriended and aided the SO team. Luna was there on a stretcher. Colonel Benedetto was nowhere about, but he was obviously spilling his guts about the friendly farmer. Krauts took the wretch out behind his own barn and put a bullet through his skull. James and Luna were escorted for interrogation to the 15th Panzer Regiment HQ (headquarters) at Passo dei Tre.

Interrogation ended unexpectedly at 9 P.M., when the entire regiment began retreating toward Randazzo. James was ordered to get into a staff car with a lieutenant while Luna was left in the road to be found by advancing Allied troops.

The retreat stalled later that night. The driver got out of the car and disappeared, leaving the lieutenant snoring

lightly in the front seat and James, considered harmless because of his wounds, sitting in the backseat.

Although his captors had relieved him of his personal belongings, including dog tags, they had carelessly overlooked his penknife. With a rapid movement, he grabbed a handful of the lieutenant's hair, stretched his neck taut and sliced through his windpipe and jugular. Just like he had practiced on the Farm. The German produced a gurgling sound and then quickly died.

It was nasty business and it depressed him later, but it had to be done.

He jumped out of the car and fled, dragging his stiffening leg. He knew what it meant if the krauts recaptured him. He hid out in barns and ditches until he eventually ran upon an American patrol that took him to a headquarters where he was debriefed and treated for his wounds. He would limp slightly for the rest of his life. It hardly slowed him down on the basketball court, however, as Major Harris discovered.

By September, his wounds were sufficiently healed for him to insert at Salerno to gather tactical intelligence for Darby's Rangers. In January 1944, he infiltrated occupied Rome following the Anzio landing. After that, the OSS base in London felt he deserved to come out from behind enemy lines for a "soft mission." Henry brought him to England and assigned him to SI in support of Operation Overlord.

And now where had he ended up? Freezing his ass off in Lyme Bay while krauts got away with Major Harris. Occupied Europe might become a permanent appellation if Harris broke.

Rescue boats dipped the survivors of the Hog's Breath attack out of the drink at daylight and ushered them to local hospitals to be treated for exposure and various other injuries.

"I'll never use Checker Cab again," James wisecracked when rescuers pulled him out of the water, half frozen and so stiff he couldn't assist in his own recovery. "I called for a ride at midnight."

"Yeah. Well, Mac, it's rush hour."

Henry was waiting for him in a temporary wing of the 29th Division field hospital. He offered James a Lucky Strike, lit it for him, and pulled a chair close to the bed. With his dirgelike delivery, long, bony face and lanky frame, the station chief reminded James of his Uncle Pony, whose real name was Horace. Everybody called him Pony because when he was born he wasn't big enough to be a horse. Put a straw hat and a pair of blue gallus farmer overalls on Henry, and, lo, he became Uncle Pony.

"You look like you got caught with your knickers in a twist," Henry observed.

"Whipped with an ugly stick," James agreed. His head had swollen until both eyes were nearly shut. Both eyes were also black, giving him the appearance, he suspected, of a ring-tailed 'coon peering out the end of a hollow log. A bandage covered the top of his head like a helmet.

Henry lowered his voice to keep it from carrying to other patients in the ward. "So far," he said, "we've recovered three of the four Overlord planners attached to the Twenty-ninth. Two were floaters scooped out of the bay. The third washed up on the sand. That leaves Major Paul Harris unaccounted for."

James filled the chief in on last night's kidnapping.

Henry let out a long breath filled with dismay and dread. "You can bet your sweets he was in Cherbourg before the fires went out," he said. "We've heard no reference to it in the German communications exchanges. It's still early, though. We can expect Harris to hold out as long as he can, but the gestapo do have their beastly little tricks. Sooner or later, minus some fingers and maybe his balls, Harris *will* talk. The longer he's in their custody, the more we have to worry about it."

Henry mulled it over.

"LST-505 was apparently the only boat the Jerries boarded last night," he continued, "and Harris the only one abducted. Can you explain how that happened, Cantrell?"

There was no doubt the boats had come specifically for Harris. The German commando dragging James across the deck had dropped him like a hot potato when his partners in crime identified Major Harris. How had they identified Harris as an Overlord officer? How had they known he was on that particular boat and on the forward deck at that particular time?

Homicide cops learned not to believe in coincidences.

If a thing looked too pat to be true, chances were it was. The governor of Oklahoma once called James the best homicide investigator in the nation after he solved several baffling murders. Did the governor know what he was talking about or was he talking through his hoe handle? James's mind was already whirring.

"Henry, is there a captain named Rick Dobbs on the KIA list?"

Henry kept a running account of the rescued, the missing and the dead. He consulted his list. "It looks like he was rescued with minor injuries. Why?"

"Can you arrange to get him recuperative leave for the rest of today and tomorrow?"

"Are you on to something you're not telling, Cantrell?"

"I'm not sure yet."

"I'll never understand what Wild Bill sees in you."

"He's my uncle by marriage."

"All right, Cantrell. This better not be all mouth and trousers. Keep me informed. This is so critical it goes all the way up to SHAEF, General Eisenhower and the president of the United States. We had better come up with something, and we'd better come up with it quickly."

James felt personally responsible for letting the Germans seize Major Harris. It was now his responsibility to get him back. Harris's chance remark that Dobbs was supposed to meet him on the forward deck of the LST might mean nothing. But although James felt like a ten-karat asshole by casting suspicion on a fellow GI, he had to consider Dobbs a possible suspect. If you were investigating a case and you had only one lead, you milked that teat until it went dry.

Dobbs wasn't seriously injured. The pencil-line mustache was gone, scorched off during the fires on LST-505, and his light-brown GI haircut had been singed around the edges. Otherwise, the chunky battalion personnel officer with a Boston accent appeared in good shape physically, if not quite as chipper mentally. James pulled a chair bedside. From his hospital cot, Dobbs gazed disconsolately up at his visitor. He turned his head away on the pillow and squeezed his eyes closed, as though nursing some deep guilt or grief.

“Rick?”

After a moment, Dobbs opened his eyes and squinted at James. He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing like a hen’s egg being swallowed by a snake. “Have they . . . found Paul?” he stammered.

“They’re still looking.”

“For . . . bodies? He’s dead?”

“*Presumed* dead.”

Dobbs flinched.

“How well did you know Paul?” James asked.

He appeared not to hear. James waited a minute. “Rick?”

Dobbs gave a start, as though prodded with an elbow. “We were in college at the same time,” he said, sounding reluctant to talk about it. “I didn’t know him at all until we started dating the same girl. Cynthia Lou Fodmacher. God, I haven’t thought of that name in years. I think she always liked Paul best. Paul gave up dating her because he knew I liked her. That’s the kind of guy Paul was.”

“What happened?”

Dobbs emitted a half-amused bark. “Paul married Deborah Cotts. Cynthia Lou ended up eloping with Roger Taylor and running a hardware store in Tupelo, Mississippi. I’m still not married.”

“My Grams said to always thank God for unanswered prayers.”

“Damn the krauts!” Dobbs grated out between his teeth. His entire body shuddered. “Damn Hitler! Damn this whole war and everybody in it!”

James nodded. “That about covers it. The last time I saw Paul just before the torpedo boats hit, he was heading topside for the landing . . .”

Grief and sadness returned to Dobbs’s voice. “I . . . I should have been with him. Maybe I could have done something.”

“You’re lucky you weren’t.”

“Yes. Lucky.”

Dobbs seemed to be mulling things over, carefully choosing his words.

“I was belowdecks because I had some stuff to do for the drill. I told Paul I’d catch up with him after we were on the beach.”

There it was. An outright lie. James no longer felt like the ten-karat asshole. Dobbs glanced nervously about in that way James had learned to associate with the guilty. There was no doubt in James’s mind that the chubby captain knew at least *something* about Harris’s abduction. The trick was in baiting him into playing his hand and revealing what it was. Limited recuperative leave might provide him just the freedom and opportunity he needed to act out on his guilt and lead James to an accomplice or a handler. Few traitors operated solo.

“I’ll never be able to forgive myself,” Dobbs wailed.

James had deliberately misled Dobbs about Harris's fate. If he were indeed a turncoat, a double agent, or simply a dupe, Dobbs would be anxious to contact his German handler in order to find out what had happened. James counted on it.

Sure enough, as soon as he was released from the aid station and off on twenty-four-hour pass, Dobbs donned his overseas khakis and cunt cap and caught the noon bus directly for London. James was ready. He disguised himself in working-class British dungarees, sunglasses to hide his blackened eyes, a stocking cap to cover his red hair instead of bandages, and even a heavy Limey mustache dug from his kit. He knew from experience that most people focused on a dominant facial feature and rarely looked beyond it to recognize even people they knew well.

Since buses were always crowded, with passengers even crammed together standing in the aisles, James didn't think Dobbs would notice him. Dobbs got on first, using the rear doors. James used the driver doors. He hunkered

low in a window seat he was quick enough to acquire and kept his face turned to deny Dobbs a good look.

Much of London lay in ruins. Bombs had destroyed or damaged some 80 percent of the city's housing. Although the Blitz had ended in 1941, marking the end of sustained bombing, the Germans kept up hit-and-run strikes in retaliation for Allied bombing and as a last-ditch effort to discourage invasion of the European mainland. In London, East Anglia or Yorkshire, there was no such thing as a noncombatant. Life had a dangerous edge. Barrels of anti-aircraft guns sprouted between trees in hundreds of city parks. Except when the weather was absolutely foul, U.S. and English bombers constantly flew overhead on their way to raids or limped back damaged, smoke streaming from their burning engines.

As always, James was stirred by the resiliency of the English. Bombed-out streets, orphaned children, barrage balloons drifting in dirty skies, nightly blackouts against German fighter-bombers—and still, as Churchill put it, the Brits persevered.

The bus crossed the Thames River at Vauxhall Bridge. Dobbs got off at Vauxhall Station and, with purpose, struck out north on Albert Embankment, which followed the river. James tailed him far enough back to keep crowds between them, yet close enough to keep him in sight.

The streets were crowded with people queuing for almost everything—public transport, cinemas, shops where rigorously enforced rationing systems distributed goods as equitably as possible. One feature James liked about rationing: women's skirts. Hemlines had risen to the knee in order to save material to make uniforms for fighting men.

Grams had disapproved of the changing fashions. "They'll keep raising hems and raising 'em 'til Katy see." She sniffed.

Dobbs entered a tree-gladed park that stretched alongside the Thames. It was largely deserted this time of the afternoon since the war effort involved everybody; young lovers and strolling couples appeared only in the dusk after work.

The chunky officer stopped and looked around, checked his watch, appeared impatient and then continued. He obviously intended to meet someone here. His khaki uniform disappeared among the budding oaks and beeches. James hurried to avoid losing him.

A rare beam of sunlight suddenly flashed through the cloud cover and reflected off a low, fast-moving wing. Kraut fighter-bombers crossing the Channel commonly skipped along the tops of waves to avoid British radar, and then climbed at the last moment to swoop down and strafe city streets. The Germans might strafe the 8:10 from Norwich or drop a load of bombs on a primary school in Southwark; the Reich was a wounded snake striking out at everything it came across.

The plane was already in a dive before James noticed it, seemingly coming directly for him. He recognized it from his days in the Italian campaign. A Junker 188. The piercing shrill of its engine reverberated against the row of buildings lining the southwest side of Albert Embankment across from the park. It grew louder and louder until completely filling the air. All along the street people panicked, running and screaming, diving into the nearest doorways, fleeing into alleyways and down side streets. A few even dashed for the park.

The plane pulled up just as it seemed it would nose-dive into the street, and a pair of bombs tumbled out of its belly, their momentum carrying them toward a line of row houses. They exploded in great bursts of fire and destruction. Shock waves slammed James hard against the ground.

He caught his breath as anti-aircraft guns opened up

from the opposite side of the river, filling the afternoon sky with tracers and ack-ack blossoms. A scream rose from somewhere.

An Fw 190 had trailed after the Junker, and now dove and zoomed above the rooftops to “mop up.” Gunshots—*pistol* shots—banged from among the trees in the park. First a large caliber, followed immediately by a smaller. A young woman wearing one of those short skirts that James so much appreciated bolted from the park into the street, trying desperately to reach the other side. She ran directly into the attacking 190’s line of fire.

Flame sparkled from the fighter’s machine-gun muzzles. Bullets ripped through a parked car, splashing more fire. They chewed down the center of the boulevard, splintering concrete and filling the air with deadly shrapnel.

The girl wasn’t going to make it.

Later, James would think about how foolish he was, though Gramps always had said that a fine pair of legs made a man stop thinking with the head on top of his shoulders. Springing to his feet, he raced to cut the woman off. He dived for her at the last moment, tackling her with one hand and holding on as they tumbled together out of the line of fire. An instant later, lead and steel chewed chunks out of the roadway. The low passage of the fighter-bomber seemed to suck their breath away.

Then it was over. People were running about and shouting to each other. Flames crackled from the bombed buildings.

“Do you bloody mind getting off of me?” the girl asked, as cool as a glass of iced mint tea in August.

“I don’t mind lying here a bit longer if you don’t,” James rejoined. “Those krauts might come back. It’s always better to be safe than sorry.”

She pushed him. “You’re saying I’m safe lying underneath a puny little bloke like yourself?”

“I’m really six feet tall. The mustache makes me look shorter.”

She looked at him. “Your mustache is coming off,” she said.

Things might be looking up after all. The krauts had sunk him in the bay and strafed him in the streets—and where had he ended up? On top of the most gorgeous little piece of filly he had ever feasted eyes upon.

James helped the girl to her feet. The world might have been coming apart all around him—which it was, what with the blazing buildings and people darting about in the confusion—but he still liked tall women, particularly those who were too tall for their hemlines.

He looked her up and down in the appreciative way of a man who knows and loves women. She had legs all the way to the ground and then some. Black hair loose and curled at the shoulders put her an inch or two above him. Her eyes were as dark and luminous as her hair. It was a face that belonged on the cover of a movie-picture magazine. Sophisticated, too, at least from her demeanor. Arrogant and haughty. And sexy.

My God, she had legs.

James's fake mustache hung at a loose angle across his

mouth. He wiped it off and stuck it in his pocket, retrieving his cigarette pack at the same time. He kept the sunglasses and stocking cap.

"I don't know about you," he wisecracked, "but I can always use a cigarette afterward."

"You really *are* six feet tall—in your mind."

"A legend."

"Cheeky too. Overpaid, oversexed, over here—and certainly not backward about coming forward."

"I don't know about overpaid."

"I suppose I should thank you for saving my life," she said, shuddering at the sight of where the machine-gun bullets had dug a shallow trench in the street almost wide enough for a grave. "You are a Yank?" she added suspiciously.

"Wide, deep and true blue. Name's James. Don't worry about the mustache and sunglasses. I'm taking a little unauthorized leave from the army and I didn't want the MPs to recognize me as a GI."

She seemed to buy it. GIs did it all the time.

"Do you have one?" he asked.

"What?"

"A name?"

She hesitated for a heartbeat. "Constantina."

"That's not English."

"It's Roman."

As in Mussolini?"

"As in Octavius."

"A Roman goddess! Am I lucky or what!"

She looked amused. As they talked, he stood where he could see the park. Captain Dobbs hadn't come out yet. Apparently he went to ground when the German planes appeared and hadn't gathered up enough courage to peek out again. The girl, Constantina, was the only person James had seen get flushed out.

"Look," James said. "I'm meeting a friend in the park.

I'm hoping I didn't miss him. Will you wait here for me a minute?"

She cast a quick glance across the street. She looked uncertain all of a sudden.

"I must hurry home, James. My mother . . ."

"I can't let you go now, Constantina."

She looked startled. "Why not?" She gripped her little black handbag.

"Fate threw us together. I think I'm in love."

Clearly from her expression she didn't know what to make of him. "Do you tell that to all the Roman goddesses you tackle and throw on the ground?"

"You're the first one this month. It's the real thing."

"It's lust."

"That too."

She seemed to be in a hurry to get away. She kept looking toward the park.

"Why don't we tryst later?" she proposed. "I suppose I owe you that much."

"Terrific. Where and when? It has to be soon."

That caught her attention. "Victoria Station? Same time tomorrow?"

"I'll be there wearing my best mustache."

She smiled. He watched the enticing swing of her hips through the short, thin skirt as she hastened away. She threw him a final smile over her shoulder. Then she was gone, rushing down a side street away from the burning row houses. Fire-wagon sirens warbled and clanged in the distance and a bobby on foot patrol came running.

Nothing like a dame in a short skirt to divert a man's attention from business. But James was back on the case now. He replaced the mustache in the event Dobbs should get a look at him and hurried back into the park. There was no one about, in GI uniform or otherwise. Everyone was out in the street, fighting the fires.

He trotted down to the Thames and looked both ways.

The GI uniforms he saw way down the bank were too far away to include Captain Dobbs. Puzzled—*How had Dobbs vanished so quickly?*—he wound his way back along a walking path. He was about to give it up when a patch of khaki at the base of an oak caught his eye. Closer inspection revealed a freshly deceased U.S. soldier.

Captain Rick Dobbs

He lay facedown, cunt cap knocked off his head, clutching a .45 army-issued Colt in his right hand.

James turned him over. A splotch of blood stained his uniform just below and to the left of where his uniform tie tucked into his shirt. A small-caliber bullet wound—a .25 perhaps, a .32 at most. The wound had stopped bleeding; dead men didn't bleed.

Still kneeling, thinking, James flipped his lit cigarette stub onto the trail. He got up and stomped it out, then picked up the butt and stuffed it into his pocket to avoid contaminating the crime scene. He stared out toward Albert Embankment as he put together the events of the past few minutes.

The attack of the German Fw 190 had been accompanied by a brace of pistol shots, a .45-caliber echoed by a smaller pistol. James hadn't thought much of it at the time. GI and Brit officers, as well as all military police, carried sidearms, even when on pass or furlough. Anyone with any kind of weapon, even a handful of stones, took potshots at German planes when they came in.

The two pistol shots hadn't been fired at the plane. Neither was Dobbs killed by enemy action. At least not by *overt* enemy action.

Constantina, if that was her real name, ran out of the park like the devil was nipping at her pretty ass. Clutching that little black purse that was certainly big enough to accommodate a small pistol. *Jesus!* Dobbs had met his handler right under James's nose and had been eliminated. *Why?*

Gramps was right. A man stopped thinking with the head on his shoulders when he spotted a skirt. Especially when he was lying on top of one. Sure, she was going to meet him at Victoria Station tomorrow—and he was going to grow wings and fly.

Rick Dobbs's murder confirmed James's suspicion that the personnel officer—*former* personnel officer—was somehow mixed up in Major Harris's abduction. However, now he was further away than ever from understanding why Dobbs would betray a friend in such a diabolical manner, what had happened to Harris, and how he might recover the missing engineer officer before he spilled the beans about Operation Overlord, which was less than three days away.

He had some explaining to do to London bobbies and military CID (Criminal Investigations Division). What was he doing in London wearing civilian attire—on a training day? When a fellow soldier on recuperative leave just happened to get himself murdered in a park?

James did what any self-respecting undercover would do. He obfuscated, lied and played ignorant. Ignorance best explained what he understood about most of it anyhow.

“Coincidence,” he insisted. “I was taking a shortcut

through the park on my way to meet a young lady whose reputation is at stake should she be seen dating a uniform. I thought the soldier had been hit by shrapnel."

"He had a .45 in his hand."

"So he did."

"It had been fired. Once."

"I wouldn't know about that."

"He didn't shoot himself."

"I wouldn't think so."

"You and the victim are attached to the same outfit—Second Battalion of the Twenty-ninth."

"So we are."

"Do you know him?"

"Not very well."

"How do you explain your both being in London at the same time?"

"Coincidence."

"What was the dame's name?"

"What dame?"

"The one you said you were going to meet?"

"Helen."

"Helen . . . ?"

"Uh, Helen Hulbert."

James couldn't chance flatfeet bumbling about driving Constantina underground. Whereas Dobbs was formerly his only possible link to Harris, that honor now fell on the mystery woman from the park.

"Address?"

"Truth is, she's a hooker. I ran across her in the street."

Two burly GIs with MP armbands, .45s and nightsticks tossed him into the backseat of a patrol jeep and drove him back to camp. They refused to let him smoke a cigarette on the way. In hindsight, he realized he should have asked Henry to arrange recuperative leave for *him* as well as for Dobbs.

* * *

His battalion CO, the same Lieutenant Colonel Branson of “You men *will* be part of a great force to end the war” took him into his Quonset-hut office and slammed the door. He looked harassed and sleepless. Not only had he lost soldiers in the sinking of LSTs 418 and 505 off Slapton Sands, he now had a murder on his hands, an AWOL captain to deal with, and the countdown to the invasion had begun. No wonder he looked distressed.

Colonel Branson chewed James’s ass like a hound on a pork bone.

“What the hell did you think you were doing, soldier?”

“It must have been the blow to my head, sir.”

“Your head’s up your ass and you were thinking with your other head. That’s the problem.”

“That’s what my Gramps would say, sir.”

The ass-chewing ended with the colonel kicking James out of his cushy rear-echelon slot in S&S Company and reassigning him to a boat team where exercises had turned serious. From now until H-Hour on D-Day the men in each boat team would eat, sleep and train together. The teams consisted of two officers, a four-man 60mm mortar crew, a four-man machine-gun crew, five men responsible for demolition of beach obstacles, five riflemen and four men armed with bangalore torpedoes for blowing holes in wire—all working in harmony to “assault enemy beaches and be able to establish a beachhead by neutralizing all obstacles and pillboxes,” as the training program put it.

A total of 6 armored divisions, 13 infantry divisions, 2 airborne divisions, crews for 4,000 landing craft and 1,300 warships, 165 U.S. Air Force squadrons—and Captain James Cantrell, now attached to one of the first Higgins boats due to hit the beach.

And if Major Harris broke, the krauts would be waiting

in force to ratify Colonel Branson's estimation that "two out of three of you are *not* going home." More like three out of three would not be going home.

"Get in proper uniform and consider yourself under permanent house arrest," Colonel Branson concluded. "The next time you pull a stunt like this, Cantrell, I'll toss your little corn-pone ass in the brig and turn you loose in time to catch your ride across the Channel. Understood, mister?"

"Sir, we don't eat corn pone in Oklahoma. It's corn bread."

"Cantrell, get out of my office."

Grams liked to say James was as antsy as a man without fingernails in a chigger patch. He had good cause to be antsy tonight. Sitting on his cot in his GP (small) tent in “officers’ country,” he smoked a Lucky Strike in the dark, savoring it and waiting for taps.

Unless weather delayed the invasion, he had two more days to find out where Major Harris had been taken for interrogation. He wasn’t alone in the quest, however. He understood how the drill worked. By now, other OSS were scrambling all over France trying to locate Harris and target him for either ground assassination or assassination by air raid. It was called *neutralizing*. A single life in this war was expendable if it meant saving or furthering the cause of victory over the Axis powers. Hundreds of thousands of people had already died. What difference did one more make?

Difference was, James did not feel personally responsible for the thousands of other lives. He did feel responsible

for Paul Harris. Paul had been the closest thing to a friend he'd had in England.

He got up off his cot and flung the tent flap aside to stand in the doorway and gaze out across the darkened compound. There was no moon; low clouds and spitting rain had obscured it for the second night in a row. *Bad weather for an invasion.* In the darkness, the inflatable tanks and phony mock-up airplanes across the road were invisible. The fake division was part of an elaborate hoax called Operation Fortitude, its purpose to fool Hitler and his generals into believing an amphibious landing would take place at Pas de Calais. All the blow-up tanks and dummy aircraft in the world meant squat if Harris broke.

A bugler played taps, the mournful strains hanging in the night air long after the bugle ceased. No wonder they played it at military funerals. Even tombstones wept.

The camp quickly settled down. James left his quarters with lock-picking tools and a penlight and made his way down Baker Road to Captain Dobbs's tent. He looked around to make sure the duty watch was not coming, then breached the tent and snapped the door flaps closed behind him. He figured he had about five minutes before the watch made his rounds.

With the thin flashlight beam he probed the tent's interior: a cot, a wooden footlocker at the end of the cot, a folding map table that doubled as a nightstand. The floor was hard-packed earth. Tent City was meant to be a temporary bivouac, but the 29th Division had been here for months.

As James anticipated, Graves Registration hadn't yet come to collect Dobbs's personals. On the nightstand were a kerosene globe lamp, a paperback book, an ashtray, and a half-empty bottle of ale. James disregarded them and went directly for the footlocker.

It was still padlocked. He required only a few seconds to manage it; he had learned safecracking from the best—

a second-story man called Bobbo from the Virginia State Penitentiary. The OSS had brought him in to teach the craft to fledgling spies.

"You've a feel for it." Bobbo had complimented James. "I might have a position for you after the war ends."

"I suspect the State Pen may have a position for you, Bobbo."

He wasn't sure what he expected to find in the footlocker. Holding the penlight in his teeth to free his hands, he dug down through folded woolens, underdrawers, socks, a pair of shined inspection boots, personal items such as a shaving kit and some opened letters postmarked Boston. He scanned a couple of them before determining they were merely V-mail from home. Disappointed, he repacked the locker as neatly as he had found it. What had he expected? A photo from Adolf inscribed *Thank you, Rick?*

Outside, the scuffle of approaching boots alerted him to the roving watch's return. He extinguished the penlight and hunkered in the darkness. The rover stopped near the back of the tent to light a cigarette. His burning match flickered dimly through the thick canvas. The guard drew smoke into his lungs with the sound of an inhaling bellows. He farted with gusto, sniffed the air and muttered, "God, what died?" His rifle clattered as he switched shoulders and went on his way.

James waited another minute before he switched the penlight back on. The thin beam darted before it settled on the paperback book, a copy of Dickens's *Great Expectations*. The edges of a photo extending from the pages caught his eye. He extracted it.

"Holy Moly!"

It was her. The girl in the park. Constantina.

Pretty women, Grams once cautioned her grandson, often had homely souls. If you wanted to be happy for the rest of your life, she advised, go out and marry an ugly woman with big, solid feet and a strong back. Then pray, James had teased back, that you didn't live too long.

God, was Constantina gorgeous! In the photo she wore a long, black off-the-shoulders evening dress and what appeared to be a real diamond necklace that dangled into the hollow of her cleavage. James envied that damned necklace. A one-star general was by her side. They were hooting it up over cocktails, elbows hooked together, and toasting each other among a ring of military admirers, both American and British.

James failed to recognize the one-star brigadier, a robust man in his late 40s with a florid face that stretched from his double chins all the way to the top of his thinning pate. Captains didn't run in the same circles with generals.

Odd, James thought. What was Dobbs doing with the

photo? A woman wouldn't ordinarily give a possible suitor a photo of herself with another man.

Still puzzled by the photo the next morning, James begged off training to attend sick call on the pretense that he was seeing double and suffering dizzy spells from his head injuries. Much of the swelling had receded, but his eyes were blacker than ever. A medic issued him a little envelope of APC and a light-duty chit for 24 hours.

He left sick call and went directly to Colonel Branson's deputy commander, a young major with general's stars in his eyes. Major Feldt knew everybody who was anybody in England. James waited outside the Quonset, set companionably next door to the battalion CO's, while a platoon of field soldiers in combat gear double-timed past. "*I wanna be an Airborne Ranger, I wanna live a life of danger . . .*" After the runners rounded a curve in the dirt road, he went into the hut and closed the door behind him. Feldt was alone, having apparently come up for a breather from having his head stuck up Colonel Branson's rectum. He looked up, annoyed at the unannounced intrusion. He was a handsome, well-formed man who must once have been a college-jock heartthrob.

"Captain Cantrell." The major sniffed. "Don't you know how to knock before entering a superior's office?"

James rapped his knuckles on a wooden chair.

"What do you want, Cantrell? Haven't you already caused enough trouble?"

"I didn't see Colonel Branson in his office . . . ?"

"He's out observing training. I say again, what do you want?"

James tossed the light-duty chit on Feldt's desk. "I want to make sure the colonel gets this."

Major Feldt looked at it. "Why didn't you leave it with the sergeant major's PAC clerk?"

"I simply couldn't bear the thought of not seeing you today, Major."

Major Feldt scowled. "One of these days, Cantrell, you're going to push too far. You're not malingering, are you, Cantrell? You know how Colonel Branson feels about malingerers."

James half grinned and raised an eyebrow, looking back at Feldt. "Yes, sir. It's obvious. I should have been a major by now."

There went his bulldog mouth.

"What I meant to say," he amended, "is that he's made it completely clear."

Not mollified, Feldt stretched back in his chair behind his desk and regarded the visitor with eyes suspiciously slanted.

"You do have a couple of good shiners there," he finally observed.

"Painful, too, sir. Do I get a Purple Heart?"

He was doing a poor job of buttering up if he expected a favor.

"What do you have to say, Cantrell?"

"One thing, sir. One of the men found this photograph and wants to return it, but we don't know who the people are. I thought you might be able to advise, since you're virtually a walking authority on who's who in Europe."

"I do know a few important people." He accepted the photo. "A real looker."

"The girl's not bad either."

Feldt glared. "I was referring to the lady."

"My mistake. Who's the general she's playing patty elbows with?"

"That's General Walter Sowell. He's new to the theater, so I don't know much about him."

Three other senior officers were identifiable, one British, the other two American. Major Feldt named them a little huffily, as though to stress how any knowledgeable, aware, *intelligent* officer with career in mind would have recognized them immediately.

Well, excuuuuuuse me!

"How about the dame?" James asked.

"There's a rumor that General Sowell was involved in a romantic intrigue with a young lady. That's talking out of school and I don't want it repeated."

"Major Feldt!" James exclaimed, sounding offended. "I don't even talk *in* school."

Feldt snorted.

"Who is she, Major?"

Feldt studied the photo and shrugged. "She's probably rank happy and wouldn't give a mere major the time of day."

"Maybe if you told her you're going to be a general before the war is over . . ."

Feldt scrutinized James's face for signs of sarcasm. James smiled innocently.

"I'll take care of the picture," Feldt offered.

James plucked it from his hand before it could disappear. "We'll return it. There's at least a two-day pass in it for the sergeant who found it."

"Haven't you heard?" Feldt smirked. "All passes have been canceled. We're on movement alert. Besides, you can't return it to General Sowell. He turned up dead a few days ago."

As James expected, he *was* as likely to grow wings as Constantina was to keep her date with him. But the least he could do was give her a chance. He showed up at Victoria Station and stayed for an hour past date time. He smoked two four-packs of Lucky Strikes waiting for her.

A pair of uniformed military police wearing web gear, .45 Colts and MP brassards patrolled the barnlike train terminal checking for AWOLs. They took a closer look at James on their third pass when they found him still waiting. He sported his Limey disguise of stocking cap, mustache and sunglasses to hide his blackened eyes. He even exaggerated his limp to give the impression he might be an English air crewman recuperating from wounds.

“Wha’s ’appening, chaps?” he greeted the MPs amicably in his best cockney. It still came out sounding Okie to his ears. He didn’t think the MPs would notice.

“It’s a long war,” the taller MP said.

“That ’tis, Yank. And it ain’t over ’til the fat lady takes the podium.”

Ain't? Did Brits say *ain't*? If he got hauled in again for AWOL, there would be no more house arrest. Colonel Branson would throw his hummingbird ass in the brig and then personally tie him to the prow ramp of the first Higgins to ram ashore on France two days from now.

"I sure do wish that fat bitch would get up and sing," the other MP said.

James offered them cigarettes, not the C-rat Lucky Strikes he hoarded for himself and which would have given him away, but, instead, war-rationed *Tank* cigarettes. They accepted. He lit the fags with a British-made *Hitler* match. They inhaled and watched the match droop and burn out. The taller MP laughed.

"Just like Hitler's dick," he said.

James chuckled with them and they went on about their business, apparently convinced James was legit non-GI. They strolled casually about. It was an off-day for them, a bit of an opportunity to relax, since all GIs were confined to their posts on alert. Little did they or most other GIs realize that this time there really would be the long-awaited landing in France.

Another half hour passed and James had to accept the fact that Constantina was a no-show. He fumed. Some gratitude the bitch showed for his having saved her life. On second thought, perhaps *he* ought to be grateful. A black cat crossing in front of you meant bad luck. At least two previous Yanks whose paths this cat had crossed were now dead—and Major Harris couldn't be far behind them.

"How did General Sowell pass from this cruel vale of tears?" James had asked Major Feldt.

"His heart quit on him. Everybody said he was as healthy as a horse. Now get out of my office, Cantrell. I have work to do."

It was time James got down to detecting. After all, it was something he had been good at. Besides, he didn't

want to still be here when the MPs made another round. They might want to take an even closer look.

Ninety percent of detective work was nothing more than wearing out shoe leather. He had a lot of shoe leather but little time remaining to wear it out. At least London was socked in with fog and cloud cover, a typical British spring, which meant he wasn't likely to get strafed. Not unless the black cat crossed his path again.

He bought a reading glass at the newsstand by the door and stepped outside on the high steps above Vauxhall Road to scrutinize the photo through it, attempting to unmask some clue in its background. The blown-glass chandelier with pendant crystals looked elegant and antique. Like that which might hang in a fashionable old hotel ballroom or private castle.

He visited the Greater London Historical Society, housed on the lower floor of a side-street building whose upper floors, the curator told him, had been bombed and burned out at the start of the Blitz back in 1940. The sad-faced old gentleman wore eyeglasses as thick as the bottoms of mason jars and had a neck like a turkey's. He peered at James's photo with the aid of the reading glass, then looked up with his rheumy eyes, nodded authoritatively and sniffed with disdain.

"'Tis as I thought," he said. "Bang on. Any gentleman of culture and history worthy of the designation should recognize it. That chandelier along with its three mates previously adorned the great room of Louis the Fourteenth."

"I'm glad to have seen Paris once, since it means it won't be necessary to see it again."

"You possess a peculiar manner of speech, young man. Neither the King's English nor quite, heaven forbid, Yank."

"My mother was from Timbuktu. I inherited the impediment. I take it the chandeliers are no longer in France?"

"Are you daft? They're far too exquisite for either the Frogs or the Bosche. They've managed to survive the war up to this point in the dining room at the Hyatt Hotel."

"Will you direct me there?" James asked.

"Proceed to the corner and turn left. Go too far and you'll end up in Paris again."

"I can hardly wait."

The dining room at the Hyatt featured a coffered mahogany ceiling, mahogany wainscoting and a mahogany floor. Silk moiré walls, Persian carpets, and the four Louis the XIV chandeliers softened the wood. There were no bomb holes in the ceiling.

The concierge took one glance at the photo. "Naturally, everyone who is *anyone* knows Lady Constantina, the most beautiful woman in London."

"Naturally," James said. How could the Brits be so damned condescending? "I'm a photographer."

"You sound Yank."

"I snapped this picture of Lady Constantina and General Sowell here last . . . uh . . . last . . . Let me take a look at my notes."

He patted his pockets absently. The concierge proved too impatient to wait, as James hoped. "It had to be last Wednesday at the Widows and Orphans Dinner," he obliged. "I understand the poor chap with her—General Sowell—was found deceased in his vehicle the morning after. Bad form, that."

"Inconsiderate," James agreed. "He must have had one deuce of a hangover."

The concierge looked James over. "I'm afraid I don't recall your being the official photographer at the event," he challenged.

"Short photogs have a tendency to blend into the silk moiré walls. *Lady Constantina* ordered the print, but I neglected to obtain an address in order to deliver it."

"A woman of mystery, that one. She comes. She goes. But always alone when she comes and she goes."

"I thought she was with General Sowell."

"Some say she was, some say she wasn't."

"I was hoping the hotel might provide her post address in order for me to deliver this print."

"We shan't have that information, but aren't you working tonight?"

"Every mule has his day free of harness."

"Quite. Quite. I was about to propose you deliver it to her at tonight's event. Lady Constantina always attends military affairs. The annual British-American Friendship Ball is the most distinguished affair of the season. Now, if you will pardon me, I must attend to preparations. We are anticipating more than one hundred guests and their ladies. Quite a social 'appening for wartime London."

"Quite. Quite," James echoed.

OSS sub-headquarters in England was innocuously located in the cubbyhole office of a front business called British Isle Exports on Southwark. James checked in with *Uncle Henry*, as he was beginning to think of the stentorian OSS station chief. Henry pushed back from his desk and regarded his visitor with the same expression he employed for most occasions—that of a mortician. He seemed in no mood for bullshit.

“Who is Helen Hulbert and what were you doing in London when Captain Rick Dobbs caught a bullet?” he demanded forthrightly. “I’ve read the CID reports.”

Just as forthrightly, James told him everything, beginning with his suspicions that Constantina had somehow coerced or persuaded Dobbs to help arrange Major Paul Harris’s abduction, then apparently shot him to death in some kind of altercation on Albert Embankment.

“I gather that after Dobbs helped snatch Harris,” James speculated, “the Nazis had no further use for him. In fact, he became a liability.”

Henry nodded without comment. James showed him the photo of Constantina and General Sowell together. Again, Henry nodded without reaction.

"The general succumbed to a terminal case of heart failure a couple of days before Slapton Sands and Hog's Breath," James said.

Henry considered it. "So it's your belief she's a gestapo agent and that two officers in the United States Army were her dupes?"

"Skirts *are* getting shorter."

Henry thoughtfully unfolded his lanky body and stood up to stare out his window. There was nothing to see except a narrow alley and an overflowing trash can.

"To date," he mused presently, still staring out the window, "we've identified and apprehended about fifty German secret agents working in England. Most of them were turned by SI or British MI6 through the Double Cross System and are now working for us as double agents, broadcasting misleading messages back to Hitler.

"We thought we had all of them until about two months ago, when the Enigma boys began intercepting communications indicating the gestapo have seeded fresh plants among us, their primary objective being Operation Overlord. That's about the time Constantina showed up in London."

"You've known about her all along!"

Henry reoccupied his desk chair. "We got interested in her because of *her* interest in the military, but we can't prove anything. She's become quite the fluttering social butterfly—but if she's a black-bag job, she's very good at it. We can't even break her cover story."

"Which is . . . ?"

"Constantina Chiapetta was supposedly born and raised in London of Italian immigrants. Educated at Oxford, after which she spent two years in the United States obtaining a degree in psychology at Yale. She vanished in April

1943, as far as documentation is concerned, until two months ago.” He sighed expansively and shook his head. “After the clusterfuck that was Operation Tiger back in April, you would think higher commands would know better than to put Overlord officers in harm’s way again.”

“We’re still learning lessons from World War One,” James said.

“So are the Axis armies. Fortunately for us, we learn faster than they.”

James stuck a cigarette between his lips but left it unlit while he massaged his bad leg. Henry didn’t smoke.

“From what we can glean from intercepted communications, we don’t think Major Harris has talked so far. He is one tough cookie, from what I hear,” Henry continued. “There was some chatter about the gestapo retrieving an expert interrogator from London—a psychologist—for the task of questioning him.”

“Constantina?”

Henry shrugged.

“Any lead on where Harris might be held?” James asked, leaning forward.

“We assume somewhere around Cherbourg. We’re trying to confirm that now. Major Harris could have convinced them he knows nothing. That means they may be snooping around trying to find a second Overlord to work on.”

Henry’s brow knitted. His funereal voice dropped to the bottom of the casket. “James, you have fifty-eight hours left.”

James stiffened. “Sir?”

“Fifty-eight hours to locate Major Harris and either rescue him or silence him before he spills everything. Eisenhower is postponing the invasion once because of weather. I don’t think he can risk another delay. If we’re right about Constantina, she could be the key. Work fast—or prepare to lead your boat team ashore on Normandy.”

“Clear enough,” James conceded. “One more question, Uncle Henry . . .”

“Don’t call me Uncle Henry.”

“If you were suspicious of Constantina, why didn’t you have an agent on her?”

“We did. He’s identified in your photo as General Sowell.”

James was already laying out a plan of action by the time Constantina, fashionably late, arrived at the Hyatt for the British-American Friendship Ball. He had begun to think she was a no-show, frightened off, perhaps, by the incident with Captain Dobbs on Albert Embankment. But there she was, and every male at the ball was suddenly back in high school trying to impress the prom queen.

She entered like royalty, glistening black hair pulled back in a bun, aristocratic eyes coolly observing the gathering of well-scrubbed officers and their ladies. She had legs. My God, did she have legs. And cleavage. All amply displayed by a little black evening number that might have gone better on some lucky man's bed, or GI cot for that matter. The diamond necklace at her throat caught light from the chandeliers and flashed it back in prisms.

Conversation seized as she stood there wearing a half smile as though to say she *owned* this place and every male in it. The buzz resumed only after a waiter brought her a cocktail and a half dozen stag officers stumbled all

over their feet and each other in order to win the privilege of escorting her to the hors d'oeuvres.

No wonder she was known as *Lady Constantina*.

James went to work, leaning against a door frame at the top of a little marble stairway leading into the ballroom, casually smoking a cigarette with a drink in his other hand. Appearing totally at ease and comfortable in his dress blues disguise as a one-star general. He had wanted to go with two stars, but Uncle Henry warned him not to push it and generate unwarranted interest. One stars were a nickel a dozen in the European theater; two stars were a more-restrictive clique.

Tonight's objective, as he laid it out in his mind, was to convince Constantina, first of all, that he was a young, cocky general out for a good time. Second, he needed to create the impression that he was an exclusive member of the Overlord planners, that he knew the location, date and time of the invasion, which he in fact did, and that Constantina might be able to milk him dry by employing sex and alcohol judiciously.

Thus, while he pretended to be vulnerable to her wiles and she worked on him, he would be doing the same to her in reverse. If she was indeed the Nazi psychologist being recalled to France to interrogate Major Harris, which Uncle Henry believed likely, it meant she knew the location where Paul was confined. James had to devise a way of getting that information out of her. Quickly.

It was a serious and dangerous game of spy versus spy. She had murdered at least one GI officer, perhaps two, and was responsible for Major Harris's ending up in the hands of the gestapo in France. James had one primary advantage in the game, however. Beautiful women like Constantina were accustomed to men jumping through hoops in order to please and impress them. She used men. Therein lay her weakness. She would never expect a mere man to be using her.

Bring on the lions. Let the games begin.

Several minutes passed before Constantina noticed James, and only then because he was staring at her from eyes still blackened and slightly swollen from his encounter with the Nazi commandos aboard LST-505. She tilted her chin haughtily against him.

He grinned when she glanced his way a second time. Her face clouded at his impudence, then suddenly opened in astonishment when he placed a forefinger across his upper lip to indicate a mustache.

Recognizing him then, she laughed with a flash of remarkable white teeth and immediately excused herself from her ring of show-off Tom Sawyer admirers. Covetous eyes watched the snug, black dress caress its owner's marvelous bottom as she sashayed over and posed at the bottom of the marble steps, looking up at the little Napoleon in army blues at the top of the steps.

"'Tis you," she purred, sounding both surprised and suspicious. "And you *are* taller without your mustache. A brigadier, no less. Is the uniform yours, or are you in another disguise?"

He manufactured a hurt look. The uniform, in fact, was a bit oversized on his frame.

