

Chapter One

Switchblade

Early April, 1944

PRIVATE PETER EDDY FELT THE cold ocean water soak through his pants before he'd even had a chance to grip the oars. He looked up through the rain to see Captain Ducey laughing at him.

"You can still say no, Private."

Peter slipped the oars into the channel, feeling rainwater trickle down the back of his neck. "And let the Nazis get away with it? No, someone has to do this. I just wish the waves weren't quite so high tonight."

The gray-haired captain gave Peter half a grin. "Bad weather can be an ally. Use it. You have three hours. You should be done in half that time. You say you have never done this sort of thing before?"

Peter smiled. "Haven't even shoplifted." He thought about telling the old sea captain that for three years straight he had led his high school baseball team in stolen bases, but that wasn't the type of theft Ducey was interested in. Besides, Peter found that most of the English didn't *get* baseball.

"I thought not. Best of luck, then. You Americans are a crazy lot."

Peter nodded his farewell and began rowing. It wasn't long—maybe four strokes—before Ducey and his ship disappeared from sight. *I'm not crazy*, Peter told himself, not for the first time that night. *Inexperience doesn't mean I can't burglarize a Nazi garrison.*

Peter had met Captain Ducey just that night. The tough old sailor hadn't been willing to talk about any of the previous missions Peter suspected the man had been on, but he had taught Peter the basics of navigating his small, stealthy ship. Ducey seemed to know the English Channel as well as Peter knew his family's farm back in Idaho, even if his half dozen voyages during the Dunkirk evacuation were the only trips he was allowed to tell Peter about.

Peter's mission, Operation Switchblade, was his first for the US Office of Strategic Services, and it was extremely important. As he rowed, Peter reviewed the information he had learned during his briefing. Three days ago, a German spy stole one of the code books the American military used to communicate with sources in German-occupied territory. It was always bad news to have a code book stolen, but the military normally reissued code books so frequently that it wasn't a significant loss. This particular code book, however, was used to communicate with deep-cover agents in Belgium, Denmark, and Northern Germany. Peter was told that some of the agents were so entrenched in the German military hierarchy that issuing a new code book to them was deemed a risk of unacceptable proportions. The code book's loss was devastating to the Allied cause. If the book stayed in Nazi hands, they could set traps to capture and kill valuable sources of information.

One little book—that was why Peter was alone in the dark, in the rain, on the English Channel, hoping not to run into sea mines or be shot by a Nazi patrol when he landed on the beach. It was his job to find the book and destroy it before it left the French fortress.

When Peter's dinghy hit the beach, he wasn't sure he was ready. The OSS man, Captain Knight, had assured Peter he was the right man for the job, but Peter still wasn't convinced. He had grown up just a farm boy. Since then, he'd been one of thousands of new recruits, then a tank driver, then a very junior member of General Eisenhower's staff. *Too late to turn back*, he told himself. *Now you're a spy.*

The beach was rocky, but the man-made barriers dwarfed the natural ones. The German Army was expecting a cross-channel invasion sometime this year, and they had turned the beaches of Northern France into a soldier's nightmare. Peter prayed that he wouldn't step on a mine as he pulled his boat from the surf, past rolls of razor-sharp barbed wire, and around wooden poles stuck into the sand to slow down any invasion force. Peter could make out the glowing end of a cigarette not too far down the beach, and wondered how many patrolmen he could expect. He smiled as he remembered Ducey's advice. *Bad weather can be an ally.*

The night was dark, windy, and wet. The few German patrols he saw seemed more focused on staying dry than on looking for phantom enemies. Who, after all, would try to invade on a night like this? It was the type of weather that made sensible people want to stay indoors. Peter usually thought of himself as sensible, but as he climbed the steep hill off the beach,

he was grateful for the tempest. The clouds obscured nearly all light from the moon and stars, and the rain dimmed the sound of his footsteps as he circled the Nazi base. The threat of an air raid kept the fortress dark; the time of night kept it quiet.