"Are the diamonds yours?" he challenged back, his gaze dropping toward her bosom.

That seemed to ruffle her feathers. Clearly she wasn't used to being mocked. She scowled and started to turn away in a huff.

"I like the view from the rear almost as well," he said.

That stopped her. Her shoulders stiffened. She glared at him. "I would suspect that with such bad form you must see more of women's rears than their fronts. You are an impudent little man, are you aware of that?"

"Absolutely, Constantina. Tall men are often impudent."

She considered that for a moment, then burst into

laughter as clear and merry as the brook that ran over stones through the old homeplace back in Oklahoma. Speculatively, almost cautiously, she reevaluated her would-be suitor.

"You do appear six feet tall from this angle," she said. "What was your name?"

"James." He indicated his name tag, straightened his shoulders and puffed out his chest with self-importance. "Brigadier General James Doss."

"We seem to keep bumping into each other, James."

"Coincidence, my dear lady. And fate."

He liked it when she laughed. "I must apologize for my beastly lack of memory, Brigadier General James Doss. 'Tis just that during our last encounter—"

"I'm sure a beautiful woman like yourself gets her life saved every day—"

"—you were wearing sunshades, a cap, and that barmy mustache. I took you for a corporal, or at best a sergeant. You're rather young, wouldn't you say, to be a general?"

"I wouldn't say. Not if a very special job requires my particular talents."

"That sounds very important," she cooed.

He tilted his chin. "Maybe it is."

He deliberately swayed a little as he finished off his drink with a manly gulp and signaled for a replacement. He dropped his cigarette butt in the bottom of the used glass before the waiter balanced his tray and rushed off.

"Tell me more," Constantina said in husky tones, languidly taking a step up the stairs to get nearer. "You must be a very special general."

He smelled her perfume. Rather, her perfume coiled out and caressed him and teased his nose and eyes toward her cleavage. His throat thickened, making it all the easier to appear on the verge of intoxication. He puffed out his chest even farther.

"You might say I'm essential to the war effort," he said, slurring his s's a little.

"Ooooh! How intriguing."

She floated up the remaining marble steps and stood close. She wore high heels that added to her already considerable height. There were certain benefits to being short. For one thing, it placed James's eyes on a level to peer directly into her bosom. She knew where he was looking. She smiled and went to work. "I have always admired red hair," she said, stroking the whitewalls of his GI haircut. "You weren't really AWOL when the airplane attacked us? Not a general officer, surely."

He exaggerated drunken looks in all directions to make sure no one was eavesdropping. "I was on special assignment."

Her eyes narrowed slightly. "I heard an American officer was killed in the park."

Ignorance was often the best ploy. "Is that so? By whom?"

"I assumed it was shrapnel from the bombs," she said, relaxing.

She was very good. James must be careful not to overplay his hand.

A big band started to play in the ballroom, drawing couples out onto the dance floor beneath revolving ceiling balls shooting bolts of colored light. "Midnight Serenade" by Glen Miller. Constantina clapped her hands in delight. "How wonderfully romantic!"

While she was thus diverted, watching the dancers, James dumped his fresh drink in the potted palm next to him. He was draining the last drop into his mouth when she brought her attention back. He grinned at her around the rim of the glass.

"I need another," he said. "This may be my last free evening."

“Oh?”

Let her nibble on the bait a little longer. He motioned for two more drinks.

“Bottoms up!” he encouraged. “I feel like celebrating. A toast. To the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met.”

Which was true. Farm girls might be comely, but they were rarely beautiful. Women in Oklahoma City were pretty enough, but homicide cops seldom rubbed elbows with high society unless one of them ended up with a cut throat or a bullet through the gizzard.

“To the most interesting man at the ball.” She flattered him.

She sipped. He bolted a mouthful, then held it in his cheeks until she turned to watch the dancers, whereupon he spat back into his glass and emptied it discreetly into the potted palm. Damned plant would be either dead or pickled by this time tomorrow. He was betting on dead, considering the quality of wartime rotgut.

“Do you dance, James?” she asked, nodding with approval at his empty glass. She wanted to get him drunk; he wanted to get her drunk. Liquor made tongues wag.

“Do a hound bark in the woods?”

“I wouldn’t know.” She sniffed, then smiled her most seductive. “I love Glen Miller music.”

“He’s dead. Or at least he’s presumed dead.”

“His music isn’t. And we aren’t. We’re young and alive and living in interesting times. Dance with me?”

He awarded her with a graceful bow. “M’lady. How about your other suitors?”

“Fie on them.”

He was making pretty good time for a chap who had been stood up by this same dame only a few hours ago. They wended their way around the edge of the polished dance floor to a table in the shadows near the wall. He ordered more drinks on the way. Fortunately, each table entertained a potted plant as a centerpiece. This one was

about to come down with a severe case of alcohol poisoning.

They danced to Glen Miller and Bing Crosby. She kicked off her high heels to equalize their height, but she was still taller than he. He didn't mind; his face was nearer that remarkable bosom. He felt he was at his wittiest, most charming self ever. It wasn't just the alcohol, either. Although she kept plying him with drinks to keep him well-oiled, he doing likewise to her, he emptied his into the table centerpiece at every opportunity. He was afraid the damned pot would overflow before the night was over.

It was a hell of a way to start a relationship, he mused, each of them wanting something from the other. They were running a delicate balancing act, the two of them—she scheming to wrangle everything she could out of him, he maneuvering on her for the same reason.

Even though she was working him, he could tell she was having a good time. Even though he was working her, he was also having a marvelous evening. Every male obviously envied him. All those important uniforms and this little stranger ends up with the belle of the ball.

"The only thing missing is the glass slippers," he slurred.

She giggled. "And the coachmen and white horses."

"Bring on the white mice, a pumpkin and an old babe with a wand."

She snuggled deep into his arms as they whirled their way around the dance floor below the colored flashing lights. She was starting to get tipsy. He kept urging her to drink with him, match glass for glass, confident he could outdrink her if he kept her honest while he devised distractions that allowed him to further inebriate the centerpiece. He pretended to be drunk; she was no longer pretending. Moisture seeped out the drainage hole in the bottom of the pot.

Constantina flattened her belly against his to keep

her balance, leaning heavily into him. James's hands got lower and lower on her hips during the slow waltzes.

He put some more bait on the hook. "We could have had an entire day together if you had met me at Victoria Station. This may be our last night together. It'll be hard for me to see you from France."

She stopped dancing and clasped his hand with both of hers. She even manufactured tears on demand. She was a cool one. Dobbs must have fallen real hard for him to have betrayed his friend, his government, and the thousands of GIs tasked with the landing.

"France! Oh, James! That's so dreadful. Where will you be? When will I see you again?"

James winked exaggeratedly. "Loose lips sink ships. Hitler's little friend and all that."

"Of course, darling," she purred. "I love to slow dance with you."

"In another day or so," he teased, "you'll meet another general and ours will be nothing but another whirlwind wartime fling."

"How beastly of you to say such things! I'll think of you every day."

"I'll think of you when I'm on the beach," he murmured into her hair, which by now she had released from its bun to flow around her bare shoulders.

He moved near their table, against the wall away from the crowded dance floor, and kissed her in the shadows. She kissed him back hungrily, their tongues exploring. She tasted sharp and clean from gin. He suddenly knew he must have her completely, at least once. So what if he was mixing business with pleasure? That was the name of the game, wasn't it? That was how you manipulated the unsuspecting.

She withdrew from the kiss, only a few inches, so that her dark eyes seemed to invite him into their unfathomable pools. Her eyes misted and he thought that, for once

that night, she might not be playacting. He inhaled her scent and closed in to complete the kiss. He lost all sense of time and place and purpose. He was a man kissing a woman to whom he was frankly attracted. Nothing more.

“Take me home with you?” he whispered. “For a night-cap.”

She gently placed a fingertip between their lips. Then, suddenly, troubled and anxious, her hands trembling, she gathered up her little black sequined clutch purse and sprang to her feet. She swayed, looking down on him through tears wetting those magnificent Roman cheeks.

“I’m sorry . . .” she managed, her voice catching. “I’m so sorry . . .”

She turned to rush away. He was stunned to think he had lost her so near the finish line. He wasn’t even sure he had the heart to continue this deadly charade in which they were entangled.

She completed two agitated, unsteady steps toward the marble staircase that led away from the ballroom before the reality of the situation, the necessity of continuing it, caught up to him. James shook off the spell and jumped to his feet. He had to stop her. There was too much at stake.

Her retreat faltered at the same time. She halted. He saw her shoulders and spine stiffen. She spun back to face him. The tears were gone. Resolve and determination reappeared in her posture and expression. She had made a decision. She rushed back to the table and grabbed his hands.

“James, darling. Come with me.”

Black widow spiders, he couldn’t help thinking, always ate their mates.

James smoked a Lucky in the darkness outside the hotel on Cadogan Place, the brim of his gold-braided uniform cap pulled low over his eyes. It was Constantina's suggestion that he leave first and wait outside for her in order to avoid attracting attention. An air-raid siren shrilled in another part of the city, reminding James again of the war's proximity and of how little time remained before Allied armies invaded occupied France. Bombs in the distance went *Crump! Crump!* Antiaircraft fire webbed the black English sky with red tracers and ack-ack bursts. The Jerries were up and at it again.

There was a blackout over London. Windows and doors all over the city were covered against leaking light. What, the Bosche couldn't find London if the lights were out?

Presently, the hotel door cracked, releasing a brief flash of dim light along with the lady in black. The door closed. James drew deep on his cigarette, making the tip glow to illuminate his face.

"James?"

“You were expecting Winston Churchill?”

She glanced fearfully toward the tracer fire in the sky. It reflected against her face. She shuddered and took his arm, clinging and leaning on him to keep her balance.

“We must hasten,” she urged. “The curfew, you know.”

They hastened, their good moods returning even before the siren sounded All Clear. Laughing and holding onto each other when she lost her balance and James pretended to lose his. Both had had a great deal to drink, almost as much as the potted palm and the table centerpiece, but James kept sober by reminding himself that his Roman goddess possessed the heart of an assassin. His job was to make her slip up and reveal some clue as to Major Harris’s whereabouts.

Grams always cautioned him not to put all his eggs in one nest. But if you only *had* one nest . . . For all he knew he could be wasting his time while the clock was running.

She lived upstairs in a surprisingly shabby apartment building a few blocks away from the Hyatt. Its hallways were dimly lighted and even shabbier than the exterior. He heard a BBC broadcast on a radio through the door at the near end of the third-floor hall. Constantina’s flat was at the other end. She leaned against her door frame. He encircled her waist with his arms. She sagged willingly into him and kissed him openmouthed with passion and the promise of better to come beyond the door.

What lies beyond the door? James, you are one suspicious little beggar.

In this business, it paid to be cautious of even an unlighted lamppost on the corner. They were playing high-stakes poker here.

Constantina fumbled a key into the door lock while he held her steady from behind with his hands around her waist. Laughing a little, she rubbed her fanny suggestively into his groin. Damn! She made it hard for him to keep his mind on business.

The door swung open. She moved aside with a smile and an inviting gesture for him to enter ahead of her. It was pitch black inside. He hesitated, blinking, listening for some whisper of sound to give away whoever might lurk inside. He thought of Dobbs and Constantina's little black purse. He considered slipping out the Fairbairn-Sykes fighting knife strapped to the inside of his calf.

She giggled. "You're not a cat who sees in the dark, James?"

"Only in bedrooms."

"Naughty James."

She reached inside and turned on the light, a single weak bulb hanging from the ceiling on a long, dusty cord. Wary and distrustful, James half-crouched in preparation while his eyes darted from side to side. To the left a worn sofa against the wall, a low coffee table and a chair in front of it. To the right a little kitchenette with a table, chair and a stubby breakfast bar. Straight ahead an open door led to a bed made up with a lamé spread. Worn and faded linoleum of a purple pattern covered the floors and clashed with the green walls, which were totally bare except for a framed print of the infamous dogs wearing green eye-shades playing poker around a table.

Constantina looked amused. "'Tis it not what you expected, James?"

"Not from a woman who wears a diamond necklace," he admitted.

"This is wartime London, James. Flats—*any* flats—are hard to come by."

This was the apartment of an ordinary working girl, one who obviously had no finer tastes. He wondered if he might not either be wrong about Constantina or if this was not hers at all. Say, a secret safe house used for nefarious or emergency purposes while she lived elsewhere as *Lady Constantina*.

The dogs playing poker! She has to be shittin' me.

She closed the door but left it unbolted. Topsy and giggly, she swept into the bedroom to pull the blinds. James watched her through the doorway. She looked at him, laughing as she tossed back the covers, then stepped out of sight to one side. He heard a door open and close and thought it must be a closet.

Taking no chances, James bolted the living room door against any surprise visitors. Constantina reappeared after a minute with her dark eyes smoky with what he hoped was desire. She had kicked off her heels and gotten rid of her earrings and diamond necklace and clutch purse. That left the little black dress and whatever she wore underneath that little black dress. James's throat tightened. He felt his breath catching.

It's a helluva job, but somebody's got to do it.

For all he knew, she was thinking the same thing. They'd have to wait and see how it turned out once the flesh settled.

She came to him, smiling, eyes glistening. She slid the uniform bill cap off his head and sailed it across the room toward the sofa. Next, the blue jacket with its rows of medals. Then the tie came off, slowly and sensually. She playfully twirled it in the air like a lasso and let it settle on the sofa with his coat and cap before freeing the top buttons of his shirt. They kissed deeply, standing in the front room with the eager bed visible over her shoulder. If she was faking it, she ought to be in Hollywood.

He let her lead him to the bed. Warning alarms were going off like a fire station in his head. *Hey, dummy. She's the Black Widow.* He ignored them. He wasn't thinking with the appropriate head. Had it been this way with Captain Dobbs and General Sowell? General Sowell was an SI operative; he should have known better.

James should know better.

"You're the first man I've brought here," she whispered hoarsely, nibbling on his ear, blowing her breath.

It sounded good, even if she was lying.

"You're the first woman I'm here with," he said.

They collapsed with passion on the foot of the bed, melded together, her legs over his and her hem almost up to her panties to expose those long, wonderful legs. Breathing heavily, kissing, he ran a hand up between her legs until he felt the soft cushion of hair contained in silk. She inhaled sharply.

"James. Oh, James . . ."

An Academy Award winner, this one.

He was trying to think objectively with the right head to exploit the situation for OSS goals. That was his job. He wanted her to believe he was under her spell—and the influence of liquor. The former was almost completely true, the latter not quite.

He thought he might have her where he wanted her. She obviously thought the same thing. After all, a woman leading a man by the handle had him under control. They both went back to work.

"James . . . ? James, when will you be leaving me?"

"When the sun comes up?"

"You know what I mean! To France?"

"Soon enough."

She kissed him. "Will we have other nights?"

"In France?"

"Can I come to you? Where?" Sounding excited.

"You couldn't until after pacification. It's too dangerous. Besides, where would you stay?"

"Near you, James."

"You don't know where I'll be."

"Wherever it is. You'll tell me, James. If it's Pas de Calais, I'll find a place there. If it's somewhere else . . . ?"

They were at a point in their relationship when a vice cop sprung his badge on the prostitute and explained that the jig was up. A judicious administration of truth serum might accomplish what passion and cocktails could not.

Uncle Henry might even turn her into a double agent to add to his reformed stable of other Nazi agents Hitler had sent over.

He doubted it. She was apparently guilty of at least two murders. That meant the firing squad. She would realize that and not go willingly into that dark night. Besides, they didn't have time for standard interrogation techniques. That left him the path he was on. There was still time. His best work was yet to come, during the warm glow of after sex when asking personal questions that could lead to unexpected answers was expected. Besides, he could always call in Uncle Henry's boys if all else failed. In the morning.

She couldn't come right out and ask him where and when the landing would be. He dared not come right out and ask her where the gestapo was holding Major Harris. So they thrust and parried verbally between kisses lasciviously intended to wear down each other, neither one drunk enough to make mistakes of judgment. They were at an impasse.

She pulled back. "Darling, I'll mix you a nightcap," she said, sounding resentful at the difficulty of making progress with him.

Apparently, she didn't think he was drunk enough yet. Neither was she.

"Mix one for yourself," he suggested. "I never drink alone when a gorgeous woman is in bed with me."

"I'm not in bed yet, clever Dick."

"You will be."

She returned from the kitchenette with gin and tonics. She handed James his and set hers untouched on the nightstand by the bed. He lay back. The buttons on his shirt were undone and the tail wrestled out of his trousers. He reached for her hand.

"I'll go and freshen up," she evaded. "The loo is down the hall."

"I'll be right here 'til the cock crows."

"Of course," she said, and smiled before she left, shutting the bedroom door on him. He heard the *clack-clack* of the outer door opening and closing. Later, he realized how she had managed to lull him into a false sense of security.

So far, things weren't going well, at least not as far as his mission was concerned. Left alone, he had the opportunity to look around.

The bedroom was as sparsely furnished as the living room: bed, nightstand, dresser, and, on the wall, another framed print of some anthromorphic dogs. In this one they were playing dominoes. *Strange*, he thought. Except for a couple of psychology books, there were almost no personal effects lying around. Every other dame's apartment he had visited was stuffed with Teddy bears, knickknacks, pajamas or slips on a chair, underthings drying on a line in the kitchen. Her flat almost looked unoccupied.

He cracked the shade over the single window and looked deep into a narrow, dirty alley three floors down.

The door to what he assumed to be a closet was locked. It took him only a second to slip the lock using his laminated fake military ID card. To his surprise, the small windowless closet beyond contained not a single stitch of clothing. Instead, there was a wooden table and chair, and on the table a W/T radio with keypad, batteries, a coil of commo wire and a gray-green attaché case. The ordinary English working girl, especially a Roman goddess with diamond jewelry, seldom had a two-way radio in her closet. Especially not one manufactured in Germany.

He was right: This was a safe house, not Constantina's residence.

She would be returning shortly. He had to hurry. The attaché case was locked. Ashes smeared the floor underneath the table where she apparently burned coded messages after receiving them on a pad next to the radio. He

held the pad up to the light at an angle to view any impressions a pen might have made through the previous page. He detected nothing obvious, but he ripped off the page nonetheless, folded it carefully and placed it in his pocket for later analysis.

He heard the outer door open to alert him to her return. He turned off the closet light, shut the door, threw himself back onto the bed and reached to the nightstand for his drink. His blood froze when heavy footsteps accompanied hers into the living room. At least two men. Constantina must have had Nazi goons standing by in another room to back her up. He was about to find out where Harris was imprisoned a lot sooner than he expected. They were going to snatch him right out of the Black Widow's bed.

The bedroom was empty when the intruders directed by Constantina burst in. It didn't take them long to figure out that James had gone out the window. He hadn't had time to close it after him.

“Wie bitte? Das glaube ich nicht.”

The Nazis flung aside the blackout curtain. To one side, James hugged the brick wall like a fly against a window-pane, digging his fingertips into the mortar cracks between bricks, his perch a ledge the width of a brick that separated the floors of the apartment building. He would have been as exposed as that same hapless fly but for the London black-out. The darkness was so complete that only a strip of night sky above the alley delineated the shapes of buildings.

Weak light from inside the bedroom framed the window. Three heads thrust out through it. Constantina's, along with the shaved pate of a man as square and ugly as a rusted fireplug and the emaciated features of a taller, slimmer man just as ugly as the first. They peered into the alley three flights down.

Couldn't the bastards have waited until afterward?

James held his breath. Light from inside hampered the searchers' night vision.

"The crazy little man jumped!" Constantina concluded, sounding both annoyed and admiring.

James caught sight of a pistol clutched in the fireplug's large hand. He was dead meat if they spotted him. Either they captured him for interrogation, or they killed him outright. Either way amounted to the same thing.

He couldn't even defend himself. Freeing so much as one hand to reach for the knife concealed against his ankle meant throwing himself off balance and therefore off the ledge. He found himself, as Gramps used to say about the Great Depression, caught between a rock and a hard place.

"He must be injured in the alley." The skinny man had a high, thin voice.

"Or hiding," Fireplug said. "He can't go far."

"Get down there. Quickly!" Constantina barked in German. "He can be valuable to us. I want him alive if possible. There's a torch by the door. Take it."

Uh-oh. Here comes trouble. Way to go, James. Your bulldog mouth has once more succeeded in getting your hummingbird ass in a crack.

The skinny man took off running. James heard the front door slam.

"The fool! Can't he be quieter?" Constantina fussed.

James kept perfectly motionless, so near the window out of which poked Constantina's and Fireplug's heads that he could have reached out and touched her. Not, to be sure, as he had touched her just minutes ago in the bedroom when the night still lay ahead with promise. He thought of grabbing her hair, if worse came to worse, and taking her with him in a lovers' leap.

Constantina and the other Bosche agent argued in low tones while they waited for the third to reach the alley

below. Although Gramps, being from the Old Country, insisted James learn German, James had always disliked the guttural quality of the tongue. Especially when a woman spoke it. More especially when that woman intended to kill him. Weren't black widows supposed to slay their mates *after* the act while the poor unsuspecting chap was enjoying an after-sex cigarette?

Eavesdropping, James learned Henry's intelligence had been right on. Constantina *was* the psychologist being recalled to France to interrogate the "tough cookie" seized off LST-505. The fireplug and his emaciated sidekick had blown in earlier in the evening and were waiting in a nearby commandeered room for Constantina to come home. She apparently hadn't known they were arriving tonight. James's showing up at the Hyatt provided an unexpected bonus that solved the problem once and for all if things went Constantina's way.

She was furious. "He knows where and when the landing will take place," she raged. "I would have had the information with only a little longer to work. I distinctly told you not to come until tomorrow anyhow."

Why hadn't the suckers listened to her?

"Where does Herr Himmler recruit such idiots!" Constantina anguished.

Whatever convoluted intrigue ultimately produced the current situation didn't concern James nearly as much as how he was going to get out of it.

"The boat is waiting," the long-suffering Fireplug said. "We must not be in the Channel when day breaks. My orders are to deliver you tomorrow to Chateau Fleuve."

Constantina sighed. "Very well. Find the American. We'll take him with us if he's alive. If he gets away or is dead . . . Either way, I am finished here. I have already left too many skeletons."

A flashlight came on in the alley below. Its beam darted furtively from side to side in the blackness, lingering on

garbage cans, spotlighting a rat the size of a small house cat, then a house cat, lean and mean with yellow baleful eyes, hiding from the rat. Constantina and her cohort leaned farther out the window, peering down. James dared not twitch a muscle or an eyelid.

The disembodied torch beam explored the alley in quick flickering movements. It stopped. It swept back and forth at the base of the apartment building where the American should have landed if he went out the window. Slowly, it crept up the brick wall, past the first floor, lingering on the precarious ledges between floors as though its operator might be considering possibilities.

Then, abruptly energized, the splash of light skimmed up the side of the building as swiftly as a squirrel scaling a pecan tree. James caught his breath. Light pooled on the opposite side of the third-floor window. It explored a length of ledge on that side. Finding nothing, it flashed across the two faces in Constantina's window and caught James clinging to the wall like a startled bird on its roost.

Constantina cried out a warning. Next to her, the fire-plug swung his pistol. James reacted instinctively, conscious of a single thought: survive and escape. Capture was not an option.

He let go his fingertip grasp on the bricks and propelled himself with his legs at the gun and gunhand. For an instant while he was airborne he thought he had missed his mark. Next step, Pancakeville.

The fingers of his left hand grabbed the Nazi's thick wrist and held on. He swung on it like a pendulum while his right hand clawed at the windowsill. He managed to find a grip that held his weight. With that as leverage, he extracted the off-balance Nazi gunner from the window like a loose tooth.

"Auf Wiedersehen, asshole."

The man shrieked like a falling seagull all the way to

the concrete alley, where he hit with the sickening sound of a busting melon.

James felt his one-handed grip on the windowsill slipping. The next splat in the alley would be his. Using his feet to walk across the wall, he swung himself upward enough to catch a piece of the window with his other hand. Things were looking up. His back muscles tightened, anticipating a gunshot from below, but apparently the skinny Nazi was too busy dodging falling bodies to go for his heat.

Straining, he chinned himself on the sill and heaved himself inside through the open window. While he was still catching his breath, stunned that he had managed to pull off such an impossible high-wire act, he saw Constantina dart out of the radio room carrying the gray-green attaché case he had discovered earlier. He was too exhausted to give chase, his muscles quivering uncontrollably from overexertion. He saw her long, long legs carry her out the door into the hallway. The door slammed and she was gone.

By dawn, the dead German in the alley had been fingerprinted and photographed in an effort to identify him and link him to other spies and provocateurs in England. Police also recovered the corpse of the elderly woman whom the Nazi agents “liquidated” while appropriating her room. She had been strangled. Chalk up another victim in the Black Widow’s wake.

Uncle Henry saw to it that James was kept in the clear and out of police hands. A tip to the constabulary that this was a matter of utmost state security did the trick. James went to ground inside OSS headquarters at British Isle Exports while Henry worked the telephone with military and civilian authorities in an attempt to organize a response to circumstances. James overheard him discussing options ranging from strategic bombing to commando raids and assassination. Major Harris had to be silenced.

Frazzled from having been jolted out of bed at 2 A.M., Henry wearily kicked back in his battered office chair and regarded his agent. James sank deeper into an overstuffed

chair and swung his legs across the arm. He yawned mightily.

"Keeping you up, Cantrell?" Henry inquired mildly.

"I intend to write a letter of complaint to Adolf."

"Get used to it. You may be our only available option."

A sobering thought.

Chateau Fleuve, the name the German agent dropped in his quarrel with Constantina moments before James extracted him through the open window, meant something to Henry if not to James. Apparently that was where Constantina was bound.

"It's the only thing we have to go on," Henry pointed out. "There was nothing discernible on the notepad sheet you pilfered. We have found no radio codes or any contact information in her radio room. She's too slick to be careless."

He produced a laminated map of the French coast and stabbed a blunt finger at a site startlingly near the Strait of Dover across which the Allies were scheduled to start their mainland invasion the day after tomorrow. James got up out of his chair to look over the station chief's shoulder.

"Chateau Fleuve is a seventeenth-century nobleman's castle located in the little town of Sainte Anglais, near Bayeux," Henry explained. "It's well-guarded, since it not only houses a gestapo regional headquarters but also an important Nazi telephone exchange. I think we all agree it is the logical choice where Major Harris could be held for interrogation."

James was thinking of the taste of Constantina's lips on his, of running his hand between her thighs . . .

"Are you listening, James?"

"Certainly. Mind if I smoke?"

"Not if you don't mind if I pass gas."

"Go right ahead, sir." He fired up a Lucky Strike.

Uncle Henry shook his head, puffed out his cheeks and

went on without other change of expression or inflection. "Rommel is still as dangerous as a cornered wolf and will remain so up until hours before Operation Overlord is launched. It's imperative that we reach Harris and neutralize him one way or t'other. We've got one chance at it. If he's not there, or if he breaks before we get to him . . ."

He left the implication unfinished. Since the "Desert Fox" had too few units to guard the hundreds of miles of vulnerable French coastline, he had adopted a daring strategy of flexible response by stationing his battalions miles inland, ready to be deployed within hours to wherever the Allies invaded. His plan depended upon receiving advance intelligence about D-day, where and when, in order for him to shift his forces to arrange a reception from which the Allies might never recover. A worst-case scenario led to a negotiated truce that left Hitler in power and still in control of much of Europe.

"What's my only available option?" James asked.

"We will infiltrate you tonight to link up with the French Resistance and determine if Major Harris is present at the chateau. I think we owe him a rescue attempt, if one is feasible."

James snapped erect with sudden intensity. "I can't agree more, sir. I'm the logical choice to go, of course. I know Harris on sight and I'm available and prepared. I speak both French and German . . ."

"You don't have to sell yourself, James."

"Paul Harris," James added, "is also my friend."

Henry didn't bat an eye. He returned James's gaze. "The only other option if Harris *is* at Chateau Fleuve and rescue is impractical," he said, "is to bomb. You realize, naturally, that if you and the French cannot get him out alive, he must not remain accessible to the Nazis."

"I'll get him out, sir. If anybody can."

Henry nodded. "One more thing. You possess the same knowledge about Overlord that led to Major Harris being

targeted. Apparently, your new girlfriend knows that you know.”

The chief opened a desk drawer, took out a tiny envelope and solemnly passed it across the desk. James accepted it with the same solemnity. There was no need for explanations; James knew the score.

The envelope contained rubber-coated capsules known as L-pills. The *L* stood for *lethal*—in other words—self-termination. Biting down on one caused near-instant death. Otherwise, they could be swallowed and passed harmlessly through the digestive tract.

“Two capsules,” Henry said. “One for each of you—if it should come to that. Call it the final option.”

Uncle Henry made the necessary arrangements. A black-painted B-24 Liberator from the 801st/492d Bombardment Group would insert James behind enemy lines by parachute to link up with the Cafard Circuit of the French Resistance near Sainte Anglais. The “Carpetbaggers,” as the 801st called itself, was the transport arm of the secret war against the Germans, a special air unit designated for clandestine operations. For cover, James’s Liberator would fly into France amid a squadron of B-17s before breaking off to deliver its single passenger to a lonely forest clearing some 20 miles back of the Normandy beaches.

“Good luck, James,” Henry said in that melancholy way, as if he were bidding a terminally ill patient farewell. At least their relationship had progressed to a first-name basis. With all proper dignity, Uncle Henry embraced James.

“Does this mean we’re engaged?” James cracked. “Do you think we might ask Mr. Churchill to be best man?”

In the gathering purple dusk of nightfall, James trailed

his aircrew and their gear out to the flight lines. He wore a GI uniform and standard-issue jump helmet, since to be caught by the Jerries out of uniform meant immediate execution as a spy. He would have to chance a civilian disguise once he linked up with the resistance.

Although prepared for martyrdom, Winston once said, *I prefer that it be postponed.*

On his battle harness he carried a holstered Browning 9mm semiauto pistol with a spare 13-round clip and his Fairbairn-Sykes stiletto. The Sten submachine gun secured to his left shoulder fired the same Parabellum rounds used by the Browning. Since it would be a short one-way trip, he had already donned a T-9 parachute. He didn't bother with a reserve, since it constituted extra baggage and was useless anyway at the low altitude from which he was jumping. This would be his first combat jump, his first jump of any kind since undergoing training at Area F. Although he was still not comfortable with parachutes, he was wired mentally and physically for action.

None of the crew wore the usual oxygen tanks and heavy padded flightwear, since the Liberator would be flying low and fast. That made it easier for them to get around inside the bomber's cramped interior. While the pilot and copilot ran through their long preflight lists and the gunners settled in, the bomber/navigator installed James into a fold-down jump seat near the bombardier station, where he could see through the cockpit the shadows of regular bombers lining up on the taxiways.

"That channel out there is the shortest stretch of water in the world when you're going out on mission," the navigator said, "and the longest in the world when you're on your way back."

Gramps used to say almost the same thing: *The longest road in the world is the road that leads back home.*

Back on the farm along about now, Gramps and Grams would be getting ready to start the afternoon milking,

calling in the cows from the pasture—"Oooo-eeee, Mollie Belle! Ooooo-eeee, Caroline!"—reuniting cows and penned calves after half of each cow's produce ended up in buckets for the cream separator. James delighted in sunsets on the farm—the western sky turning brilliant with color beyond the hay meadow and the little creek lined with cottonwood, willow and sugar gum. Breezes were redolent with the smells of grass, creek bottoms and cows' breath.

Bombers took off two at a time at 30-second intervals, thundering down the side-by-side runways and lumbering into the night air, where squadrons, groups and wings circled over England to get into formation before rendezvousing with fighter escorts out over the water. James's plane was one of the last to take off. It lifted easily and climbed steadily since its cargo consisted of only one man. The massive formation lined out and hauled coal for France and Germany.

Buckled into his seat, overwhelmed by the drumming of hundreds of mighty engines all around, James felt as though he was at the epicenter of a powerful cyclone. Every once in a while he caught a silhouetted glimpse of another war bird, but mostly he waited in darkness broken only by night-red instrument lights that illuminated the faces of the crew like glowing carnival masks.

Colonel Branson, his battalion CO of the 29th Division, must be going apoplectic all over again about now. A medical light-duty chit was no license to go AWOL. The colonel probably had a cell prepared especially for James's little "corn-pone ass." Make that *little corn bread ass*. Too bad James wouldn't be back to occupy it before the invasion.

He thought of the mission and how in one American army officer captured by the German gestapo lay the key to Operation Overlord's success or failure. James had tonight, tomorrow and part of tomorrow night to rescue or

“neutralize” Major Harris, as Uncle Henry had put it. *Neutralize* was such a, well, neutral term. Could James handle termination if that was the only way? Did he have another choice?

If Overlord failed on Tuesday, the Allies might not try again for years, if ever.

There was always the chance that Harris was not being held at Chateau Fleuve, or that he had been moved. James refused to dwell on that possibility. Constantina was on her way there, was perhaps already there.

What if he encountered her again when they were enemies on clearly drawn opposite sides? He had little doubt she could and would kill him if it came to another confrontation. The question was, could he kill her?

The navigator nudged him, cutting into his woolgathering. James blinked.

“You got a quarter hour before we put you out,” the crewman shouted in order to be heard above the aircraft rattle and the roar of the engines. “Do you want to take a look?” He indicated the bomb site.

The bombers had already passed over the Channel and were penetrating occupied French airspace. The main formation climbed toward the stratosphere in its long flight toward targets in the Reich while the separated “Carpet-bagger” bled off altitude. It attempted to avoid known radar and anti-aircraft sites by entering France low and black and alone using dead reckoning, whereby position is maintained by calculating direction, speed and elapsed time.

Through the bombing lenses, James made out white ocean breakers bashing their heads foolishly against long irregular stretches of light-colored sand. He failed to distinguish the infamous defenses of the German Atlantic Wall, they blended so well into the terrain. If there were anti-aircraft guns down there, which there surely were, they kept mute to avoid giving their positions away prematurely.

Beyond the beaches lay the darker and more ominous-looking interior of enemy country.

"You OSS guys got gonads bigger than bowling balls," the navigator said with admiration.

"Right now mine feel about the size of BBs," James said.

"We'd better get you ready. It's almost time."

With the bombardier/navigator's assistance, James crawled down into the empty bomb bay. The plane had dropped even lower. The ground cushion of air next to earth bounced the Liberator about hard enough to rattle James's teeth and make footing precarious. Otherwise, the jump appeared simple enough. All he had to do was brace himself above the doors, wait for them to open, then let go and drop out of the belly like goose shit.

He tightened his helmet and snapped the loose end of his parachute static line to a structure support. At this low altitude there wouldn't be time for him to pull in the air. It would be a hop and pop and land, almost that fast. The navigator said something, but it was so noisy James couldn't understand him.

The doors opened wide in a single broad aperture that revealed the earth passing black-mottled below between James's braced legs. Cold wind howled past. The navigator reached down from above in the hold to help James steady himself. He was talking to James, but James still couldn't hear him.

Leaning down, holding on by one hand while the navigator clasped his arm for extra stability, James scanned the forward blackness for the drop-zone lights of the Resistance reception committee. The Resistance practiced an unvarying procedure for pickups: four flashlights marking the drop zone with a giant letter *L* that also indicated the direction of the wind. As soon as the reception was sure it had been seen, someone among it flashed the Morse Code for the letter *X* for authentication.

James spotted the DZ lights, pinpricks against the night earth. They were coming up fast. The code for X began blinking. He felt the navigator release his arm and slap him on the helmet as the pilots throttled back on the engines. He glanced up once, saw nothing except the greater blackness inside. He paused a few seconds more within that vortex of sound and fury of wind and throbbing engines and pounding heart. The lights were almost directly below.

He took a deep breath and let go, snapping his boots sharply together and slapping his chest to bring his elbows in tight. He plummeted into breathtaking space.

Almost immediately he felt his canopy streaming out into a positive opening. There was a sharp tug upon full inflation that jerked his feet higher than his head and would have made of him a permanent soprano if his harness hadn't been tight enough.

Then he was floating in a sudden dead calm, all the more pronounced following the bedlam inside the Liberator. He experienced a sense of elation. *What a lovely night*, he thought. All those stars shining in the sky. A good 'coon-hunting night back in the Cookson Hills once the moon came out.

He hardly had time to revel in his success, however, before the lights on the DZ below his drifting feet went unexpectedly insane, dashing and darting about like frantic fireflies on dope. They extinguished themselves simultaneously as bursts of rifle and automatic-weapons fire shattered the night. Muzzle flashes flickered in vicious pinpricks from the west corner of the clearing.

Oh, shit in a washtub!

A T-9 parachute was all but unsteerable. Desperate, James climbed his front risers in order to spill air out the back of the canopy and push himself toward the east side of the DZ. He was coming down right in the middle of a

firefight. There was no way to avoid it unless he suddenly sprouted wings. His insertion had apparently been compromised.

Damn! Trouble seemed to follow him like stink on skunk.

James drifted toward the edge of the open field, next to the trees, and prepared for his PLF, parachute landing fall. Feet together, knees slightly bent to absorb the shock. From across the clearing to his rear came an extended burst of automatic-rifle fire, its death-drum *paradiddle* threatening to stab him in the back with every beat. As the black ground surged at him, he pulled the chute's front risers all the way to his knees to slow his descent. He still hit like a ton of manure and tumbled head over kneecaps, hitting his helmeted head hard against the solid ground. That rang his ears for him, more so than any cuff from his old school marm at McKey.

The canopy collapsed like a used condom. Wasting no time, James struck the quick release to get out of the harness, rolled away and ripped the Sten free from his shoulder to get it ready for action. The distinctive *ackety-ackety* of an assault rifle lashed whip-crack rounds into the trees on either side.

Springing to his feet, he dashed for cover as more

high-powered bullets cracked and snapped. Once in the shadows of the timber, he dropped to his knees to orient himself, confident he couldn't be seen. He was breathing hard, not so much from exertion as from the sudden excitement that had greeted his arrival. *It was so nice to be expected.* It seemed everything except a marching band had turned out in his honor.

Something *had* gone terribly wrong. But how could the krauts have known of his arrival? Only two people in London were aware of his mission: Uncle Henry and himself. In France, however, the Cafard Circuit would know. From previous experience, James accepted that there was no such thing as perfect security. Somehow the gestapo and German intelligence must have received a tip.

At the moment it didn't matter how the Germans found out. What mattered was E&E, escape and evasion. There was no way, landing in shit like this, he was going to come out smelling like roses. The best he could hope for was to come out of it at all. The mission had failed even before he put boots on ground.

The farm-to-market road where a Frenchman, code-named "Levesque," was to receive him in case something went wrong on the DZ lay about a hundred yards or so to the east. Bolting a round into the chamber of his Sten, James set out toward it through deep woods so dark they seemed to absorb all matter. He had to feel his way through.

From his rear came sounds of pursuit. Men as blind as he thrashed about in the woods. A good number of them, judging from the racket they were making. Maybe, James conceded, he should have stuck to being a cop, where good guys were good guys and bad guys were stupid. He swore at that moment that after the war he was going back to the farm to raise good horses.

The way things looked right now, there was not going to be an after the war for him.

He broke out of the woods onto a small weed-overgrown clearing illuminated by starlight, beyond which lay the road marked by a stone-wall fence. The upper rim of the red, rising moon was barely visible above the wall. The road was white and narrow and winding, past the fence and on up, where it climbed into some rolling hills in the distance. The moon would be full up in another few minutes.

He trotted across the clearing, keeping watch over his shoulder, hearing his pursuers still coming in the forest. Firing had ceased on the DZ, which meant the French reception members had either scattered and escaped or were dead or captured. He vaulted over the stone wall and found himself next to the road. He looked up and down it, seeing nothing except more road narrowing and twisting off in both directions. Neither Levesque nor anyone else was waiting for him. He was a stranger in a strange land.

The moon was brightening by the minute. On the other side of the road, James could make out freshly mown hayfields that stretched toward bare hills. Not so much as a prairie-dog hill—*They didn't have prairie dogs in France*—to offer cover or a place to hide. Even a hare racing across those flats would have stood out like a bull at a tea party. There was no chance of escape in that direction, nor could he run either way on the road without being targeted. And behind him, the hounds on his trail were about to break out of the woods.

Trapped.

He thought of the wily old 'coons he had hunted in the hills when he was a kid. Just when you thought you had one cornered, he seemed to come up with one more trick in order to get away. However, James was as fresh out of tricks now as the big 'coon he and Gramps and Uncle Pony finally treed that time and shook out of a sycamore right down into a pack of dogs yammering for his blood. James had felt sorry for the old ringtail and commented

how it didn't seem quite fair, what with one 'coon against eight or nine vicious dogs.

"We coulda shot him with the twenty-two, in which circumstance he wouldn't have had no choice at all," Gramps explained. "But now that ol' boy has the option of whipping all them dogs and walking right out of here."

James sighed. The dogs almost always won.

He knelt on both knees behind the rock fence and prepared to make his stand. He cocked the Browning 9mm and placed it back in its holster. He checked the Sten to make sure it was ready. He couldn't determine how many were coming for him out of the woods, but he assumed reinforcements were on the way. He might pick off one, two, even three. But sooner or later they were bound to get him.

As a final precaution against being captured alive, he retrieved the L-pills from his pocket and popped both into his mouth, holding them in his cheek away from his teeth to avoid prematurely biting down on them. With rare exception, men subjected to extreme torture succumbed to it and eventually told everything they knew. Those who didn't break did so only because they died first.

The L-pills provided a more-civilized alternative to death by torture. Death came swiftly and painlessly. One moment you were in this world. Bite down and the next instant you were . . . You were *where*?

The moon popped full up like a bright egg yolk and exposed a figure emerging from the woods on the other side of the clearing. He hesitated as though sniffing the air for a scent. The distinctive cut of his helmet identified him as a German soldier. Two more soldiers eased out of the shadows. They sniffed the wind suspiciously, like hunting dogs. Shadows strung out long behind them in the new moonlight.

Although James had killed before and expected to kill again, it was not something he relished. You destroyed a

little of yourself each time you killed another human being, no matter who they were. Still, faced with limited choices, it was better to deal out death than to be dealt it.

He tongued the two capsules from his right cheek pocket to his left.

The three German soldiers advanced cautiously toward the rock wall, their weapons up and ready. James took a bead on the center kraut. He drew a deep breath, let out half of it, held—and squeezed the trigger just as the target took another tentative step.

The liquid recoil of the little submachine gun into his shoulder felt comfortable and reassuring. The Jerry disappeared behind the flickering muzzle flash.

This first action triggered immediate reaction. The surviving Germans fell in the grass and returned fire. It sounded like they had an MP-40 and a machine pistol. Rock splinters fractured off all around James's head. Slugs ricocheted off the wall, shrieking.

James ducked full behind the stone fence and scurried to a new position from which he stole a quick peek. The Germans were on their feet and maneuvering against him, dodging and darting. He fired at the lead man and missed him. The other soldier ripped off a burst from his MP-40.