He avoided the compound's carefully guarded main gates and went instead to a smaller gate, almost hidden. His briefing for the mission had included a map of the complex made by a French refugee who had long ago served on this base. Peter waited while a patrolman walked past and checked the gate then noiselessly slid toward it when the man moved on. The side gate was secured with an old lock—which took approximately thirty seconds to pick. Peter locked it again behind him, sure a patrol would check it again before he was finished and ready to leave.

Once inside, it was easy to avoid the solitary, huddled soldiers on patrol. Their flashlights gave Peter plenty of warning that they were approaching. Besides, the building he sought was not far from the gate he had forced, and he soon found an unlocked window that allowed him inside. Peter entered the compound swiftly and found the rooms he sought at the end of a long hallway after backtracking only once.

At that time of night, few people were about; the staff room was deserted when Peter arrived. The walls were covered with maps, silhouettes of friendly and enemy planes for identification, a picture of Hitler, and a medium-sized Nazi flag. Beyond the staff room was the commander's office, which Peter managed to unlock, even without a key. In the office, the wall decor again included a picture of the Führer, but there were fewer maps. Rummaging through the pile of undone paperwork on the commander's desk, Peter located a book and verified that it was the one he'd been sent to retrieve. It wasn't very big—several dozen pages thick, with a soft, well-worn, red leather cover. It had no title, but the first line of text matched what he had memorized earlier that day. *Had it really been that easy?* Peter wondered. His biggest hardship in retrieving the book had been the weather. He'd been expecting something more difficult.

He looked at the clock and realized he still had plenty of time until Ducey would consider the rendezvous broken, so he took apart the commander's phone and snipped a few wires before putting it back together.

* * *

Gefreiter Hess was halfway through his patrol. His shiny, recently polished boots struck the floor and squeaked slightly as he walked—the polish a

result of strict grooming standards for members of the German Army, the squeak a result of walking through the rainstorm earlier in his patrol.

Hess yawned. He still wasn't used to being up all night, and patrol duty from 0000 until 0600 hours was not as exciting as he once imagined war would be. There were no Soviet snipers within a thousand miles, rarely any British pilots sighted, and the last French Resistance fighter to enter this base had been caught and executed more than two years before. No one had breached his base's security since then.

Hess continued his patrol through the staff room, pausing there to glance at the maps on the walls, tempted to sit in one of the relatively comfortable chairs and put his feet up on a desk. But the desks were covered with charts, orders from Berlin, and dozens of contingency plans for defending France from the cross-channel invasion everyone thought the Allies would begin that spring. *And if the patrol leader were to catch you . . .*

One of the other new guards had made that mistake. The hauptmann in charge of the nightly patrols had walked the halls silently—in socks—and found the guard sleeping on duty. The punishment had been severe. Reluctantly, Hess left the staff room and continued his patrol into the base commander's office. He walked into the room with a slight smile on his face. Usually the room was locked during his patrol, and he was eager to enter. Even when empty, the office was the center of power on the base. He could almost taste it as he breathed.

Then something heavy hit the back of his head, and his body fell to the floor with a thud.

* * *

Peter put the ammo box down and leaned over to check for vital signs. He had lost his blood lust for German soldiers several campaigns ago and was somewhat relieved to feel a pulse. He gently dragged the unconscious gefreiter around to the other side of the desk, where he would be concealed from the hallway, and continued his work, grateful the dark clothing he wore and his hair—almost black with water from the storm outside—had helped him remain invisible to the patrolman.

Peter was bent over the desk, putting a waterproof covering on the code book, when he heard the sound of a gun leaving its holster, followed by a German exclamation. In addition to English, Peter spoke near-fluent French because his uncle was married to a French woman. Peter's German was very limited, but he could guess that what he'd heard, if translated,

would have earned the wrath of his mother and the bitter soap she'd kept on hand for washing out Peter's mouth when he was younger. He slowly turned around and faced the German hauptmann, glancing at the man's socks and recognizing that as the reason he had heard no warning footsteps.

"Turn around; hands on wall," the hauptmann said in rough French.

Peter gave the pretense of cooperation, turning around at a calm, slow pace. Then he brought his Colt M1911 up suddenly, swung toward the hauptmann as he dropped on one knee, and fired a shot into the German officer's chest. The hauptmann got a shot off too. It hit Peter's upper left arm, not hitting anything that would cause lasting damage but hurting nonetheless. The German officer dropped his weapon and fell to the floor. Peter's wound began to bleed almost immediately, and when he put his hand over the injury, he felt the warm sticky blood seep through his fingers. He didn't bother to see if the officer was unconscious or dead. He knew gunshots made enough noise to be heard over a rainstorm, and he was suddenly in a hurry to get out of the base commander's office. Using the same tool he'd cut the phone wires with, Peter cut the bottom of his shirt off and wrapped it tightly around his wound.

The code book was too big for Peter's pocket, so he stuck it inside the waistband of his pants. He looked around the room for an escape, knowing he needed to exit quickly. There was a single window in the office, but opposite that window, about twenty-five yards away, were the barracks that housed two German companies. Peter thought it would be wise to avoid the barracks if he could.

In the room were two immobile German soldiers and two doors. Peter knew the door he had come through led through the staff office to a hall with guards patrolling outside. So he went through the second door. As he closed it behind him, he heard loud voices and heavy footsteps rushing down the hallway, reacting to the gunshots. The door locked from the inside, so Peter locked it and turned around. The room he had just entered was a storage room. Filing cabinets lined one side, there were cleaning supplies in another corner, and shelves with rolled-up papers and unlabeled boxes took up the rest of the room. It had no windows and no doors, save the door Peter had just come through.

Somewhere on the base, an alarm bell sounded, and the German guards began yelling at him through the door. Despite having been raised in a strict Mormon household where vulgar language was prohibited, Peter nearly

swore. He thought he was trapped until he noticed a puddle on the floor, looked up, and saw the grating on the ceiling that was part of the room's ventilation system. He guessed it was about two feet wide by two and a half feet long. He climbed onto the shelves rather clumsily because of the now-numbing pain in his left arm. As he climbed, German soldiers began banging on the door with something. He couldn't see what they were using, but based on the sound it made when it collided repeatedly with the door, he guessed it was something solid. The screws holding the grate to the ceiling were old and rusty. He tugged two of them loose immediately, and two more pulls rendered the remaining ones useless as well. Then he yanked out the fan. Peter glanced over his shoulder. The hinges on the door were showing signs of strain.

The ventilation system's second, mostly solid grate was hinged to open out onto the roof. Peter jumped to the ground, grabbed a broom from the corner, and used it to knock the second grate open. He climbed back up the shelf, nearly fell off the unsteady furniture, then regained his balance and used both hands to grip one end of the hole in the ceiling and swing his legs into the other end. It wouldn't have been a problem at all if both of his arms had been fully functional. As it was, his left arm gave out, and he found himself hanging by his legs. By that time, the German soldiers had nearly broken the door down, but all the sit-ups and pull-ups Peter had done during recovery from his last set of war wounds now proved beneficial. He swung his good arm up and managed to slither through the hole just as the door's hinges gave way.

The lights surrounding the complex had been turned on, casting alternating shadows. The view from the roof would have been extraordinary, but it was still raining far too heavily to see more than a few yards beyond the base's fence. Peter hardly noticed the rain, focusing instead on survival. He located the side of the compound nearest the beach and dropped from the roof.

By this time several dozen guards were roused. Most of them were heading into the front of the building Peter had just left, but some of them were patrolling the fence that surrounded the base. Peter crawled on his stomach the twenty-five yards to the troop housing, glad the rain masked his movements. Although he'd planned to avoid the barracks, the shadows at their base now seemed a safe haven. Out of breath, Peter paused in the darkness, lying on the soggy ground next to the barrack wall, hoping his pulse wasn't really as loud as it sounded in his ears. Looking back, he could make out dark silhouettes walking along the roof he had crawled from

moments before. Getting out of their sight by crawling to the other side of the barracks was fairly easy. He stayed low and stuck to the shadows of the building.

His movements were glacial. He longed to escape from the compound as quickly as possible, and he knew if he was late getting to the ship, Ducey would leave without him. Still, Peter felt stealth was necessary for the present. Fortunately for him, the soldiers were sleepy and confused—most of them didn't know what they were looking for.