Rock dust stung James's face. He staggered back, gasping from shock and surprise—and inadvertently swallowed both L-pills. Horrified, he dived to his knees and gagged himself with his finger, desperately hoping to throw up the capsules.

Too late. They were gone to his stomach. He wondered with fleeting cynicism if the rubber coating on the pills had ever been actually tested on a real human's digestive tract.

When shit started coming down on a man, it really came down.

He popped up like a Jack-in-the-box and sprayed the clearing with bullets to drive his attackers to cover and

give him a few more minutes before he got shaken out of his sycamore. He was considering taking his chances and fleeing down the road before they closed in again, when he heard the geared-up whine of an auto engine approaching fast down the road to cut him off.

He spun on his knees to confront this latest threat. A dark car braked into a slide, throwing gravel and dust as it skidded to a stop. James was about to bust it with steel and lead when a rear door flew open and a voice shouted in French.

“Cheveux Rouge, get in quickly.”

Cheveux Rouge—“Red Hair”—was his code name. This must be Levesque.

James sprinted for the car door and threw himself across the legs of the people occupying the backseat. The car roared to life. If the L-pills melted in his belly, James thought, it was better to die with comrades than in the hands of the enemy.

James scrambled to make a place for himself among his rescuers in the backseat and held on, bracing himself as the wildly swerving car careened along the road at full speed, its headlights extinguished, the driver guided only by moonlight reflecting faintly off the light-colored road. A spatter of final gunfire from the outwitted krauts punched harmlessly into the night. The black Renault took a curve without slowing, hurling the occupants of the backseat to one side, and then it was out of range and picking up more speed.

James extricated himself from the tangle of arms and legs. No one so far had so much as cried out. They were too busy driving, watching the road, or holding on for their lives. There wasn't much James could tell about any of them in the dark. The driver and a man wearing a cap held down the front seat. They were in a hurry to get off the roads. Cars in occupied France were authorized only for official business by police, firemen, doctors and of course, German occupiers. Citizens generally went about

on bicycle, foot or horse cart. Anyone breaking the rules on vehicle usage or disobeying the dusk-to-dawn curfew was subject to immediate arrest by the gestapo or the French secret police.

There were two people in the backseat with the rescued American, but he could tell very little about them. On the curves that threw them against one another, he did notice that the figure on his right seemed exceptionally small, almost childlike, while the other was not much larger. Was the French Resistance recruiting children these desperate days?

They all seemed content to wait until they reached their destination before explaining anything. James had never been known for his patience.

"Levesque?" he finally inquired.

"Gone," the driver replied in French as he skillfully slid the Renault around a corner. "Levesque is no longer with us."

Immediately suspicious, James demanded, "Where is he?"

Anyone, James feared suddenly, could have picked him up—say, the French police, known as *milice*—pretending to be the Resistance in some scheme to win his confidence and use him. In this land of war behind lines, you trusted people at face value at your own peril. James slid the Browning holster around where he could get to the pistol readily. It would be easier to wield inside the car than the more awkward Sten.

"How about explaining now?" James insisted, his voice hardened.

The car immediately braked and went into a side skid, throwing the passengers in the backseat forward. Even before the Renault fully stopped, the driver twisted under the wheel to shout at James, "You can get out now, Yank, as far as I'm concerned. No one asked you here. You bring us nothing but trouble and—"

His voice broke off in mid-sentence. The muzzle of a Browning in the Yank's fist pressed against his temple.

"I'll ask you one more time," James said, his voice cold and level. "Where is Levesque? You people better be who you say you are."

The car was probably full of enough armament to start the French Revolution all over again.

"Your driver gets it first if anyone moves," James promised. "Then you," he said, meaning the guy wearing the cap in the front seat. "In less than ten seconds I'll own this car and there'll be four dead traitors in the bar ditch for the krauts to police up. Now start talking."

A hand gently touched his arm. "*Oui*," said a girl's soft voice.

"*Oui*?" James repeated, surprised. "A dame? Who are you?"

"Gabrielle Amandine Arneau," she said.

"Like the wine?" What a dumb thing to say, but it was the first thought that came to mind.

"With the headache that comes with it," said the girl's companion on James's other side.

"And who are you?"

"My brother Vinain," Gabrielle volunteered. "The gestapo picked up Levesque today," she went on quickly.

James felt a bit queasy. He hoped the damned L-pills weren't starting to melt in his stomach.

"Levesque is leader?" he asked.

"I am commander," the driver asserted gruffly. "Levesque had contacts inside the gestapo and was very useful to us. Someone must have found him out. He was picked up today in Sainte Anglais and transported to Chateau Fleuve for questioning. We were sure he was squealing like the weak pig he is. Germans tonight at the pickup point confirmed it."

"How much did Levesque know?" James asked.

"Only that we were to receive a package tonight at the

drop zone. Nothing more, I swear. We may have suffered other casualties there. We should not have come for you at all, except we are informed that your mission will win the war."

"Perhaps not win the war. Rather, to prevent its loss."

"It is the same thing."

It *wasn't* the same thing, but James let it ride. "*Comment vous appelez-vous?*" he asked.

"I am Fernand. We radioed London and informed them that we may have been compromised. By then it was already too late. You—the package—were airborne. London said the mission must go on. It is that vital."

"What do you know about the mission?" James asked, testing. He kept the muzzle of his gun pressed against Fernand's head. Fernand was afraid to move.

"My people were alerted to watch for unusual activity involving an American captured in England," he said. "This morning we were advised that the prisoner may have been taken to Chateau Fleuve. We assume he is the reason you come?"

James refused to take the cue. "And . . . ?" he prompted.

Fernand wasn't accustomed to being on the other end of an interrogation. He was growing more sullen by the moment. James tapped him lightly with his gun barrel to get his attention.

"The American prisoner is at Chateau Fleuve," Fernand confirmed.

"How did you find this out?"

"The Germans use French women as house cleaners. They in turn talk to us, as do other sources. Gestapo are heavy-handed and crude. They rendered the *Americain* unconscious with their brutish tactics, but they are trying to revive him. He almost died. An interrogation expert arrived last night to take over the questioning. This one is a woman."

Constantina!

"They must want his secrets desperately," Fernand said.

James sighed with pity for his captured friend. "You have no idea," he said. "Did Levesque know any of this?"

"I told you, he knows nothing except that we were to be at the drop zone tonight."

Not that it mattered now what Levesque might have told his interrogators. The Germans weren't stupid. At least, Constantina was smart enough to add up the facts. It could be no coincidence that an American operator was being dropped in to link up with the French Resistance in the same vicinity where the Overlord officer was being held. Add up two plus two and the answer came out: Someone had been sent to neutralize the army officer before he talked.

It was only a matter of time before Major Harris in his weakened condition told Constantina everything he knew right down to his wife's dress size. Overlord was in dire jeopardy.

"Can we get off the road now before the Germans discover us?" Fernand entreated. "This is insane to stay here after what has already happened."

James relaxed, leaning back in the seat but keeping the Browning in his hand. "You're the fool who stopped the car," James reminded him. "Let's go."

Gabrielle lay her hand on his arm again. "*Nous sommes les amis*," she whispered. "We are friends."

They quickly came to a small town whose streets and homes were completely darkened because of the black-out. They entered the back way. Fernand pulled up behind a tall house with a garage at the end of a row. There were a small courtyard to one side, an even smaller garden surrounded by clipped hedges, and a raked gravel path leading to the back door. It was late and the moon was still low and darting in and out from behind a gathering weather front. The invasion needed such a late-rising moon so the assault fleet would be shrouded in darkness as it approached, then lighted by the moon when the first paratroopers baled out of their planes and gliders.

Gabrielle and her brother got out of the car. James followed them. He holstered the Browning while still carrying the Sten. Fleeting moonlight revealed Gabrielle as a tiny creature in a long dress while showing nothing of her other features. She opened the back door, revealing a

darkened room. They waited there without conversation until Fernand and the other in the cap returned from garaging the Renault.

"Come with me," Fernand growled, still sulking. "How are you called, *Americain*?"

"You can call me . . . Robert."

"Uh," Fernand said.

He led the way down a narrow flight of stairs so dark James had to feel with his toes to keep from tripping. In the basement they came to a door with light leaking out from around it. Fernand rapped on it three times and waited.

"You must be very brave, Robert," Gabrielle whispered, standing next to James, "but you are not as big as we expected."

"Size is a relative thing."

"Were you injured?" she asked, concerned. "You are limping."

"An old war wound."

Someone inside opened the door. They filed into a large chamber with damp concrete walls and floor, the only furniture a number of wooden chairs and a table upon which burned a kerosene lamp. It provided James his first look at his redeemers.

There were three other people already in the basement—a horse-faced older woman in her 30s and two slender men wearing old caps and worn-out shoes. Most French these days were thin. Fernand introduced them as Yves, Pascal and Annee. His front-seat partner from the Renault was Deon, a lanky, blond man in his mid-20s who looked German. The names were probably assumed, since no one in the Resistance used his true name. A security precaution.

Fernand looked to be 40, older than the others. He was tall, rawboned, with cautious, sunken-in eyes and black hair. Vinain, Gabrielle's brother, was about sixteen, a

skinny youth with rusty disheveled hair and a frame that might have held 110 pounds if somebody drenched him in the Seine River.

Gabrielle was by far the more engaging of the lot. She appeared animated, curious, personable and interested in James. The family resemblance between brother and sister was profound, Vinain being a slightly larger cutout of his sister. She came up to James's shoulder, if she tiptoed, and weighed no more than one of the sacks of cow feed James used to throw over his shoulder to carry to the barn. Long hair secured in a ponytail was as red as James's, so red it looked orange. A full heart-shaped mouth, eyes as blue and clear as any James had beheld, and a sprinkle of golden freckles across her small nose completed the picture. Full breasts and a cute figure said she was probably older than her brother, but James couldn't be sure from their faces.

She clapped her hands in astonished delight upon seeing James's red hair and freckles, then scowled the next instant over the question in his eyes with which she apparently dealt on a regular basis.

"I'm almost twenty-two," she volunteered.

"You've just turned twenty-one," her brother corrected.

"Well. He can't be much older," she bristled, *he* meaning James.

"I'm fifty-eight, *jeune fille*," James said.

Her eyes widened. Then she giggled. "You are not. *Soigneux*, or your nose will grow. You are French, aren't you? You sound like a native of the South of France."

"That's me. A good ol' Southern boy. My Grams is from Montelimar."

That made her eyes dance. "I knew you were! What happened to your eyes? They're blackened!"

"A new war wound," James said.

The others, ignoring James, were busy throwing questions and answers back and forth about the action on the

drop zone. It seemed the Cafard Circuit half-expected a hot DZ, inasmuch as Levesque had been captured shortly beforehand, and had prepared for it. The fate of the Resistance fighters who created the diversion on the west end of the DZ that allowed the package—James—to escape to the east was still unknown.

“The *Geheime Staatspolizei*”—State Security Police—“are promoted because of their loyalty to Hitler and fascism rather than their ability and brains,” Fernand finally said, wrapping up the discussion. “Arnaud and Remy are too clever for them. You’ll see. They’ll return shortly.”

“We are praying for them,” said the horse-faced woman.

Watching James carefully, almost with hostility, Fernand raked a chair up to the table with his foot. He sat down and thoughtfully rolled a cigarette from makings carried in a tobacco pouch. He licked the paper and lit it by presenting it to the open top vent of the kerosene lamp. He twisted his head away from the heat and puffed until the cigarette tip glowed. He offered tobacco to James.

The man’s attitude rankled James in spite of the peace offering, made him feel like an unwanted guest who had already stayed around long enough to start smelling like day-old fish. He craved a cigarette, but he declined while he held Fernand’s gaze. The others stayed silent, watching, as though ready to take their cue from Fernand on how they should treat the stranger. Gabrielle edged nearer James’s side; she had made up her mind.

“Why do you call yourselves Cafard?” James finally asked to break the tension. *Cafard* was the French word for “cockroach.”

The horse-faced woman Annee and the one called

Yves openly chuckled. The others smiled. Even Fernand seemed to relax a little.

“Because, like cockroaches,” he explained, “we will survive and continue to plague the German kitchen.”

Cockroaches didn’t care *whose* kitchen they plagued, but James kept his opinion to himself. Although he wasn’t sure he could trust cockroaches by any name, he realized he had no choice but to get along with them, considering the time constraints under which he was operating.

“We will talk,” Fernand said. “Sit down.”

James walked slowly to the table, pulled up a chair and sat across the table from Fernand after placing his submachine gun on the floor at his feet. The rest of the band looked relieved. They pulled up chairs. Gabrielle seated herself next to James on his right. As a goodwill gesture, James took out a couple of packs of C-rat Lucky Strikes, shook one out for himself, and passed the remainder around. Gabrielle also took one. James lit it for her with a match while the others used the lamp globe. She inhaled amateurishly and erupted into a spasm of coughing. That broke up her friends. Fernand grinned, and then turned serious again. He leaned across the table in the lamplight toward James.

“Let me tell you how we see things in France,” he said with fierce intensity. “We French in the Resistance are always surrounded by the enemy, fighting them during the day and in the night while we wait for you and the invasion. The invasion will come soon, you tell us. You must have the perfect weather, you say. The tides, the currents, the moon and hours of daylight must be just right. In recent days we have seen increased Allied air reconnaissance. Day and night for weeks your Anglo-American air attacks hammer German radio stations, depots and other strategic sites. Even the Germans wonder,

as do we, when and if it will come. Some of them are beginning to think that Eisenhower and Churchill do not have the courage for it. We have our sources who tell us Rommel drew up a situation report to Rundstedt saying the invasion is not imminent. Rommel will set off for Berlin by car tomorrow evening to spend the night with his family. That is how much they believe in the invasion."

Agitated, he dragged on his cigarette furiously, blowing smoke out his mouth and nostrils.

"Where does it leave me and my people?" he demanded rhetorically. "We can hardly move anymore without the gestapo or the milice knowing about it. The Germans are trying to wipe out the Resistance before the invasion begins, if it begins. I ask you now, Yank, *will* there be an invasion, and if so, will it be soon?"

"There will be the invasion," James promised. "When and where?" He shrugged.

"That's not good enough!" Fernand rejoined angrily. "Now you are here. The Germans know you are here. What is it you wish us to do, you and the prisoner at Chateau Fleuve, before the Bosche kill us all?"

There was no other way to break it except straightforwardly, without preamble. "We must free the American from Chateau Fleuve by tomorrow at fourteen hundred hours," James said.

A hush fell over the basement. Fernand blinked.

"Are you a mad man!" he finally exclaimed. "I am responsible for my people. Not London. Not Paris. My people will not be sacrificed without good cause."

"There can be no greater cause in this war," James assured him. "You must trust me on this."

"In this war I trust not even my own mother."

"I am certain your mother does not trust you either."

There went his bulldog mouth again. Fernand glared. "It is impossible," he declared. "Do you hear me, *Amer-*

icain? Impossible. The chateau is guarded like your Fort Knox."

James looked him straight in the eye, seeking mettle somewhere behind the bluster and surliness. "Then we will break into Fort Knox," he said.

It is a mistake, Winston Churchill said, to look too far ahead, since the chain of destiny can only be grasped one link at a time. The chain, as far as James was concerned, stopped with the first link if he could not persuade the Cockroaches of how critical the mission was without actually telling them why. He gave it his best, appealing to their sense of duty, honor and patriotism. *Vive la France*, and all that.

“We will discuss it among ourselves,” Fernand finally consented. “You will wait outside.”

James smoked another Lucky while he cooled his heels on the bottom step of the stairway outside the basement door, the Sten across his knees, in the dark the only illumination the glowing red tip of his cigarette and the straps of lamplight seeping from around the closed door. He felt none too comfortable waiting for the decision. The destiny of the world might well lie in the hands of a bunch of “cockroaches.”

He consulted his watch. Almost midnight. In a few

hours' time, about 30 in fact, weather permitting, the Allies would invade France—and meet with certain destruction if Rommel received information on the Overlord plan in time.

A heated babble of French churned and percolated behind the door. What if the Cafard refused to cooperate? Where did James go from here? He had assumed Henry had everything lined out and that all he had to do was parachute in and lead the Resistance to glory. Apparently, Henry had likewise counted on the Cafard Circuit accepting James's leadership, as most any other cell would have done under the circumstances. James was learning the hard way not to count on anything behind enemy lines, especially when it came to the French. They were a contentious lot, independent to a fault, not always willing to meld together for the common good.

They couldn't even agree on which side they should fight in the war. Some went with the Allies, some with the Vichy, who recruited their own pro-German army; the rest surrendered to anything with a swastika on it. GIs often joked that extra cloth was sewn into the armpits of French uniforms to allow the soldiers to throw up their hands faster.

James's stomach gnarred. He hoped it was nerves and not the L-pills. It occurred to him that he was going to have to retrieve the capsules sooner or later. He made a face. This was getting to be a shitty job.

Occasionally, raised voices propelled understandable phrases through the door. The young girl, Gabrielle, sounded like she had more balls than all the men put together.

"They would not have risked sending him across unless his job was important," she argued. "The message we received before he came said it was vital to the war effort. We agreed—Fernand, *you* agreed—to assist in his mission."

"That was before Levesque was seized," Fernand shouted. "Things change in a war. We all understand that. We rescued him off the drop zone. That is all he should expect of us."

"He should expect of us that we live up to our duty," Gabrielle shouted back, refusing to give in.

"What do you know?" Fernand exploded. "You're no more than a tart of a girl who does not know what it's like to be under fire."

"I was there tonight."

"You were in the car."

Fernand's big fist crashed against the table. Voices lowered again to an indistinguishable drone. There were no further outbursts. Presently the door opened, framing James sitting on the stairs in a square of lamplight and throwing Fernand's shadow across the bare concrete floor.

"*Americain?*" he snapped, more sullen than ever. "How are we going to get the other *Americain* out of Chateau Fleuve?"

James stood up. "I'll have to look over the chateau before we make a final plan."

"It cannot be done at night with the curfew, especially not tonight, after what happened when we picked you up."

"At first light then? When the town starts to stir and we can mingle?"

Fernand grunted and went back inside, closing the door. There was more discussion. He returned shortly, followed by the others.

"We have decided to go that far with you," he announced. "But if I do not like the plan, my people and I will not take part."

"I've sometimes wondered what would happen," James mocked, "if somebody gave a war and nobody showed up."

Fernand scowled. "You mustn't be seen in a uniform,"

he said. "Get rid of it. Gabrielle will give you French clothes and show you where you can sleep. Don't worry. You will be safe here."

Gabrielle squeezed past Fernand and smiled at James. She carried a guttering candle in a porcelain holder. It silhouetted the outline of her petite figure through her thin dress. "Walk this way," she invited, leading the way up the stairs.

"I don't know if I *can* walk that way."

That elicited a trill of pleased, embarrassed laughter. She directed him to a second-floor room with its double windows sealed and taped with black paper. She set the candle on a stand next to a gigantic four-post bed. He watched her as she sorted through clothing in a closet to produce a worn blue chambray shirt, navy canvas trousers and a pair of old brogans.

"The shoes may be a bit big," she apologized.

"I've always wanted to be a circus clown."

"You're very funny," she said, laughing up into his face. "No one in France has fun anymore since the Germans came. I miss it."

"Thank you for tonight," he said. "I mean, for standing up for me in the meeting."

"It is the right thing," she said.

Candlelight highlighted her copper hair, glowed warm against her skin and accentuated the sprinkle of freckles across her nose. She kept smiling. There was nothing more lovely in the world than a young woman under candlelight.

"Take off your uniform," she said.

"Have we been properly introduced?" He glanced at the bed.

She blushed. "Not that, silly. I have to get rid of the uniform. Keep your weapons. You can put on the other trousers while I turn my back."

Which she promptly did. The house began vibrating,

windows rattling, as flight after flight of high-flying bombers roared overhead on their way to Germany. Gabrielle lifted her face toward them, showing her profile. There was something sweetly appealing about it.

"They are flying day and night," she said. "The Germans seldom fight them anymore until they reach Paris on their way to the Rhine River. Do you suppose the war is almost over?"

"I would say the beginning of the end. But a rattlesnake is most deadly when it is wounded and dying."

She clapped her hands. "Oh, that it would be *fini*! It seems to go on and on so that I can hardly remember when there was not a war."

Her face remained lifted in profile, pensive. "I used to pray when the planes flew over that an angel would come down from them and take me to a place where there were no Germans and no one being killed and tortured. Perhaps to a deserted island where it was always warm. The angel would be very handsome and we could live there forever. Just the two of us, living happily there and in peace for the rest of our lives."

"Have you given up?"

She blushed again, furiously. "I was younger then and very silly. Have you changed out of uniform yet?"

"Almost."

"Robert, you must please forgive Fernand. At the beginning Fernand was brave. *Fort*. Like you. But since the beginning we have had our friends killed and Fernand becomes cautious."

"A war cannot be won with caution."

"He understands that, I think. But still he is cautious."

James pulled on the canvas trousers. They were loose and covered his bare feet. He drew the ties snug around his waist. He was bare from the waist up.

"There," he said. "You can turn around now."

She looked at him, her blue eyes soft in the candle-

light. It made him uncomfortable, but he did not want her to leave.

"How long have you been with the Cafard?" he asked, to keep her there and talking.

"Since almost from the beginning." Her face saddened. "Since the Germans took away my parents and killed them."

She hesitated, as though undecided if she should go on. "My father was Jewish," she said. "Does that make a difference?"

"Should it?"

"To some people it does. Even in France, many do not like Jews."

There was something so innocent and charming about her that James resisted the impulse to encircle her in his arms and hold her tight until she was laughing again. He wanted her to stay with him now more than ever. Living on the edge, existing in the constant presence of death that narrowed time down to *this* minute, *this* hour, produced whirlwind wartime romances. You had to take life where and when you could before it was gone. At least he didn't think Gabrielle would kill him afterward.

She seemed to shake herself mentally, breaking the spell. She quickly gathered the parts of his uniform off the bed. The Browning pistol, the Sten, his stiletto and extra ammo she left untouched.

"I'll burn your uniform in the furnace," she said. "I'll see you in the morning bright and early."

"Breakfast in bed? For two?"

"You *are* funny, Robert."

She left after telling him how to get to *le cabinet*, closing off his last chance, perhaps, of dying happy.

The toilet was outside, as many rural and small-town French still did not have indoor plumbing. Hell, Gramps and Grams did not have plumbing. He went down to see

if he could pass the two L-pills, without success. Disappointed and more than a little anxious about it, he returned to his room and bed.

He thought he would never be able to sleep and was surprised when the soft purr of a little engine awoke him hours later. He got up and cracked the blackout paper. It was still dark outside, but the sky was beginning to pale in the east. Fernand was outside meeting two men who had ridden up on a little motorbike. They hid the bike in the garage with the car. James supposed they were the two missing Cafard from the diversion at the DZ. Home safely.

It was almost 5 A.M. James bathed from a pitcher of water and basin, dressed in his French attire, put on the too-big brogans, and settled down on the edge of the bed to wait for dawn.

Sainte Anglais came slowly to life ahead of the sun's arrival. Signs of war were everywhere, even in this small town. They were more subtle, not like London, where whole sections of the city had been bombed. A woman and her little daughter pushed a rubbish cart past notices in storefront windows proclaiming NO MEAT TODAY or RICE POSSIBLE LATER; working men in boots and berets carrying their lunches stopped to read new anti-Resistance posters showing a thug with a gun superimposed over Stalin, below which appeared the proclamation THEY MURDER! WRAPPED IN THE FOLDS OF OUR FLAG; houses sat shuttered and silent; women waited patiently in line at the bakery until it opened, since bread was rationed; the milice, the hated French security police, manned a checkpoint on the main road.

For breakfast James had *pain noir*, bread made from cheap flour and bran; ersatz coffee boiled from roasted grain and another big dose of Fernand's pessimism. It was a hurried meal, with James, Fernand, Gabrielle and

one of the men, Remy, who came in late from the DZ, sitting at the table. Remy was about Fernand's age and of the same dour temperament. Gabrielle at least brightened the meal.

"After last night," Remy reported morosely, "the Germans are tightening security throughout the town. Especially at the chateau."

"They know something is about to happen," Fernand said, just as morosely. They were a cheerful team. "I am against this action, *Americain*. It will attract unnecessary attention to my people."

James sipped his bitter artificial coffee. "You're on the record in opposition."

"It is impossible to get past the guards at the chateau," Fernand persisted.

"The difficult is routine, the impossible takes a bit longer."

James persuaded Fernand to reaffirm his commitment to at least give a plan of rescue a fair hearing, and to promise that his band would be ready for action. Fernand also agreed to get a clandestine radio message out to Henry in London confirming that Major Harris was present at Chateau Fleuve. Receipt of that message guaranteed James until mid-afternoon, 1400 hours, to rescue the army officer before bombers struck the chateau with such force as to destroy it and everything inside. Including Harris.

Gabrielle volunteered to accompany James to reconnaissance Chateau Fleuve; a young Frenchman and his girl out on a lovely spring morning should attract little attention. James donned a tan beret and Gabrielle playfully dabbed some flour around his eyes and worked it into his pores to make the bruising less noticeable. She seemed to consider it all high romantic adventure, an opportunity to tag along with the brave *Americain* who had dropped out of the sky to her.

They set out on the little moped from the garage, a kind of motorized bicycle whose small engine was started by pedaling. James intended using the side road from last night, except Gabrielle pointed out how suspicious that would look, since it would seem they were trying to avoid being seen. Instead, James *put-putted* the moped up the main thoroughfare to the milice checkpoint, Gabrielle riding sidesaddle behind him with her arms wrapped tighter than necessary around his waist. She wore a tan beret that matched his. It and her bright ponytail gave her a sassy, happy look. She made sure her loose skirt revealed plenty of enticing leg when they stopped at the checkpoint.

The milice knew her as a pretty girl around town who worked afternoons for a *tailleur*; they would never have believed she was also a member of the notorious Cafard Resistance. In less time than it took the two French cops to steal a look at her legs, she had them charmed and submissive with her teasing and her bubbling laughter. She clutched their arms possessively and smoothed down the older man's thinning hair, an action that made him red with pleasure. She rattled out nonsense about how brave and noble they must be to protect the town from crime at the risk of their own lives, which caused them to blush some more and all but ignore James. Her little charade was working fine.

Besides, James looked boyish and nonthreatening; the milice couldn't know that he was armed with a 9mm Browning concealed in an ankle holster and a stiletto strapped to his other leg.

"Where are you off to so early, *petite mademoiselle*?" the older milice gushed.

"To the café to introduce my cousin Robert from Montelimar," she said, still laughing with them. "Robert, this is Officer Fournier and Officer Rabaud. Are they not *so* handsome?"

With his red hair and freckles, James certainly looked the part of a cousin.

Conscious of last night's excitement in the countryside, the milice made as though to question James further. Gabrielle didn't give them a chance. She preempted by rising boldly on tiptoes to reward each with a quick goodbye peck on the cheek. She jumped back on the bike and James pedaled off, getting the engine started while Gabrielle waved back at the flustered cops.

"You're a born con." James complimented her. "They never knew what hit them."

"Thank you, I think."

"And sassy too."

"Do you think I'm beautiful as well?" she whispered into his ear as they chugged along the town's narrow main street, approaching Chateau Fleuve.

"No."

Constantina was beautiful.

"You don't!"

"You're something more than beautiful."

"What is more than beautiful?"

"I'll tell you when the time is right," he teased.

"In war there is no time like the present."

"We'll have to make time."

"Will we?"

"I promise."

"Do you often make promises you can't keep to lonely French girls?"

"Only to the redheaded ones."

Something about living on the edge exhilarated and made life sharper, cleaner, fuller, especially with a pretty young thing clinging to you and breathing in your ear. The L-pills in his belly merely sharpened that edge. Live in the present—for tomorrow may be *le mort*.

Gabrielle brushed her lips across the back of his neck, making the hair rise. Uncle Henry himself would proba-

bly come on mission if he knew how things really were.

But of course things weren't always this way.

Everyone seemed to know Gabrielle. Pedestrians waved and smiled and she waved back and called out greetings. She was very popular. Few demonstrated undue interest in James since to do so might call attention to him as a stranger. Occupiers and collaborators were always watching.

"Everyone thinks I'm nothing but a scatter-brained little orphan girl," she whispered. "What will they say if they knew I live a dangerous secret life?"

"They would fall in love with you."

"Is that what love is?"

"I don't know. I've never been in love."

"How wonderful, Robert! I've never been in love either."

The 17th-century Chateau Fleuve dominated the town square. It resembled a scaled-down Versailles, with its grand front entrance and wings on both sides that turned at right angles and veered off toward the rear. There was undoubtedly a basement level below the three main floors topped by a mansard roof with arched dormer windows. It had once been a nobleman's castle, but renovations over the centuries had replaced stone walls and moats with a high fence built of stone pillars and iron railings.

James took in everything about it as they passed, without seeming overly interested. The place, he realized with consternation, was a literal fortress, as impregnable now as when it had been surrounded by thick walls and moats. Uniformed sentries patrolled ancient gardens that must have been magnificent before the war. Now the mossy fountains were dry. The guards at the main door carried MP-40 submachine guns. Others at the front gate had set up a light machine gun behind sandbags and were smoking cigarettes and suspiciously watching people in the square.

Around one of the dry marble fountains were parked a pair of armored trucks, a Mercedes sedan painted German-uniform gray green, and two black Citroens, favored by the gestapo in France.

Fernand's concerns about attacking the chateau were legitimate. Maybe it could not be done successfully. Yet, James had never given up on anything without at least giving it a shot. He had won the welterweight Golden Gloves boxing championship his junior year at Oklahoma A&M by pure mule-headedness. He kept coming and coming until he wore down the odds and his opponents.

Gabrielle and he parked the bike and took a sidewalk table at the Café des Fleure, across the street from the chateau and down the block next to a medieval church. It was risky business, showing up as a stranger in town when the gestapo and security police were certain to be looking for last night's infiltrator. Sometimes, however, the best place to hide was in plain view. Besides, James had to study the layout of the chateau in order to build some kind of game plan.

They ordered biscuits and cups of ersatz coffee and sat close together, pretending enthrallment with each other while James sketched an outline of Chateau Fleuve, studied its strong points and weak points, and fired barrages of questions at Gabrielle. The Cafard had pulled surveillance on the chateau since the Germans occupied it shortly after conquering France. Gabrielle was quite competent in answering most of James's inquiries.

Three major entities occupied Chateau Fleuve, she said. Gestapo regional headquarters, including cells and torture chambers, took up the entire basement. A German telephone exchange with connections all the way to Paris and Berlin occupied the main floor. The sector military command overran the bulk of the remaining upper floors.

The military commander was a Colonel Zimmerman, who kept a French mistress; the gestapo commander was

a portly man named Arndt Schutz, who wore thick eyeglasses and was widely feared in the town because of his reputation for cruelty to prisoners and his dogged loyalty to the Fuhrer. Gabrielle supplied what she could on the guards, their locations and hours of shift changes, but things appeared to have changed somewhat after last night. Security had more than doubled. Even normal civilian workers at the chateau—housekeepers, telephone operators, kitchen help, and the like—were having to line up at the gate to have their credentials double-checked. The Germans must know the Allies had targeted Major Harris.

“It’ll take a battalion to break in,” James pondered. “It’d be easier to fight our way *out* than to fight our way *in*.”

The task seemed impossible, but every stronghold had its weakness, just ask the Trojans. If Cafard could somehow get inside—say, by posing as plumbers or electricians—and create a diversion—say, a fire or an explosion—they might provide the element of surprise needed for others to break the outer security. *Might* was the operative word.

It wasn’t wise for a stranger to tarry long in any one place and invite scrutiny. Especially not today. Still mulling over challenges the chateau posed, James had risen to return with Gabrielle to the moped, when he spotted a black Citroen bearing down the street toward them. Curious pedestrians stopped to stare after the car as it parked on the street in front of Chateau Fleuve.

A uniformed driver got out and opened the back door to let out a tall, dark-haired woman carrying a gray-green attaché case. James caught his breath as he recognized Constantina’s long, long legs and her elegant carriage. She wore khaki trousers and a stylish pale blue shirt with full sleeves. Of course, you could have draped a feed sack on that remarkable figure and she would have looked stunning. She paused a moment to put on sunglasses, even though the sun was barely up, through which she coolly

surveyed her surroundings in the manner of royalty auditing her kingdom.

James recalled how her thighs felt, running his hands up them to her . . .

"You know her!" Gabrielle charged, catching his expression.

James nodded.

"*She* is beautiful," Gabrielle said.

"And dangerous."

A pudgy German wearing a black suit and thick eyeglasses got out the opposite door of the Citroen to escort Constantina inside.

"Arndt Schutz," Gabrielle whispered, as though fearful of being overheard.

The purposeful way Constantina turned and strode toward the gate of the chateau made James suddenly worry for Major Harris.

The street was becoming crowded, what with men going to work and housewives getting an early start on shopping for scarce goods. James knew he had overexposed himself when he caught sight of two men elbowing their way toward the café. Both were dressed in black suits. One carried a portable military radio/telephone by a strap over his shoulder. Gestapo all had that stupid, predatory look.

James plopped some francs on the table and took Gabrielle's elbow, smiling as though nothing was wrong.

"We're about to have company," he said. "Do as I do. These chaps look like they mean business."

The capture of either James or Gabrielle individually would be a severe blow; of both, a catastrophe. Together they were a prize worthy of Constantina's talents. Gabrielle would know Resistance names, addresses and code words, James the secrets of Overlord. He couldn't even readily commit suicide, he reflected with wry black humor, since the damned pills were still inside his stomach. Maybe he ought to go against travelers warnings and start drinking lots of the local water.

The two gestapo weren't high on subtlety, dressed as they were like a couple of Hollywood gangsters. James led Gabrielle by the hand and left the sidewalk café walking rapidly, but not too rapidly. He changed his mind about the moped at the last moment and ducked toward an alleyway that ran alongside the medieval church. He glanced back, expecting to see the Germans chasing them.

They were wending their way through the tables on the sidewalk, rudely pushing people out of the way. They

broke free and bore down upon the alley. Walking fast but not running.

"The idiots," James scoffed. "They think we won't notice they're trying to tail us."

Gabrielle was not amused by gestapo folly. "This way," she urged, taking the lead onto a short side street lined with shops.

They stopped and pretended to look in a display window after they turned a corner. Sure enough, the Germans weren't far behind.

"*Anhalten!*" one of them shouted, abandoning all pretext of cleverness after realizing they had been made.

They drew weapons and charged down the middle of the street.

"This town's not big enough for all of us," James puffed, pulling Gabrielle onto another side street. They ran hard, hands joined, into a neighborhood of large, old houses, most of which were decrepit and subdivided into small apartments and bed-sitting rooms for young bachelors and spinsters.

"You run fast for a fellow who limps," Gabrielle panted.

"It's a matter of incentive. The lion runs for his supper, the deer for his life."

"You make times interesting, Robert."

"You ain't seen nothing yet, *jeune fille*."

They coiled back toward the main street, since James figured it was easier to hide in a town, even a small one, than to be driven into open fields. Gabrielle matched him step for step, looking more excited than actually frightened. This one, James thought, would do to ride the range with.

They were leaving the out-of-shape krauts in the dust, but the one with the radio was already summoning reinforcements, shouting into his hand mike as he chugged along after his fleeter partner.

The fugitives skidded around another corner a short block away from the main street, where they found their ears assailed by the ominous growl of traffic, the short, angry beep-beep of truck horns, and the grinding gears of a German military convoy entering Sainte Anglais. They had no choice but to keep running toward the thoroughfare, hoping they made it across the intersection ahead of the approaching convoy. They couldn't go back. Gestapo gangsters were closing in from behind.

They reached the intersection steps ahead of the convoy bearing down from the left. James yanked Gabrielle back just in time to avoid her being crushed by the lead vehicle, an open-topped armored staff car occupied by German officers. It rumbled past close enough to rip the hem of her full skirt. She cried out as James crushed her to safety in his arms.

"*Dummvolk!*" an officer shouted, turning around in his seat to glare back.

Elements of the convoy had closed up to enter the town. The dozen or so vehicles, mostly trucks, were almost bumper to bumper, sucking dust with them from the dirt roads a few blocks away outside town. James noted the absence of troops and major coastal weaponry, which meant this was a resupply and not a reinforcement convoy. That was a relief. Rommel wasn't yet beefing up his beach defenses. Major Harris must still be holding out.

Gestapo from behind shouted jubilantly, assuming they had their prey cornered. Racing down the main street from the right galloped a pair of uniformed *flics*, local French *gendarmes* who remained on the job to maintain law and order and who must have been alerted to the foot chase. Most *flics* were less than enthusiastic in assisting their conquerors. They often sympathized with the Resistance.

James hopped up on one foot to retrieve the concealed Browning from its ankle holster. He wheeled and pointed

it at the *gendarmes* closing in. That was all it took. The lead cop executed a comical little double-take leap in the air, a Charlie Chaplin reaction, and took off in the opposite direction, dogged by his partner.

The armed gestapo wouldn't be so easily frightened off.

"Grab your girdle!" James barked. And with that he lunged between the rear of one passing truck and the front bumper of the next, wrenching the girl along with him.

She screamed as the bumper dealt her a glancing blow. They tumbled together out the other side of the convoy and scrambled to get out of the way. The chateau was only a block away. The lead armored car had stopped in front of it. Two sentries at the front gate, apparently warned by gestapo radio, spotted the fleeing outlaws and charged down the street after them.

"This way," Gabrielle panted, limping a little from her encounter with the truck.

"Are you all right?"

"*Certainment*. Now we have matching limps."

"I like gimpy girls."

James deferred to her familiarity with the town. She ran like a boy, with long, sure strides, arms pumping at her sides. Tiny, but as fast and quick as a squirrel. It was all James could do to keep pace with her. His "old war wound" made the joint in his knee stiff after prolonged exercise.

They ran down a quiet side street lined with little cottages. Pistols cracked several times as the Nazis opened fire. A bullet whipped past James's head, close enough to let him know he was dealing with pretty good shots.

If Gabrielle was injured, she didn't act like it. She bolted over a low picket fence with greening rosebushes, James right behind her. An elderly woman wearing a shawl sat rocking on her front porch, having her morning pretend coffee. She froze in astonishment as the young

man and woman stormed past her and burst through her front door. The man carried a pistol in his fist.

"Le regrette!" James called back over his shoulder, not slowing down.

They went in the front door and out the back. More neat cottages lined the next street, providing some cover as James and Gabrielle extended their lead over the hounds.

They stampeded out the far end of the street. Their pursuers hadn't yet picked up their trail again. Gabrielle pirouetted in the street, looking in all directions. It was a dead end. Beyond lay a green wood choked with briars, lillians and other foliage of astounding variety, as though the countryside, neglected, was allowed to return to virgin wilderness. The forest stretched before them and seemed to curve in a wide wild arc behind Chateau Fleuve. Through a rare opening James glimpsed a stream downhill, sparkling in the morning sun.

"I used to play in the Chateau Forest when I was a little girl," Gabrielle hurriedly explained. *"Vite! Vite! Quickly. Follow me."*

She ducked into the jungle growth. James followed. She seemed to have thought of something, a way to escape, which was better than James could do so far.

It was cool, moist and dusky in the woods. Gabrielle avoided stag and hare trails and cut straight across as though she knew exactly where she was going.

"There's a well!" she exclaimed. "Hardly anyone knows about it."

They came to a dense copse of oak and beech packed with even denser undergrowth. The stream lay just beyond. Gabrielle stopped and looked around. She seemed uncertain.

"It's right around here somewhere," she muttered to herself.

Germans at the dead-end road were shouting back and

forth to each other. It wouldn't take long before they figured out that James and Gabrielle had taken to the woods.

"May I suggest we not make haste slowly?" James said.

"I haven't been here in years," Gabrielle cried, almost in tears. "Maybe it has caved in."

"Then we'd better run. It's either that or fight."

"Wait. *Wait!*"

She seemed to have gathered her bearings. She dropped to her hands and knees before a thicket so impenetrable a hare would have thought twice before entering. Being tiny, she managed to wriggle into it, almost immediately disappearing. A moment later, she called back to James.

"Robert! Come quickly! It's here!"

James hesitated. He had three choices: hide, run or fight. They wouldn't get far running. Fighting was out of the question, since they were outnumbered and outgunned. That left . . . He shrugged and dived into the thicket, wriggling backward along the path Gabrielle had broken so he could brush out their tracks.

She grasped his ankle. In another moment he lay beside her in the twilight. The well opening was so overgrown that she had to point it out to him not two feet away.

The gestapo and soldiers from the chateau were already in the woods, thrashing about and calling to each other.

"I'll go first," Gabrielle volunteered. And with that she plunged out of sight like Alice down the rabbit's hole.

"It's not deep," she reassured him from below. There was no splash, so it must be dry.

"When in France . . ." he muttered and went over the rim after her, into the darkness.

The foliage sprang back into place immediately to conceal the small opening. The well itself was so minuscule that James could hardly breathe. He and Gabrielle were

jammed together like Siamese twins joined at the hips, breasts, and knees. He sighed, already questioning his judgment and feeling trapped and helpless.

“Let’s hope they don’t have dogs,” he whispered. He and his old ‘coon hounds back in the hills of Oklahoma had pulled a lot of varmints out of dens like this one.

Attempting to make themselves comfortable in the narrow well was, James reflected, a bit like trying to practice kama sutra in a sleeping bag. Legs and arms entangled, bodies meshed together, they made themselves as small and distant from the well entrance as they could. Gabrielle ended up on James's lap, her skirt hiked up and her bare legs up on either side of him. In the darkness they were compressed belly to belly, face to face. Her breathing felt warm on his lips and tasted fragrant. Unexpectedly, in spite of the circumstances, he ached to kiss her in this dirty hole in the ground.

Christ! Did nothing stop young hormones from raging?

"They're pink," he whispered into her ear.

"What!"

"*Sous pantalones*. I saw through your torn skirt when you crawled into the bushes."

"Robert! Shhhh!"

He felt the heat of her blushing. He held her tightly. She held him back. Isolation in the well lent them a sudden

sense of security far beyond what might be warranted. Both felt, whether reasonable or not, that everything was going to be all right as long as they held together.

Sounds of the search in the woods, although diminished by the depth of the well, grew louder, nearer, until at least two, perhaps three, krauts stood on the outer edge of the thicket that concealed the well opening. Gabrielle squeezed James's hand so hard it went numb. They stared up together from the bottom of the hole in silent supplication, afraid to even breathe lest it be heard. Tension filled the well like a viscous fluid. James's chest ached from holding his breath.

He carefully freed his gun hand and pointed the gun toward the oval of lighter darkness that marked the well's mouth, determined to turn the first face that appeared there to pink mist. That would ruin somebody's day. After that, well . . . James *had* seen cornered 'coons whip off a pack of hounds. Once.

Gabrielle spoke only French, but James overheard enough of the German conversation above to gather that the gestapo thought, quite correctly, that they were searching for last night's parachute infiltrator. They expected him to end up in Sainte Anglais, although they didn't seem to know why. That kind of sensitive information would be reserved to top gestapo agents such as Constantina.

The Germans kicked around in the bushes, but their search seemed desultory. For a moment or so James feared they might accidentally spot the well.

"Ich verstehe nicht . . ." one of the Germans said finally.

Well, asshole. Let's make sure you never understand.

Seconds passed that seemed like minutes, a minute that could have been an hour.

"You inform Herr Schutz that he got away," one of the gestapo said to the other.

"He can't have gone far. He hasn't got away yet."

The guttural voices slowly faded as their owners departed. James heard a morning breeze rattling leaves outside in what within the last few minutes had become the unreal world. The real world had shrunk to the size of a hole in the ground big enough for only two people.

Gabrielle released a long sigh of relief and stirred. "They're gone," she said.

"They might return," James warned.

"I have never been so afraid," she mouthed directly into his ear.

"Me too."

"*You* were afraid, Robert?" she gasped as though she didn't believe it.

"Can't you feel me shaking?"

She giggled, relaxing even more. She held him tight. He held her, feeling himself unbelievably aroused. She moved. He moved. Then they waited, breathing into each other's mouth as the Germans went farther and farther away. Her full lips closed softly over his.

They held the kiss for a long time in the darkness. It grew more urgent, demanding. At first James thought of how time was running out and of how this would complicate an already impossible mission. Then he gave himself up to the kiss. After all, there was nothing else to do, trapped as they were, and they dared not come out of their lair right away. What would any other redblooded American secret agent do?

Gabrielle's little body shivered. She sobbed with desire into his mouth, and with something else as well. Uncertainty? Apprehension? Doubt? James suddenly realized she was nowhere as brazen and worldly as she pretended. Her sexual movements through their clothing seemed unsure, unpracticed, as though she lacked confidence and experience when it came right down to the act.

Perhaps it was the environment. After all, this wasn't exactly candlelight, wine and roses.

"We don't have to," he reluctantly comforted her.

"No, no, Robert. I want to. We may all die before another day. I don't want to go to my grave never having made love."

That took him aback. "You're a virgin!"

"I'm a vulgar tart, just as Fernand says, but I've still never made love to a man. We can do it quickly if you want? I've practiced on myself, Robert. I broke my hymen when I was fourteen. I can please you, I truly can. It is just that I've never met a man I wanted to do it with before. I hoped you were the one when I saw your parachute in the air, just like I'd always dreamed, and then I knew it when you baled into the car on my lap."

"It wasn't exactly a formal introduction." Was he trying to talk her out of it?

She was so damned near! And willing! And desireable!

Almost involuntarily, his free hand slid down her slim waist to the flare of her hips. He wedged the Browning pistol between his leg and the wall to free both hands for caressing the length of her thighs, running them back up the tender insides to the willing cushion behind her pink *pantalones*. She gasped with pleasure.

He continued exploring, finding her small, hard nipples inside her shirt, massaging them gently between his finger and thumb until she writhed against him and her tongue probed his mouth. She was a quick study.

He no longer wanted to talk her out of it.

Sexual attraction will find a way to express itself under the most trying conditions. Even in a well. James managed to unbutton his trouser fly. Gabrielle rose enough to allow him to push aside her panties to reach her. She exhaled sharply, with delight, while she worked herself slowly down on him.

Then he was fully inside her and they were both moving in excited little restricted jerks, melded together, and the world inside the well became even more real. It was

the only world there was, the only one James cared about, and it became past, present and future fused into an on-going present eternity.

He thought of Constantina once, wondering what it would have been like with her—and then he didn't care anymore.

They reached heights together, then came back down breathing hard and collapsing in each other's arms. The confined fragrance of raw, moist earth mingled with the scent of their lovemaking to form an intimacy known only to new lovers. James experienced a rare tenderness, a protectiveness that had not been there before, that he truly had never felt with any of his other women.

"Robert?" she whispered.

"Yes."

"Nothing. Just . . . Robert."

"It's not Robert," he confessed. "It's James."

He owed her that.

"Robert. James . . . they are both you."

He caressed her cheek. It was wet. She was crying. He needed a cigarette.

"Thank you . . . James."

"For what, *jeune fille*?"

"I will not die a virgin."

"You are not going to die, my little redheaded Gabrielle."

He kept holding her, and as he held her he became aware that he had somehow stretched one leg to its full length. It startled him. He wriggled his foot, moved it about. There was a *passageway* that led out the side of the well at the bottom.

"Robert . . . ? I mean . . . James?"

"Yes." Distracted, his mind moving on to practical matters.

"Just because we made love does not mean you are obligated—"

“What is this place?” he interjected.

“I told you. A dry well.”

“It’s too shallow for a well. There’s a tunnel. Where does it go?”

“It can’t go far. Ask my brother Vinain. He was bolder than me.”

James’s mind raced. People didn’t just go out in the woods and dig holes and tunnels for the hell of it. James felt around. The well and the tunnel that led off it were both lined with heavy stones to keep them from caving in. He recalled reading how nobles once burrowed secret shafts from their castles in case they were hopelessly besieged and needed to escape. Could this be one of them? He calculated they were directly behind Chateau Fleuve, about 150 yards away in a straight line.

Gramps used to tell a story about a little bird freezing to death who fell into a fresh cow pie and was saved by its heat, the moral being that falling in shit didn’t always mean bad luck.

“Gabrielle,” James announced, “we may have found a way to get into Chateau Fleuve.”

James led the way, feeling with his hands in the absolute darkness. It was small, too. They proceeded on hands and knees, sometimes on their bellies in narrow stretches. He allowed himself to hope that he was right about its connecting to Chateau Fleuve.

He struck a V-match once they were clear of the well. Its flickering light, bright as it drove away blackness, revealed the shaft proceeding straight ahead into more darkness. It appeared to lead gradually uphill and away from the little creek. The construction looked ancient, probably centuries old.

Gabrielle's eyes radiated blue warmth in the matchlight. She rested a possessive hand on his knee.

"I liked it," she said.

"How I like to be liked."

"Well, I do. I will never forget this first time—and I pray my last time will also be with you."

"Let's hope, *jeune fille*, that both the first and the last are not on the same day."

He examined her heart-shaped little face in the dying light of the match. He stroked her dirt-soiled cheek, his emotions tender and confused, resisting and attracted, protective and defensive, all at the same time. It was the nature of war that those caught up in it lived as though tomorrow might never come and accepted relationships as tenuous and transient. You had to take what you could get, *now*, or you ended up with nothing. He didn't want to remember Gabrielle in that way. He burned her face into his memory so he would remember her always, however short or long he lived.

The match burned down and bit his fingers.

"Ouch!"

He dropped it and they were plunged back into darkness.

They moved on. The tunnel was mostly dry, but there were places where water seeped through the walls and made mud that caked their hands, knees and clothing. Although James wore thick canvas trousers, his knees became raw from crawling on them. Gabrielle wore a dress and her knees were bare.

"We could make kneepads for you using our berets," he offered.

"Keep going, James. We must hurry."

He liked hearing her saying his real name rather than Robert. The languid French vowels spoken by a woman sounded incredibly sexy. In contrast, there was something harsh and military about the German tongue. Constantina's entire personality seemed to harden when she reverted to German while he had clung to the ledge outside her window.

He could imagine her pillow talk: *Achtung! Ich bin fertig!*

The thought amused him.

"The Germans were shooting at us?" Gabrielle said. "I mean, when we were fleeing from them."

"Those weren't bees buzzing."

"Fernand cannot say anymore that I have not been under fire."

"You behaved well, *jeune fille*. A true veteran."

That seemed to please her. "I had you with me, James."

"I had you with me."

That pleased her even more.

They heard water trickling from overhead.

"Yuck!" she said in disgust.

"How will we contact the Cafard again?" James asked her, already thinking of a plan. Fernand must know of the events in town and therefore would be changing hide-aways.

"We have a system for reassembling," she said. "Some of us are not suspected and live in the open. The others use abandoned houses, barns, stables, sometimes wine cellars and once a hotel of prostitution. I think I will have to go underground after today. They saw who I am and know I was with you."

"For that I am sorry, Gabrielle."

"You need not be, James. I'm not. We will fight them together."

Life was hard enough already for the Resistance band without their attracting more hostile attention. But there was a war to be won, a war not to lose. All over northern France, the Resistance must be ready to give up whatever security its circuits had carved out for themselves and launch a massive uprising to aid the invasion when it came. Saboteurs armed by parachute drops of guns, ammo and explosives must attack from behind at the critical time and stab the Hun in the back to cramp Rommel's ability to maneuver. If James was right about the tunnel, Fernand's Cafard Circuit had to be ready to act even sooner.

"There is a system," Gabrielle reiterated. "I am able to contact Fernand quickly."

Fernand had at least nine fighters that James had counted, perhaps more in waiting, plus there was now the shaft, which hopefully led past the walls and sentries of Chateau Fleuve into its very heart. Such a tunnel had worked once before, James recalled, from his Sunday School classes at the First Freewill Baptist Church on Drake's Prairie when he was a kid. At King David's command, Joab and ten expert Israeli archers breached the walls of Jerusalem by entering through a water shaft that ran underground and came up inside the city. If the ploy worked for King David in retaking the Jewish holy city, surely it would work for James in rescuing a single prisoner.

He began to think of the mission as Operation Joab.

Gabrielle and he had covered an estimated 100 yards underground when James, leading the way, feeling in the darkness with bare hands, encountered a blockage. He patted all around, attempting to recover the shaft. Finally, he struck another of his precious remaining matches. Its stark light confirmed his fears. They had reached a dead end.

Gabrielle wedged up beside him to survey the damage. Her face was smeared with mud, her ponytail disheveled, and her beret soiled and askew on her head.

"This tunnel survived intact for two or three thousand years and now it has collapsed," James said, fearing the worst. "The Germans might have discovered it at the other end and closed it off."

The air was as stale as the inside of a pharaoh's tomb. The match flame burned steadily. James swept it slowly back and forth across the obstruction, searching for some sign that the shaft continued. It flickered overhead and went out as though suddenly snuffed.

Starting to hope again, James struck another match and held it in the same place. It flickered out immediately.

"There's a draft," he said.

He tore at the debris with his bare hands. Gabrielle helped. After a few minutes' work, he thrust his hand through a break and wriggled his fingers freely on the other side. It was a natural cave-in caused by time and not German interference.

"Operation Joab moves on," he exclaimed.

It required only a few more minutes to enlarge the vent enough for them to crawl through it. They continued. Shortly, however, they encountered yet another dead end. James was running out of matches. He looked around in the flame's glow and determined to his dismay that this was not a natural cave-in. The tunnel had been intentionally blocked off.

Just before the match burned out, Gabrielle pointed out a large, flat stone above their heads. James ran his fingers around its edges. It seemed to be like a cork stuffed into the top of a bottle. On his knees, James braced his shoulders into the stone and lifted. It refused to budge. Gabrielle lent her own smaller shoulders to the effort. Together, they strained against the giant rock. Dry sand and dust trickled down into their faces from around the seal.

They rested a minute, catching their breath, and tried again. The stone suddenly gave way with a grating of rock against rock that startled both of them. An avalanche of dirt and dust cascaded down onto them. Gabrielle stifled a cough.

Gradually, using all their strength, they shifted the rock to one side to provide a small opening. Fresh air rushed into the shaft. No light came in with the air. They waited for a full five minutes this time, not daring to talk or move while they listened for some sound to indicate their break-in may have been discovered.

Finally, hearing nothing, James placed his face into the breach. Darkness beyond seemed less dense. Careful to avoid making more noise, he shouldered the makeshift

door aside to permit him room to poke his head into the space above. Accumulated loose dirt around the opening attested to the centuries that must have elapsed since this escape door was last opened.

There was light at the far end of what appeared to be a subterranean hallway lined on either side by thick, bolted doors with tiny barred windows in them. James surmised they were in the basement of Chateau Fleuve, where the gestapo appropriately headquartered, with its cells and “interview” rooms. Like Joab and his archers, James thought with mounting excitement, Gabrielle and he had successfully broken into the enemy’s camp.

Major Paul Harris must be behind one of the doors.

Gabrielle stuck her head up in the opening next to James's.

"We're inside the castle!" she whispered.

Dirt as dry as powder sifted down around them, kicking up a thick cloud of foul-smelling dust that threatened to choke the intruders and drive them into paroxysms of coughing. Accumulations of soil over the ages had concealed the slab door and kept it unnoticed until now, located as it was at the dark end of the passageway.

"Ugh! What's that awful smell?" Gabrielle protested.

James's subconscious had assessed the stench and moved on, since he considered it irrelevant to his mission. A man never got entirely accustomed to the smell of human putrefaction and rotted blood, but James had learned to deal with it on the battlefields of Sicily and Salerno.

"Phew!" Gabrielle gagged. "It's all around us. It's in the dirt. I'm going to be sick."

"There's no time for you to be sick," James hissed,

more harshly than he intended. She was right, though. The smell of death seemed to infect the dust itself.

James's mind was racing with other matters. Obviously, the occupiers of Chateau Fleuve never suspected there was a secret back way into the old castle. This particular corridor appeared to have once been a servants' quarters and had probably not been used again until after the Nazis moved in and turned it into a prison. There were some dozen cells along the walls and four regular doors near the other end where the hall T-junctioned with another. Light emanated from the right-hand branch. James assumed guards were stationed down that way.

The odds for mission success, James figured, had gone up in his favor. Maybe even as high as sixty-forty or seventy-thirty. He could live with that. As Winston said, you reduced the danger by half if you met it promptly and without flinching.

He had to act fast. The rare ability to disengage emotion from action was a quality highly regarded in the secret-agent business. With cold detachment, James concluded that the surest way to handle the situation would be to slip down the hallway, locate Major Harris if he were here, and put a bullet through his head to silence him forever. Then he and Gabrielle would catch the pickup plane out of France tonight. He might even make it to London in time for Colonel Branson to send him back across the Channel with the 29th Division and the invasion fleet.

Not a cheerful thought.

James knew he could execute Paul Harris if necessary. He could even terminate himself if necessary. But was it necessary? He already had enough killing on his conscience without adding to it the murder of a friend.

"Gabrielle, how rapidly can you get back to the Cafard?" he asked.

"They won't be far."

"I doubt the Germans have ready access to dogs, so

you should have little trouble escaping back through the well like the besieged noblemen did. Here's what I need done . . ."

He had her repeat the plan. She would direct Fernand and some of the Cockroaches through the tunnel to rendezvous with James here as soon as possible. At a time to be predetermined by Fernand, the rest of the circuit would create a diversion across from the chateau to draw attention from the basement while the rescue party broke Harris free and fled with him through the tunnel to a waiting vehicle.

"Tell them to make sure there's lots of gunfire and explosions," he instructed.

Clearly, Gabrielle had her doubts about Fernand. "What if he refuses to come?" she asked anxiously.

"Tell him if he refuses I'll personally have him executed after the invasion. It's that important."

There was going to be a day of judgment for collaborators, traitors and others who refused to do their duty after the Germans were finally booted out.

Gabrielle was reluctant to leave him. "What are you going to do?" she asked.

"There won't be any time to lose when Fernand gets here," he explained. "I'll locate the right cell and recon the guards so everything will be ready. Don't forget: We may need explosives to blow the cell door. You're not still hurt from the truck hitting you?"

"I'm good, James."

"You are that." He grinned tightly. "If by some chance I get our man free before Fernand gets here, I'll meet him and the other Cafard in the tunnel. Make sure there's transportation at the other end. Everything hinges on that. Ready?"

"Okay." She still hesitated.

"Now get your pretty little butt on the way, *jeune fille*."

“James . . . James, I will return even if Fernand doesn’t come. I’ll come for you no matter what.”

She kissed him quickly on the mouth. He kissed her back. Then, without further protest, she ducked into the tunnel and was gone silently, leaving James with the salty taste of her tears on his lips, the stench of death around him and a sinking feeling that he might never see her again.

James shook off the melancholy that momentarily overcame him after Gabrielle's departure. Alone in the belly of the beast was no time to be preoccupied with extraneous matters.

He removed the oversized brogans and his beret and left them in the tunnel for later. Stocking feet provided him with more agility and stealth. He shoved the Browning pistol into his waistband for faster access, but left the stiletto strapped to the calf of his leg. He sensed that things could quickly turn nastier than two boars fighting over a rutting sow, and if so, he was going to take some Nazi swine with him. He had to make sure to save the last bullet for himself.

The L-pills would have made things much more convenient.

Finally, he took a deep breath and lifted himself with his arms out of the tunnel and into the darkened corridor. He crouched there for a moment to gather his bearings, and his nerve. The stench of death cloyed around him. He

gagged. Bile burned his throat. He looked around but saw no corpses.

Hugging the right side wall, he slipped down the hallway toward the lights, feeling the way with his hands and feet, his first objective being to recon the other halls and locate security. It was a long hall, fully 100 feet in length. The nearer he came to the T-junction and its light, the better able he was to make out his surroundings.

The basement had been bombproofed, the walls sand-bagged and the ceiling reinforced with steel girders and poured concrete. With characteristic German efficiency, the cells had been numbered and the other gestapo rooms identified with sign plates: PHOTO LAB, INTERVIEW ROOM, INTERROGATION CENTER . . . The cell doors had Judas openings at eye level and slots near the floor through which to slide food and water.

The frightful sounds of suffering he heard escaping from the cells chilled James's blood. Muted sobs. A scream of pure horror that grabbed him figuratively by the throat as he passed. The "*No! No! No!*" of an unseen occupant who then went into a frenzy of screeching and sobbing at the top of his lungs. Insane mutterings, men praying . . .

James felt as though he must have gone down the rabbit's hole only to end up in Dante's Inferno. He had to lean against the wall a moment to regather his resolve. He listened, but the guards, unperturbed and accustomed to this hell of their own creation, did not come to investigate.

He reached the hallway junction and crouched low to the floor to take hasty peeks. This corridor was lit by electricity, but dimly. At each end were closed double doors further blocked by a wooden table and two uniformed standing guards armed with machine pistols. The guards to the left appeared tired and sleepy. The pair to the right was chatting it up and laughing, undisturbed by the sounds of misery coming from the cellblock. James

supposed a man could get used to anything if exposed to it long enough.

Satisfied that nothing short of a riot would bring any of these guys to investigate, James hurried back down the lines of cells, softly calling out Harris's name through each Judas opening. Uncontrollable weeping came from one cell, silence from another, sounds from a third as though someone unable to walk was dragging himself across the cold stone floor.

"Major Harris?"

"Go 'way! Go 'way. Leave me be!" A British voice.

These poor abused bastards. What must they have suffered?

James entertained the temptation to release all of them, but suppressed it knowing that in their states of mind they would only call attention to what was going on and foul up the entire operation. Many more like them would end up in gestapo dungeons if Harris was not dealt with.

He had checked less than half the cells when he heard doors clanging open and closed. Rapid footfalls from a number of people clustered together approached the T-junction. James thought to retreat to the tunnel by which he arrived when somebody turned on the lights, illuminating the cellblock all the way back to the displaced trap door and the dead end. He could never make it to the tunnel in time. He had got his hummingbird ass caught in another crack.

Voices drew near. Those of a man and a woman. The woman sounded all too familiar.

He sprang toward the nearest non-cell door, desperately hoping it was unlocked. The sign in German identified it as the Interrogation Center. It sounded threatening, considering how the gestapo functioned, but there was no time left to choose another door. He almost cried out with relief when the handle turned.

He ducked inside the darkened room and closed the

door behind him just as the multiple footfalls turned the T-corner into the cellblock. They came nearer, pounding against the concrete floor, pounding almost as loudly as James's heart. He sagged against the door, listening through it and hoping they kept on going.

To his dismay, they stopped right outside the door.

"Have you heard when the invasion will begin?" a voice asked in German.

"It won't be today," replied a woman. "The weather is bad in the Channel."

James might not have recognized Constantina's voice in German had he not heard it before in London when he perched on the ledge outside her window.

"Nevertheless, we will soon have all the information we need to hurl the pigs back into the ocean," she said. "Have him brought to me."

"He may not be conscious, Fraulein Elser."

Constantina Chiapetta, or Elser, or whatever her name was, raised her voice. "Revive him. I must be able to question him immediately. There is no time to lose."

She would make a hell of a dominatrix.

Boots pounded the floor, scurrying off to do her bidding. She remained at the door. The doorknob rattled.

Cornered like a 'possum stealing chickens.

Grams had this saying: *Don't get caught in your un-awares*. James was about to get caught in his unawares. His row was about to be hoed, his goose cooked, his chickens plucked.

Electric light suddenly flooded the room. The switch must have been located in the hallway, since the door remained closed. Alarmed, James jumped back, pistol in hand, prepared to shoot his way out, an action which, had he the time to reason it out, would succeed only in summoning additional guards who would surely end both his life *and* the mission to save Overlord.

Fortunately for him, Constantina lingered outside, engaged in low, indistinguishable conversation with someone else. Apparently, they were waiting for her order of “bring him” to be carried out. *Him* could only mean Major Harris.

“Not that one, you fools!” Constantina shouted at someone down the corridor. “Bring the American from the Channel.”

The mistake bought James an extra minute or two while Constantina and her colleague tarried to make sure the fools got it right. He flash-scanned the room, desperately seeking a place to hide. To his horror, he found himself trapped inside a torture chamber.

It was divided into two parts. Up front, in the “foyer,” were bare white walls and bright lights glaring at a cheap table, two hard chairs and a ceramic ashtray fashioned after the SS skull and crossbones.

Walls of the larger back portion of the room were utilitarian brick. James’s eyes took in furnishings that made his stomach knot: a bloodstained pillar for tying up victims; an umbrella stand filled with wooden clubs, steel bars, a baseball bat, tongs and the like; a hospital room operating table fitted with a head clamp and leather wrist and ankle straps; an electric shock machine; a locked cabinet that presumably contained drugs, hypodermic syringes and other horrors. And then he spied a second, larger cabinet whose open door exposed mops, brooms, soap boxes, buckets and various additional cleaning supplies. There was room in it for a man to hide, providing he wasn’t a large man. James dashed for it in his stocking feet, stepped inside past a bucket containing a residue of bloodstained water, and quietly pulled the metal door closed behind him. Just in time. He heard the Germans enter the room, their voices no longer muffled and unclear.

“Fraulein Elser,” Constantina’s companion was saying in German so guttural it sounded like a dog’s bark, “I tried to explain to Herr Kauffman that your presence here is not required.”

“Herr Schutz, I shall file a formal complaint with Himmler,” Constantina said. “Herr Kauffman and you could have warned me in advance rather than dispatching your stupid henchmen to surprise me in England while I was at work. It could have been disastrous. Which

it was, in a minor way. One of the fools you sent fell out the window to his death.”

“Ahem,” said Gestapo Regional Chief Arndt Schutz deliberately. “It is my understanding he was *pulled* from your *bedroom* window.”

“So he was,” Constantina snapped. “If they hadn’t appeared, my extraction may not have been necessary. I was working on an impudent little man with red hair whom I am convinced has knowledge of Operation Overlord. He would have revealed everything with far less effort on my part.”

At least James had made *some* impression. *Impudent little man*, was he? If she only knew who was hiding right now with the mops and brooms in the same room with her. First thing she would probably do was chop off his head.

“You were advised ahead of time that they were coming for you,” Schutz alibied.

“And I advised Kauffman to wait another day. I needed to cover my tracks in the event it was necessary for me to return to England. That is out of the question now. Even the doltish Americans may have connected me to a couple of . . . of necessary indiscretions by now.”

Such as Captain Dobbs and General Sowell?

Chief Schutz sighed expansively, ready to concede the point. “As I have been trying to explain, *Fraulein*, we have almost broken the American and secured his cooperation. He will tell us everything we need to know.”

“Herr Schutz,” Constantina Elser pointed out with a hint of contempt, “you have had him in your custody for two days—and he still has told you nothing.”

“Perhaps it is because he knows nothing, *Fraulein*.”

“You doubt me, Herr Schutz?” she demanded incredulously. “You doubt *me*? He knows about Operation Overlord. He was in on its planning for the American Twenty-ninth Division. That much I know from the loutish fool I had to neutralize.”

Schutz continued doggedly on his single track, "He would have told us everything yesterday evening, except—"

"Except?" Constantina taunted.

"He fainted," Schutz concluded sheepishly.

"Your crude methods would have killed him before he talked," Constantina said with her overbearing air of superiority.

No one, James knew, could bear the agony of applied torture indefinitely. If it were utilized patiently, persistently and judiciously, even the strongest personality betrayed his best friend, his lover, his mother and all his relatives for two generations past. Often, however, in their zeal, the gestapo ran out of patience with a subject and killed him inadvertently.

Major Harris had held out longer than most. In spite of himself, James was curious about what methods Constantina intended to employ. She certainly appeared confident enough.

"We will have the information in time for *Generalfeldmarschall* Rommel to repel the landing," she predicted.

"I am certain you will do so," Schutz said, controlling his sarcasm just enough that it could not be considered blatantly insulting or insubordinate. Apparently, Berlin held Fraulein Elser in high regard.

James shifted around in the cabinet in order to place one eye to a drilled hole in the door that was probably intended for a chain and lock. He was struck all over again by Constantina's incredible dark beauty. She looked fresh and self-assured, wearing the khaki pants and big-sleeved blue shirt in which he had seen her enter the chateau earlier. The top button of her blouse was undone to expose her cleavage. Schutz couldn't keep from staring at it through his thick eyeglasses as the two gestapo seated themselves at the table to wait for their subject to be

brought. He lit her cigarette for her, hovering over her and staring. She smiled and scooted her attaché case underneath the table between her feet.

"Put your eyes back in your head, Herr Schutz," she scolded.

That flustered him to all ends. He snapped to attention in a dither and popped a crisp salute. "Heil Hitler!"

He hardly looked at her again. He pulled another chair to the table and situated it in such a manner that he faced a neutral direction toward the door and away from her.

"Interrogation is an art and a science," Constantina lectured mildly. "It is not a matter of brute force and terror, although they have their uses when the proper groundwork is laid. You see, Herr Schutz, Americans are conditioned to trust and respect their women. Dear old mom, apple pie and Sunday dinner. Women are therefore far more effective in dealing with recalcitrant Americans whose minds are incapable of detecting deceit in a woman and accepting it. Freud was right. To the Americans, all women are by extension their dear, trusted mommies."

She bent forward over the table to stub out her cigarette in the skull and crossbones. She glanced impatiently at her watch. Schutz failed to control his eyes. They found her cleavage. James couldn't blame him.

James found himself likewise impatient for Harris to be produced. In another half hour or less, if everything went right, there would be diversionary explosions in the street outside the chateau and Fernand and his Cafard would be scurrying like their namesakes out of that hole in the floor. How convenient that the Nazis were bringing Major Harris to him rather than his having to hunt for him through the locked cells.

"I am not comfortable with conducting business at Chateau Fleuve," Constantina was saying, sounding concerned. "I warned Kauffman that the chateau is known to the Allies and that they will bomb it to rubble if they confirm

that we are holding the American. They will stop at no effort to recover their man, or to stop him from talking.”

Schutz looked disdainful. “At least we have nothing to fear from the French Resistance. They are girls, homosexuals and Jews.”

“Who have blown up railroads, ammunition depots and turned the people against us.”

“That will cease once we have destroyed the invasion force.”

Constantina’s restless eyes shifted toward the door. “Nevertheless, we are obviously under surveillance for an action,” she said. “They must suspect the American is being held here. How else can you explain why we are being watched?”

“It was only one man and a slip of a local girl,” Schutz said dismissively. “We have identified the girl as *Mademoiselle Gabrielle Arneau*, who, as far as we know, has no affiliation with the Resistance.”

“I suppose she ran away from us for no reason. And the man?”

“A stranger. Perhaps her lover, perhaps her cousin. It does not matter. They cannot get away. We will soon capture them.”

The opening of the door from the hallway put a stop to further conversation. Two helmeted guards with slung machine pistols escorted in a battered and blood-encrusted man who sagged on his bare feet between them. Totally nude, shivering in the chill underground air, his tall body was a mass of ugly bruises and contusions. His face was so swollen that it took James a moment to recognize Major Paul Harris. He was obviously a regular at the “Interrogation Center.”

Constantina sprang indignantly to her feet. “What have you done to this poor soldier?” She sounded outraged and spoke English for Harris’s benefit. “Bring his clothing! Bring him something to eat!”

The guards spoke no English. They stared uncomprehendingly until Constantina reissued her orders in German. The guards turned Harris over to Schutz, who appeared loath to touch the abused creature until Constantina warned him with a look. Harris swayed on his feet while Schutz gingerly supported his elbow.

A look of confusion and uncertainty crept slowly over Harris's disfigured features at this unexpected concern for his welfare. He was obviously reaching his breaking point. James realized that Constantina's change in technique might soon have the poor man dazed, disoriented and telling everything he knew. The success of Operation Overlord might well hinge upon the unravelling of events in this house of horrors.

Hiding in the cabinet, James watched the little drama unfold. Guards brought Major Harris the same combat woolens in which he had been seized off LST-505 and helped him dress. He continued to shiver from exposure and stress.

“Please sit down, Major,” Constantina invited, indicating the chair formerly occupied by Schutz. She sat down on the opposite side of the table.

Now dressed, Harris’s confidence seemed to return in part, along with his suspicions. He gingerly took the proffered chair, more to keep himself from collapsing on the floor, it seemed, than out of gratefulness or any sense of obligation. He sagged but kept his head upright and his shoulders squared. He watched Constantina cautiously across the table through the swollen slits of his eyes. The man still had guts in spite of all he had endured.

Constantina politely introduced herself in English. “My name is Fraulein Elser.”

Harris remained silent, confused.

"You are Major Paul Harris, is that correct?"

Again Harris said nothing.

"It's all right," she said. "We'll talk after you've eaten and feel better. You look shagged, Major Harris."

She smiled and discontinued further questioning. Schutz stood nearby, hands clasped behind his back in a position of relaxed parade rest, wearing a holstered pistol. Soon the same guards who helped Harris dress returned with a steaming plate of food and set it and a cup of hot coffee in front of the American. Harris couldn't help staring hungrily. He appeared gaunt and probably had eaten nothing since his abduction. He licked his lips. They were so dry James thought he heard them crackle.

"Steak and eggs, Major. The American way," Constantina encouraged pleasantly. "And *real* coffee."

Nobody in Europe these days had steak and eggs and real coffee, except the occasional farmer. Harris stared greedily but restrained himself.

"I trust we can make amends for the bad form in which you've been treated, Major Harris."

There was a place on the side of Harris's head that still bled. He appeared oblivious to his many injuries, almost as though he were absent from his body. After a while, a man tortured almost ceased to exist as a human being.

Constantina rose from the table. "Eat," she said.

She gestured at Schutz and the two of them went out of the room, leaving Major Harris at the table and the two storm troopers guarding the door. James assumed she had sized up her target and was now apprising Schutz of the role he was to play in her little choreographed melodrama. She had it all—beauty, brains, and a heart as cold as a toad's rear.

Alone at the table, Harris glowered around like a wounded dog who was afraid a bigger dog was going to take away his food. After another second of indecision, unable to resist temptation, the poor man emitted a sob

and attacked the food with both hands, shoving it into his mouth, gobbling, not bothering with the provided tableware. He had difficulty chewing because some of his teeth were broken or missing.

James almost wept at the sight of the pathetic creature who had once been Major Paul Harris, U.S. Army engineer.

Schutz returned without Constantina. He goose-stepped to the table, seized the plate and shoved it to the opposite side of the table, out of the American's reach but still within his sight. Harris's eyes followed it. The bigger dog had come.

"I would rather you starve like zee worthless pig you are than permit you to eat zee food of brave German soldiers," Schutz barked in good but accented English. "You would be dead by now if *she* had not saved you."

James recognized the tactics Constantina had clearly chosen: the "good guy-bad guy" routine often used with various amounts of coercion by police around the world. One interrogator abused and broke down the subject, the other offered him sympathy and a way out.

Having set up the next scene, Schutz wheeled and marched out. Harris slumped forward, hands in his lap. He did not reach for the plate. Constantina reappeared, full of tenderness and understanding. She sat down at the table with him and pulled her chair close without returning his breakfast. She rested a gentle hand on his arm. Harris trembled. The touch of a friendly hand in a hostile environment felt like the greatest kindness in the world, a lifeline thrown to a man drowning in despair.

She knew exactly what she was doing. The American was being skillfully worked, taken back and forth from extremes of despair to hope, but he was too far gone from torture to realize it. He couldn't take much more. The right shove would propel him into complete submission.

Constantina's voice could sweeten pancakes. "Paul,

you must understand that I want to help you, but I am not in control. Do you want to know who is in control?"

Harris's head bobbed involuntarily like that of a palsied old man's.

"Paul, *you* are in control. Pain and humiliation will last as long as *you* choose them to last. They will stop when *you* choose them to stop. Do you understand, Paul?"

She let that sink in. Tears squeezed from between Harris's swollen eyelids and dribbled down his bruised cheeks. After a few minutes, she opened her attaché case and produced a photograph. She handed it to him without comment. He looked and erupted spontaneously into unrestrained weeping, pressing the snapshot to his lips.

"Your wife Deborah and your little daughter Louise miss you," Constantina said. "It's in your hands, Paul, whether or not you will ever see them again. Together, you and I can save your life. I can't do it alone, Paul. You have to help me. You have to cooperate, Paul."

A wail escaped the depths of his withered soul. "I . . . I *can't!*"

"Paul, you must. Your wife and daughter are the only people who truly matter in your life. No one else cares about you. Your government has abandoned you and has sent people to kill you so you will never see Louise again. I'm your only friend, Paul."

Even her repeated use of his given name was designed to bond him to her. She continued in her soft, understanding tone, assuring him that he was totally alone in the world, isolated, and that the single human being upon whom he could depend was *her*. Unless he made the right decision, she stressed, he would never see his family again.

She tenderly stroked his hair as she talked, brushing the strands back in place, fingertipping his eyelids, leaning over him so he had to look at her cleavage, so he smelled the breath of a caring woman in his face. It was

a masterful performance against a man on the brink of losing everything.

"You are alone, Paul," she said. "No one will come for you. Even your friends betrayed you, Paul. You are here because of a man you thought was your friend. Captain Rick Dobbs—"

Harris winced at mention of the name.

"That's right, Paul. Rick was one of us. He saw the inevitability and desirability of the worldwide sweep of national socialism. He was the one who made sure you were at the right point on the deck of your ship when we came for you. He was your friend, Paul, and your friend betrayed you."

"No . . . *No!*"

"I'm afraid it's true, Paul."

Trapped in the nearby cleaning cabinet, James had never felt so helpless in his entire life, not even when the krauts had captured him in Sicily. He gripped his Browning 9mm with controlled rage. Constantina's diabolical little charade filled him with disgust. He still had 11 rounds unfired in his pistol. With the element of surprise he could take out Constantina, the two guards and Schutz, who was undoubtedly waiting outside the door for his cue to return.

But then what?

What the hell was keeping Fernand and the Cafard? He needed them to cover his withdrawal. Without them, he could never reach the tunnel entrance before other guards descended upon him. Harris was too weak to walk on his own. Even if they got extremely lucky and made it into the tunnel, they were still up the proverbial shit creek without a paddle. There would be no car waiting to haul them to an airfield for extraction, nor a Resistance network to hide them in the meantime. Both Paul and he would be recaptured in short order and together delivered unto Constantina's clever mercy.

Fernand, you cowardly little cockroach!

Circumstances were rapidly reaching a point where only one option remained to prevent Harris from talking—and James as well. Call it the final option.

But first he would kill Constantina. She deserved to die. If it was the next to the last thing he did, he would kill her.

Her husky, carefully modulated British voice continued to assail Harris in silken tones. “Tell me two things, Paul,” she was saying, “and I can make it all go away. I can save you and set you free. For the sake of your wife and daughter? For your own sake, Paul?”

Harris’s head thrashed back and forth. “I . . . I . . . No,” he mumbled.

“Of course you can, Paul. When will Overlord begin? And where? That’s all, Paul. That’s all you need to answer.”

“No-o-o-o-o-o!”

He was still holding out beyond all human expectations. *This guy had grit.*

Without showing her disappointment, Constantina slid the plate of unfinished steak and eggs back in front of her victim.

“All I’m asking, Paul, is that you think about it. Promise me you’ll think about it, Paul?”

He nodded spastically, clutching the photo. She smiled at him and rose to her feet. One more session with the “bad cop” should just about do it.

James eased the hammer back on his pistol. Then he eased it down again. He had to give the Cockroaches as long as he could. Perhaps they were on their way right at the moment.

Cosntantina left the room. After a few minutes Schutz returned to take her place. He pretended to be in a rage. No more Mister Nice Guy. He swept the breakfast plate off the table with such force that it shattered against the

far wall, splattering eggs. The coffee cup followed. Harris howled with abject misery when the gestapo chief snatched the photo from his hand, ripped it into pieces, and let the pieces flutter to the floor.

“Welcome back to hell, Major,” he barked, his wicked little eyes magnified through the thick lenses of his glasses.

Responding to a signal, the two guards rushed the weakened prisoner and stripped him of the clothing they had put on him only a few minutes ago. A naked man always felt more vulnerable. They carried him by his arms and legs to the hospital operating table and strapped him in facedown with his arms and legs spread wide and his head secured. He was too feeble to resist.

Schutz rolled the portable electric shock machine near the table and turned on the power. It hummed menacingly. He hummed along with it as he attached a long steel tubular object to the end of a cable. He made no attempt to interrogate the victim; that was Fraulein Elser’s job. A true sadist, he seemed to enjoy this part of his work. Grinning, he approached the hapless American with the steel tube in one rubber-gloved hand.

James watched with mounting horror and fury, mesmerized by the depravity of it all. Tears welled up. It was all he could do to restrain himself from busting out of the cabinet with his pistol blazing.

Harris screamed in agony as the gestapo, still grinning, licking his lips with the tip of his tongue, bent over and thrust the electrified steel penis deep into the American’s exposed anus. Harris screamed and screamed, every muscle and fiber of his tethered body constricting against the excruciating pain, screaming as though the world was ending.

The machine hummed. Electricity crackled and sparked. Schutz removed the probe before Harris passed out. Harris seemed to collapse inside himself.

“No more,” he croaked. “God, I can’t take it. Bring her. I’ll tell her anything. Only, don’t . . . *Don’t!*”

Constantina returned as if by magic. She must have been listening outside the door.

James exploded from the cleaning cabinet at the same instant, determined to execute his final option since it was the only one left. Crouching with his deadly pistol in one hand, the stiletto fighting knife in the other.

Harris was a friend. Damn it all. But the first bullet was for him.

The next bullet was Constantina’s.

Then shoot as many of the Germans as he could. Maybe he could escape. If not, there was always a last bullet.

“You bitch!” he roared. “You filthy bitch!”

James first swung the muzzle of his pistol toward Major Harris, secured to the operating table. At least the major, only half-conscious and unable to turn his head because of his bindings, would not see it coming—and from a friend, no less. James was already taking up slack on the trigger when the first of a sudden series of detonations reverberated from outside in front of the chateau. They sounded weak and muffled here in the basement, but they were loud enough to break through the adrenaline rush pumping into James's veins.

He hesitated, disbelieving his own ears, distrusting most the incredible timing.

It had to be the Cafard! Gabrielle had done it. The Cockroaches were here!

That changed his options.

Arndt Schutz's reaction to the explosions outside and the inexplicable appearance of the wild, muddy little red-headed gunman in the middle of the room left him stunned and frozen in place. James shifted his point of

aim from the helpless American to the gestapo officer. He tapped him twice with the Browning and experienced a little thrill of satisfaction as Schutz squealed with shock. The sadistic sonofabitch *knew* what hit him. He went down hard, coughing and wheezing up blood and gore and dying with a look of surprise on his chubby Nazi face. The fall shattered his glasses and knocked them off his face.

Since Constantina was unarmed, James dealt with the guards next. He was on a bloody roll. Bullets struck the first guard in the torso with the impact of busting a ripe watermelon with a sledgehammer. Blood spewed from his mouth, spraying Constantina who, recovering from surprise, was already bolting toward the door. His body fell against the bottom of the door, jamming it shut and trapping Constantina inside.

The second guard dropped clear of the door. Neither had gotten off a single shot.

Constantina was the last Nazi standing. She was frantically trying to pull the door open against the dead weight of the slain storm trooper. James had her in his sights. *Heartless bitch!* She deserved to die.

He squeezed the trigger. At the last instant he tilted the barrel up. A bullet hole magically appeared in the wooden door frame above Constantina's head. Wood splinters flew.

He would never understand completely why he deflected his shot. Perhaps the fact that he had never killed a woman before triggered some compunction against it, some innate aversion. Perhaps it went deeper than that. Whatever the reason, it jolted Constantina as much as it did him. She wheeled around, her back flattened against the door. He might have killed her anyhow with a second bullet had she not recognized him.

"James!" she cried.

That did it. He shook his head hard to come down off

his adrenaline high. He grew calm again, methodical, cool and professional. The perfect secret agent. James in control. At least he had answered the question of whether or not he would be able to kill her. The answer was *Maybe*.

But not this time.

"My Grams was right," he said. "If you think there is good in everybody, it's because you haven't met everybody."

Terror left Constantina's expression, replaced by her old self-confidence. With all that carnage in the room, blood spray and gun smoke in the air, facing death, the Black Widow smiled.

"You get taller every time I see you, James."

"I'd love to engage in a little foreplay, Constantina, but there always seems to be *coitus interruptus*. Besides, you know how it is when you've got appointments to keep."

He sheathed the stiletto at his calf but kept the pistol trained on her. He sidestepped toward the operating table where Harris lay moaning.

"Unstrap him, Constantina," he commanded, "or I'll mess up that pretty face of yours."

She believed him. She came over and removed Harris's restraints, taking her time, stalling.

"Quickly!" he barked. "I saved your life once. That means you owe it to me and I can collect any time it's necessary."

"You're a sentimental bloke, James."

"That's me. But I still have the loaded gun. I ought to kill you."

She looked at him. "Why don't you?"

He still couldn't answer that one.

Harris was too weak to sit up. He blinked at James, but, still in shock, failed to recognize him. He barely recognized himself in his surroundings. In another few minutes, barring James's interruption, he would have unthinkingly delivered Operation Overlord into Nazi hands.

"Paul, I'm here to take you home. Do you understand?"

Harris stared uncomprehendingly. James motioned at Constantina with the gun. "Stand back. Over here. Get down on the floor. Get down!"

She obeyed.

There was no time to get Harris dressed. James hoisted the nude and ravaged body across his shoulders in a fireman's carry. The major was too weak and stunned from atrocities committed against him to struggle.

James backed toward the door, past Schutz's corpse. He listened for activity in the hallway. Hearing nothing, he pulled the door hard enough to move the dead guard out of the way. He glanced back at Constantina prone on the floor next to the torture table. She was looking up at him.

"Auf Wiedersehen," he said.

"Until we meet again," she said.