On the other side of the building, not quite fifteen yards from the fence, Peter spotted a thick electrical cord fastened neatly to the side of one of the light poles. Silently he unsheathed his knife and brought it up to throwing position in his good hand, thinking he could sever the cord and extinguish the lights. Then he could make an unseen exit. Peter was no expert in knife throwing, and it missed the cord by two inches, embedding the blade firmly into the wood instead. This time Peter did curse; he was running out of options.

Two patrolmen were walking along the fence, coming toward the shadow Peter was hiding in. *They'll see me when they pass*, Peter thought. He racked his brain, trying to think of a way to distract them, but the best idea he came up with was throwing something in another direction to divert their attention from his location. He searched the ground for a rock or a stick, but he only felt wet grass and mud.

Peter mentally cataloged his choices and checked his pockets: he had the book, his Colt pistol, an empty knife sheath, and his clothing. He couldn't find his lock-picking tools—they must have fallen out when he'd escaped to the roof. Peter knew he couldn't throw either of his shoes; he'd have to run like an Olympian to make it over the fence and to the beach. He couldn't get rid of the book—it had to be destroyed, or the lives of Allied agents in northwest Europe and the lives that depended on their knowledge would be in grave danger. The empty knife sheath was thick canvas and wouldn't make much noise, nor would any of his clothing. He didn't want to get rid of his pistol, small though it was, but he was desperate.

He spotted a patrol of four soldiers coming from the other direction. He didn't have enough bullets to fight them all. He fleetingly wished he were back in his tank in Northern Africa with his turret aimed at a Panzer rather than here on the northern coast of France with his little handgun aimed at six guards who each carried rifles or submachine guns. He wouldn't survive that shootout.

The shot he'd made earlier had been the first time he'd used his Colt in combat. Peter sighed, quickly unloaded it, and threw it and the bullets over his head so they landed on top of the building. They made enough noise that the soldiers heard them over the rain. The patrols both turned to the building and ran to the other side. One patrol ran along the west side of the building; the other patrol ran along the east side.

The moment they were out of sight, Peter sprinted north to the fence and jumped as high as he could. The chain-link fence was eight feet high; he still had a bit to climb. The top of the fence had three strands of barbed wire, but fortunately, the strands were similar to the type used to make cattle fences instead of the more dangerous razor wire the military normally used. Favoring his left arm, Peter reached the peak of the fence, found handholds without barbs, and swung his legs over just as someone saw him. The barbs caught his shirt and tore into his skin, but his weight was enough to free him as he dropped to the other side. Peter fell to the ground, hitting his left arm in the process and sending a new wave of pain through his body.

He winced. But what alarmed him far more than the pain was the sound of German soldiers rushing toward him; a few shots kicked up mud on the ground just behind him. Peter stumbled through some low-lying bushes and weeds, away from the fence and the shouting patrolmen. About a dozen yards beyond that was a steep hill that sloped down to the beach. He ran as fast as he could toward it—an eight-month-old ankle wound preventing him from achieving the speed he'd once been capable of—but he reached the crest of the hill just before the compound's pillbox-encased machine guns opened to full fire. He slid down the hill, below the guns' firing level, and made his way onto the sand.

He gritted his teeth to hold back a groan of pain and made sure the code book was still in his waistband. His hands were shaking, but the code book was there. So were a dozen new scratches, scrapes, and bruises. Peter headed for the rocks, knowing they would give him partial protection from the eyes of searching soldiers. He saw the headlights of several military jeeps about half a mile down the beach coming toward him from the east. It was too far and too dark for him to see how many troops were in them, but they drove slowly and shined lights into the rocks. Two other jeeps were headed toward him from the opposite direction, and a third, also heading west, appeared to have just passed his current location. They too were making careful, slow searches.

Peter found his dinghy and dragged it to the ocean, navigating his way through the maze of man-made obstacles. His arm ached horribly; it had felt

like it was being torn off on the slide down the hill. He stumbled over the sand, tripping first on a piece of wire then on a boulder. Even the wet weeds clung to his legs as if they were part of a conspiracy to prevent his escape. He struggled to get the dinghy into the water, fighting against the frigid waves and his own fatigue. He reached chest-deep water a few minutes later and crawled into the boat. Peter was wounded, exhausted, frightened, and cold, but he was also on a strict time line. So he began to row, and despite everything, he kept going.