He slipped into the hallway and jogged with his load toward the secret tunnel. He expected Cafard by this time to be popping out of the hole like cockroaches to cover his escape. Instead, to his consternation, the darkened end of the corridor remained disengaged. He didn't understand. There had been the diversion right on time—so what had happened to the rest of the plan?

He ran as fast as he could with Harris's weight.

He heard galloping boots from behind as storm troopers and gestapo responded to the gunfire in the basement.

"Halten! Anhalten!"

Up yours, buddy.

He had less than 20 feet to go to reach the tunnel entrance when automatic-rifle fire unleashed a savage rage that filled the cellblock with the crackle of lightning, the buzz of bullets, and the shrieking of ricochets off concrete and stone—a thunderstorm of steel and lead through which no living being could endure unscathed for long.

A bullet caught Harris with such a solid impact that it

staggered James. James tried to stay on his feet. He went sprawling on the floor instead, dropping Harris. He chanced a look back. Four or five helmeted douche bags blitzed toward him, their weapons blossoming flame and death.

Where were the damnable Cafard? Damn Fernand! Damn him to hell!

Bullets chewed the floor all around the downed Americans. The enemy soldiers were bloody poor shots, but James realized he hadn't even a slim chance of fighting his way clear. All he had left was the final option. He thrust the muzzle of his Browning against Harris's head.

A slug stung him hard on the right thigh. He grunted. Another slug walloped his upper right arm before he could squeeze the trigger. The Browning flew from his hand. He scrambled forward on his belly, clawing after the gun with one hand and reaching to unsheath his stiletto with the other.

He mustn't be captured! Neither he nor Harris.

Nazi gunners pounded toward him. They ceased fire unexpectedly in response to the penetrating voice of a woman in the background.

"Nein! Nein! Sie dumm herren! Don't kill them, you fools! They must be taken alive."

The tips of James's fingers touched the grip of his pistol. A black polished boot kicked the gun out of reach. James had the stiletto in his other fist. It darted for his friend's jugular.

The same polished boot stomped down on his knife hand with enough force to crush bone. James suppressed an outcry only through pure cussedness. Unsubdued, he tried to reach Harris to suffocate him with his bare hands. A rifle butt thumped against his elbow. Excruciating pain shot all the way to his toes. This time, involuntarily, he cried out.

He lay there on his belly, pinned to the concrete floor

by the Nazi jackboot, cursing himself for not having the guts to take care of business when he'd had the opportunity inside the Interrogation Center. But how was he to know Fernand would double-cross him and not show up?

Through the anguish filming his eyes he saw Constantina's long trousered legs walk up beside him.

"James," she said coolly, "we are now even. This filthy bitch just saved your life."

While troops scurried about Chateau Fleuve manning strongpoints and preparing for further assault, the basement filled with excited uniformed and civilian-clothed Germans all shouting and exclaiming over the redheaded intruder and the havoc he generated by killing three men, including the gestapo's regional head. Discovery of the secret escape shaft heightened the confusion. There was chatter that it might have been freshly dug, that the Americans were already landing and that the tunnel would soon disgorge the paratroopers. A machine-gun crew arrived to cover the entrance.

While all this was going on, Major Harris lay unconscious, having taken a bullet in the lower back that exited through his side. Four helmeted oafs armed with machine pistols pointed at James's head held him belly down on the floor. "*Nein sich bewegen!*" they commanded, the tone understandable even if James had not understood German. They appeared eager to retaliate for the slaying of their comrades.

Cosntantina warned them off.

Although in severe pain, James remained stoic while he mentally assessed his injuries. He had suffered at least two bullet wounds, one in his upper arm and a second through his outer thigh. They bled some, the muscles were stiffening, but apparently no major veins or arteries were severed. His elbow where the goon butt-stroked it throbbed with the beating of his heart. His left wrist might have been shattered when the same dumb bastard stomped it.

This operation hadn't ended the way he'd planned. It certainly wasn't the outcome expected from the example of Joab and his archers. But then King David hadn't let Joab down when the gates to the city were opened.

Constantina summoned immediate medical help for Major Harris. A bespectacled French doctor arrived from the town within minutes. He was already nervous and afraid, a condition that was exacerbated when Constantina gravely informed him, "He must not die. If he dies, you die."

"I do not think there is involvement of vital organs," the doctor soon advised Constantina in French as he worked to stop Harris's bleeding and prevent shock.

To which she replied, likewise in French, "Will he live?"

"He is not in good shape—dehydration, deprivation, multiple contusions, shock . . ."

"I didn't ask for a diagnosis," Constantina snapped. "I want a prognosis."

"Without competent care and surgery he will die," the doctor stammered.

"How long?"

"Twenty-four hours, perhaps two days."

"That's long enough. Patch him up."

"He should be clothed to help prevent further shock," the doctor recommended.

Constantina bobbed her head at one of the soldiers. "His clothing is in Schutz's torture chamber. Bring it."

The soldiers hustled away, returning shortly with Harris's dirty, bloodstained woolens. The doctor finished with his first patient and started on James while the soldiers dressed Harris in his trousers and uniform blouse.

James had already been searched and relieved of a partial pack of Lucky Strikes and a half-depleted book of V-matches. He had possessed nothing else, not even identification.

"I'd kill for a cigarette," he said to Constantina in French.

"You already have, James. You can sit up now."

He crossed his legs while the doctor slit his canvas trousers and chambray shirtsleeve to expose his wounds. He was mud-caked from the tunnel, bloodstained from his wounds, had blackened eyes, and was now rendered ragged by the doctor. He wasn't going to end up on anybody's Best Dressed list.

Constantina took his Lucky Strikes from a guard and, kneeling next to James, placed a cigarette between his lips and lit it for him. He drew calming smoke into his lungs and nodded his thanks. She shook out the match flame, tossed the burnt remains on the floor and impulsively touched his cheek.

"You need a shave, James. You're out of uniform again. You can be shot for being a spy."

"Would it make any difference if I wore Patton's pistols and a polished helmet?"

"Probably no more so than if I wore a Hitler mustache in London. You're with the OSS, James?"

"Constantina, you know the drill: name, rank and serial number."

"I'll take that for a yes." She motioned to a guard. "Look in his mouth for suicide pills," she ordered.

James obediently opened his mouth, wryly thinking

how they were going to have to look deeper into his anatomy and perhaps up another orifice to find the L-pills. He winced as the French doctor cleansed his lacerated wrist with an antiseptic. "Take it easy, Doc. That's no chicken wing, you know."

"Remember this: We need answers," Constantina said, hardening.

"Are you going to show me your boobs?"

She fastened the top button of her blouse.

"James, we'll get answers either from you or from your mate. Either way, no matter what happens, you brought it on yourself."

"Whatever are you going to do without Schutz?" he taunted.

"James! Why couldn't you have been born a German?"

"Just like you?"

"Damn you, James."

He looked around. "I think I've already been damned."

And damned, he pondered, was the most he could hope for, for any of them. One way or another, he had to find a way to employ the final option. Or at least make sure Harris and he held out until Uncle Henry applied *his* final option by bombing the elegant chateau back into the Stone Age in the early afternoon.

Chateau Fleuve settled down after the Germans determined that the forces who attacked the castle consisted of a lone redheaded stranger and a disparate team of Frenchies who threw a couple of grenades and fired a submachine gun as they sped past the cheateau in an old Renault.

“A boy and a whore of a girl!” Colonel Zimmerman, the military commander, sneered disdainfully in a conversation with Constantina that James strained to overhear. None of the krauts, including Constantina, knew he spoke German yet; no need to play that hand until he needed it.

Either Zimmerman never said, or James failed to hear, what happened to the Frenchies, whether they were killed, captured or driven off. No doubt it could only have been Gabrielle and her brother Vinain. The effort they had made touched James. At least she had tried. That was more than he could say for Fernand and the rest of the Cafard.

The thought of her dead left him hollow and nauseated. He still tasted the salt of her farewell tears on his lips.

Colonel Zimmerman was a tall drink of water with a mustache patterned after Hitler's and the personality of a boar. He and Constantina continued their heated conversation, standing to one side of where the prisoners were being guarded at gunpoint. Constantina wanted to move her captives immediately to a more secure location for interrogation. She assumed that the Allies and the local Resistance were plotting to storm the chateau. Zimmerman scoffed, assuring her he had sufficient troops to repel anything the enemy threw at him. How could a force that powerful be assembled in such a small town without his knowledge?

Constantina's voice rose. "Don't you see? They know Harris is being held at Chateau Fleuve. Why else would an OSS agent be sent?"

"You don't know for sure he's OSS."

"I suppose he merely broke into the chateau in order to sweep and mop Schutz's torture chamber?" she replied with dripping sarcasm. "What is most important is they know what we have here. They'll also realize soon enough that their rescue attempt has failed. That leaves one alternative. Colonel, they're going to bomb your chateau."

Zimmerman appeared more and more apprehensive as the discussion continued.

"I need a few more hours with the prisoners," Constantina asserted. "Perhaps as long as another day. I need a secure place where I shall not be disturbed. Harris is unconscious and may not revive for several hours. I'm convinced the other one knows just as much. He may be more difficult, however. But they *will* talk, be assured of that. They always do."

She played her trump card. "They're my prisoners, my

responsibility, Colonel. The Fuhrer will reward you handsomely for your cooperation.”

The commander relented. He was obviously considering what he should do about the Allied bombing she predicted was coming.

“Put them on the supply convoy then,” he snapped. “Good riddance to the lot of you. Rommel and I have a war to fight.”

“There won’t be a war left to fight, Herr Colonel, if we don’t find out where and when Eisenhower is coming ashore.”

Constantina, looking triumphant, rushed to the guards. “Bind these two hand and foot and load them under guard in one of the trucks out front,” she ordered. “Immediately. The convoy will be moving out soon.”

“What about the other prisoners?” Colonel Zimmerman called out.

“They aren’t my concern, Herr Colonel. They’ll be destroyed by the bombers anyhow.”

Colonel Zimmerman ordered the chateau evacuated at once. James learned the source of the foul stench at the back of the hallway by the tunnel entrance before he and Harris were bound and carted off. It was the site where the gestapo executed their victims.

Cell doors opened. Guards shouted and cursed and kicked and pummeled as they drove half-insane men toward the back walls. Emaciated, half-naked, half-dead creatures screamed and prayed and swore in terror as they were thrown in various positions onto the blood-dried floor. James turned his head away, his eyes misting.

The *Crack! Crack! Crack!* of pistol shots silenced their voices forever.

Trussed up like goats at a roping, hands lashed behind their backs, James and Major Harris were tossed feet-to-head into the back of one of the convoy trucks lined up on the street outside Chateau Fleuve. Cargo had to be shifted around in the box to provide a cramped place to fit them in a corner near the cab. James tried to get a look around as he was carried out on a stretcher. There were no townspeople on the street after the earlier disturbance; no one wanted to be singled out in the event the Germans sought to retaliate by shooting a few French. He glimpsed the little outdoor café next to the medieval church where Gabrielle and he had shared ersatz coffee and biscuits only a few hours ago. It was unoccupied as well.

He began to have hope that Gabrielle might have escaped. From what he could tell, no corpses hung from light posts as a lesson to others.

The truck's end tarp was drawn, cutting off James's view to the outside world and leaving the two Americans in semidarkness. A pair of armed storm troopers jumped

into the back of the truck to keep watch over the prisoners as the convoy lurched into motion. James didn't think its destination could be far away. Soon, clouds of choking dust had guards and prisoners alike coughing and sneezing.

James had botched his mission. Even though the operation by necessity had been hastily conceived and executed on the fly, it still might have succeeded had that cowardly bastard Fernand showed up on time. None of this, however, excused the fact that James was now tied up like a Christmas turkey in the back of a kraut truck with a dying Overlord officer who was primed to tell everything he knew at the next stop.

The facts, grim enough, were also simple: The success of the Allied landing depended upon Harris's promptly dying and upon James's ability to stall, obfuscate and misdirect until it was too late for Rommel to rush reserve forces to the Normandy coast. Failing that, he himself must die rather than risk interrogation.

He figured he needed to hold out until at least midnight. It must be close to noon now. That meant twelve more hours.

Since Constantina and the krauts were going to execute Harris anyhow when they were through with him, James figured the most charitable thing he could do for his friend to save him further humiliation and suffering was to find some means now to end his life. Kill him in order to save him.

The very thought disgusted him all over again. He couldn't shoot Constantina when he had the chance. Yet, he was still contemplating *this*? What kind of a monster was he? He began trembling all over and drove the thought temporarily from his head.

He was terribly uncomfortable from his fresh wounds and from being contorted with Harris into a space hardly large enough to accommodate a single man. Billowing

dust and the rattle of the military truck over rough roads made Major Harris cry out occasionally and moan almost continuously. Why couldn't he just die quietly and quickly? It was the best thing for him, for the entire world.

Harris regained consciousness at some point and began mumbling to himself.

"Can you hear me, Paul?"

The truck had lost or punctured its muffler, which made it unlikely the guards by the tailgate would overhear. Besides, they were too busy hanging on over the rutted and potholed road to bother with their charges.

"Paul?"

Harris came to with a start. "What? Who is it?"

"It's me. James Cantrell. Down here."

James lifted his head as best he could to look over Harris's bare feet stuck in his face.

"Cantrell . . . ?" Harris seemed to struggle with it. Then it suddenly dawned on him. "Okie! What are you doing here? Where are we? I can't move."

For a moment he seemed perfectly lucid. Then his poor confused brain had him sobbing and wandering in a mental wilderness. "They . . . They . . . Oh, my God! Deborah! *Deborah!* My little Louise . . . ! I'll tell you! I'll tell you anything if you'll let them go."

Bellowing it out from his deep anguish. Shrill enough that one of the guards shouted at them in German to stifle it.

Mercifully, Harris fainted and was gone again. The convoy took a sharp curve that crammed James into the corner with Harris's weight thrown against him. A short time later, the trucks bounced wildly off the road and came to a stop, their engines running. James deduced the reason for the delay when he heard an airplane buzz over, low and fast. With the invasion only hours away, the Allies were stepping up their air recons of Nazi positions and movements.

The convoy resumed its journey. Unbidden, the pros-

pect of what James knew he had to do entered his head with fresh presence. Horrifying as it was, he couldn't let the thought go. He mustn't. Sacrificing one life that was already the same as lost anyhow in exchange for saving the lives of thousands of others could never be construed as cold-blooded murder. He had already embraced the concept. What sickened him was what he would have to do to carry it out now. It was one thing to pull a trigger, quite another to devise a means to wipe out a friend and fellow soldier quickly and quietly when he had no weapons and his hands and feet were tied.

Tears welled in his eyes. He felt them washing down his cheeks. With the tears, however, came new resolve and determination. It was as if they washed away all doubts and indecision. He ceased trembling. He steeled all emotion to what must be done. A coldness of purpose overcame him. The only question that remained was *How?*

Harris lay unconscious again, completely dead weight. With raw logic, it occurred to James that he might be able to accomplish the task if he could maneuver his stocking-clad toes up another four or five inches in order to reach the major's throat.

He strained against Harris's weight and the confined space, gradually stealing an inch or two of wiggle room for his feet. There he lost momentum. A heavy wooden crate hard against his head and shoulders and another digging into his midsection hampered further manipulation. He broke out in a sour sweat. Billowing dust turned to mud on his face and clothing and inside his nostrils and eyelids. His wounds throbbed and hurt like hell from the effort.

He finally gave up.

Next, he considered twisting himself on top of Harris where he could turn around head to head with his intended victim and reach a jugular with his teeth. That didn't work either. There simply was no room for it.

Finally, he wedged his knees into Harris's solar plexus

and summoned all his strength to shut down the solider's lungs through applied pressure. Harris cried out and thrashed wildly about, fighting with unconscious desperation for survival.

James at last relented, both exhausted and repulsed by his clumsy endeavors. He couldn't even commit murder. He possessed mens rea; he simply lacked the physical ability. He lay in his own sweat and discouragement in the back of the truck and, having no other choice, waited to reach their destination.

An hour passed. Brakes began squealing, engines geared down, and the convoy slowed to a crawl and finally stopped at an apparent checkpoint. After a few minutes, it crept forward and traveled slowly for another five minutes before it halted with a final hiss of brakes.

The two guards at the back of the truck threw open the canvas and let in a burst of sunlight. The truck was parked with its tailgate downward on a slight knoll. James twisted his head to take a look. The position allowed him a view of what appeared to be one end of a steel-and-concrete bunker overlooking the gray sea beyond. He saw various boat traps, Belgian gates and other obstacles implanted on a stretch of tan-white beach.

My God! They were on the Normandy coastline. With the Allied invasion coming in less than 18 hours.

Because of James's perceived misdemeanors, Colonel Branson had reassigned him to command a boat team in one of the forward Higgins scheduled to hit the beaches on D-day. What would the colonel think now if he knew James was the *first* GI ashore at Normandy, hours ahead of the invasion?

The truck hauling James and Major Harris backed up to a smallish concrete bunker to discharge the prisoners. Two Asians whom James took to be captured Russians brought a stretcher for Harris while James was dragged out unceremoniously by an elderly looking corporal with a stiff left arm and a sergeant with a wooden peg leg. Shortages of German manpower had forced Hitler to supplement Atlantic Wall defenses with soldiers too old or disabled to serve on an active front, but whose loss of a leg, arm or an eye did not diminish their ability to fight from entrenched positions.

The Asians carried Harris's stretcher down a short underground flight of concrete steps to a dank, narrow

passageway lighted by generator electricity. The American officer moaned and flailed about, mumbling incoherently.

James's guards released his ankles and walked him down. Ahead of him the Asians opened a steel door and lugged the major inside. James started to follow, but to his chagrin was jerked back and shoved through another door into an adjacent chamber. The Nazis were making it harder and harder for him to prevent Major Harris from revealing his Overlord secrets.

The steel door clanged shut with alarming finality. His arms still tied behind his back, James found himself in a bare room, the concrete floor cold through his socks, with only a bucket in the corner. Midday sunlight streamed through a high barred window that appeared to open at ground level. James sat on the floor and worked his bound hands underneath his butt and over his feet to his front. That made it easier to upend the bucket and stand on it to look out the window and get an idea of the lay of his imprisonment.

Although he had received intelligence briefings on the Atlantic Wall, what he saw still stunned him. A workforce of 100,000 German construction men and forced laborers had used 1 million tons of steel and 20 million tons of reinforced concrete to create a zone of fortifications along 1,700 miles of coastline, from the Seine estuary to the Contentin Peninsula. They had also sown several million antipersonnel and antitank mines while engineers constructed additional reefs of underwater obstacles designed to rip the bottoms out of landing craft. James was looking at just one of these defenses.

In back of the seawall and a wide, sandy stretch of beach rose low cliffs into which had been implanted heavily fortified bunkers, blockhouses, pillboxes, anti-aircraft and machine-gun positions and networks of infantry trenches, all arranged for interlocking fire. Down

on the beach, past the seawall festooned with rows of barbed wire, the rising tide washed over razor-wire entanglements, lines of giant wooden stakes, concrete "Belgian Gates," tetrahedrons farther out in the surf, and various other diabolical contrivances intended to slow down, impale, hamper and destroy an invading force.

Next door to his cell, James saw an 88mm antitank gun within a concrete revetment, the black snout of which pointed toward the Channel. The crew, along with several infantrymen whose Mauser Karabiners rested casually against a wall, were laughing and joking with one another as they feasted upon a late lunch dug out of cans and packets. They looked relaxed, as though they weren't expecting action anytime soon.

That could change in the span of a few hours. The roads of southern England this night and day before D-day must be thronged with military traffic as great convoys of army trucks rumbled along every highway heading for debarkation docks. Invading France against the Atlantic Wall was going to be bloody enough, but it would be damn nigh impossible if Rommel and Rundstedt were tipped off in time to place Normandy on full alert and rush their six reserve panzer divisions forward.

Midnight tonight was the "safe hour," the point after which German reinforcements, even if they were mobilized, could not arrive in time. It was an eternity away. A lot could happen before then to change the fortunes of millions of lives. Significant as far as James was concerned was whether or not Major Harris could be revived in time for Constantina and the gestapo to complete his interrogation. This time he was going to tell all.

The sun shone brightly on the beaches of Normandy, but looking out to sea, James saw low, gray clouds teasing the tops of relentlessly marching whitecaps. Eisenhower had already postponed D-day once because of weather. There was always a chance he might delay it another

24 hours. That gave Constantina and the gestapo that much more time to work on Major Harris—and upon James as well. And it extended Rommel's window to move up troops once he learned an invasion was imminent.

James lifted his eyes toward the sky: *God, please let them come on the dawn.* He knew neither Major Harris nor he could hold out any longer than that.

Somehow he had to reach Harris before Constantina did. He never thought he would see the day when destroying a friend, and perhaps himself, would become an achievement. It saddened him, knowing what he must do, but he was a man of strong will.

I am prepared to meet my Maker, Churchill once said. *Whether my Maker is prepared for the great ordeal of meeting me is another matter.*

James had never felt quite so helpless, so impotent, in his entire life. He stood on the upended bucket and watched the German gun crew, who ignored him, or he stared out past the iron crosses and other beach obstacles as if willing the invasion fleet to appear like the cavalry in some cowboy-and-Indian movie.

This wasn't Hollywood.

Restless, he paced the cell, his eyes searching for some opportunity. A chink in the concrete walls. A way to carry out his mission. *Something.*

Nothing.

His wounds were beginning to stiffen his joints and make him sore all over. He might even have the beginning of a fever. He hobbled back and forth across his prison, his limp more pronounced than ever. A filthy, ragged figure wearing bloody bandages and black eyes. His wrists were almost numb from his bindings.

He pressed his ear to the steel door to listen, hearing only the low murmur of German guards outside in the hallway. He tried the door, knowing it was locked. The guards shouted at him.

Suddenly, a belly cramp bent him almost double. He rushed to use the bucket. Afterward, he fingered through the disgusting mess until he found one of the rubber-coated L-pills. The other had not yet passed. He would have to wait on it.

Now all he had to do was break through a foot or so of solid steel and concrete to get the capsule into Major Harris's mouth before Constantina came to finish what she had started.

He thought of Gabrielle and wondered if she was okay. There was something about her orange mane and freckles. About the loose, boyish way she walked. Her lopsided smile. Her French with its sexy rounded vowels . . . At least she, of the entire Cafard Circuit—she and her brother—had kept her word not to desert him. They had tried.

Cut it out, Cantrell. The only woman you're ever going to see again is the Bosche Black Widow—and it ain't gonna be no happy reunion.

Boots pounded in the passageway outside as someone approached. James listened through the door, his heart pounding in alarm. He heard failure coming. They were coming for Major Harris. There wasn't a damned thing he could do about it either.

To his surprise, the jackboots continued past Harris's door and stopped in front of his. James jumped back as the door was unbolted and swung wide. The jackbooted soldier, a young corporal with that cocky Aryan look,

stood between the stiff-armed corporal and the peg-legged sergeant. They all glared at James like owls eyeing roosting guinea fowl in a tree.

The sergeant motioned and said, "*Kommen.*"

They escorted him along the empty hallway and up the concrete steps. Peg Leg's wooden prosthesis popped sharply against the concrete. Major Harris called out weakly from his cell as they passed his door. "Deborah? Honey, is that you?" He sounded delirious.

Once outside, James saw the convoy of a dozen or so trucks parked at a warehouse bunker. The soldiers unloading cargo stared curiously at the prisoner. The black Citroen from which Constantina alighted that morning at Chateau Fleuve was parked in front of a pillbox between the warehouse and the prison bunker. She must have followed the convoy.

In the near distance to the rear rose the steeple of a church, spearing the sky up above the treetops, a distinctive landmark that told James exactly where he was, for whatever good that did him. He knew from his briefings about the landing that the church marked the town of Vierville sur Mer, located about 600 yards back of the German defenses along a stretch of beach code-named Omaha in the Overlord planning. Elements of James's 29th Division were assigned to hit the beach at Omaha. Nothing would be more gratifying to James than to walk down after the landing and personally shake Colonel Branson's hand when he came ashore.

He wasn't likely to get the chance.

The young *Wehrmacht* in jackboots led the way past the Citroen to the pillbox. On the other side of the pillbox and supply warehouse was a heavily fortified ravine. The three guards and the prisoner entered the pillbox. It was rounded with a series of doors in a circle around a sort of foyer. Jackboots clacked his heels together in front of the center door.

“Fraulein Elser?”

“Bring him inside,” ordered Constantina’s voice from behind the door.

She took a long disapproving look at James when he was presented to her. Not knowing what to expect after everything that had happened, he kept his mouth shut and studied her in return.

Her black hair looked freshly drawn into a tight bun, high on her head in the French style. She had changed into formfitting black slacks and a matching black blouse, the top button of which, James couldn’t help noticing, she had left undone. James shot her a mocking half grin. She reacted with an angry blush.

In contrast to her immaculate appearance, James felt like a bum begging for handouts. His canvas trousers and chambray shirt were mud- and blood-encrusted and had been cut and torn by the French doctor who patched him up. His socks were filthy and beginning to wear holes.

“Clean the pig and bring him back,” Constantina ordered first in English for James’s benefit, then in German.

“I thought you might be fond of pigs,” James couldn’t help taunting in English. “Like Winston Churchill says, dogs look up to us, cats look down on us, but pigs treat us as equals.”

“Get him out of here,” Constantina snapped. “Make sure he shaves.”

Keep provoking her, James thought, and she’ll have me shot. Or shoot me herself.

Guards took him next door to a troop bathing room in the warehouse bunker where there were low benches supplied with basins of water, towels, and a set of rough-looking peasant clothing of faded green. Sergeant Peg Leg grunted and pointed, since he assumed the prisoner understood no German. Corporal Jackboots untied his hands so he could undress and tend to his ablutions, then stepped back and seemed disinterested. Peg Leg and Stiff

Arm pointed their weapons at him and glared. Apparently they held grudges because of their war handicaps.

James took a whole bath and shaved using one of the basins. His bandages were filthy and blood-soaked, but he left them in place nonetheless. Maybe he wouldn't contract gangrene for a few more days, if he lasted that long. He changed into the faded peasant garb, which fit him a lot better than his previous wardrobe. He was afraid the guards would make him remove his socks, inside one of which he had concealed the retrieved L-pill, but they didn't seem to notice that he kept them on. No shoes were provided.

He had to admit he felt a lot better afterward. The guards bound his hands again. Constantina was alone in her room when they returned their scrubbed prisoner.

"That's better," she said approvingly.

She had let her hair down long and dark and silken around her shoulders. She ordered the guards to wait outside. She regarded James coolly while they obeyed. Puzzled, not understanding what she might be up to, he took in his surroundings with a glance, looking for some way to take advantage of the situation. Fate and luck couldn't keep going against him forever.

The windowless room contained a palliasse covered with a rough blanket, two wooden chairs, a wooden table upon which rested her unopened gray-green attaché case, and a second door, which probably led to *le cabinet*. As soon as the guards were gone, Constantina walked to an old-fashioned Victrola, the only other piece of furniture present, wound it by its handle and played softly an American recording of "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out."

How appropriate.

Did she really think all it took to make him talk was music and a pair of half-bare mamas?

"I'll have *foie de veau* and a bottle of *La Tache*," he

said in French. "No steak and eggs for this ol' boy. I saw what happened to your last guest."

She wasn't amused.

"On the other hand," he added, going back to English, "I'd settle for a cigarette."

Her scent, warm and womanly with a delicate trace of French perfume, surrounded him. High-voltage sexual tension crackled in the room. He looked squarely down her bosom; he could almost see her nipples. That he still desired her after everything that he had seen her capable of disgusted him to the point of nausea. Yet, there she dwelled, in the darker recesses of his mind, an image composed of lust and fascination. What was it about dangerous women that seemed to attract him?

She possessed the partial pack of Lucky Strikes that was taken from him in the basement of Chateau Fleuve. She shook one out, placed it between his lips and lit it for him.

"A last cigarette for a condemned man?" he asked.

"That's up to you, James." Standing so close to him that when she shifted her weight her thigh brushed suggestively against his. "I didn't want it to end this way, James."

"Isn't this the same way it ended with Captain Dobbs and General Sowell?"

She stiffened. That seemed to strike a sour note, as though the Victrola had screeched.

"James, we're at war!" she snapped. "I'm doing my job. Don't tell me you wouldn't do the same thing under similar circumstances."

He had to admit she had him there. In war you did what you had to do to win. He motioned with his cigarette toward the palliasse. "Is that part of your job?"

She ignored the insult. The music seemed to absorb her attention. "I miss it," she said languidly. "I liked America.

Especially the movies and the music. Dancing with you at the Hyatt, James, brought it all back. Kissing you . . .”

Her dark eyes softened and melted into his. He regarded her warily. He wasn't sure what the purpose of all this was, unless it was a preamble to another psychological interrogation technique. The Black Widow's version of foreplay.

“I know she's a blond, but I've always identified with Greta Garbo,” she said.

“You remind me of her in *Two-Faced Woman*.”

“James, please. Let's not be beastly, shall we?”

She wrapped her arms around his neck. “Dance with me, James? Or are you in pain from your unfortunate injuries?”

“They weren't unfortunate. They were deliberate.”

He held out his bound hands. “I can't put my arms around you like this.”

“I won't untie you, James. Don't be foolish.”

He shrugged and clamped his cigarette between his teeth. They waltzed awkwardly around the room together, slower than the beat. Her cheek pressed against his. She breathed in his ear and brushed against his hands tied between them. Her breath hoarsened.

“There was something special about you, James,” she murmured in his ear. “First, it was the way you came out of nowhere when I needed you.” She giggled. “That ridiculous mustache and your black eyes and red hair. James, you were a fresh sight. We're enemies, James, but we can be something else as well.”

“I bet you tell that to all your victims.” That big mouth of his.

She went rigid and pulled away. The music continued to play as they confronted each other.

“Damn you! You won't let me be nice to you.”

“I keep remembering the last time,” he rasped, “when

I ended up hanging from a third-story window while you and your goons tried to kill me.”

She controlled her anger and moved on. “James, you have it in your power to save both your life and your friend’s.”

He wondered how long it would take her to get around to it.

“I know you are OSS,” she said, “and that you possess the same knowledge as Major Harris about the Allied invasion. There’s something you don’t understand, James. I don’t *need* you to talk. I *want* you to talk in order that you save your friend Paul Harris. I couldn’t bear the thought of your hating me if something happens to him.”

“Like, for example, another electric probe into an orifice? Don’t lie to me, Constantina. You’ll execute him—you’ll execute *both* of us—when you’re finished.”

“He’s a broken man. You saw him, for God’s sake. He’ll tell me everything I want to know. A physician is with him right now, preparing him so he’ll be coherent. I’m trying to get across to you, James, that you can save him further discomfort. You *can* save his life. Damn you, James. I can keep both of you alive. Don’t you understand? I *want* to keep you alive.”

She was almost pleading with him. He wondered how much of this was an act and how much of it sincere.

“I want you to keep me alive, Constantina.”

“Then, blast you, James, show some gratitude.”

“You’re about to lose the war, Constantina.”

“Not if we beat back the invasion.”

Women complicated even a war.

“Then let’s start talking,” he said.

She brightened, then immediately looked suspicious.

“I’ll tell you how we’re dropping thousands of paratroops on Berlin to end the war,” he proposed. “We can talk all night long together on the palliasse. But you know how pillow talk is, and how perfidious men are.”

Why couldn't he keep his bulldog mouth shut and drag things out as long as he could, play for time? He let her get to him and now he had pissed her off. She stepped over and switched off the Victrola with a final ear-shattering screech of the needle on wax. She wheeled around to confront him from across the room.

"You'll both tell me everything we want to know before it's over," she flared.

He flared back. "We could screw all night and I'd still feed you nothing but sweet little lies."

"I am thinking of 'screw' in an entirely different setting. Blast you, James, for a fool. Guards!"

The door flew open. They had been waiting directly outside to protect her. She didn't trust him either.

"Besorgan ihm. Take him back to his cell."

Sergeant Peg Leg and Corporal Stiff Arm hustled James from Constantina's stormy presence, out of the pillbox and back toward his dungeon in the bunker. He realized all too grimly that once he was locked in again, he would be here for the rest of the day and night while Major Harris provided Constantina the information Rommel required to beat off the landing. James's last chance, his *only* chance, lay somewhere between the pillbox and the slamming of the steel door behind him.

Right. All he had to do was fight off all those 'coon dogs and walk out of there.

As far as he had been able to determine, the only occupants of the small bunker were himself in one cell, Major Harris in another and the two guards in the passageway. He ought to be able to play that to his advantage.

Through experience he knew how other men frequently underestimated him because of his slight stature and mild appearance. What most didn't realize until it was too late, however, was that dynamite, as Gramps liked to say, comes

in small packages. James had boxed at Oklahoma A&M, trained in "dirty fighting" techniques at the Oklahoma City Police Academy, employed hand-to-hand in the army, practiced long hours of "gutter fighting" at the Farm during OSS basic training, and survived three behind-the-lines combat missions so far. He was a proven fighter with none of the qualms against seriously injuring or killing a foe that normal men sometimes harbored. In a game like this, there were no rules except one: Kill or be killed.

Peg Leg and Stiff Arm seemed lulled into the same sense of false security that had done in the Nazi lieutenant whose throat James slit in Sicily. They had cashiered their long guns and now wore only pistols securely snapped into their holsters. They marched shoulder to shoulder in casual conversation behind the prisoner, neither paying much attention to him as they descended the bunker's concrete stairway into the underground hall. After all, what did they have to fear from a short, battered American who looked as though he might have been savaged by the entire German army?

James exaggerated his old Sicilian limp to throw his escort further off guard. He effected a stumble and almost fell, as though from the accumulated consequences of his injuries. Peg Leg poked him in the back with his finger.

"Sich bewegen!"

"Screw you and the black horse you rode in on," James muttered in English. He had had about all of the "Super Race" he could stand.

"Wie bitte?"

James tossed a weak smile back over his shoulder. "Your mama sleeps with the *Wehrmacht*."

"Ich verstehe nicht."

"You'll understand soon enough, Herr Sewer Breath."

The sergeant's wooden peg thumped and echoed in the empty passageway. The generator lights flickered. James

glanced back over his shoulder and saw that the heavy door leading outside at the top of the stairs was left open.

Even with his hands bound, he figured he could handle two crippled soldiers if he created the proper situation.

Major Harris remained silent this time as they passed his door. It was bolted from the outside. Sergeant Peg Leg prodded James in the back to hurry him along the few steps before reaching his own cell door. James took a deep breath to clear his mind. His muscles bunched for action. It was now or never.

Rapid footsteps clattered down the stairway into the bunker. Corporal Jackboots trotted up. James's heart sank. Three to one might be too many odds. The Mauser rifle Jackboots carried added to his authority.

"Gustav and I will relieve you at five for the evening meal," Jackboots said. "As long as it's all right and I don't have to drive *her* somewhere."

"That won't be necessary," Peg Leg replied. "We will relieve each other for meals."

Corporal Jackboots looked at James. "Is it wise, you think, to leave one sentry to watch over such a formidable-looking enemy?"

They all looked at James and burst out laughing. James laughed with them, pretending not to understand German. He seethed inside.

"Did you ask him if he might be a Jew?" Jackboots said.

"Why don't you check his foreskin?" Stiff Arm suggested.

They all had another laugh at James's expense. Jackboots left, jogging up the stairs. James staggered and appeared about to faint, dawdling until Jackboots was well gone.

"*Eintreten*," Peg Leg ordered, indicating the open cell door.

James exploded into action. Wheeling in his tracks, he brought the "Tiger Claw" up from the bunker floor with all the force of his body behind it. Both clawed fists tied together ruptured Sergeant Peg Leg's eyes, releasing a geyser of blood. The sergeant instantly dropped off his wooden leg, knocked unconscious before he had a chance to cry out a warning.

Overwhelmed by the suddenness of the attack, Corporal Stiff Arm instinctively attempted to grapple. He was a big man who caught James in a front bear hug with his good arm. James administered the "Shanghai Buster" by simply going limp, then grabbing the man's testicles and effectively ruining him. Shock muted him long enough for James to snap erect and drive his combined fists viciously into the man's Adam's apple. The German went limp next to his buddy. So much for the ethical treatment of cripples.

"Still wanna inspect my foreskin, asshole?" James growled.

The door at the head of the stairs framed an empty square of sky. So far, so good. Working rapidly, James dragged the two unconscious troopers into his cell one at a time. He ran to the barred window and stepped up on the slop bucket to look outside and make sure he hadn't been heard. One antitank gunner was dozing in the sun. Another smoked a cigarette and gazed pensively out to sea. Probably thinking about pussy. The others were joking among themselves.

Good enough.

Sergeant Peg Leg groaned. He mustn't be allowed to sound the alarm. James knelt between the two unconscious men as he hardened his heart, closed his emotions down to one track, to a direct action mentality so essential in this line of work. Peg Leg moaned again and rolled his head from side to side, both eyes blinded and still bleeding profusely. Stiff Arm had difficulty breathing

through his ruptured windpipe. His breath wheezed and snored.

James finished off both men by using the palms of his hands to pile-drive their noses into their brains. They died quickly and quietly. He stood up over them. Even though it had been necessary, he felt somewhat saddened and diminished all over again by the act of taking life.

He took a deep restorative breath. Now all he had to do was deal with Harris.

And escape if he could.

Everyone has his day, Winston once observed, *but some days last longer than others*. Whether Churchill intended it as a metaphor or not, James took it literally—today was barely half over and it had already been his longest ever. He couldn't think of a worse fix: alone in enemy country, in the middle of one of the largest defensive forces ever assembled in the history of the European continent, about to be caught between it and an even more formidable invasion force. So far, it had been one damned thing after another.

He figured safe hour to be about eight hours away. Uncle Henry, not knowing what had happened, should have bombers pounding Chateau Fleuve by now. In the meantime, James had the L-pill, one of the dead Germans' P38 pistol, and a commitment to protect the secrets of Overlord.

From the bodies James rifled a clasp knife, pocket watch, matches, and a nearly full pack of awful yellow German cigarettes. He used the knife to free his hands.

He then inspected the dead krauts' uniforms while a plan began to form in his mind. Garbed as a German soldier, he *might* stand a slim chance of making it to Vierville sur Mer after he saw to Harris. There, he could either hook up with the local Resistance or hide out and wait until invasion forces reached him.

Sergeant Peg Leg was the smaller of the two men, but he had only one boot. James stripped him of his gray greens and donned them over the clean light green peasant shirt Constantina had provided him. The garrison cap fit; the polished black pistol belt containing the holstered P38 Walther was adjustable. That left Corporal Stiff Arm's boots.

They were at least three sizes too big, larger even than the brogans he got from the Cafard, and made him feel more than ever like a circus clown. He hoped the boots wouldn't give away a modest-sized soldier with exceptionally big feet.

The sun, low in the west, shone through the high cell window, drafting a watery yellow square on the concrete floor next to the corpses, one of whom was stripped of his clothing, the other of his boots. James stood a moment with his face uplifted to the sunlight. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply. He still felt nauseous and stiff from his multiple injuries and thought his fever might be spiking. He hadn't the time to worry about it now.

He slipped into the dimness of the hallway and bolted the cell door behind him. There were blood smears on the floor, but no one was apt to notice them unless he stepped in them.

Steeling his emotions, shutting down the wheels of his mind, he quickly unbolted Major Harris's cell and entered. Regretfully, there was no way in God's Kingdom he could take Paul with him.

Like the cage next door, this one was similarly equipped with a slop bucket and a high barred window that over-

looked the antitank emplacement and let in light. Someone outside laughed with the high-pitched bray of a draft mule. It seemed a mocking sound under the circumstances.

Major Paul Harris was gone.

James's frantic thoughts raced. It occurred to him that Paul may already have been interrogated even as the Black Widow was trying to get him to play stink finger in her chambers. He dismissed that thought. Constantina's ego wouldn't permit anyone else to handle this job. She must have had the guards take Paul somewhere else to prepare him for her questioning. All things considered, the most logical place for Paul to have been taken was another room in the pillbox, one that provided Constantina and her torturers easy access to him.

He seethed with rage at the prospect of the poor man stripped and bound to another operating table while Constantina and her gestapo minions wrested secrets from his wretched and tormented brain. Horrid as it was to contemplate, it was better that Paul die from an L-pill administered by a friend than to die writhing in pain and blubbing out everything he knew. The Black Widow had to be stopped from obtaining secrets that would allow

her to unleash further evil in her dedicated service to the Reich and its Fuhrer.

Girding himself mentally for what had to be done, James climbed to the top of the bunker stairs and blinked in the sunlight. Pulling this thing off required brass balls. A major part of undercover work consisted of creating the impression that you *belonged* wherever you happened to be. He stood erect, shoulders squared, balanced squarely and firmly on his legs as he took in his surroundings and cataloged them for future reference. He lit one of Peg Leg's awful yellow cigarettes. It tasted as bad as it looked.

Constantina's black Citroen remained parked near the front of the pillbox next door. Farther down, a work party of soldiers was about to complete the convoy's offloading. A crusty, bandy-legged sergeant goose-stepped a platoon of *Wehrmacht* through close-order rifle drills on the road between the sedan and the convoy.

James studied the lay of the land looking for possible escape routes, and then returned his eyes to the pillbox. Constantina appeared from underground, still dressed in black, clasping her attaché case. She appeared to be in a hurry. *Had she finished with Harris already?*

She scowled, tapping her foot with impatience. She glared at the rifle drill, and then wrenched her gaze toward the bunker and the sergeant standing in front of it smoking a cigarette.

James lowered his head, tugged the garrison cap over his eyes and casually turned away, smoking his cigarette with his hand splayed to cover his face. His heart thudded. He expected her to recognize him and start squawking like a magpie. Grams would have said he was about to leap from the skillet into the fire, at which point he had no choice but to use the Walther.

When he chanced another look, she was rushing back

inside the pillbox. He heaved a long sigh of relief. It proved premature.

A German officer had eyes on him and was walking purposefully down the road toward him. Pretending not to notice, James pinched the ember off his cigarette, field-shredded it, and began limping briskly and with a seeming sense of duty toward the pillbox.

The officer hesitated. The limp helped establish James as a bona fide member of the over-the-hill brigade. The officer turned and went the other way. The bandy-legged sergeant and his platoon paid no attention to anything outside their workout area.

Two soldiers, rifles balanced on their shoulders, passed James. One of them noticed the sergeant's big feet. He sniggered and motioned to his comrade. Then both snuffled and chortled as they disappeared around the other side of the pillbox.

James had to get out of sight. Sooner or later someone was bound to challenge him. He entered the pillbox. In the foyer, Constantina's door was closing behind her.

The doors circling the foyer were all closed. No one seemed to be about. James had observed no firing ports during his visit to Constantina's quarters a few minutes ago. Either the pillbox had defensive positions built into its outer crust or it was primarily an administrative area. Whichever, it seemed unoccupied for the moment.

Drawing the P38 from its holster, then glancing back to make sure the nosy kraut officer hadn't followed, James made his way to Constantina's door. He listened, though he doubted he could hear anything through the thick door and walls. He moved on. If Harris was here, he was most likely confined to a room adjacent to Constantina's.

As in the neighboring bunker, the doors in the pillbox could be bolted from the outside but not the inside. Sucking up his marbles, James swung open the first door next to Constantina's room and sprang inside, pistol gripped in both hands. It was empty except for a desk, a couple of chairs and another palliasse.

He moved to the door on the other side of Constantina's

room. This time the room wasn't empty. James found Paul Harris lying naked on his back on top of a large table, his hands and feet strapped. Fresh blood oozed from lacerations on his face; he was breathing with great difficulty. He appeared to have been discarded like the skin of an overripe banana. Eyes wide and filled with pain and fear stared directly at James. He was still alert.

James closed the door and hurried to his side. "Paul, it's me—Cantrell."

Confusion and suspicion swept Harris's mangled features. His breath came in short, raspy gasps. Blood caked the table underneath him like drying paint. He must have been under "interrogation" even while Constantina was entertaining James next door. How she must have enjoyed taunting the OSS agent, knowing that her "physician" was next door preparing her next victim.

James slid the *Wehrmacht* garrison cap off his head and knelt so Harris could see his face in the dim generator light.

"Okie!" Harris wheezed, startled. "It's really . . . you. I thought I was dreaming. What . . . are you doing in . . . that kraut getup?" He paused after almost every word to catch his breath. James had to lean down over his face in order to hear him.

"There's not much time, Paul. I'll explain later."

There was an inner door that appeared to connect to the room Constantina used. James reached it in a few quick strides. He opened it, weapon trained to cover any occupant. It was a cubbyhole toilet, vacant. The adjacent rooms must share the same facility, for another door led into Constantina's quarters. James bolted both doors to prevent a surprise visit.

Before proceeding, he needed to find out how much Paul had revealed. He unstrapped Paul's hands and feet and covered his shivering body with a blanket from the cot in the corner. Paul was snoring. James shook him. There

wasn't much time. Someone could burst in on them at any moment.

"Paul . . . I need some answers."

Harris turned his head aside, as though suddenly overcome with guilt and shame. Tears of humiliation squeezed from between swollen eyelids. It was the face of a beaten man.

"Okie . . . I—I understand it's . . . good manners in Oklahoma to . . . bait the girl's hook on . . . your first date."

The old bon mot between them. "Yeah, Paul. I'll still beat you at basketball when we get back home."

That wasn't honest. Paul Harris was never going home. James didn't have the heart to come right out and admit it: *Paul, ol' buddy, I'm either gonna have to kill you for the greater good if you haven't talked yet—or leave you here to suffer and die if you have talked.* A hell of a choice, but there wasn't the slightest chance a single fake kraut could walk out of here carrying a dying American prisoner. There was only a marginally better chance of the fake kraut walking alone out of here.

"Paul, I need to know. Did you tell them?"

The tormented eyes opened and gazed directly into James's. Calm. Resigned. Constantina's "physician" may have administered drugs. James kept the Walther in his hand and his eyes on the door.

"Okie . . . did you see what . . . they did to me?"

James could hardly understand him through all his missing and broken teeth.

"Okie, will you . . . tell Deborah and Louise . . . ?"

He drifted off.

"Paul?"

"Okie, tell them . . . I love them."

James shook his head in anguish. Would this nastiness never end? Harris regarded him with a sudden innocence that tore into James's bowels like a rusted knife.

"I am a Christian, Okie. Did I . . . Did you know that? Tell Deborah . . . Tell her I'll meet them both . . . in heaven."

Harris's feeble hand reached out. James grasped it. They trembled together from emotion. Tears rolled down James's cheeks, dripping onto his friend's face. His thoughts screamed out in protest.

He swallowed. "Paul, did you tell about Overlord?"

Harris looked defeated and ashamed. "The Nazis know *everything*."

James glanced toward the toilet door. So far, Constantina was likely the only German who knew the date, time and place for Overlord. She was an ambitious woman; James had seen that in her. She would want to claim the credit for breaking the secret, which meant she would tell no one else until she personally spoke with Hitler or Himmler. That was probably why she appeared fretful when he saw her outside; she was waiting for someone to drive her to a strategic telephone exchange line with direct access to Berlin. Besides, James doubted she wanted to be anywhere near the beaches when the Allies turned Normandy into hell on Earth.

James had to hurry. He had to stop her.

He dropped his chin on his chest and closed his eyes tight, no longer able to look at his doomed friend. Tears dripped. He reached silently into his pocket and produced the L-pill.

"Put it between your teeth and bite," James instructed as he slipped the pill between Paul's lips.

Major Harris tongued it into place between two teeth that were still partially intact. He squeezed James's hand a final time and held the grip.

"I'll be seeing you, pal."

And bit down on the suicide pill. They were still holding hands when he died.

Paul's death had come too late to preserve the secrets of Overlord. James stood over the body, bowed his head and closed his eyes.

What made him think God would be in this place? All soldiers cried out to God, but still they kept killing each other.

"Amen," he whispered.

Ceremony over, such as it was, his face hardened. His eyes narrowed when he heard a sound next door, as if something had dropped on the floor. That Constantina had returned to her chambers for some reason provided perhaps his best and last chance to successfully conclude this nasty business. That it would likely end his own life was beside the point. Paul sacrificed his life for Overlord. Why should James expect his own life to be of more worth?

He steeled his heart and damaged soul and sprinted for the toilet, his too-big boots flapping. He threw open the first door, raced past the stool and sink, unbolted the second door, and stormed into the other room, ready and

determined to kill. A quick glance was all he needed. *Too late.* The room was abandoned. The generator light on its long cord from the ceiling ebbed and flickered against the abandoned table, palliasse and Victrola.

She was getting away.

He rushed the outer door and erupted into the foyer. Constantina was halfway up the stairs on her way to the waiting Citroen. She had changed out of all-black into more sensible attire—flared tan canvas slacks and a short tan cord jacket. That must have been why she returned to her room. She still carried the attaché case.

He snapped up the Walther and drew a bead on her back.

Squeezing the trigger meant James would seal his own doom. Perhaps it was for that reason, or perhaps it was something subconscious, that caused him to hesitate. Twice now he had had her in his sights—and twice he let her go! She would never have let him go like that.

She evaporated up the pillbox stairs into the sunlight. He hurried after her, holstering the pistol to avoid attracting notice until he was ready again. He emerged at the top of the steps. Constantina stood by the sleek Citroen with her back to the pillbox, visibly annoyed at the delay, still waiting for her driver.

Everything appeared relaxed and normal otherwise—the brawny sergeant goose-stepping his troops, the convoy off-loading, the nosy officer walking off down the road, the sun westering toward the Channel as though fleeing the overtaking night. There were no indications that German defenses had yet been alerted to dawn's coming attractions.

Constantina stood on tiptoe and waved impatiently. It

wasn't until then that James realized Corporal Jackboots, the uber Aryan, was actually her driver. He waved back at her and rushed toward the car.

It struck James that sparing Constantina's life might have been the prudent decision after all. She might well provide him a way out *and* a way to preserve his life.

He acted on instinct, striding forward and reaching from behind to open the back door for her. As befitted her status and her nature, she paid no attention to a mere underling. She deigned to even look his way when she slid into the backseat with her attaché case.

Instead of closing her door, James slid in behind her, roughly pushing her over. Offended, she started to protest until she saw James's face and felt the sharp jab of his pistol against her ribs.

"You have two choices," he barked in an undertone. "Do as I say, or start saying your Nazi prayers."

He smiled to cover the nature of their confrontation in case someone was watching—and men were always watching a pretty woman. She gaped in astonishment.

"How did you . . . ? Where did you . . . ?"

"Did you think I could ever stay away from you?"

"All I have to do is scream."

"You won't," he said with confidence. "Let me explain. I just came from seeing Major Harris. After what I saw, I will happily shoot your pretty ass. You know what that means. The secrets of the invasion die with you, and with me. I know you, Constantina. You're already thinking about how you can stay alive and play this to your advantage. That leaves you with one choice."

Corporal Jackboots, trotting, was almost to the car. The next few seconds determined whether either of them lived to see the invasion.

"Tell him I'm going with you," James ordered, his voice as thin and strained as his nerves. "*Ich verstehe Deutsch,*"

he added, so she would know he understood German and not try to play language games. "At this moment, dear heart, I almost don't give a damn which way you choose."

She had to realize this was no bluff. She gave in.

"James, we really must find a more convenient way to see each other."

"Yeah, well . . . I never thought you'd be this difficult when I saw your name on the toilet wall."

"Must you always be crude?"

"Speak German!" James snapped. "Go ahead. Tell him I'm going."

Corporal Jackboots hustled up to the car, apologizing profusely for his neglect as he seated himself behind the wheel, not daring to give James more than a perfunctory glance. It wasn't up to him to question what the fraulein did and with whom she did it. Besides, he never expected to see the American prisoner in German uniform, so he simply didn't.

James jerked his garrison cap lower on his forehead and tilted his face down toward Constantina to hide his reflection in the rearview mirror. Jackboots might remember the black eyes, if nothing else. James prodded Constantina with the muzzle of the Walther concealed between their bodies.

"Vierville," he muttered.

Constantina echoed the command to her driver, settling the issue for the moment.

"*Heil Hitler!*" Jackboots responded and started the engine.

The black sedan twisted away from the pillbox onto the dirt road, eased past the stationary convoy, and headed toward the defensive perimeter of razor wire entanglements, guard shacks and patrolling sentries that separated the German beach fortifications from the town. The church

spire rising above the trees at Vierville looked like such a short distance away.

The road left the coast and wound across some sandy flats overgrown by marsh grass. Here and there a ravine or dry wash cut past an abandoned beach house. Hedgerows, some of which, left untended, had grown to a height of eight feet, dividing the land into large parcels. A hogback ridge rose up in an impressive hump on the near side of a deep ravine known as Vierville Draw and diminished back into the flats as it neared the German perimeter.

Constantina regarded James with a half quizzical, half admiring expression.

"I will grant you this much, James," she said. "You have the balls of a man six feet tall."

He poked her with the gun to shut her up. He was sweating profusely and felt his skin burning. "Keep your eyes off the rearview mirror," he warned, sotto voce. "Don't try to signal. I swear I will kill you."

"Bad form, this entire business, James. You look awful. Are you ill?"

"Nothing that the dawn's light won't cure."

She smiled. "We're only promised one day at a time. None of us knows what tomorrow will bring."

He tapped her ribs with the gun. "Some of us do."

More flights of Allied bombers droned overhead near the stratosphere. German antiaircraft guns along the beach held their fire and saved ammunition for more accessible targets. Corporal Jackboots leaned forward over the wheel as he drove and peered upward through the windscreen.

"They've been flying over like that for days," he remarked in German.

You ain't seen nothing yet.

The road topped the low end of the hogback ridge and brought the perimeter into sight—wire, trenches and

stilted guard shacks stretched off either direction into seeming infinity. The road's twin tracks led toward a gate marked by sandbagged positions and sentries with fixed machine guns. Beyond the gate lay the town.

"They'll never let us through," Constantina remarked.

Another couple of hundred yards to go. To the right, the Vierville Draw dissected the terrain on its way to the beaches. Scrubby trees clung to its lips like stray hairs around the wide mouth of a toothless witch. To the left lay the low end of the ridge and beyond that a flat field of knobby sand dunes thinly scabbed with marsh grasses. Above, Allied bombers streamed past. Behind, the Atlantic Wall bristled with concrete and steel. Ahead, approaching ever closer, the gate to freedom.

James appeared collected on the outside. On the inside his guts roiled, his heart hammered. Sooner or later, he thought, he was going to run out of adrenaline.

So what was he going to do with Constantina if they made it? She remained dangerous to him, and to Overlord, until the bitter end, a woman as slippery as a river eel on a trotline. Scheming, deceiving and plotting were integral parts of her nature. James had to watch her closely when they reached the gate and be ready for anything.

“It’s up to you to convince the sentries,” James said

with another prod of the gun. "Or we'll die together like Bonnie and Clyde."

"Bonnie and Clyde?"

"Crooks during the Dust Bowl. Police gunned them down in each other's arms."

"A touching love story."

"They were sick killers."

She raised a meaningful eyebrow in the direction of the gun between them. "You and I are kindred spirits, James, who deal in death."

It was not a comforting thought.

Just a few more minutes. James felt escape nearly within his grasp, when the beachfront to the rear spontaneously detonated with the thud, rattle, scream and hammer of a battery of weapons opening up together. Startled, the occupants of the Citroen whirled around in their seats in time to glimpse an airplane skimming German fortifications through a brutal hail of tracers and exploding ack-ack. Reconnaissance pilots flying twin-prop Lightnings sometimes used the diversion of bomber flights to make "dicing runs" on German positions to obtain detailed tactical photos.

The timing, as far as James was concerned, couldn't be better. Gate sentries would be too busy ducking and dodging and watching the display to give a departing gestapo vehicle their full concentration.

"*Beeilen sie sich!*" James shouted. *Hurry up!*

Corporal Jackboots panicked at what he apparently took to be an Allied attack. Instead of speeding up and pressing on toward the gate, he jerked the wheel and swerved the car off the road toward the cover of a grove of trees next to the ravine. The maneuver threw James off balance.

Constantina let out a cry and, with the advantage of surprise, snatched James's pistol from his grip. She threw herself back and away from him as she attempted to get

her finger on the trigger and point the business end of the Walther in his direction.

James scrambled to recover the weapon. Somehow he got a hold on the barrel and wrenched it away and up. She tried to knee him in the groin. He deflected the blow off his wounded thigh, sending pain shrieking to every nerve.

Struggling, they bounced from the seat onto the floorboard, James on top. The P38 discharged between their faces with a stunning blast of fire that rang in their ears.

“Flie! Flie!” Constantina yelled at the driver. “Run! They’re coming at dawn! Tell Rommel!”

Jackboots was having trouble trying to both drive and understand what was going on in the backseat. He released the steering wheel with one hand and wrenched his body around. The car careened off a tree, swerving sharply on two wheels, and crashed into a boulder, slamming the driver’s head against the wheel and dazing him.

Constantina continued to bellow at Jackboots to get his ass out of the car and spread the word that the Allies were coming. Seeing an opening, James slugged her in the jaw with enough force to make her release the pistol.

Snatching the weapon off the seat, he jumped up from the floorboard like a jack-in-the-box, intending to put the driver out of his confusion. Jackboots’ eyes bulged when he saw the gun. In a single desperate movement, he threw open the door, hurled himself out on the sand, scrambled to his feet and took off howling at the top of his lungs.

James tumbled over the back of the front seat as he frantically attempted to get a shot off before the fleeing corporal got out of range. He had to be stopped; he knew about Overlord.

Recovering, Constantina scrambled after James, whaling at him with her attaché case. Both of them fell out through the open driver’s door together. Constantina

sprang to her feet first and sprinted toward the ravine, attaché case in hand.

Even as James scrambled to his feet, he feared he could finish off only one of them before the other got away with knowledge to effectively repel the invasion. They were fleeing in opposite directions.

Jackboots darted through the grove of trees on his way to alert the perimeter sentries, exposing only flashes of gray-green uniform in the foliage. James dropped to one knee and steadied the Walther with both hands. Pandemonium generated by the recon plane along the beach masked the *crack* of the powerful pistol.

The corporal jerked in mid-stride as the bullet thumped loudly into his back. He staggered against a tree, trying to catch himself. He hung onto the trunk, hugging it with both arms as he looked to the sky in shock and fear. James knocked him decisively to the ground with the second bullet.

Weapon ready, he then wheeled in the direction of Constantina's flight. Through the steam hissing from the Citroen's busted radiator he glimpsed her disappearing over the edge of the ravine into a maze of boulders, shrubbery and washouts.

She was getting away.

James took off after her. He sailed off the edge of the ravine, windmilling his arms to maintain his balance in the air. He landed with a jolt that clacked his teeth together. A gravel-and-sand slope on the lower level of the washout spilled him head over heels into thick shrubbery clotting the bottom of the gorge. The impact knocked him breathless.

The pistol flew from his hand.

Gasping, he scrambled about on hands and knees until he located the Walther. He sprang to his feet in time to see Constantina disappearing around a bend in the wash on her way toward the ocean and the German fortifications. Her long legs in tan slacks, flashed and her black hair streamed out behind her.

James resumed the chase. As a cop, he had surprised the hell out of fleet young burglars and robbers by chasing them into the ground. That was before the limp, how-

ever. He also hadn't been handicapped by wounds and a pair of oversized boots.

Constantina was nowhere in sight when, running as hard as he could, he reached the bend around which she had disappeared. The wash forked into two branches, either one of which she might have taken. He hesitated. *Choose the wrong one and she is going to escape.* He desperately searched for tracks in the sand. He had to get a shot at her before she reached safety. This time he mustn't falter. He should have wasted the bitch when he had the chance.

As startling as the first outbreak of antiaircraft fire had been a few minutes ago, the silence that settled over the canyon when all firing suddenly ceased was more disconcerting. Either the Lightning was shot down or it had eluded fire and was on its way back to Britain with last-minute intelligence on the German defenses. No longer would the roar and clatter of big guns camouflage the *crack* of a hostile pistol shot. Instead, a gunshot would bring troops charging to investigate.

James had been warned, during OSS phase training, that a day like this might come. The training director posted a bold sign above his desk: NO GREATER LOVE HAS ANY MAN THAN THAT HE LAY DOWN HIS LIFE FOR HIS COUNTRYMAN.

The washout branch to the right was wider and deeper than the other. James saw the tops of blockhouses and pillboxes where the Vierville Draw opened onto the beach. Those and a scuff mark he found convinced him Constantina had gone this way.

He sprang forward on her trail, his breath whistling in his ears as he ran.

The wash twisted and turned like the tracks of a chicken snake fleeing after a raid on a henhouse. James soon caught another glimpse of Constantina, one so

fleeing that he had no chance for a shot. He was gaining on her, however. He called for every ounce of reserve speed and strength he possessed, knowing he was pursuing his own destruction.

He and Death had been playing tag this entire interminable day. He had the feeling that Death finally had the upper hand. There was no time, however, for second guessing. He accepted his fate. He had to catch and kill the Black Widow before the knowledge she possessed annihilated thousands of his fellow countrymen and turned the beaches scarlet with their blood.

The ringing of a fever replaced the droning of the last high bombers. Through it, he heard trucks, mobile guns, and other vehicles grinding their gears. Excited men shouted at each other in German. Any time now he should encounter tanglefoot, machine-gun emplacements, outposts and other obstacles thrown up by the Germans to keep invaders from using the ravine as a funnel to get up off the landing beaches and gain a toehold in Europe.

He couldn't stop now, not even if he had to shoot Constantina in front of a battalion of Germans before they mowed him down.

Another twist in the canyon lay ahead. He flew around it, hoping to catch Constantina before she gained the next bend. He skidded to a halt in abject disbelief, his jaw dropping and his eyes widening. For there, directly in front of him, appeared what had to be a hallucination.

Gabrielle had the muzzle of a Sten submachine gun shoved against Constantina's spine and was marching the much taller woman back up the ravine toward James.

“Bonsoir, James.” Gabrielle greeted him cheerfully as the two women drew near.

The tiny French redhead carried the fraulein’s attaché case in one hand and the Sten in the other, poking Constantina in the back with it to hurry her along. Binoculars hung by a strap around her neck and her full peasant skirt swished around her bare, dusty legs. She walked high-headed and loose-jointed like a proud Ozark lass on the way to her first day of school. A rising lump over Constantina’s left eye oozed a thread of blood.

“She required some friendly persuasion,” Gabrielle explained with a grin as wide and bright as a sunrise. She stopped with her prisoner in front of James.

“She can be hardheaded,” James agreed, finally recovering his tongue.

The sight of Gabrielle stirred James’s emotions, especially since he thought never to see her again. Had it been only this morning that they made love in the well? She had certainly kept her word most dramatically to come

back for him. He resisted the urge to hug her with joy and ply her with a hundred questions on how she found him and ended up inside the German defenses. Instead, he squeezed her hand as he took the Sten. It was the same one with which he parachuted into France last night.

"Are you happy to see me, James?" Gabrielle asked.

"More than you know, *jeune fille*. But it would be better if you had stayed safe somewhere else."

"Why?" She indicated Constantina. "You would never have caught her in time. Why were you chasing her?"

"I'll explain later."

Breathing hard from the chase, Constantina glowered first at one captor and then the other. She looked subdued but not defeated. Speaking in French, she said, "Isn't this just too sweet for words! James, can't you ever keep your pants buttoned?"

"Do you want me to hit you in the other eye?" Gabrielle threatened.

"I should have known it was you two in Sainte Anglaises," Constantina said. "You threw the hand grenades," she accused Gabrielle.

Gabrielle clasped James's hand. "We are a team," she said proudly.

Constantina looked away, her lips compressed into a bitter line. She touched her fingertips to her injured eye. There was another bruise on her chin where James had slugged her.

From down-canyon came the continued growl of vehicles and the shouting of Germans. So far, their activity and the wrecked Citroen appeared to have gone unnoticed. James wanted to keep it that way. He ushered Constantina in a reluctant trot back to where the wash junctioned and they could catch their breath with less fear of being observed.

While Gabrielle's surprise appearance was a relief in that James knew she had not been captured or, worse yet,

killed, it also complicated matters tenfold. Grams liked to say that life was filled with crossroads and that one's destiny depended upon which road he chose. At this moment, James felt like he had reached a dead end. Even before Gabrielle showed up, his chances of getting through the perimeter gate in the hijacked sedan with Constantina had been at best fifty-fifty. His chances were a lot less than that now, what with the Citroen out of commission and Gabrielle joining him.

Constantina seemed to read his mind. "I presume you killed my driver," she said. "They'll find him, they'll find my car, and they'll come looking."

James didn't want to be responsible for a life other than his own. Not again. He had assumed responsibility for Major Paul Harris—and now Paul was dead. He couldn't bear the thought of Gabrielle's capture and execution.

The only available option was to run and hide. He nudged Constantina with the submachine gun. "Let's move."

She balked.

Wearing a smirk, she turned to Gabrielle and blurted out her poison before James had any inkling of what she intended: "Operation Overlord, the Allied invasion, starts at dawn."

James shoved her hard to shut her up, but it was too late. The damage had been done. Constantina looked up at them from the sand where she had fallen. She wore the self-satisfied smile of a black widow who had just consumed her mate.

"Do you understand, *jeune fille*?" she rapped out in a hard, amused voice. "The invasion is at dawn. Now you are infected with the fatal Overlord disease."

Consumed with sudden rage, James might have blasted her on the spot but for Gabrielle's restraining hand and his awareness that gunshots now would certainly summon bad guys.

“Is it true, James?” Gabrielle cried hopefully. “Are the Allies coming?”

All James could think of was: *Constantina, you calculating bitch*. Multiplying the number of people who knew the secret supplied more potential fodder for subsequent interrogations and, at the same time, provided some modicum of additional security for herself. James would have to neutralize *two* women to safeguard Overlord should they be compromised.

James turned his head sharply away, not daring to look at Gabrielle and let her see his eyes. He almost cried out in anguish at the thought of having to destroy her pretty face in order to protect the landing.

James selected a narrow leg off the Vierville Draw and piloted the two women into it. They traveled slowly, cautiously. The arroyo narrowed and deepened as it dug through the lower end of the ridge and came out to the flats on the other side. They saw only a thin ribbon of sky above. James touched both walls at the same time by extending his arms.

The gully doglegged sharply to the right under a shelf-like overhang into a cavity formed by erosion. It was large enough to conceal several fugitives if they were willing to get terribly familiar with each other. Anyone from above on the banks of the wash would have to look very closely to see it. It was the best hide they had come across so far.

James prodded Constantina with the Sten. "Under there. Home sweet home."

She had to bend low to crawl underneath the ledge. She gave a low laugh. "My, what big feet you have, James."

"The better to kick you in the butt with if you don't get under there and shut up."

"You're still cranky, James."

"*Silencieux!*" Gabrielle snapped. "Or I shall be kicking you in the butt as well."

Constantina laughed derisively as she wriggled her way underneath the boulders. She sat at the back of the hollow with her knees up and her head lowered to rest on them. Gabrielle crawled in next. James, who was in possession of the group's only weapons—the P38 and the Sten—blocked the opening with his own body. They were jammed in so tight that Constantina complained she couldn't breathe.

"Now what?" she demanded in German.

"We wait," James said. "Speak French."

"At dawn," Constantina taunted in French, "we are going to be ground zero for the grandest train wreck in history."

"It is truly the invasion?" Gabrielle said.

"Of course it is, *mon cheri*," Constantina said with deliberate cruelty. "That is precisely what you will tell my gestapo when they come, before they insert the silver penis and pull out your tongue. I'm sure they're already looking for me."

She peered defiantly through the dusky air at James. "You might be equipped to kill me, James—but can you kill *her*?"

It surprised James that she actually sounded jealous.

"You'll be the first to go, Fraulein Elser," he vowed. This time, he thought, *this* time he would not hesitate.

They waited in hunkered-down silence as purple shadows flowed into the ravine like calm night water. Only an arm's length away from James, Constantina gradually blended with the darkness until she faded from sight. Sergeant Peg Leg's pocket watch told James that the Safe Hour was less than six hours away. All he and the women had to do was stay hidden and endure.

Hearing no sounds of search or pursuit, James began to think he might actually pull this thing off.

Gabrielle helped pass time by filling them in on the adventures that had led her to the Normandy beaches. Constantina seemed as interested as James. He cautioned that they speak in low tones, although he doubted even normal voices carried much beyond the confines of the narrow arroyo.

After she crawled back down the tunnel from Chateau Fleuve, Gabrielle said, she found the Cafard without much trouble. However, Sainte Anglais was literally overrun with Germans scouring the town for the man and woman who had eluded the gestapo agents. Fernand decided it was too risky for his band to go along with James and chance getting trapped with him inside the chateau.

"I intended to return in the tunnel to you, alone or not," Gabrielle explained. "Vinain suggested we could help more by staging the diversion you wanted to cover your getaway. It didn't help."

"It did. More than you know, *jeune fille*."

"I like it when you call me that," she whispered.

James felt Constantina glaring.

Vinain and Gabrielle had hurled hand grenades and shot up the front of the chateau. Vinain fled into the countryside afterward to lead the pursuing troops away from his sister.

"Vinain knows the country better than any German. They cannot catch him."

Madame Lemieux at the dress shop had concealed Gabrielle in her loft, from which vantage point Gabrielle could see the main street through Sainte Anglais and the army convoy parked in front of the chateau.

"After a while," she said, "they brought you out with the other man. Both of you were tied up like hogs on the way to market. The other looked dead, and James, you

were so bandaged and bloody . . . I was scared you were dying! They put you in the back of one of the trucks. This . . . this *woman*,” by which she meant Constantina, “seemed to be in charge. James, I couldn’t let them take you away. Not after . . .”

James thought she must be blushing.

As the convoy departed, she went on, gestapo men raided the dress shop and shot Madame Lemieux.

“A collaborator must have seen me go in,” Gabrielle said, tears in her voice.

Carrying the Sten gun and a pair of binoculars, Gabrielle had escaped out the loft window and across an adjoining roof only moments ahead of the gestapo and milice. She ran down alleys and back streets and caught up with the convoy where the road bent sharply past the medieval church and the trucks had to slow. Since the convoy hauled supplies and not troops, she wasn’t spotted when she dashed out and slipped underneath the tarp of one of the vehicles.

“I was so frightened,” she exclaimed. “But I knew you would have come for me, James.”

Would he have come for her? In James’s world of espionage and sabotage, mission came ahead of people or anything else. It was not something that made him proud.

Gabrielle rode the truck until, peering through a rip in the canvas, she recognized the Normandy beaches. She decided to abandon her ride after the convoy passed through the German defensive perimeter and approached the end of the road at the coastal fortifications. She piled out of the truck and hid in the dunes while dust kicked up by the big dual wheels camouflaged her escape.

“I sneaked up on the ridge above this ravine where I could watch through my binoculars and see where they took you. *Mon Dieux*, James, I didn’t know what to do. I saw you come out of the bunker twice. The first time you

had your hands tied. I almost didn't recognize you the second time with you wearing that dreadful kraut uniform."

Gabrielle observed James get into the Citroen with Constantina and her driver.

"You were leaving and I was frightened all over again at being left alone and unable to go with you," she concluded in a rush. "Then the plane came. I saw the car crash and . . . and *she* ran and you chased her. That was where I could help you—it seemed so important that you catch her. James, I thank God for watching over you. For watching over *us*."

Even Constantina seemed touched by the girl's devotion and courage. "You got balls almost as big as his, *mademoiselle*," she said begrudgingly. "I'll grant you that."

"Is she always this coarse?" Gabrielle asked seriously.

That ended Constantina's generosity. "Out of which melon patch did this *paysan* come?" she snapped.

"I am a country girl, a *paysan*," Gabrielle lashed back. "But I was taught the difference between good and evil. I know that your Fuhrer is the devil himself, who has set his fires to the entire world. In the end you will all join him in hell."

Darkness consumed the three huddled transients. Each became a disembodied sound of breathing, of occasional shifting of position that scraped the ground or dislodged pebbles, of a cough or a suppressed sneeze provoked by dust. Out of such confinement gradually emerged a sort of shared intimacy, as though this hole in the ground symbolized all that was left of the world and the three in it the various warring nations that had torn it apart.

Surrendering in the silence to his own thoughts, James felt soured emotionally and sapped physically from the growing infection in his blood. The day's killing, though necessary, had tarnished his soul. He couldn't erase from his mind the sight of Paul Harris's face as he bit down on the suicide pill, the sad, pained eyes pleading for explanation, for meaning. And now a French girl had risked everything, including her own life, for a man she had known less than 24 hours. There remained the possibility, even the likelihood, that he would have to do to her what he had done to Paul.

Five hours until Safe Hour. He craved a cigarette but dared not light one.

Gabrielle sat for a long time while the night took over their separate identities. James was grateful when she finally diverted his thoughts. She sighed deeply and began speaking in a sad little girl's voice.

"True, I am a *paysan*," she said. "I was happy in the country and content to live my life in simplicity and innocence. Then, one day, uninvited, you Germans came."

Constantina remained silent, to her credit.

"You and your tanks and guns and storm troops and your doctrine of a super race."

She shivered as cold seeped into her bones, and bad memories began to well up.

"My father was a Jew," she continued. "He changed his name to Arneau to hide it, but he was still a Jew."

She choked up. James held her hand.

"One day the gestapo asked the town council for ten healthy Jews for a work detail. It was no work detail. The entire town knew the Germans were seeking retribution for Resistance activity.

"The gestapo took the ten Jews, including my father, to a place where a gallows was already prepared. The milice had to hang the Jews with their own hands. To add to this horror, the gestapo drove everyone out of their homes to the hanging place so they could witness it as a lesson. Many women fainted and everyone was crying at seeing the terrible sight of our fathers, sons and brothers writhing on the gallows. My father was very brave. Before he was hanged, he said, 'I am dying. But Hitler will also die and the Germans will lose the war.'"

She sobbed quietly at the recollection, her shoulders shaking. James held her tightly. Constantina sat still, silent.

"My mother possessed documents proving she was a Gentile, but they seized her anyhow. Neighbors sheltered

my brother Vinain and me. We were young, so collaborators did not tell on us. The Germans took Mother away at night. I remember the rumbling of the train as it left, and Vinain and I watched. The clatter of the iron wheels and the whistle of the locomotive drowned out our voices. I counted twenty-three cattle cars filled with our people.

“The noise awakened our Gentile neighbors. Some windows opened. The train left. Windows were closing when I heard someone say loudly, ‘Those damned Jews. They won’t even let us sleep at night.’”

There was another long silence when she finished. A certain shared personalized humanity drew the three of them together in their earthen confinement. Oddly enough, inexplicably, James felt close to both women, as though consumed by them together in their private darkness.

At last, Constantina’s voice appeared out of the darkness, revealing a side of her James didn’t know she possessed.

“I’m sorry,” she said, and James sensed she meant it.

Gabrielle emitted a startled little cry. The beam of a battery torch, a flashlight, swept above across the opening of the washout. James saw the dance and shimmer of other lights against the night sky. Any intimacy Gabrielle and he shared with Constantina vanished in that instant. She became the enemy once more.

He jabbed her with the muzzle of his submachine gun as a warning, his finger on the trigger. She had seen enough of him in action this interminable day to know he was not bluffing. One peep out of her and all three of them died at his hand in a bloody second. He counted on her conniving mind to keep her quiet. She would stay alive as long as she could, trusting in her treachery and guile to break free in time to get the word to Rommel.

James could live with what he had done to Paul Harris. He wasn't sure if he wanted to live if he had to do the same to Gabrielle.

German torches approached the washout, probing. Shouts and inquiries batted back and forth between the

members of the search party as it halted at the edge of the dropoff almost directly above. Their torch beams thoroughly examined the gulch, but the overreaching ledge concealed the fugitives huddled below.

Light reflected off the rock and sand and shimmered underneath the overhang, exposing the women's countenances to James's scrutiny—Gabrielle's face, heart-shaped, with golden freckles beaming on her pale skin, eyes as round as blue pools of frozen water, one hand clapped over her mouth as though to prevent an involuntary outcry of fear; Constantina's face, expressionless and controlled, her dark eyes unreadable and concealing her unpredictable nature. They cowered in the den, one woman at James's side, the other his captive, both bound with him to a common fate.

Laughing and joking around, the German soldiers began jumping over the gulch. They backed off one at a time to get a run at the obstacle. Light beams darted through the night air above the gully as they sailed over. Weapons clanked and boots thudded when they landed on the opposite side.

One soldier miscalculated, slipped and almost plunged into the gully. He caught himself at the last instant on a root growing on the rim of the wash and held on while his buddies guffawed and chided him for his clumsiness.

"Let him fall," one suggested. "It will teach him a lesson if he has to climb out."

James chanced a hasty look from underneath the ledge and saw a soldier holding a light on the one hanging on and pounding his legs against the ravine wall. If the guy fell, he would land almost in the entrance of the hiding place. Everything would be all over. The lives of everyone in the den hung on the balance of a kraut soldier who was about to literally drop in on them.

Finger on the trigger of his Sten, James waited, un-

moving, ready to do what had to be done to protect Overlord. Gabrielle and Constantina hardly breathed.

The patrol leader finally had enough of the grab-assing. He growled something and the others pulled the underachiever up to solid ground. James sighed with relief.

Yet they were not in the clear. The patrol decided to take a rest break and a smoke after the exertion of jumping the washout. Presently, the aroma of cigarette smoke wafted to James's nostrils. His mouth watered. God, what he would give for a Lucky Strike, a cup of Grams's black coffee, the drumstick off a country-fried chicken, and the chance to stretch out on the old sofa in the living room back on the farm in Oklahoma. Just lie there for a month or two and smoke, sip hot coffee, munch cold chicken, and forget all about krauts, L-pills, Overlord and women who complicated his life.

The soldiers conversed in low tones. James strained his ears to eavesdrop, but about all he could garner was that the Citroen and the driver's body had been discovered and a search organized to find the missing female gestapo officer. James heard nothing said about Sergeant Peg Leg and Corporal Stiff Arm being found dead in his former cell in the bunker. One of the soldiers opined that the female gestapo must have shot her driver after a lovers' spat.

"It teaches you one thing, *freund*," said this cynic. "You can never trust the ball-less gender."

That made Constantina squirm. James wouldn't want to be that poor devil if she ever got free and found out who he was.

Someone flipped the butt of a cigarette into the wash. Its red tip inscribed a long arc through the darkness before it struck the bottom in a splatter of sparks. Another soldier took a leak into the gully, splashing odorous urine on top of the ledge. He passed gas and grunted.

James cursed underneath his breath. *Damn krauts!*

They had beaten him up, shot him up, tied him up, locked him up—and now the bastards were trying to piss on him.

The patrol moved out to resume its search, weapons rattling, boots shuffling in the sand.

“Sturm!” Constantina predicted. “I smell the rain.”

Huddled in the silence, alert for hostile sounds, James became aware of a fresh breeze rustling the marsh grasses that lined the edges of the gully. He too smelled the approach of rain, now that Constantina pointed it out. Anxious, he looked up at the thin sliver of sky visible from the bottom of the wash. Whereas before there had been stars, now veils of silver-black cloud scuttled landward from the sea.

Weather in the English Channel this time of year was always unpredictable. Whatever it was like on the beach would be ten times worse in the Channel. James was right back where he started from if Eisenhower postponed the landing. Worse. There was no way he could hope to survive for another 24 hours with a woman who would do everything in her power to escape and sound the alarm. Neither himself nor either of the two women must be allowed to fall into German hands alive, no matter what it took to prevent it.

Sounds from the beach drifted in on varying breezes as Hitler's troops continued digging in and making preparations. It was still early evening and Normandy's massive defenses had not yet settled in to rest for the night. There were about 10,000 *Wehrmacht* along this one stretch of beach, give or take a thousand or two. At least some of them had already organized into search parties.

And just wait until they discovered James was missing from the bunker and that he had left a little present behind in the form of two slain Jerries: This was going to turn into one hell of a 'coon hunt. James foresaw only one ultimate end to tonight, whether the Allies came or not. A bleak one.

His brain whirled like a calculator to come up with an alternative to sitting here in the dark waiting to be treed. If there was one, he couldn't think of it.

Gabrielle quivered at every noise. The waiting and the recent enemy visit wore on her nerves. It wore on the nerves of everyone. Once, she cupped her palm over James's forehead. It felt cool to him.

"You are burning up, James," she whispered, sounding alarmed.

"I'll be all right. It's only a few more hours."

"None of us is going to be all right," Constantina interjected.

Gabrielle seemed tiny wrapped in James's arms, vulnerable because Constantina had deliberately infected her with the "Overlord disease." James thought of the remaining L-pill.

Pardon me. I have to go to the bathroom. Then I'll come back and kill you.

Tension continued to build. They could almost hear clocks counting off the seconds, the minutes. *tick, tick, Tick, Tick, TICK, TICK . . .*

Constantina shifted positions.

"Don't even think of it," James warned, nudging her with his foot.

tick, tick, Tick, Tick, TICK, TICK . . .

A distant sheet of flash lightning heightened anxiety. A few raindrops fell, plopping in the dust.

"The patrols will be back," Constantina said. "They won't stop searching until they find us."

"It's to your advantage as well as ours that they don't find us," James responded.

"I'm not thinking of my personal advantage. I must consider the Reich and my Fuhrer."

Churchill had a saying for every occasion. *A fanatic is one who can't change his mind and won't change the subject.*

Amused, Constantina quoted Churchill back to him with her own twist: "Winston Churchill is a sheep in sheep's clothing."

Gabrielle angrily entered the exchange. "We shall see who is the sheep for shearing when the Allies come."

"If they come, *jeune fille*," Constantina said, adding, "So here we sit together in the dark, waiting for an event that is bound to fizzle out. You cannot win this one, James."

"Neither can you, Constantina."

"So that gives us what?" she demanded, reverting to German from French. "*Ein stehenbleiben*? A stalemate? Time is not on your side, James. Especially not if the weather keeps deteriorating."

Moments later, shouts ringing out from up the gully near its junction with the Vierville Draw startled them from their forced lethargy. The roar of a vehicle resounded across the dunes as it sped toward the shouting, its engine sometimes whirring and racing from the rough terrain. It was equipped with a mobile anti-aircraft

searchlight. Its powerful beam of blinding illumination swept back and forth across the flats, flooding daylight into the darkness.

“We have to go,” James announced. “They’ve picked up our tracks.”

James removed the Walther P38 from its holster, stuck the weapon in his waistband and sliced the leather uniform pistol belt into long strips with the clasp knife he had taken from Peg Leg's body. From this he fashioned a crude leash. He noosed one end of it around Constantina's neck and secured the other end to his wrist.

"I figure this is the only way any man can hold on to you," he commented.

"You do have a way with words, James."

"That's me—short, succinct and simple."

The baying of trackers came nearer. Voices carried more easily at night. They sounded excited. Freshening breezes that constantly changed directions lifted and lowered their volume. The weather seemed to be getting rapidly worse.

Gabrielle followed at a trot as James led Constantina deeper into the gully until he located an easy way up and out where erosion of stone and boulders formed a functional ladder. He climbed up first, tugging on Constanti-

na's leash. He rolled over the lip of the gully and offered a hand to Constantina. She took it and he pulled her up beside him.

"Stay on your belly!" he barked as the mobile searchlight beam swept across them and splattered against a nearby upcropping of sand and rock crush.

Gabrielle was as nimble as a goat kid. She scrambled up and lay next to James, panting with excitement.

"Wait," James cautioned. "Wait."

The light leaped past the upcropping toward the sky. Except for the searchlight and torches carried by the German patrol, the rest of the beach lay in darkness due to imposed night discipline. Not even a cigarette tip glowed. That observation revitalized James's hopes and confidence.

Ahead of them, on the other side of a stretch of raggedy flatlands, rose the rocky ridgeline they had traversed earlier. The ridge near the coastal cliffs was high and rugged and strewn with boulders, as though some giant had picked up a handful and flung them to Earth. As the ridge angled inland in the direction of the German perimeter and Vierville beyond, it gradually flattened back into more normal landscape. It promised cover, which they could not expect out here on the flats.

If they were exceptionally blessed, they might be able to use the ridge to screen their movements while they made their way toward the outer defensive perimeter. If they were even more blessed—and beat the moonrise—they might either locate an unguarded passageway through the wire or devise one themselves.

At the present moment he didn't see that they had any other choice.

James jerked Constantina to her feet once the searchlight beam moved on. She fussed at her ignoble treatment and struggled against her tether.

"Follow and do as you're told and you'll live a while

longer," James advised. "Otherwise, stay behind with your throat slit."

He *did* have a way with words. Were their roles reversed, he doubted she would have any qualms about deciding *his* fate. It would be safer for both Gabrielle and him, he admitted to himself, if he eliminated her right now. He simply could not make himself do it. Not yet.

She ceased resisting. The three of them sprinted in explosive spurts over the sand dunes and marsh grass, falling to the ground each time the searchlight made another bright sweep, then jumping up again when the light passed. There was no need for words. Panting and sweating from exertion, they understood that their collective and individual fates depended upon not being seen. Even Constantina had a vested interest in escape as long as she was leashed to James.

Behind them, torches jabbed and bobbed in the gully where they had hidden. A few more raindrops fell. They struck James's face and reminded him that the lives of thousands of Allied soldiers, as well as the lives of himself and the two women with him, depended upon the weather.

Flattened in sparse vegetation on a slight rise of land, James took a moment to look through Gabrielle's binoculars to see what he could of the Channel. The moon had not yet risen. Stars played hide-and-seek with ragged rain clouds that looked like flying horses's manes. Alternately, they shone brightly upon the troubled surface of the sea, then disappeared behind clouds. Rolling lines of white-capped breakers near shore bashed against the various boat traps and ominous-looking obstacles that were arranged like rows of lemmings from the wide beach into deeper and deeper water. Even if James could maintain the element of surprise for the Allied troops, the landing was going to be no walk in the park for the poor dogfaces who would ride the Higgins boats in from the sea.