* * *

About one hundred kilometers to the east, in the Calais harbor, a man known as Pierre waited in the storm. He watched his contact, Philippe Laroux, arrive in the dark alley between two warehouses, close enough to the harbor that they could hear the rain hitting the water. Laroux was right on time for their rendezvous.

“Pierre?” the lanky Frenchman whispered.

“Right behind you,” Pierre answered.

Laroux turned around, a look of surprise on his face. “They told me you would appear like a ghost, but I didn’t believe them.”

“Do you have it?” Pierre’s voice probed.

“Yes. You know how to use the device?” Laroux asked.

“Of course. I only lacked access.”

Laroux was holding the object in his hands: a limpet mine. “And you know the ship?”

“Yes,” Pierre answered confidently. “The *Umsicht*. I watched her sail in this evening. She is scheduled to unload her supplies at the dock tomorrow morning.”

“What is she carrying?”

“Munitions, mostly.”

Laroux paused before continuing. “You are well informed.”

Pierre nodded.

“Do you know what we went through to get this?”

Pierre could guess, but he didn’t interrupt.

“My team and I broke curfew and risked execution to make the supply drop a success. We held up flashlights to alert the plane that it was passing over the right location then worked all night to hide the supplies. Then yesterday I was told to bring the mine to the harbor and assist a stranger with a sabotage assignment.” Laroux lifted the mine to look at it more closely. “We have gone through considerable risk to retrieve this and smuggle it into Calais, so I must ask, Pierre, what is your vision for postwar France?”

Pierre knew enough about Laroux, even though this was their first meeting, to assume the man wanted to hear something about the end of both Fascism and Capitalism. "A France with no Nazis," Pierre replied.

"A return to how things were before the war?" Laroux asked.

"Not necessarily."

"What do you believe in, Pierre?"

Pierre chose his words carefully. He knew Laroux was the chief coordinator for a Communist cell with five other members. Most of their work was what they called "technical matters": secretly printing and distributing pro-Communist and anti-Fascist literature. They had only recently been asked by a member of the regional Communist party to cooperate with SOE contacts in sabotage activities. Pierre had no plans to join the Communist party, but he didn't want to offend them. For now, they were a useful ally. "Liberty, equality, and fraternity." Pierre hoped the slogan would ease Laroux's mind. If not Communist, it was at least revolutionary. "Does anyone on your team know how to place the mine?"

Laroux looked away. "No."

"Then may I have it?"

Laroux nodded. "Would you like me to keep lookout?"

"Please," Pierre was already removing his shirt and shoes. The rain was cold, and the water in the harbor would be even colder. But this was not the first time he had attached a limpet mine to a ship and blown it up. He could tolerate the cold water well enough. He carefully studied the explosive device Laroux had handed him. It was the same type he had used two weeks ago on a similar assignment. The mine didn't weigh much, and its buoyancy was such that Pierre would be able to easily handle it in the water. There was a timed fuse, and the mine was magnetic. He would stick it on the ship's hull about two meters below the waterline. He planned to set the fuse for an hour and be far away from the harbor when the *Umsicht* blew. Pierre tied a rope around the mine so it would be easier for him to tow out to the ship.

"You don't mind the rain?" Laroux asked.

Pierre almost laughed. The rain had long ago penetrated his clothing, soaking through to his skin. "I would be wet anyway. The rain will make me harder to see and harder to hear." Pierre noiselessly slid into the water with the mine, leaving Laroux behind as he disappeared into the dark, rainy night.

Pierre had lived near Calais his entire life, and he had grown up swimming in the ocean. One August, when he was twelve, he'd told his

younger sister he swam all the way to England and back. It had been a lie, but she had believed it and reported his story with pride to their father. His father hadn't reprimanded Pierre for dishonesty; he had simply told him he should never lie to flatter himself. Pierre had thought it strange at the time; his father hadn't told him to avoid lying, only to avoid lying for the wrong reason. Years later, he'd learned his father had been a spy during the Great War of 1914–1918. Espionage and sabotage were in Pierre's blood.