Although he reassured himself that the massive invasion fleet would likely remain invisible over the horizon until H-hour, he nonetheless scanned the horizon, desperately seeking some sign of it. All he detected were banks of clouds rolling in like avenging fog.

At least the weather prevented German aircraft from patrolling.

"Are they coming?" Gabrielle whispered.

"They have to come," he replied.

Constantina smirked. "Hope is the final resort of fools."

Bobbing, weaving and flopping to avoid the constantly sweeping searchlights, they were drawing near to the lower swells of the ridgeline when James let out a curse and jerked Constantina to the ground with her leash. She cursed back. Gabrielle sprawled next to them. All were breathing hard.

A line of torches moved toward them down the near side of the ridge. The distance turned them into mere pinpricks. Mesmerized, the fugitives stared at the drifting and disembodied spook lights, unattached to anything except their own illumination in the black river of night.

James counted four lights. Assuming that, at maximum, every other kraut carried one, the patrol consisted of a minimum of eight men.

Worse yet, a second column of torchlights moved toward them from the direction of the perimeter, triangulating with the ridge element and with the patrol coming up out of the gully in the rear, effectively enclosing their prey in the middle of the dunes between the gully, the ridgeline, and the perimeter wire.

James ducked his head as the searchlight beam glared at low angles across the flats. The vehicle upon which the lamp was mounted had changed positions again, this time moving closer to the perimeter. The three who hid in the marsh grasses and dunes were bathed in illumination. All

they could do was lie as motionless as deer caught in a car's headlights.

Finally, when it seemed they must surely be discovered, the searchlight skimmed away. Gabrielle sounded like she was hyperventilating.

"It's gone," James whispered.

"I'm afraid," Gabrielle admitted, whispering back. "But I'm happy to be with you and—" She lowered her voice even more. "—and I'm happy not to be a virgin anymore."

"I'm happy if you're happy, *jeune fille*. We're uncomplicated people."

"James, there may not be much time. *Dites-mor*. Tell me. Did you mean it when you called me something more than beautiful? And what is it that is more than beautiful?"

"I'll tell you when we're in England having tea and crumpets."

"Is there really such a thing as a *crumpet*?"

"We'll find out."

She paused. "Do you think we'll ever really get to England?"

"You doubt it?"

"Not if you don't, *mi amour*."

He doubted it, but he didn't want to tell her so.

Constantina crawled near, tugging on her leash. "It's over, James. Give me a chance. I assure you that I can keep you alive. Both of you."

She was beginning to sound like a stuck record on a Victrola.

"It's not over until *I* say it's over," he said, his voice level and determined.

From the expanded effort now devoted to the search, James assumed the Jerries must have unraveled the full story. It wasn't always true that dead men told no tales. James had left enough dead Germans on his trail to fill the pages of a thriller. The only thing missing in the saga so far was the denouement—and that couldn't be many pages away. With pissed-off enemy forces converging from three sides, James feared he was caught, as Gramps might have put it, between the shithole and the shitpile.

He dared not expose his little party even for the brief seconds it took to scurry from one point to the next. "Stay down," he ordered. "We'll have to crawl."

He tugged on Constantina's leash. Constantina took the opportunity to rebel, sensing that the tide might be turning in her favor.

"James, you're crazy!"

"Haven't you noticed?" he snapped back in exasperation. "We're all crazy. You're crazy, I'm crazy, they're

crazy. All God's wicked little children are crazy—and you want to try to make sense of it now!”

“James, you have to trust someone,” she pleaded.

“I’ll bet you tell that to every Tom, Dick and James.”

“I’m trying to save your life. *Our* lives.”

“And what will you do with me? Lay me out on your couch and psychoanalyze me just before you call in the electric prod? That dog won’t hunt. I’d rather take my chances with a pit full of rattlesnakes. Let’s go.”

She pulled back stubbornly. “I’m not a dog you can lead around, James. I’m going no farther until you remove my collar.”

“Don’t do it, James,” Gabrielle protested. “We can’t trust her.”

“*You* can’t trust me, *Schwester*. James can.”

Like the hen trusted the snake caught in her nest, James thought.

Constantina dug in. “I mean it, James. You can shoot me now, but I won’t be humiliated any longer.”

“Shoot her.” Gabrielle encouraged him.

“Are you dense?” Constantina cried. “Hasn’t it occurred to you that if he shoots me he’ll have to shoot you? Why do you think I told you about the invasion?”

“*I’ll* cut her throat,” Gabrielle offered.

Constantina laughed, mocking them both. “He was on his way to my bed long before yours, *Liebling*. Ask him how he felt in London.”

The barb worked. Seething with rage, Gabrielle flung herself at the German woman before James could prevent it. The two women locked up in a hair-pulling, rolling-about-on-the-ground, snarling-and-kicking catfight. James grabbed hair, clothing, arms, anything that became available, in a desperate effort to break them up before the Germans overheard. He wedged himself between them.

“Damn both of you,” he rasped.

Surrounded by 40,000 Indians in the middle of Indian Country, and what do I get? Bickering women.

"I shouldn't have saved your ass from the bomber in London," he hissed at Constantina.

"I shouldn't have saved yours at Chateau Fleuve. But I did. Now we each owe a life to the other, James."

He wished to hell she would stop ending nearly every sentence with his name.

"Take the collar off, James."

"Don't listen to the bitch," Gabrielle said, still overwrought. "She'll jump up and run . . ."

Constantina knew she held all the cards. "They're coming, James," she softly reminded him.

Lights from the ridgeline were already down on the flats heading their way. The searchlight shot its broad ray over their heads. Its radiance momentarily exposed the faces of the two women to James. Constantina's looked serene, confident, victorious. Gabrielle's red hair glistened copper in the light; her face looked flushed to match.

James emitted a sigh of frustration, tore the leash from Constantina's neck and made her remove her shoes and throw them away. She couldn't get far barefooted. He shoved the Walther P38 into Gabrielle's hand.

"Plug her if she looks like she's even *thinking* of running," he said. "Now, shall we go? If it pleases you ladies, that is."

Constantina had to have the last word. "Remember, *Liebling*," she pointed out, "if you shoot me, James will have to shoot you and himself."

"You Nazi bitch," James said and, taking the lead, low-crawled off in the darkness with the Sten cradled in the crooks of his elbows. First, they must try to live. Only if that failed would he contemplate the final option.

Constantina followed him. Gabrielle brought up the rear with the pistol in one hand and still dragging Constantina's attaché case in the other.

The dunes were low and rolling and sparsely covered with knee-high marsh grasses and clumps of thistlelike growth. Here and there ran shallow erosion ditches that offered some degree of concealment. A dark cloud moved into the coastline and sat there like a giant mother hen over a contemptible brood of hatching chicks. Soon the cloud wept a cold drizzle through which approaching flashlight beams darted like watery ghosts. Rain provided a mixed blessing at best. On the one hand, it helped obliterate the fugitives' trail. On the other, it meant the possible delay of Operation Overlord.

James angled to the west and then faded to the north toward the German perimeter, endeavoring to avoid intersecting any patrol's projected path. They made fair time given that they proceeded like a trio of crippled lizards. Each time the shaft of searchlight skimmed over, James froze with the Sten pointed at Constantina's head. She lay motionless, looking back at him. She seemed in no hurry to commit suicide, at least not yet, when she had at least three more hours remaining to escape and reach Rommel in time.

The three triangulating patrols traversed the flats. The element from behind should pass well to the rear if it continued on course, while the one coming from the direction of the perimeter traveled straight and true to bisect the field. The third patrol, the ridge runners, proved more unpredictable. It snaked back and forth through the dunes and marsh grass. Just when it appeared it might under-shoot and march on by, it unexpectedly changed direction and headed for the center of the field and toward its frantic prey.

It approached swiftly through the drizzle. German voices grew louder and louder. The searchlight inadvertently revealed just how near the patrol was when it spotlighted the Germans like actors at center stage. They ducked their heads, shielded their eyes with their hands

to prevent being night-blinded and delivered back a howl of curses and complaints. Thin skeins of rain slanted over them.

The idiot manning the searchlight realized his error. The light moved on. The soldiers waited a minute to recover their vision before plodding forward again, providing James time to wriggle into a thicket of weeds and thistle with his two women. The patrol leader called a halt not more than eight or ten feet away. The fugitives froze in the bushes like rabbits threatened in their burrow. James pressed one hand against the back of Constantina's neck in order to feel if she tried anything. He kept the finger of his other hand on the trigger of the Sten.

Rubber and canvas rustled as men adjusted or pulled on more raingear. Rain whirred gently on the foliage and hissed at the sand. Like soldiers everywhere, the Germans were bitching about their lots in life. They preferred to be somewhere else—anywhere, as long as it was warm and dry. Men in inclement weather had a tendency to pull in upon themselves and not be as observant as they normally might be.

Cheek pressed against the rough sand, James cast a wary eye up toward his brow as the Germans milled about, cursing and bitching with a real talent for profanity. He caught misty glimpses of helmeted figures backlit by their electric torches. They were regular troops armed with Mausers and MP-40s, not cripples or gestapo types.

Light beams explored. James feared they would illuminate the marks their bellies had left when they dragged across the earth. They would have if the rain hadn't been darkening the sand and concealing their trail.

Seconds dragged by like hours. James almost forgot to breathe.

With a last round of complaints against the weather, their officers and their sorry duties, the Jerries formed

back up and moved on behind their lights. James felt Constantina's muscles tense at the last moment, as though she realized that this might be her last chance to escape and get the word to Hitler. Gabrielle apparently sensed the same thing. She twisted on the ground to bring her pistol to bear on her despised rival.

James seized Constantina by the throat with a pit bull's grip. His other hand abandoned the Sten and grabbed Gabrielle's gunhand. "Don't shoot!" he cried, sotto voce.

The patrol had not moved out of earshot. "*Ich gehort etvas!*" barked a sergeant.

James and the women froze into a bizarre tableau concealed by the clouded night, James with a death grip on each woman. If he got out of this scrape in one piece, he vowed, he was going to give up womanizing, period.

Torchlight beams diffused by mist and drizzle glistened off the wet vegetation, darting randomly in the direction from which the Jerries thought they had heard the noise. Rain whispered. Soaked in her thin dress, Gabrielle lay shivering next to James, hardly breathing. For all of them, death lurked but a heartbeat away.

"*Nervos,*" the German sergeant finally decided.

Everybody has the nerves tonight, Buster.

Constantina let the moment pass without resistance, evidently and correctly assuming that she would be the

first to die. None of the three dared utter a whisper or scrape a foot until after the patrol diminished into a bobbing collective glare of distant floating light.

Constantina wrenched free of James's grasp. She gasped for breath.

"You bloody near suffocated me, you idiot," she scolded.

"It could have been worse," he retorted in French.

Gabrielle stuck her pistol into the German's side. "It *should* have been worse."

Constantina sniffed. "Whatever happens to me, *nusskuchen*, happens to you."

James had had enough. "Cut the infernal caterwauling. You sound like blue jays."

"Why, James darling," Constantina purred. "Don't you know our entire purpose in life as the fairer sex is to please and obey men?"

Gabrielle responded with a cheeky snort. "I told you we couldn't trust her, James. She was going to give us away."

"Nonesense!" Constantina snapped. "We'd *all* be dead by now if that were my aim."

Something about the episode chafed at the back of James's mind. "Except," he mused, scratching the itch, "that with the three of us dead, you would have no way to inform Hitler . . ."

He caught himself mid-sentence. "Well, I'll be damned," he breathed.

Why, if he was willing to offer his life to protect Overlord, couldn't Constantina be equally committed to producing Overlord for her Nazi masters? Only some innate sense of self-preservation, he realized with a jolt, prevented her from sacrificing all their lives minutes ago. The only reason she would contemplate that dire action was because . . .

She knew that, should the three of them die, there was

a way of making sure information on the invasion's date and site reached Rommel.

"You are one conniving, treacherous, backstabbing . . ." he muttered angrily. "Trust you? You're as phony as a six-legged hound in a rented tuxedo."

She didn't know what he was getting at. "Thank you, James. I'll take that as a compliment from one on a first-name basis with such qualities."

"Gabrielle, are you still dragging around her attaché case?"

Constantina's sudden intake of breath told him he was on the right track. Gabrielle thrust the case at him.

"It's not heavy," she apologized. "I thought you wanted me to keep it."

"You did well, *jeune fille*. You might have saved our lives."

By bringing along the attaché case and denying the Germans its contents, she could have also saved—once again—the secrets of Overlord. James returned his attention to the gestapo woman.

"You Germans are notorious for details," he said. "The case contains your reports, if I'm not mistaken. And I doubt I am."

For once she had nothing to say.

"They'll never find these reports in time now," he promised. "Scream, make any sounds, and I'll kill you and burn the papers. Your sacrifice won't mean anything except to get us all dead. Watch her," he instructed Gabrielle.

There was no way to inspect the case in the darkness, but he felt certain he was right about it. He began digging in the sand with both hands. His injured wrist and arm throbbed, his bandages felt soaked with rain and blood, and his brow pounded with an excruciating fever headache. Soon, the soft earth opened a hole big enough to receive the case. He wedged it at the bottom and covered

it. In a few minutes the rain would obliterate all signs of the excavation.

"It won't do you any good now to get us killed," he said. "We're all safer."

"You bastard!"

He rubbed it in. "Two and a half hours until Safe Hour."

"I'm still in the game if the invasion fails to come at dawn," she taunted back.

He cast an anxious glance at the sky. Rain needled his face. More dark clouds appeared to have rolled in off the sea to landfall.

Eisenhower, Churchill, don't fail me now.

Gabrielle clutched his arm. She cleared a catch in her throat.

"I understand everything now," she said in her husky little girl's voice. "James, you really did come to France to save the war. If you have to, James . . . I will understand if you have to end our lives. All I ask is that we be together."

Constantina boiled over in astonishment and disbelief. "You foolish little *paysan*!" she cried, not without a trace of admiration. "When did you realize you were in love with this man? You would have done better to stay back on the farm, marry a pig grower and wait for the war to end. No good will come out of any of this."

"Something good already has," Gabrielle whispered to James.

James found her wet face in the darkness and kissed her quickly on the mouth.

"Let's keep moving," he said.

The Germans were not going to give up. There wouldn't be a lot of places to hide once daylight arrived. Hopefully, by that time the landing would have taken place and the krauts would be too busy to concern themselves with escaped prisoners.

If the Allies came. If they came. The dreaded possibility of another Overlord postponement kept playing through James's thoughts like a stuck 78 rpm.

They crawled doggedly toward Vierville sur Mer and the perimeter between. It was exhausting work. Brambles and thistles scratched their faces and hands. Sharp rocks tore their clothing and bruised and bloodied their legs. Gabrielle suffered most since she wore only a thin dress. Inexplicably, in a moment of weakness or pity, Constantina offered the French girl her cord jacket to protect her arms. Gabrielle refused it. She instead accepted James's green peasant shirt that he wore underneath Peg Leg's uniform tunic.

The searchlight stroked back and forth across the field

as fugitives and searchers played cat and mouse. Twice, soldiers crossed within 100 feet or so. James half expected Constantina to try something reckless as her window of opportunity slowly closed. The only thing that prevented her, he supposed, was that she might be beginning to expect weather to delay the landing and thus give her more time to scheme and plot.

James inadvertently scraped the bandage off his leg and felt with his fingertips that his bullet puncture was hot to the touch, had swollen dreadfully, and was oozing. Fever made his mouth dry. He turned over on his back and opened his mouth to the rain. What he craved most of all was to find a soft, safe place and sleep for the next three days, rain or not.

As he rested there, breathing heavily, he noticed that although the cloud cover still made the night as dark as the inside of a closet, it was beginning to break up here and there to let starshine through. Although a break in the weather increased chances of the Allied landings, he still counted on total darkness to hide their efforts to break past the perimeter, without which they stood not a snowflake's chance in hell of getting through.

They kept going. The rain stopped completely. With his limited view of their surroundings, James had no idea of how close they had come to the perimeter wire until clouds low on the eastern horizon parted to reveal the moon. It was almost like noon compared to the total darkness of before.

James could have reached out and almost touched the first roll of concertina wire in front of him. To his right rose a guard post on stilts, its sentry clearly silhouetted against the rising full moon. A second guard post stood on spindly legs to the left.

"Don't go stupid on me," he warned Constantina, whispering.

They hugged the earth, trying desperately to become

part of the vegetation, which looked sparser than ever under fresh illumination. Ragged shards of cloud seemed repulsed and deflected by the moon.

As a hillbilly kid roaming Wild Horse Mountain, James often had spent nights lying on his back on an isolated hilltop gazing up into the stars and wondering about the mysteries of galaxies and the universe. He used to take his forefinger and pretend to gently nudge summer night clouds away from the moon's face, as if he were God and had the power to direct the elements.

Right now he could use some of that power to tuck the moon back under its covers.

Dark clouds oozed back into place with agonizing lethargy and slowly leached moonlight from the still earth to plunge it into darkness. The wire and the guard posts disappeared from sight. Another glance skyward cautioned James that conditions were rapidly changing. It would be only a matter of minutes until the moon broke through the pea soup again, quashing James's hopes of escape in this quarter. Moonrise had beaten him to the punch.

He led the women back into the dunes and grass, low-crawling rapidly to stay ahead of the moon, clenching his teeth against the pain of his reopened wounds. Once clear of the perimeter, he turned toward the lower end of the rocky ridgeline, where the rugged terrain offered some degree of cover and concealment. First they had played cat and mouse with the Germans; now it was time for hide-and-seek.

They suspended movement whenever the moon popped out between clouds. Constantina lifted her face toward it. Her black hair was wet and stringy from the rain, her aristocratic features soiled by sand and mud. Her left eyebrow was swollen from Gabrielle's butt stroke, and there was another bruise on her chin from where he had slugged her. Yet, in spite of it all, even though he felt guilty admitting it, he thought her absolutely the most beautiful woman he

had ever beheld. Men had died because of that amazing face and body.

He wasn't going to be one of them.

Constantina caught him watching her.

"The weather's clearing," he observed. "You'll never reach Rommel in time now."

She looked troubled but not defeated. "The invasion hasn't started yet."

"I can hear the fat lady tuning up to sing."

The three of them lay silent, waiting for the moon to hide again.

"James, why didn't you kill me?" Constantina asked bluntly, reverting to German. "You had no further need of me after we wrecked the car. I would have betrayed you at the first chance, and will still do so."

He thought about it a moment. "I've asked myself the same question," he confessed. "I haven't sorted it out yet. You're a shrink. Maybe you can."

"Humans are so much more complicated than even Freud believed, James. You and I, we're proof of it. What a magnificent German you would have been." She almost smiled, a rueful twisting of her full lips. "We would have been so good together."

"Sure. Burn a few Jews before breakfast. Torture some spies for lunchtime entertainment. Deceive those who fall in love with us and murder them."

Instead of anger, the comment induced momentary sadness. "I didn't murder Captain Dobbs on Albert Embankment that day of the plane," she said. "He shot at me first."

"You came there intending to assassinate him."

"*Assassination* is an ugly word."

"*Neutralize* is so much more polite and appropriate in our business. I'm curious, Constantina. Why did you kill him after you used him to set up Major Harris for your *Schnellboote* gangs?"

"I suppose it makes no difference now. He was jealous. He was going to expose me."

"The photograph?" James asked. "General Sowell and you?"

"You know about that?"

"You were working Sowell too."

"He was OSS, James. The same as you. Sometimes in this business you do things you're not particularly proud of. I know you understand that, James. I wager you didn't leave Major Harris alive when you escaped."

A pang of guilt and regret almost took away his breath. What right did he have ultimately to hurl recriminations at her? Weren't they both merely doing their jobs, dirty though they might be?

Gabrielle tugged at James's sleeve. "I don't understand German," she protested.

Still in German, Constantina asked, "Do you love her?"

"Does it matter?"

"She's in love with you. I envy her in a way. I envy both of you."

She leveled a contemplative look at the French girl, who was also dirty and ragged. Her ponytail had come undone to release tangled red hair around her freckled face.

"She has potential, James," Constantina said. "More than you and I put together."

The moon disappeared, allowing them to continue. They reached the lower end of the ridgeline without encountering troops and crossed over to the opposite gradient to use it as a blind against patrols on the flats. Soon, they clambered to their feet and made better time with the rocky spine of the ridge towering above their heads. James broke a path through fields of boulders and rock slides, climbing to the top of the hogback. The terrain was rough enough that they left few tracks for German

patrols to follow. Barefooted, Constantina was soon limping on both tender feet, but to her credit, she kept her complaints to herself.

It was late enough by now that most activity along the beach defenses had knocked off for the night. Clearly, the Germans expected no action tonight.

Higher up on the ridge there was a breeze from the ocean. James inhaled salt air deep into his lungs, mixed with the scents and tastes of wet sand and rain-drenched foliage. Gabrielle stood looking out toward the sea while light breezes tugged at the hem of the peasant shirt hanging nearly to her knees like a dress. The searchlight and electric torches continued to light up the flats.

James located a fortresslike formation of boulders the size of donkey carts that provided an ideal observation site. No one could approach from either side of the ridge without being spotted well in advance. He directed the women inside the boulder walls and sat down with them facing the sea, where he could keep an eye on the Channel and beaches using Gabrielle's binoculars. He placed the Sten across his knees and consulted Peg Leg's pocket watch.

"It's almost Safe Hour," he said. "Now we wait for the invasion."

"James," Constantina said, "I still don't hear the fat lady singing."

James had grown to young adulthood roaming the woods and hills like a “young heathen,” as Grams put it. He learned to shoot, track, hunt and fish as well as any of his Cherokee and Creek Indian buddies. Frequently, the only thing for supper was a bunny, squirrel, deer, 'possum, fat 'coon or string of carp and bullheads from the creek. It always amazed James how well wild critters adapted to their environment.

Take the cottontail rabbit. It blended so completely into brown winter grass that you could almost step on it. The sharpest predator eye would never see it as long as it remained steadfast and did not panic. James figured that, like the wild rabbit, he and the women could hide out in their cramped stone fortress on top of the ridge until daylight or the invasion, whichever came first. In the darkness, even with moonlight, a patrol would literally have to step on them before it saw them. The surrounding rock provided a black pool of shadow that further concealed their presence.

As long as they did not panic. As long as Constantina kept quiet.

She seemed tired and content to ride out the night now that the Safe Hour was upon them and it was too late for her to do anything before daylight. There was nothing she could do to stop the invasion if it came at dawn as scheduled. If it didn't, if Eisenhower postponed it, tomorrow would be another day and another chance for her to escape and reach Rommel.

Tomorrow, if the invasion was delayed, they all would probably have to die.

God, please let the Allies be on their way. Is that too much for a good ol' country boy to ask?

Glassing his surroundings with Gabrielle's binoculars, taking stock of the situation and of how he and his wards might best survive the rest of the night and the hoped-for landing at dawn, James beheld an amazing sight no other American had yet seen.

Scattered wisps of cirrus remained blowing over the Channel while the major cloud bank escorted its rain deeper inland across Normandy. The wide beach seemed to glow under the moonlight between obstacles casting shadows of harsh lines and intricate patterns on the sand. Foaming breakers at near low tide followed the gentle curve of the beach, lapping at one another in twisting ranks, one after the other, as far out to sea as the eye could reach.

Cliffs and rises in back of the seawall bristled with pillboxes, bunkers, trenches arranged for interlocking fire, bulwarks, parapets, machine-gun emplacements, strongholds . . . *My God*, the whole coastline looked impenetrable, impervious to assault by the combined armies of the entire world. Nevertheless, if Overlord went off as planned, these beaches would become killing fields within the next few hours, and the higher flats, gullies and ridges from the waterline to Vierville sur Mer would

erupt in a volcanic explosion from the tons of bombs and shells hurled at them.

Not more than 100 yards away from James's observation site, the black snout of a large artillery piece protruded from the end of the ridge in haughty command over its sector of the defenses. On the opposite bank of Vierville Draw, illuminated by slanting moonlight, hunkered a concrete-and-steel pillbox stronghold manned by infantry, machine guns, and mortars. Concertina and razor wire entangled the floor and walls of the canyon between the defensive emplacement and the beach. James's 29th Division would have to charge through that mess in order to secure a toehold in this sector of Nazi Europe.

Operation Overlord's advantage lay in the German command's ignorance of exactly where and when the landing would occur. James felt a rare pride in knowing he was contributing in his own limited way in helping maintain that advantage. He was forever a part of history, even if he died before or during the invasion and no one ever knew the role he played in it.

Last, James scanned for search parties on his trail and, one by one, pinpointed their lights bobbing about out on the flats while the mobile searchlight continued to sweep. None of the patrols posed an immediate threat, probably wouldn't do so until at least daylight. No sane kraut would expect the fugitives to hide out so near German defensive positions.

With a painful groan, James let the binoculars drop onto their strap around his neck. He lodged himself deeper among the rocks next to Gabrielle, facing the German woman. Their upraised knees were all jammed together in the middle. Gabrielle rested a possessive hand on his thigh while keeping Walther trained on Constantina with the other.

"Will they come?" she asked anxiously.

He didn't have an answer. After a while, he said, "The

two of you may as well sleep. I'll wake you for curtain call, Constantina."

"Don't bother," she crabbed back in German. "Opening night is never on time—and they're usually flops or one-night stands."

"I wouldn't know about one-night stands," he said, also in German.

"I could have offered you a rain check."

He didn't answer.

They waited, this time with little of the intimacy they had enjoyed while hiding in the ravine. They were simply too wet and weary. James felt sick and exhausted of mind, body, spirit and soul, his primary thought being, *Would this night never end?* He had lost blood, had not eaten since breakfast in the Cafard safe house, and had either chased or been chased all over Normandy since yesterday morning in front of Chateau Fleuve. He had killed men, watched his friend Paul Harris die, dealt with the likelihood that the women and he would perish, confronted the awful reality that it might all be for naught if Eisenhower called off the landing . . .

His teeth began chattering. He couldn't make them stop. Gabrielle felt his forehead and removed the shirt he had given her and wrapped it around his shoulders. She snuggled as close to him as she could get to lend him her body warmth.

"I will fetch a doctor," Constantina volunteered.

"*Sileneuse!*" Gabrielle snapped.

He was so damned cold. Freezing. He had to hold on. Just a few more hours to see if the Allies came.

His chin dropped onto his chest. He remembered one January morning when he had been as miserable as this. Gramps and he were hauling a wagonload of corn from the farm to a mill down in the Arkansas River bottoms. Sleet began to fall and the temperature dropped into the 20s. James was so cold his teeth clacked uncontrollably,

his fingertips went numb and his legs felt like chunks of ice. Gramps gave the boy his coat and James burrowed deep into the load of corn where he hollowed himself out a chipmunk's nest. There, curled into a ball, he soon got warm and fell asleep.

He awoke with a start. For a moment he was still in that load of corn. It took a moment for him to realize he had fallen asleep with his head resting on Gabrielle's shoulder. She was awake and on watch with her pistol.

"I'm here," she said softly when she felt him stir.

Darkness seemed to have receded. The moon had already traveled across the sky and, barely radiant through the cloud cover, was starting to sink in the west. Dawn was coming, but it would be dreary and overcast with a stiff breeze blowing. Constantina was sleeping, her breathing regular and deep.

"How long have I slept?" he asked Gabrielle.

"Three hours, perhaps."

"I apologize, leaving you alone. I shouldn't have . . ."

"Pas du tout. I like it when you sleep next to me."

"Are the Allies coming?"

"Maybe they're not coming, James."

James felt better after resting, but he was still shaky when he clambered to his feet to take a look around. The movement roused Constantina. The first thing she did in the morning light was look up through the enclosing boulders to study the sky. Then she met James's eyes. Although her expression contained traces of satisfaction and relief, there was neither triumph nor smugness in it.

"It won't be today, James," she said in French, sounding almost apologetic. "Not in this weather."

James's lips curled into hard lines and he clenched his teeth. He had dozed off with hope; he awoke with dawning acceptance and resignation. Surely Eisenhower must have postponed Overlord for another 24 hours.

The wind had picked up while he slept and could be heard snuffling and sniffing around among the boulders. Only a handful of stars beginning to pale remained visible through rents in clouds that had buried the moon. He glassed the sea and saw gray mists rapidly shifting before the onslaught of the wind. The tide was out, more than a

half mile, exposing even more of Hitler's Atlantic Wall obstacles standing like aliens on sentry duty. The waves looked unforgiving in the murky light, cold and choppy, violent and ominous. The sea just kept rolling and rolling, whitecaps aligned in infantry ranks all the way to where the horizon blacked out into what remained of the night. He saw nothing else in the Channel except some driftwood or other sealane flotsam far out.

"I heard airplanes flying over," Gabrielle supplied eagerly. "I couldn't see them. They were above the clouds. There were many of them and they were flying lower than bombers."

For an instant James let himself believe paratroops had landed behind lines in the first wave of the Overlord invasion. He turned to look at Gabrielle, letting the binoculars fall on their strap around his neck. She appeared small and young and as vulnerable as ever in spite of the Walther in her tiny fist. She looked back at him, silently beseeching. Tears glistened in her eyes. She knew what it meant for them if the invasion failed to come off.

"Just after the planes went over," she added with growing desperation, "the Germans seemed to wake up all around. I heard them banging about and shouting."

Everything was quiet again. Apparently, the German command had dismissed any pending threat.

James heard a droning sound, almost like a high wind above the cloud cover. He listened intently. It *could* be aircraft. Liberators, perhaps, on their way to bomb Berlin some more. He shook his head to clear it and listened some more. This time he heard the wind and only the wind.

He looked back out toward the heavy seas and his heart sank.

They had given the krauts a run for their money all right, but soon it would be daylight and everything would be over. Weariness and a great sadness overcame him at

the bleak recognition of the situation into which he had awakened. Constantina realized it as well. She seemed withdrawn, watchful and apprehensive.

James thought if he tried hard enough he could pass the second L-pill. A bullet through the head was good enough for Constantina and him when the time came and they were trapped. He doubted he could ever shoot Gabrielle.

Tears came to his eyes. To avoid confronting the inevitable for a few more minutes, he raised the binoculars and focused on the German stronghold on the opposite side of the Vierville Draw. He saw no activity there other than a lone sentry perched on a concrete wall surrounding a mortar pit next to the pillbox.

He swept his view on around to the snout of the anti-tank gun at the end of the ridge. Everything seemed peaceful there as well.

Finally, he switched surveillance to the flatlands to see if the search parties were still moving. Nothing moved out there, not even a hare. Maybe everyone had given up and gone home for a cigarette and a cup of ersatz coffee. Wishful thinking.

After scanning the fields, paying particular attention to the hedgerows, he started on the rocky slope of the ridge falling away below him. He had barely focused on a thicket of brush growing in a watercourse than movement from the corners of the lenses caught his eye.

The lenses froze on the helmeted head and gray-green uniform shoulders of a Nazi *Wehrmacht*. The guy was not more than 200 feet away, looking up the side of the ridge with more soldiers strung out behind him. He saw James at that same moment and snapped his Mauser to his shoulder.

James ducked. The rifle cracked, the report and the singing ricochet of the bullet off stone merging into a single sound. That he would be fired upon, disguised as

he was in a German uniform, meant the krauts had seen through his ruse. They were going to be awfully hard to reason with.

Two hundred feet stretched the accuracy of James's stubby little submachine gun, but he fired a burst anyhow to drive the attackers to ground and buy some time. Gabrielle scrambled to her knees with an outcry of fear and surprise.

Seeing her chance, Constantina took advantage of her captors' distraction and sprang on Gabrielle like a cat on prey. She elbowed the smaller woman in the belly, bending her double, and wrested the Walther from her hand.

Before James had time to react, Constantina thrust the weapon in his face.

"Stay down!" she barked.

She jerked the Sten from his hands and jabbed a foot hard against Gabrielle's backside, which crashed her into James. Both crumpled into a heap while Constantina crouched opposite, covering them with her pistol. The German patrol opened up with a terrific crackle and chatter of firepower. Lead stung the air and chewed at the boulder hideaway.

"I win, you lose," Constantina said. "I'm truly sorry it has to be this way, James."

The Walther abided firmly in Constantina's hand, the muzzle opening up to James's eyes like the tunnel to eternity. Even in the fortress, there was enough light to show Constantina's features. With the hardened look of someone who knows exactly what she must do even though she might not like it, she was still beautiful, if a marauding maneater can be beautiful.

Gabrielle lay sprawled across James's legs where she had fallen, her dress hiked up nearly to her waist, her legs scabbed and begrimed from a night crawling around the countryside. James pulled her into his arms, covered her with his own body, and braced himself for the expected impact of Constantina's bullets. He kept his gaze fixed on Constantina's eyes. He remained mute; now was not the time for his bulldog mouth.

For some reason, the German patrol ceased firing, permitting a hush to envelope the drama in the rocks. From high above, faintly, issued the droning sound James

thought he had heard earlier. It was louder now. Winds above the clouds seemed to be picking up force.

"I don't have to kill you, James," Constantina said in German. "There's no need. You lost fair and square."

"*'In defeat, unbeatable; in victory, unbearable.'* Winston Churchill."

"*You* are unbearable, James. Unbearable, overbearing, pugnacious, cocky . . . What a shame, James that you chose to be born on the wrong side."

"We each have our burdens to bear."

Gabrielle lifted her head and stared at the sky, listening. She heard it too.

"Here's what we're going to do, James," Constantina decreed. "You will surrender to me. Put your hands up and I'll march you out. Don't do anything brash. You and the girl won't be harmed. There's no need for further interrogation. I possess all the information we require."

"Gabrielle is half Jewish," James reminded her.

"I've never burned any Jews, James. What do you take me for?"

In truth he didn't know what to take her for. Every time he got used to seeing her one way, she changed and was another way.

"I want her to live, Constantina," James insisted, attempting to extract a promise the Black Widow might not be inclined to keep.

"No one has to know she's a Jew," Constantina granted. "If the two of you play it right, you'll ride out the rest of the war in prison camps. But I can't promise you'll ever see each other again."

She shook her head in annoyance, as though the humming from above the clouds was a swarm of insects. The German patrol must have already paid the noise full attention, having initiated and then suspended an attack that should have succeeded by now, had there been no interference or distraction. Their guns remained quiet.

Left out of the conversation because she didn't understand German, Gabrielle concentrated on the sky. Her expression went from puzzled disbelief to sudden comprehension. One hand shot up, finger pointing, and she cried out in wonder and elation.

"*Aerien!*"

Gabrielle's exclamation and the unrelenting high winds above the clouds pressed upon Constantina's senses. She could no longer ignore the droning, and lifted her head, her expression first quizzical, then disbelieving.

"*Avion!*" Gabrielle breathed. "*Aerien! Avion!*"

James's hopes surged back to life. He could hardly believe it.

The massive allied air raid began with the whistling of bombs being dropped through the clouds. Thousands of bombs falling like deadly rain while the throbbing of massive engines from unseen bombers vibrated the ground. Bombs broke through the overcast in clusters of black exclamation points, noses plunging down, tail fins shrilling louder and louder the nearer they came to colliding with the earth. Erupting finally into the deep, pulsating, ear-shattering thunder of worlds being rent. Dense walls of smoke, tumbling and tossing in the wind, furiously slit, slashed and punctured by flames, billowed up from the rear along the German perimeter that divided coastal fortifications from Vierville sur Mer. Bombs were landing well inland of Omaha Beach and its defenders, apparently because of the cloud cover and the bombers' fear of hitting incoming Allied troops, but there could be no doubt that it was the start of the invasion.

James felt like jumping to his feet and shouting for joy. Gabrielle held onto him tightly; she *was* shouting for joy. The ground shook so furiously that it knocked Constantina back against the boulders behind her. Her mouth hung slack. Surely there were expressions like that all the way from common *Wehrmacht* defending the Normandy

coast to Rundstedt, Rommel and Hitler as they realized the Allies were finally invading Europe. There was no longer a need to keep Operation Overlord secret. The question of where and when the Allies would strike were answered: *Now, here, at Normandy.*

Yellow and red from bursting bombs played in grotesque flashing hues across Constantina's stricken face. The tables had turned against her in an instant. She was not a good loser. The Walther in her hand trembled from suppressed fury. She glared at James and Gabrielle.

"It's your play now, Constantina," James said. He almost felt sorry for her.

Suddenly, something inside her seemed to collapse. She visibly wilted as the reality of the situation overtook her. Her body shook as with the ague. She dropped her chin on her chest. Black hair in tangled masses fell around her face. It was not a pleasant thing to witness.

"Damn you, James!" she exclaimed, sobbing with sudden bitterness.

After a last sob, she lifted her eyes and through her brows gave James a long, lingering look.

"I'm a psychologist," she said, "but I probably can't explain what I'm about to do. James, there's an abandoned house back there on the other side of the upper draw, hidden in a grove of trees. I saw it on the way in and asked about it. I understand it has a basement where you'll be safe. Take the *paysan* with you. You deserve each other. I don't mean that in a negative way."

Here she was, changing on him again. "What about you?" he asked.

"Give me your tunic and barracks cap. It's still dark enough that the patrol will think I'm you."

"Why are you doing this, Constantina?"

"A conscience can be a terrible thing to waste. Give the uniform to me, James. Don't be a fool."

James stripped out of the sergeant's tunic and replaced

it with the green peasant shirt. Constantina put on the tunic, buttoned it all the way, bunched her hair on top of her head, and pulled the garrison cap down tight on it. James thought she had never looked quite so beautiful as at that moment. Not always did pretty women have homely souls. It seemed there was a reason after all that they let each other live.

"I really do need to get my head examined," she muttered.

"Constantina . . ."

"Hush, James, before I change my mind. Take the *pay-san* and run for the beach house as soon as I'm gone. I'll keep them busy. Got it?" She looked at him. "Damn! I must be insane."

She smiled from some deep, bleak place inside. She lunged to her feet and fired a burst from the Sten over the rocks in the direction of the patrol. That woke up the soldiers. She dropped the Sten so James would have it, then vaulted over the boulders into the ripping chatter of rifle and automatic-weapons fire.

James heard Constantina cry out in pain as he snatched up the discarded Sten gun and dived out of the boulders in the opposite direction from which she had gone, Gabrielle in tow. They took no fire from the German patrol; it was too busy dealing with Constantina in her disguise. Though she might be wounded, she was giving a good accounting of herself judging from the spiteful firefight between her purloined P38 and the automatic weapons of her former comrades. That she had turned against her country's soldiers, and thus against her own country, left James baffled.

At the moment he hadn't the leisure to ponder her motives. Although the Allied bombing line extended in either direction for as far as the eye could see, a rolling thunder of exploding bombs, it left unscathed the sands of Omaha Beach and its defenders. The naval bombardment certain to follow would not be nearly as charitable to German defenders, nor to anyone else within the target zone. James had to get himself and Gabrielle away from

the immediate coastline and under cover before warships opened fire. What rotten foul luck, what tragic irony to die at the very end from the invasion of friendly forces.

Continuous eruptions from the bombing drove thunderheads of smoke and fire skyward to merge in oily gray turmoil with the overcast skies. Pulling Gabrielle by her hand, James bolted into the outer haze of smoke, heading in the direction Constantina pointed out. It wouldn't take the kraut patrol long to eliminate her and discover the ruse she had perpetrated in order to cover the American's escape.

Coughing and choking from smoke and cordite ash that enveloped the entire terrain like fog, James and the French girl labored along the crest of the ridge until, farther inland, it began to broaden and flatten. The concussion chains of the detonating bombs shook the earth and made footing precarious. Although sleep had restored some of James's strength, he still felt like an arthritic old man with all his aches and pains. Twice he stumbled and fell as they plunged into a drainage ditch that emptied at the bottom into the shallower, upper end of the Vierville Draw, through which smoke surged like floodwaters. Gabrielle maintained her viselike grip on his hand.

He looked back. The fight between Constantina and the patrol had ended. It couldn't be a good end for the psychologist. James didn't want to think about what she had sacrificed for him. And for Gabrielle as well. He would deal with all that later. Provided there was a later.

He saw no signs of pursuit.

Panting from exertion, adrenaline overload, and the accumulative debilitation of his festering wounds, James led the way down the drainage ditch and crossed the draw at a shallow part. Through binoculars, he picked out the grove of trees Constantina apparently intended. Murk and smoke all but obscured the outline of a cottage hidden in the thicket. Whether it was occupied or not was another

matter. He still couldn't bring himself to fully trust Constantina. She had conditioned him during their brief association to expect a disguised agenda behind her every action. She never seemed the altruistic sort, the type of person who impulsively risks everything on an emotional whim.

He pointed out their goal to Gabrielle. The crash and roar of falling bombs beyond the house precluded lengthy conversation. Gabrielle nodded eagerly, her blue eyes round and frightened but also touchingly trustful in the heart-shaped smudge of her freckled face. He squeezed her hand. He was going to keep her alive or die trying.

"Se dirige vers le maison!" he shouted directly into her ear. "We have to keep going. The naval guns will pound everything."

They had to hurry if they hoped to reach the relative security of the basement in time. James led the way at a hobbling trot over a stretch of dunes, through an untended hedgerow and across a narrow country lane. They dived into the hedgerow on the other side when a German armored car followed by a mounted anti-aircraft gun on a flatbed truck roared out of the smoke on its way to the front.

Wary and cautious, James chose to approach the house using the cover of cottonwoods growing along a spring-fed stream that meandered past the rear of the cottage. They rounded a blind curve in the little creek and blundered point-blank into a pair of German troopers sneaking around with similar designs on the basement. Not ten feet separated the pairs of enemies. Startled, each side jumped back and went for weapons.

One of the Jerries, no more than a teenager with short, blond hair and clear blue eyes, had his MP-40 slung across his back. The other, who had also lost his helmet, posed the most immediate threat. He swung the muzzle of his Mauser toward James.

James got on his trigger first. The Sten clattered out a burst with the sound of ripping canvas magnified. The kraut jiggled a little in place as slugs thudded into his chest, gouging out chunks of flesh and gray-green uniform cloth. He was already dead by the time his convulsing body struck the ground.

The blond kid made a break for it, springing in among the cottonwoods and tearing through the underbrush like a fleeing deer.

"Wait here!" James shouted at Gabrielle.

He crashed through the trees in pursuit, realizing he wasn't physically up for a chase but knowing he couldn't let the kid get away to lead back a larger element.

Cottonwoods turned to marsh grasses away from the stream. Bad luck for the kraut. Running for his life, bounding like an Oklahoma jackrabbit through sagebrush, he brayed forth a little yelp of terror every time his foot struck the ground. James had picked off a lot of rabbits on the run with the old .22 rifle his dad left for him. This was even easier shooting—a larger target.

He took quick aim and snapped off a shot. The bullet slammed the kraut in the back like somebody had reached out of the haze and smashed him with a baseball bat. He plowed up sand with his face and lay still except for spasmodic muscle jerking. A hiss of remaining air tore from his lungs like a suppressed scream.