His muscles cooperated easily, remembering the motions of how best to swim in open water. Pierre knew he would be a little sore the next day, but that wouldn't matter. Sore muscles were a small price to pay for the opportunity to anger the occupying army. The storm made the water choppy, and for every five feet forward, he felt he was pushed two feet off course. He slung the rope holding the mine over his left shoulder and under his right arm. Working with the mine was dangerous, he knew. If the explosives were agitated too much or if the quality of the workmanship was substandard, the mine would go off even without a fuse. The limpet mine was not large, but a premature detonation would put a quick end to Pierre's sabotage work.

He reached the *Umsicht* after about twenty minutes of swimming. He knew there had to be at least one sailor standing watch, but he could see no one. He was also confident no one could see him. He set the fuse and attached the mine to the hull in about two minutes, just as he had planned. Twenty-five minutes after that, he was pulling himself out of the water and accepting a blanket from Laroux.

"Will I see the ship explode?" Laroux asked.

Pierre was still breathing hard from the cold, the exertion, and the thrill of accomplishing something dangerous. "The explosion will take place underwater. You won't be able to see it—not at night, not in this weather." Pierre studied Laroux carefully and decided that perhaps he could, after all, stay to watch the *Umsicht* sink. Laroux would want to have an eyewitness account to give his comrades. Knowing what their efforts had helped accomplish would be their only reward. "There is an empty room in the top corner of this warehouse. If you have binoculars, we should be able to detect panic on the ship's deck. If we're lucky, some of the ship's cargo will ignite and we'll have ourselves a little fireworks display."

Laroux nodded, looking pleased, and handed Pierre a thermos of lukewarm liquid—it wasn't really coffee, but it was the closest thing a French civilian could get in wartime France—and the men entered the warehouse through a window to wait for the mine's detonation.

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Peter was thoroughly worn out and dizzy when the starboard side of Ducey's fifty-foot-long ship came into view. Peter guided the dinghy to the side of the ship and tried to reach up to the railings, but it was difficult in the choppy seas. The slickness caused by the rain and the waves did little to help. He tried once more, failed, and decided to ask for help.

"Hey, Ducey! I could use a hand." Seconds later, a hand reached over and gripped his right hand, and then a second hand came down and grabbed his wounded left arm. Peter grunted in pain and tried to jerk away, but the grip was too strong. Despite Peter's movement, the hands continued pulling him up onto the deck, and the process sent horrible undulations of pain through his body.

"Wrong arm. Let go, or I won't be able to do anything with it for—" Peter didn't have time to finish before he'd been set down face-to-face with a very large, brutal-looking man. He had stubble on his cleft chin, and on his faded green-gray feldwebel's uniform was the emblem of the swastika. He was a beast. He didn't let go of Peter's arm; he pulled him over the railings and squeezed even harder. Peter gritted his teeth to keep from crying out in anguish, and his silence took every ounce of self-control he possessed. *Where is Ducey?* Peter thought as he stared up at the Nazi soldier.

After what seemed like a very long time, the feldwebel loosened his grip slightly as he spoke to someone out of Peter's sight and turned, bringing Peter around with him. There was another German soldier there, a teenager, by Peter's estimation. Peter caught the younger man's name, Himmelstoss, but didn't understand the German instructions. Peter's eyes didn't linger on the second soldier, however, because sprawled on the deck was Captain Ducey. Peter couldn't see his face, but he knew Ducey was dead. His neck was bent at an odd angle, one Peter had never before seen that portion of the human body take on. *The work of German nightmare number one*, Peter assumed. He looked back at the second soldier, who looked slightly ill. Peter concluded that the second man was either seasick or he didn't like the sight of Ducey's neck. Peter didn't blame him; Ducey's neck hurt him more intensely than his arm did.

The large German drew out his Mauser, stepped back, pointed it at Peter, and threatened him in German. He wiped Peter's blood from his hand onto his pants. The younger soldier frisked Peter and discovered only the book and an empty knife sheath, which he handed to his superior.

Himmelstoss then proceeded to tie Peter up, tying his hands together at the wrists then his upper arms to his chest. Peter thought that perhaps the young German soldier was not a vindictive person because he avoided putting a rope across the bullet hole in Peter's arm. Next he directed Peter to a chair, tied his legs at the knees and ankles, and tied his torso to the chair. Peter didn't struggle. He had no doubt he would be shot if he resisted. The look in the feldwebel's eyes hinted that at even the slightest provocation, he would execute his prisoner and feel no remorse.

Peter watched Himmelstoss check his work, which was quite secure. Then Himmelstoss stepped away from Peter and away from Ducey's body, drawing out his own handgun as he did so. He didn't point it at anyone. He just held it and looked pale and worried. Peter noticed the worried expression, and it confused him. He felt well cornered; surely his captors had nothing to worry about.

The older soldier spoke. "You and your friend have caused us a great deal of trouble." He spoke nearly perfect British English. "A pair of English spies. I hate spies, and I hate the English."

Peter thought about telling him that his few English ancestors from his father's side of the family had all left England before the rise of Napoleon but decided instead not to talk at all. He had said only a few things in English and thought perhaps he could still convince his captors he was French. British and American commandos were generally executed when captured. French Resistance men were usually treated the same but were expected to have less information worth teasing out during the predeath interrogation. Peter didn't consider himself a coward, but he still didn't want to be tortured.

Peter was grateful for his decision to remain silent as the feldwebel continued his rant. "The only thing worse than an Englishman is an American. I prefer to kill Americans on the spot. They ought to mind their own business and stay out of Europe." Peter believed the threat and held his tongue rather than point out that Germany had been the one to declare war on the United States. The man bent himself at the waist and brought his face down so it was level with Peter's. "What is this book, and who are you? You will tell me these things, or I will break every bone in your body."

Peter hoped he wasn't serious.

"Say something!" the Nazi yelled.

Peter took too long thinking through what he should say and which language he should use, so his interrogator kicked his chair over. Peter fell

on his bad arm, and pulses of pain shot up and down the left side of his body. Milliseconds later his head hit the deck with a crack, causing bright lights to swirl across his eyes. Peter shook his head to clear the lights away, but he couldn't move much. Then the waves picked back up, causing the ship to rock up and down. Peter's head spun, and his stomach lurched. He wished he were anywhere but on the ship.

"Answer me," the huge German demanded.

"What do you want me to say?" Peter asked in French.

The man's face grew red as Peter's French words reached his ears. Peter momentarily worried he would be shot out of frustration. He didn't get shot, but he did get kicked, hard, in the chest. It knocked the wind out of Peter. While he struggled to fill his lungs with air again, the two soldiers had a small conference in rapid German; then the younger one took over the questioning.

The large German picked up the chair, with Peter still tied to it, and slammed it down onto the deck so it was once again sitting on all four legs. Himmelstoss spoke awkward and slow French. He repeated the questions about the book, which was now in his possession, and the questions about Peter and his intentions. Himmelstoss wasn't as bold in manner or in voice as the feldwebel, and Peter felt his situation grow ever so slightly less desperate.

He decided that if he didn't talk, their tempers would take over. "I am a member of the French Resistance. The English sailor and I have come to France to find out if there are sufficient troops at that compound to warrant an air raid." Peter spoke in French, so only the younger, less-intimidating soldier could directly communicate with him.

There was again a conference in rapid German.

"Why did you take book?" Himmelstoss asked in broken French.

"It looked like something good to read on the way back to England."

Himmelstoss translated Peter's answer to his superior, who was still standing behind the chair. The feldwebel didn't seem to like Peter's story. He slapped the back of Peter's head, grabbed his hair, and pulled his head back to face him. He muttered something in German that Peter didn't understand, but he assumed it was another threat to his life.

"Tell your name," Himmelstoss ordered in French.

"Captain Jean Valjean." Peter gave himself a promotion and blurted out the first French name that came to his mind. He waited for the translation and hoped that neither of his captors was a big fan of French literature. Then he asked a question of his own. "Why did you kill my associate?"

The young soldier was surprised at the question but was not experienced enough to recognize that he was letting his role as interrogator slip. "Your friend attack Feldwebel Keller. He hid, we came to ship, then he jumped on Keller; they fought. The feldwebel won." Himmelstoss turned to look at Ducey's body, and some of the color faded from his face.