James stood over the blond kid, looking down at the body. "I'm sorry you had to end this way," he said, meaning it.

Having expended the Sten's last cartridge, he flung the weapon aside and appropriated the German's MP-40, extra ammo for it, and a couple of potato-masher hand grenades. Sergeant Peg Leg's trousers were so baggy on him that the pockets comfortably accommodated the extra ordnance. He checked the guy's combat boots for a better fit, but they were no smaller than the ones he already wore.

He hurried back to Gabrielle at the creek and found her rifling through the other dead man's gear. She had already slung his Mauser over her shoulder. She looked up, her expression stony. She was proving herself as tough and as dangerous in her own way as Constantina was in hers. A man rarely encountered two such remarkable women in an entire lifetime.

"*Bonne jeune fille.*" He approved.

"*Merci.*"

They hunkered together below the level of the creek banks while a trickle of water ran past and the corpse's hand dipped into it, looking, listening for other troops who might be in the area close enough to overhear gunfire above the thunder of bombs and respond to it. The two guys' behavior—the one soldier's slung rifle, the way they were hurrying—suggested they may have deserted their posts along the perimeter when the bombing started and were looking for somewhere to hide. The basement, for example.

The bombing shut down as abruptly as it had begun. The droning of departing airplanes dissipated, leaving an eerie quiet that would certainly not last more than a few minutes before the U.S. Navy unlimbered its big guns.

James inspected the dead German's boots for fit—*Damn! Did all krauts have big feet?*—and then grabbed Gabrielle's hand and raced out of the creek bottom with her, across a pasture, and through a hedgerow to the back of a weed-overgrown cow shed and pen. They paused there while James's eyes darted around for signs of danger, his finger on the trigger of the MP-40, while Gabrielle backed him up with the Mauser.

Everything about the tiny cottage bespoke abandonment. Weeds and marsh grasses overran the yard. Its white-washed walls were cracked, while here and there stones dribbling away left holes through which they could glimpse the interior. The red morning sun peeked through

holes in clouds and bomb smoke and reflected off the broken shards of glass remaining in the windows. Even the trees shading the house appeared to have gone back to unbridled nature. The back door hung askew from a single leather hinge.

Weapons ready, they approached the entrance. Gabrielle kept watch while James explored the interior.

It had four rooms and appeared to have been ransacked and looted of anything valuable. Broken furniture, ragged clothing eaten by mold, old papers and other rubbish littered the floors. The roof leaked. Rain from earlier still dripped through it, plopping resoundingly in a little puddle in the uncanny silence. A little girl's doll with a missing arm lay next to the puddle.

The basement turned out to be a cellar underneath the house, the entrance a heavy slanted door that James almost overlooked in the overgrowth out back. He slung the MP-40 to free both hands for the task of breaking the rust on the heavy hinges as he pried the door open. Obviously, no one had been here for a long time.

Daylight penetrated only to the bottom of the third or fourth step down. Beyond lay a deep black hole.

"It looks like a crypt," Gabrielle disapproved.

The naval bombardment began with the crackle and roar of a mighty distant storm. Shock waves vibrated the air as huge shells howled across the sky from the Allied armada of warships off the coast of France.

"Home is where the heart and ass are!" James quipped.

They dived together hand in hand through the doorway.

James banged the heavy cellar door closed and cast them into utter darkness. They felt their way down the steps and away from the door, the shelter's weak point. The walls were slimy with mold and mildew. Broken glass crunched underneath their feet. They stumbled over unseen obstacles left strewn about. The air was damp and heavy and smelled as though it had not been recycled in so many years that it was beginning to rot. Gabrielle sneezed like a kitten.

From outside came deep, pulsating thunder and the lightninglike crack of striking naval artillery. It rumbled like the most terrific thunderstorm ever to assail the Earth. James and Gabrielle crouched against the wall to one side of the stairway, holding each other in the dark while the tempest raged, intensifying. James settled to the floor, his fevered muscles needing rest.

One night, he recalled, a tornado blew across Drake's Prairie, smashing barns and houses into kindling and lifting the roof off the little farmhouse Gramps had built

shortly after he came over from Germany. Gramps, Grams, James and Bubba Doaks, whom Gramps hired for haying season, barely reached the storm cellar in time. The tornado had come upon them, as Grams put it, like a thief in the night.

Bolts of lightning webbed the sky's globe, striking repeatedly with bursts of fire and heaven-busting percussion. The wind blew so hard it drove the rain sideways. It hammered their bodies with the velocity of gravel shot from cannons. And the roar of the tornado itself! God and the angels were racing cars.

James remembered the banging of the cellar door as Gramps and Bubba Doaks tried to hold it shut. The tornado finally ripped it off its hinges and out of their hands. Everyone in the cellar would have been sucked out and blown to kingdom come by the sheer fury of nature gone wild had they not clung to each other and braced themselves against a timber that supported the earthen roof.

Fierce as that tornado had been, it was a mere summer's dust devil compared to the storm that now raged against the Normandy beachheads. Dust, churned free of the earth-trembling cellar walls and roof, made James and Gabrielle cough and sneeze. All they could do was wait it out and hope a shell didn't land on them. They held onto each other for comfort.

"We'll be buried alive!" Gabrielle fretted.

"It'll hold unless we take a direct hit," James reassured her.

After a pause, Gabrielle asked, "Do you ever pray, James?"

"To God, you mean?"

"Of course, I mean to God. Who else?"

James thought about it.

"When I was a kid," he said, "preachers used to come through the countryside and put on revivals at McKey School or set up a tent in a field. Every night for a week

or two there'd be whooping and shouting and praying and rolling in the aisles. I remember ol' Dub Kinsey got saved and backslid so many times he must have been a legend and a challenge to every preacher who came to Sequoyah County. One night he jumped up during services while everybody was shouting in unknown tongues—"Alli my kashundi!"—and ran out and around the schoolhouse like a dog with worm fits. He was yelling, 'Catch Him! Hallelujah, catch Him!' Ol' Dub had done seen Jesus and was trying to catch him before He got away."

James patted his pants pockets for Sergeant Peg Leg's yellow cigarettes and matches. There was no reason he couldn't smoke now.

"Ol' Dub must not have caught Him, because that was the last night of the revival and Sheriff E. W. Floyd arrested Dub the next night in Sallisaw for being drunk in public and fighting."

He finally located his cigarettes. They were damp from the night's rain, but they seemed salvageable.

"Holy Rollers aren't so much in bringing the Holy Ghost into your life as they are in scaring hell right out of you," he went on. "For years after I left home I had the feeling God was going to get me. I suppose God and I haven't said howdy to each other much since then. He probably doesn't even know I exist."

"God knows everything, James. God helped me find you again. He's looking over you and me together. If it's okay with you, I'll keep praying for us."

"It can't hurt," he acquiesced.

He thought it was naive to believe God played any personal role in the petty affairs of mankind. Still, that innocence in the middle of war was part of her attraction.

He struck a match on the barrel of the MP-40. Damp, it fizzled out. He struck another. It caught and he lit his cigarette and drew bitter but relaxing smoke deep into his lungs. He held the burning match overhead. Through dust

swirling in the air from the artillery pounding, he saw, oddly enough, that the cellar appeared not to have been ransacked like the house.

"James?" Gabrielle said in a strange but compelling tone.

"*Oui, jeune fille.*"

"Could you have truly killed me if it became necessary?"

The match burned down and bit his fingers. It gave him an excuse not to answer.

He struck another match and stood up, remembering how Gramps and Grams always kept a kerosene lantern in the cellar, filled and ready for use during storms. Rural people were the same all over the world.

Guided by matchlight, James explored rows of shelves containing dusty home-canned goods, assorted rusted tools and other odds and ends of a farm life. Sure enough, it didn't take him long to find the lamp, on a shelf next to the steps. It hadn't been used in a long time. Half the fuel had evaporated. It required most of his reserve of matches to get the wick going. He wiped the globe with his shirt and replaced it. Diffused light spread out and took the edge off the darkness. A rat the size of a squirrel scampered away, rattling glass sprinkles.

Staring in horror, Gabrielle clambered slowly to her feet. She pointed a trembling finger. James thought the rat must have unnerved her.

"This is a *crypt!*" she said, then repeated it when James failed to hear because of the furor outside.

The object of her alarm appeared to be nothing more than a bundle of old rags discarded and partially hidden in a far corner. James took the lamp and, holding it high above his head, explored further, Gabrielle right behind holding on to his shirt.

A skeletal foot protruded from one end of the bundle. From the other end extruded the back of a skull to which

long shreds of a woman's dark hair adhered. Time and rodents had taken care of most of the flesh and skin.

Gabrielle tiptoed near, riveted to the scene. "What do you suppose happened?"

James pointed to where the lamp revealed a bullet hole in the back of the head. A yellow Star of David was sewn on the rotted dress. Wherever they went, Nazis sought out Jews and marked them.

"Oh! *Mon Dieu!*" Gabrielle stammered.

There was a bulge in the middle of the skeleton underneath her ragged dress, as though the woman in life had attempted to cover or protect something. James lifted the bones; they weighed little, what with most of the soft body tissue gnawed or withered away.

Underneath her was a second, much smaller skeleton. It wore a dress that identified it as a female child of perhaps four or five years old. James recalled the one-armed doll inside the cottage. Sewn on the dress was another crude yellow star. The bones were curled into a fetal position of terror so abject it could still be felt.

James had investigated similar homicide scenes in Oklahoma City. Closer inspection told much of the story. The woman displayed an entry wound on one side of the head, an exit on the opposite. The little girl's entry wound corresponded with her mother's bullet exit. Both mother and child, their heads together, had died from the same gunshot. An execution in deliberate cold blood.

Human remains, plus the fact that there appeared to be little of value there, explained why the cellar remained unlooted. The stench generated by purtrifying corpses confined in small spaces had been enough to keep even the most curious at bay. All that remained of the odor now was a sort of mustiness.

Gabrielle was too horrified to speak. She hung on to James as though afraid if she let go she might collapse into a pile of bones next to the others.

James stood spellbound by the scene and by evidence of the mother's unselfish attempt to save her child. As incongruous as it might seem, he saw in the sacrificial quality of their deaths something in Constantina's character that had transformed her in the end to something noble. Never mind what she might have been before, never mind even that she had been part of this same machine that executed mother and child, never mind anything that had gone before. What mattered now was that Constantina had offered her life in order that James and Gabrielle might have a chance to live.

His head ratcheted toward the cellar door and the storm that raged beyond it. Gabrielle saw the expression on his face in the lamplight and somehow she knew.

"No!" she cried. "James, you can't go back out there. You'll be killed!"

She attempted to argue him out of going: It was God's will that they remain here in the cellar where they were relatively protected, together, until it was all over; he was wounded and feverish and couldn't survive out there; Constantina was not worth the effort—she would have killed them both in the name of the Fuhrer and the Reich; besides, she was likely dead by now.

When all else failed, she pleaded to accompany him. He stood firm. He had to know that she was as safe as possible under the circumstances.

"Why are you doing it, James?" she pleaded. "*Pourquoi?* We owe that woman nothing. What is there between you that you would die for her?"

"She may already have died for us," James responded simply. His mind was made up. "You'll be okay in the cellar while I'm gone. The dead won't hurt you," he added, indicating the skeletons. "It's the living you have to fear, but you have the Mauser and you know how to use it."

"I'm not thinking of myself, James. I'm thinking of *you*."

James wasn't sure he could explain it, so he didn't try. True, they wouldn't be in this predicament but for Constantina. None of this would have happened. Still, all he knew was that Constantina risked her life, had perhaps already surrendered it, in an effort to save them. He could never live with himself if he turned his back on her after what she had done. A man was not a man unless he lived up to his obligations. Besides, if he was honest with himself, a part of his adventurous, questing spirit yearned to witness the invasion for himself, this grandest historical event of the century.

"I'll bring her back here," he explained.

If courage, as Churchill explained it, is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities because it is the quality that guarantees all others, then Constantina had qualities in depth that he may never have seen.

With luck, he wouldn't have to contend with the German patrol with whom they had clashed on the ridgeline. The krauts would be too busy saving their own butts against the unfolding invasion to pursue and finish off Constantina. He considered four possibilities as to her fate: She was dead; she was wounded and in hiding; she had been taken prisoner; or—this was a legitimate possibility in light of her crafty nature—she had gotten away and rejoined the enemy with a good alibi.

There was only one way to find out.

Lamplight reflected the tension in Gabrielle's freckled face and flickered against tears brimming her eyes. She threw herself into his arms and clung to him for a long minute. She was argued out and so said nothing else.

"Keep the home fires burning, *jeune fille*," he said gallantly.

He turned quickly away lest she see his eyes. He looked

back once at the tiny solitary figure standing next to the lamp before he heaved his shoulders against the cellar door and lifted, letting in the amplified noise of the naval barrage. Despite knowing deep in his soul that they may never be together again, he still had to go.

Unlike the aircraft bombs, which had been cautiously dropped to the rear, the Allied navy laid steel directly on target. A few errant rounds burst in giant mushrooms here and there, but the main ferocity of the shelling was concentrated on bluff defenses above the landing beaches. Ebbing gale winds tumbled and tossed great barriers of smoke and vapor all along the coastline. The morning's first sunrays tinged it an earthlike yellow while the shadows were a sorry blue.

The crackle and clatter and thunder made James's ears throb with pain. Men up there in that dense wall of smoke slashed by detonations would give one of their balls to be back in the rear—and here James was, hurrying to get up there to join the chaos and destruction, his goal to reach the spine of the ridge and the natural rock fortress where he had last seen Constantina.

If she *was* alive, maybe he should have her examine *his* head.

Limping and unsteady on his feet, he retraced his

route along the little stream where he had killed the two German deserters. The body by the creek lay where it had fallen, stretched out in the posture of a tired man resting, open hand draped into the running water. Upon his frozen face was a smear of blood and an astonished and sorrowful look.

James stopped to look at him. He couldn't explain it, but he knelt by the water, wet the tail of his green peasant shirt and washed the blood off the dead man's face. He closed his eyes and rested; what he dreaded most of all was finding Constantina's body with a similar smear of blood on her face.

A shell exploding nearby prompted him on his way again. Since the Germans were fixated seaward against the invasion, there was small chance they would notice a lone figure coming up from the rear through the smoke. Besides, most defenders would have burrowed underground to ride out the shelling before emerging again to fight off the landing.

James made good time until he entered the maelstrom that consumed the coastline. Shells booming forward, rearward, and on his flanks jumbled his sense of direction. Shrapnel shrieked through the air like swarms of giant killer bees. Landmarks vanished into the gathered gloom. He had to use the rise of the land as a guide to find his way.

Diving into shallow craters and behind boulders to avoid bursting shells sapped his strength. Each bone of his body ached and seemingly threatened to break. His face turned dry and grimy from smoke and he thought he heard his skin crackling. His throat felt full of burrs.

By some miracle he made it unscathed to the top of the ridgeline where he and the women had hidden in the boulders. He stumbled about on the smoldering earth calling out Constantina's name. There was no answer, no sign of her or her body. He returned to the cover of the

rock fortress and for the first time since reaching the ridge crest turned his attention to something other than the missing woman.

Winds from the sea blowing clouds of dark smoke landward opened up a view of the beach through transient shards of mist and vapor. Crouching in his stone refuge with Vierville Draw to his left and the tide now coming in on the tan beaches, James found himself with a box seat to watch the Allied invasion of Fortress Europa. He caught his breath in awe, dumbstruck. Never in the history of mankind had anyone witnessed such a spectacle.

Thousands of ships—battleships, torpedo boats, cruisers, destroyers, troop transports—dotted the sea for as far as James could see. It seemed like a man could walk from ship to ship all the way across the English Channel and never get his feet wet. The flotsam he had detected earlier on the watery horizon, James now realized, must have been the vanguard of the landing fleet.

From the warships belched fire and smoke as they baraged the German-held coastline. Volleys of rockets fired by cruisers flashed overhead in a lovely fireworks display. Ordnance bored holes through the air and smoke. Shock waves from the enormous 14-inch guns of the battleships threatened to swamp the smaller boats in the vicinity.

An LCG (landing craft, gun) darted out of nowhere close to the shoreline and ripped off a barrage from its 4.7-inch guns that struck the pillbox across the draw from James, splashing fire but appearing to do little damage. It fired again, missing the pillbox this time, then vanished as suddenly as it appeared.

Between the armada and shore, waves of landing craft plowed toward the beach, bucking in the swells, reminding James of a hatch of baby turtles. With the LCAs loaded with troops and LCTs carrying tanks came the seas, just rolling and rolling, the surf accelerating over tidal runnels as it bashed mindlessly against the sand and against antitank and antipersonnel obstacles. These first echelons, James realized with growing dread, hauled soldiers of the 29th Division, his old outfit. Colonel Branson had intended James's boat crew to be one of the first ashore on Omaha Beach. Men whom James knew, and with whom he had eaten and worked and trained during his undercover phase in England, were about to receive their baptism of fire.

The earsplitting naval barrage quit as the first waves of landing craft approached the sands. Suddenly it was eerily quiet, except for the steady plopping of mortars landing in the water and the odd antitank round. Several boats were ablaze, but the invaders were still out of range of kraut rifle and machine-gun fire. Veterans of the German 352d Division on the bluffs above Omaha held their fire and lay in wait. The bombing and naval artillery had done remarkably little damage to the German defenses.

The first landing wave touched bottom some 40 yards offshore. The Higgins boats bucked up and down in heavy surf as doors opened to lower steel ramps. Dogfaces laden with weapons and combat kit poured out into the surf. They waded through the water toward the beach in long lines, rifles held above their heads.

Here and there, men plunged out of sight in the tidal runnels. Even wearing inflatable Mae Wests, they had to fight desperately to get back to the surface with their packs and assault jackets crammed with ammunition. Some made it to the shallows and crawled up on the beach. Others drowned.

From his position on the ridge, riveted to the drama

unfolding before him, James and his binoculars commanded an enemy's-eye view of the Allies swarming ashore. He found himself holding his breath for long stretches at a time. Forgotten were his own aches and pains, his exhaustion, everything except the awful yet fascinating spectacle of flesh and blood, steel and fire about to clash against the Atlantic Wall.

He became a part of it all. Rather, perhaps, it all became a part of him.

All he could think of over and over again was that this was going to be a turkey shoot, a bloodbath, a disaster. GIs continued to straggle onto the sand, some swimming, some wading, others crawling or slithering. There was no cover, no place for them to hide from the murderous fire James expected to open up at any moment.

The first ranks of GIs were advancing across the open beach when German officers finally ordered their men to fire. Above the Vierville Draw, the 352d opened up with MG-42 machine guns and mortars while snipers lurking in trenches began their gory work. James flinched even though he expected it.

Doughboys ran for cover toward the seawall. Other than tanks and defensive obstacles, the seawall afforded exposed GIs their only hope of survival. Barbed wire curled above its top, beyond which rose bluffs veined with trenches linking German infantry, snipers, rocket launchers and mortar and machine-gun crews. Few invaders from the first wave would reach it.

An officer waved for his men to follow him across the beach. A *Nebelwerfer* round exploding next to him sliced him neatly in two at the waist with a shovel-blade-sized piece of shrapnel.

Nearby, GIs took cover behind two American tanks that had landed at the mouth of the Vierville Draw. One of the tanks was already disabled. The other fired its

76mm cannon at Germans along the cliffs above the draw and the pillbox complex across from James's position before it took a direct mortar hit. Ammo in the tank began exploding, blowing off the hatch and shooting fire toward the sky.

The doughs behind it raced for the seawall. Tracer fire from the concrete pillbox spurted up sand, ricocheted off stones, and stitched the hard beach with bullets. One of the GIs knelt to fire his rifle into the draw. His head exploded in a pink cloud. A snarling machine gun wounded another in the stomach and legs, but he finally reached a portion of the seawall near the mouth of the draw before he died.

The slaughter was fast and merciless as the Germans found the range. Men fell in every direction. The air crackled with bullets. In short order, corpses lay strewn across the sand and bumped against each other in the shallows—bodies with legs and arms off, heads missing, mangled human parts scattered everywhere.

The sea ran red.

Burned-out landing craft and immobilized vehicles, some still on fire, littered the landing sector. Out in the surf the tide rose around a waterproof tank that had lost its rubber flotation skirts. A dead man hung from the turret while the heads of other men bobbed up and down in the water around it. The tank commander sat on the turret next to the dead man. The flesh of both legs was burned off from the knees down, leaving his bare shin bones dangling in the saltwater.

Tears of rage and frustration streaked James's cheeks as he watched the massacre, helpless to do anything to stop it, wanting to hide his face in his arms and stop looking, unable to tear himself away.

"Don't stop! Keep moving! Keep moving!" he chanted desperately, willing those poor trapped bastards of the

29th down there to get up and run through the hail of steel and lead before there was none of them left.

The invasion all along the beach stalled, its soldiers pinned down. Some men were trying to dig shallow fox-holes in the hard sand. Others slithered forward, using corpses and obstacles for cover. Still others played dead in hopes the Germans would overlook them. The tide creeping up behind drowned the wounded who no longer had the strength to crawl.

Krauts cut the first wave to ribbons, then began shooting at the bodies, exploding heads and torsos, riddling wounded men with their arms outstretched pleading for mercy. The few Americans still alive were no more than target practice.

The location of the pillbox and occupied trenches at the mouth of the Vierville Draw opposite James allowed machine gunners a clear sweep of the entire beach. Murderous fire poured down onto the trapped survivors of the 29th Division. All around, men were being pulverized as they crawled or screamed for mercy.

In utter despair, James wrenched the binoculars from his eyes and dropped his head. The invasion seemed to have failed. Everything he had gone through to preserve Overlord secrets, all the lives lost, appeared to have been in vain. German defenders were about to do what Rommel ordered: Drive the enemy back into the Channel.

When James looked up again, his ears ringing from the furnace roar of the battle, his eyes were dry and burning with hatred, his teeth set in a curlike snarl. He turned his binoculars toward the pillbox that had done so much damage. Muzzle flames still speared from its gun ports. He felt like a feral beast who, cornered, was going to rip out as many throats as he could before he went down. One man might not change the course of such a fight. But he had to do *something*.

He detected a flutter of movement from the outer rim

of his vision. He centered on a pile of rock 100 feet or so back of the pillbox in the bottom of the draw. That was when he spotted a swath of brown cord jacket and a tangle of black hair.

Constantina!

It was suicide to go down there. If the Jerries in the pill-box or trenches didn't spot him and pick him off, the Americans might. His eyes turned toward the abandoned beach house where Gabrielle waited for him in the cellar. He could be in her arms now, hiding from the world, even sleeping a little while the Allies and the Germans determined between them the outcome of their desperate duel. His job as Overlord's protector was done. He certainly owed Gabrielle more than he owed Constantina. In light of his wounds and deteriorating physical condition, no one could blame him if he gave up and went back to her now. In fact, no one need ever know.

He would know. He would always know that he had not been up to the task.

It's not enough that we do our best; sometimes we have to do what's required. Winston Churchill.

Perhaps Constantina was already dead. He panned the binoculars back to the rock pile. She was alive, just barely, it seemed, and dragging herself among the rocks

like a crippled dove. An observation port in the rounded near side of the pillbox overlooked the bottom of the draw. So far the Germans seemed not to have noticed the injured woman, concentrating as they were upon the beach. However, they would surely spot someone trying to retrieve her.

He just might stand a chance of pulling it off if he could reach the cover of the rock pile. With luck, since he was wearing Sergeant Peg Leg's uniform trousers and carrying a German weapon, he would be taken for a kraut soldier long enough to get in and out again with Constantina.

He heaved himself to his feet and withdrew along the ridge, keeping low on the military crest. As soon as he was out of sight, he angled downslope to the bottom of the draw where it twisted sharply in a protective elbow. He stopped to rest behind a column of eroded earth. His lungs burned from exhaustion and fever. The sounds of the pillbox dealing out death and destruction abraded nerve endings already worn raw. It was up and around the beach and he couldn't see it from here.

He rested another minute with the ripping sound of machine guns, the breaking crash of mortars and artillery drumming around him. Then he struggled to his hands and knees and finally to his feet. He took a deep breath and hugged the near bank of the wash until he came to the bend, where he observed both Constantina's rock pile and the back and one side of the pillbox. Barbed and razor wire clotted the mouth of the draw. He couldn't see Constantina now—the angle of observation was too low—but in her condition she couldn't have gone far.

He drew a deep breath and in a low rush, his too-big boots kicking up spurts of sand, raced along the floor of the canyon toward the rocks. There was so much gunfire he couldn't tell if anyone was aiming at him or not.

His injured leg gave out on him just as he reached the

rock pile. He hurled himself over the first parapet of stone and, to his surprise, landed belly down next to Constantina. She was as startled by his unforeseen arrival as he was to find her so readily. He rolled over next to her while her pain-filled eyes slowly focused with recognition. She rewarded him with a pale smile that was more like a grimace.

"I thought I'd drop in since I was in the neighborhood," he cracked.

She had to catch her breath. She spoke English since she knew how he disliked German. "You should have let me know . . ."

"Are we enemies or friends?" he asked. He never knew from one time to the next.

Her breathing came in short, agonized gasps. "Wasn't it Ishmael whose hand was against every man, and every man's hand against him? That's how I feel."

"Where are you hit?"

He helped her roll over on her side. They had to hug the ground in order to be protected by the rocks. The left breast of her jacket and blouse was soaked in blood, to which adhered grime and sand. He opened her blouse.

"You just want to look at my knockers," she accused him, with another bleached smile.

"True."

The bullet hole just above her left breast was serrated and turning black and blue all the way up to her shoulder and arm. Air bubbled slowly from the wound. A lung shot, a sucking chest wound. The bullet must have missed her heart by a hair's width. She needed a doctor. And quickly.

"I—I can't go back . . ." she faltered. "The patrol recognized me. They shot me and left me for dead. They . . . They'll execute me if I go back."

She said it matter-of-factly, not as though she expected pity or mercy. After all, she had been a part of the system herself.

"They . . . They took the sergeant's cap and uniform tunic," she apologized. "You could have worn them to help you get away now. I'm hurt bad, aren't I? I keep fainting."

Without treatment, it wouldn't be long before her lungs collapsed and she suffocated from lack of air.

"James . . . ?"

"Don't talk now."

"I want to tell you this. I—I have to. Do you remember that . . . the night we were dancing at the Hyatt in London?"

"How could I forget?"

"I didn't want the night to ever end. James . . . James, it wasn't my idea for those men to barge in on us. I . . . I . . . James, I'm so dreadfully sorry about . . . *everything*."

She looked deep into his eyes and fainted while starting to reach fingertips to touch his cheek.

German cigarette packs contained an inner foil to keep the fags fresh. James stuck Peg Leg's last cigarette between his lips before he flattened out the foil and pressed it against Constantina's bullet wound to seal it off and stop her lung from compressing. He removed her cord jacket, ripped out a front panel, wadded it inside her blouse as a pressure bandage, and buttoned her blouse all the way up to hold everything in place. It would have to do.

She seemed to breathe more easily. He looked at that classic, beautiful face of hers, all the more radiant, it seemed, in repose. Grams always said there was inner beauty, and then there was beauty that was only skin deep. James no longer saw the Black Widow in Constantina.

He smoothed hair away from her forehead, lying on his side next to her, so close he smelled her breath. He drew it in deep, savoring it all the more because he feared she was getting near her last. Never before had he encountered two such women—and to have found them

under circumstances that could steal them away as quickly as they had entered his life.

Two more reasons to curse Hitler.

The war, whose mighty song of clashes and crashes he had shoved out of his thoughts for that brief moment of introversion, intruded once again with authority. Machine-gun tracers arced out of nowhere, green and curving and whiplashing through the rocks. James threw himself over Constantina's unconscious body as bullets chewed up rock and sand all around him.

The fight had come to him. Now he had to do *something*. Or else die with Constantina.

James lay on the sand protecting Constantina with his own body while the machine gunner raked the rock pile once more, then moved on, apparently concluding he had mowed down his target. James presumed the shooting came from the pillbox, since it was the nearest enemy position and the only one with a good view of the bottom of the draw this far back in its throat. He lifted his head cautiously and caught a glimpse of movement through the observation port.

Okay. Now what? It was a long run from the rock pile to the bend in the draw, beyond which he and Constantina couldn't be seen. Carrying her, James knew the distance might as well be a mile. They were sure to be spotted. Once spotted, they would never make it.

That left *attack* as the only option. All he had to do was knock out the pillbox first, then carry Constantina to safety. It sounded impossible, but what the hell? He hadn't anything else to do at the moment.

Besides, destroying the pillbox would save a lot of American lives.

"I won't be long," he promised Constantina, although she was unconscious and could not hear him. He kissed her tenderly on the mouth. Twice now within a short span of time he had given a woman what may well be a good-bye kiss.

Filled with increasing rage, he scrambled to his feet and joined the battle to liberate Europe from the Nazis. Zigzagging as best he could with his game leg and his pockets filled with ammo and grenades, he reached the bank of the wash nearest the pillbox without taking fire. He had either caught the machine gunner by surprise or the guy had gone back to murdering GIs on the beach.

The wash seemed to trap and magnify sound, so that the crash and tumult of the fight made him feel like his head was stuck under a washtub while a tribe of savages beat on it with clubs. Haze and smoke helped conceal his movements as he made his way toward the pillbox, hugging the bank of the wash. He had to climb to reach the base of the pillbox, and in so doing would render himself a possible target for GIs on the beach as well as any errant German who might look around and spot him. Hopefully, future encounters would be with krauts less discerning than the previous machine gunner and they would mistake him for a fellow *Wehrmacht*.

He reached the thick base of the concrete fortification. Inside, he heard the snarl of machine guns along with issued exhortations, commands and oaths in German. Down on the beach, more landing craft were bouncing in with the rising surf and disgorging American invaders onto a field of strange war flowers bursting into fierce blossom. More of them survived than before, although ghastly forms lay motionless everywhere, twisted in fantastic contortions like they had been dropped en masse from the sky.

James struggled to his feet, panting heavily around the

unlit cigarette still dangling from his lips, and crouched forward along the pillbox's curved wall. A bullet spanged off concrete inches above his head. He dropped to his belly. At least one GI took him for the enemy.

He waited a few moments, then tried again. This time he crawled to beneath the observation port. It was a good two feet above his head, even if he stood, which he dared not do until he was ready. There were disadvantages as well as advantages in being short of stature.

The aperture, he observed, was barely large enough to accommodate the barrel of a rifle or machine gun—or a grenade, if the thrower was accurate enough. Pitching baseball for Oklahoma A&M might finally have a practical application.

He scrambled to his knees in preparation for springing to his feet and taking care of business. He was almost ready when a German darted out of nowhere from around the curve of the structure. He carried a mortar tube over his shoulder and gripped a pistol in the other hand. He almost collided with the American. Surprised, he jumped back as confusion swept his face. Was this or was this not a fellow German?

That moment of indecision cost the German his life. James shot him with his MP-40. The kraut grunted suddenly as if struck by a club in the stomach. He sat down hard and gazed up ruefully, his eyes reflecting mute, indefinite reproach. Then he fell over and died.

Screw him.

James had witnessed so much death during the past 48 hours, having inflicted some of it himself, that the gravity of it had lost some of its edge. Especially now when the blood craze was upon him and all he cared to do was kill as many of the bad guys as he could in retaliation for those GIs on Omaha Beach and for Constantina.

He quickly slung the MP-40 over his shoulder to free both hands for the grenades in his pockets. He sprang to

his feet with a potato masher in each hand. Bullets splattered against the concrete all around him. He ignored them. He pulled the grenade pins with his teeth and hurled the first little bomb at the observation port, knowing that if he missed and the grenade bounced back he would blow himself up.

Strike!

Right across the plate.

The second grenade followed. Another strike. From inside the pillbox erupted a spontaneous outbreak of yelling and screaming as the Krauts realized what was happening.

“Reap what you sow, assholes!” James bellowed.

The grenades detonated with a single muffled *crump!* Flame shot from the port. James stretched to his tiptoes and thrust the barrel of the automatic rifle through the slit. He blindly emptied an entire magazine, spraying the interior. Bullets whined, spanged and ricocheted. He wouldn’t want to be one of the poor bastards inside who survived the grenades only to be trapped with bullets flying everywhere and bouncing repeatedly off the walls.

Satisfied, knowing it would take a while before the krauts manned that station again, he ran back to Constantina. He dropped on his knees next to her. She opened her eyes and tried to talk. No words came out.

“You don’t have to say anything, Constantina,” he said.

Everything important had already been said. He heaved her to her bare feet as gently as he could, supporting her limp form with his arm around her waist and her arm around his neck, regretting now that he had taken her shoes. In this manner, her feet dragging, him weaving and stumbling with the MP-40 slung across his shoulder and the cigarette still between his lips, they started up the draw away from the clamor of battle and toward the cellar where Gabrielle waited.

He looked back just before they labored out of sight of the pillbox around the sharp bend in the draw. Swarms of GIs had broken through, now that the pillbox was out of commission, and were charging the kraut trenches, every weapon they possessed clattering, banging and roaring.

Maybe all wasn't lost after all.

The day grew brighter until the sun shed its full radiance. Behind James as he struggled inland with Constantina, sometimes half dragging her, sometimes carrying her in his arms, clouds of dark smoke rose toward the sun, bright in the blue-enameled sky. Long gray walls of vapor marked the battle lines. Voices of mortars and smaller naval cannon, of explosions in series, and of rifles and machine guns in long irregular surges sent shock waves reverberating across the marsh grasses, fields and dunes, and made leaves on the occasional hedgerow tremble.

James no longer heard it. His eyes were fixed on a destination away from it all, his thoughts and emotions numbed by fatigue, shock, pain and disgust. His single thought was to reach Gabrielle—and to take Constantina with him.

He had accomplished his first mission to protect Operation Overlord. Now all he had to do was get Constantina to Gabrielle in the cellar to complete his second mission. Was that too much to ask of a man who had survived his final options?

He struggled on, a slight, wiry figure diminished by the open expanse of country, carrying in his arms an inert, blood-soaked woman whose long legs in tan slacks almost dragged her bare feet in the sand. Staggering, sometimes falling to his knees but always getting up again, his steadfast gaze refusing to falter.

After a while, he no longer listened for Constantina's breathing or looked into her face to see if she still lived. It didn't matter. He had completed his obligation to her. What mattered now was reaching Gabrielle. It was her face, not Constantina's, that kept him moving forward long after he passed the point of complete exhaustion. His *jeune fille*, so tiny and sweet with her orange hair, heart-shaped face sprinkled with golden freckles, her lopsided smile. Whose outward innocence camouflaged a worldliness thrust upon her way too soon.

There were wounded Germans and other stragglers in the fields, but they were zombies with tunnel vision, each clinging to his own goal of asylum back there away from hell. Occasional stray bullets buzzed through the air. Once a machine gun opened up from a hedgerow, chewing sand in front of James, but it stopped when he ignored it and kept stumbling forward with Constantina in his arms.

A fierce brushfire dragged a plume of black smoke across the flats. James traversed the char in its wake, kicking up a black smog with his too-big shoes. Ash settled on him and on Constantina in his arms until they were both black-faced and coated with it.

They crossed the narrow country lane bordered by unkept hedgerows and came to the little creek. This time he didn't even glance at the young German he had killed. It no longer mattered. Death itself no longer mattered—as long as he reached Gabrielle first.

He labored out of the creek bed, on his knees up the bank for the last few yards. He had to rest for long minutes, still on his knees, clutching Constantina, his eyes

glued forward and beginning to haze over from infection and his spiked fever.

Constantina stirred. At least he thought she stirred. He did not look at her.

Finally, after several attempts, he regained his feet. He saw the abandoned beach house. He lurched toward it in such slow motion that it could not be called running. Stumbling, staggering.

Faded, whitewashed walls loomed in front of his eyes. He recognized the back door hanging ajar from its one leather hinge.

He stopped in his tracks. At first he failed to comprehend. The cellar door was open, sprung back to reveal the black underground like the rotted mouth of a snoring giant.

“Gabrielle?”

No answer. He teetered forward, crying out again and again, “*Gabrielle! Gabrielle!*” As though to summon her spirit if not her body.

He carried Constantina down the steps into the cellar, his heart pounding with dread and disbelief. The lamp still burned, its light guttering at the bottom of the stone steps. Despair and guilt burned in his throat and belly. Perhaps the remaining L-pill was finally dissolving to deliver him from his wretchedness.

Gabrielle was gone. There was no sign as to what might have happened to her. The cellar looked the same as before. The Jew mother corpse and her child remained in the corner. The rat as big as a squirrel stood up on its hind legs on top of her.

“I told you I’d be back . . .” he groaned. “*Jeune fille*, I told you . . .”

He crumpled to the floor, his back to the wall and his legs stretched out in front to support Constantina. The rifle slung on his shoulder dug into his flesh, but he didn’t care. He deserved to be punished. He would never have tea and

crumpets with Gabrielle in London and tell her what is better than beautiful.

He held Constantina's body tight in his arms, clinging to her because she was warm and alive and there had been so much death. He looked down into her face finally. It was blackened from ashes and smeared with dried blood, but the radiance of her beauty survived in the weak lamp-light. He felt her still breathing, but weakly, barely.

He said nothing. He merely gazed upon her face and was surprised when her eyelids fluttered as in dreaming, then opened and looked directly at him.

"James . . . ?" she faltered.

"I am here."

"James . . . You are at least ten feet tall."

Her entire body stiffened in his arms. Air gurgled from her throat and she shuddered. She relaxed suddenly and her head rolled over into his hand. Her dark eyes remained open. She ceased breathing.

James wrenched his eyes away from her face. He looked at the rat still standing on the skeletons. He closed his eyes and saw Gabrielle's face. Seeing her was too painful, so he opened his eyes again. Looking at Constantina was also painful, so he looked at the rat.

He wondered if Constantina would have saved Gabrielle and him had the invasion not begun this morning—or would she have remained the Black Widow?

What did it matter now?

He exerted no further control over events. His job was done. He was so tired, so damned tired.

After a while, he ransacked his pockets for his remaining matches and lit the cigarette still stuck between his lips. He held Constantina's body across his knees in his arms, smoked the bitter yellow German cigarette that was certainly no Lucky Strike, and watched the rat return his gaze.

AFTERWORD

June in England was often dreary. OSS Agent James Cantrell stood on a pier at Weymouth, where the 29th Division had disembarked for Omaha Beach nearly two weeks earlier. Hands in the pockets of faded Levis and wearing a yellow short slicker against spitting rain, he looked considerably recuperated from his wounds and injuries. He smoked a Lucky Strike and gazed out across the gray unsettled waters of the English Channel in the direction of France.

Invading GIs had found him holding a dead female gestapo operative in a cellar near the town of Vierville sur Mer back of Omaha Beach. He was burning up with infection and had to be evacuated from Normandy with thousands of other wounded. Thanks to Uncle Henry, he had been identified and reclaimed before he could be sent off to a POW camp as a German.

“George Patton promises his Third Army will be in Berlin by Christmas,” Uncle Henry had said during

James's debriefing, while he was still hidden away in a private British hospital in London.

Patton's Third was sweeping an end run south toward the Siegfried Line. Montgomery was pushing a route north. A million or so Allied troops were fighting bitterly in the hedgerows across France toward Paris.

"I'd like to recommend you for a Silver Star, James," said Uncle Henry in his mortician's dirge. "Unfortunately, you, me and *British Isle Exports* do not officially exist."

James returned the surviving L-pill, not telling Uncle Henry where it had been. He closed his eyes and stiffened in his hospital bed. He would never forget Paul Harris's last words just before the final option: "I'll . . . be seeing you, pal." Nor would he forget the promise he made to tell Major Harris's wife and daughter that Paul loved them and would see them again in heaven.

"We found Constantina's attaché case buried where you said it should be," the OSS station chief said. "It's a Fort Knox of vital intelligence, exposing Nazi agents both in England and America. There were papers implicating her in the murders of Captain Rick Dobbs and Mortimer Sanders, whom you knew as General Sowell. Other documents outlining her interrogation of Major Harris could have resulted in the failure of Operation Overlord if you hadn't intervened. You did a good job, James. A damned good job. James, are you listening?"

James nodded absently.

"Constantina Elser, AKA Constantina Chiapetta, AKA Juanita Jaillet, AKA . . . Well, you get the picture. Her true name was Constantina Braun, a cousin of Eva Braun, Hitler's consort. She helped organize and deploy undercovers in a half dozen Allied nations. Apparently, she was very efficient."

James said nothing. There was more to Constantina Braun, as it turned out, than her job.

"There was something else," Uncle Henry said mysteriously. "Aren't you curious?"

James shook his head slowly from side to side.

"I'm telling you anyhow. It was a handwritten report in which she specified that one James Cantrell, if captured, was not to be harmed. She was to be notified of said capture and the prisoner delivered directly to her custody. It seems, James, you made quite an impression."

James looked at the station chief. Uncle Henry regarded him with mild fondness, like an elder uncle approving of a favorite nephew.

"What about Gabrielle Amandine Arneau?" James asked.

"We believe she's still alive. A young Jewish woman was captured by the Germans hiding in a cellar near Vierville at the start of the invasion, the same cellar where you were later recovered. Jewish monitors who keep track of Jews seized by the Nazis report that she may have been transported to Paris and then on by train to an unknown destination inside Germany. I'm sorry, James. That's all we know so far."

James squeezed his eyelids together. He saw her face behind them.

He saw her face every time he closed his eyes. Every time he tried to sleep. He saw her face now as he stood on the pier at Weymouth gazing fixedly across the Channel toward France. Somewhere, somehow, he knew he would find her. A man was not a man unless he lived up to obligations.

Transport ships of all sorts and sizes lay at anchor or were moored to docks as stevedores loaded war supplies onto them. Even surrounded by so much activity, James was a lonely figure standing by himself.

A lanky form wearing a long raincoat walked out on the pier toward James at the far end, where the seas lapped at the pilings. Uncle Henry stopped and stood next to James. James continued smoking his Lucky Strike.

"I thought I'd find you here," the OSS chief said.

James smoked his cigarette.

"The prime minister wants to meet the man who saved the invasion," Uncle Henry said.

That ignited a spark of interest. "Prime Minister Churchill wants to meet *me*?"

"Everybody knows how you admire Winston Churchill," Uncle Henry confirmed. "But . . ."

"But? So what's the catch?"

"You have to wait until I can get you out of the brig. Colonel Branson has ordered MPs to arrest you for missing movement on D-day."

James took a last long drag off his cigarette and flipped the butt into the restless gray swells of the English Channel. He stared for another minute toward France. Over there, somewhere, Gabrielle was still alive.

He turned back. He and Uncle Henry walked silently together down the long pier to England.

About the Author

CHARLES W. SASSER is a retired veteran who spent twenty-nine years in the U.S. Army, thirteen of them as a Green Beret. The prolific author of more than thirty books, his previous works have been Main Selections of the Military Book Club, recommended reading at West Point, Army War College, and required reading in the Navy. Visit the author's website at *www.charlessasser.com*.

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