"When did you get here?"

"Before you, ten minutes. We were on patrol and hear alarms, hear of spy. We got boat with motor and found your ship."

Peter inwardly cursed his slow rowing. *If I had arrived earlier, could I have prevented Ducey's death?* Rather subdued, Peter asked his last question. "What will you do with me?"

"We were to capture you, question you, bring you back to headquarters." Himmelstoss paused. "We were ordered to capture everyone, but Feldwebel Keller say one person enough to interrogate. He also say prisoner only needs to be half alive."

Keller broke in then. Peter wasn't surprised. Himmelstoss, at Peter's urging, was talking too much and not translating anymore. The younger officer nodded at Keller's instructions and was about to speak but paused, looking startled. A second later, Peter figured out why. The strong hands that had yanked Peter from his dinghy to the deck were now wrapped loosely around his neck. Peter thought about Ducey's mangled body and wondered if the enormous soldier standing behind him would obey his orders to bring back a live captive. The phrase *our prisoner only needs to be half alive* made Peter shutter. He wondered if Keller's taste for killing prisoners despite orders was the reason behind Himmelstoss's look of concern.

Himmelstoss spoke. "You will tell me why you took book, or Feldwebel Keller hurt you badly."

Peter thought desperately of something believable to tell him. "It is a list of compromised British officers and enlisted men who are giving information to the Germans." Peter sensed that Himmelstoss believed him. He also guessed that Keller found the lie plausible because he moved his hands from Peter's neck to his shoulders. His grip, however, tightened. He spoke to Himmelstoss, who then resumed translating.

"Now tell about your friend. Then we go ashore, and you talk with base commander."

"He's an English sailor. His job was simply to be the transportation." That was true enough. The young soldier translated, paused, and ran out of things to ask. Peter felt his time was running out; he knew his chances

of escape were slim on the ship but even smaller on land. The prospect of talking with the base commander that he'd just stolen the book from didn't sound pleasant. The thought of spending the rest of the war rotting in a POW camp—or being executed—sounded even worse. Himmelstoss and Keller spoke to each other in German, and then Peter was cut free from the chair. The large feldwebel once again grabbed Peter's sore arm and pulled him to his feet. Then the German soldiers dragged Peter to the bow of the ship.

Tied to the front port side of the ship was a second dinghy, this one with an overboard motor. Keller released Peter as a gigantic wave and a powerful gust of wind hit the ship. With his legs and arms tied and not a single dry patch on the deck, Peter quickly lost his footing and fell. Fortunately, the fall bruised his pride more than his body.

Keller yanked Peter to his feet and yelled at Himmelstoss. The young soldier cut the ropes and retied them around only Peter's hands, leaving his legs free and cursing in German all the while. Keller shoved his prisoner to a sitting position against the wheelhouse cabin and threatened him with his Mauser. Then he left him in the younger soldier's charge and disappeared from view into the dingy. Another wave crashed onto the deck. Because Peter was sitting, he didn't fall this time, but the effect was worse on the dinghy, and the feldwebel did fall. Himmelstoss stepped away from Peter to investigate.

When Himmelstoss retied Peter he hadn't tied him very tightly. *Perhaps the boy's seasickness is catching up with him; he didn't cut off my circulation this time*, Peter thought. Himmelstoss had tied Peter's forearms together a little above the wrist. When he put his hands between his legs, Peter could pull the rope down to the narrow part of his wrists and, with a little help from his teeth, free his hands.

Peter kept his hands together as the young soldier turned around. "You jump down to our boat; no tricks, or the feldwebel will shoot."

Keller, however, was not in Peter's line of sight and would have to come back on board to be a real threat. Himmelstoss came toward Peter with his pistol in one hand and bent down to help him to his feet. He grabbed Peter's right arm to help him up. A swift, sweeping kick with Peter's right leg was all it took to knock the German soldier to the deck. A second later, Peter lunged on top of him and reached for his weapon. He wrestled the pistol away from him, rolled to the railing where Keller was waiting in his boat, and took aim. It was too dark for Peter to see where his shots hit, but he saw Keller fall.

Despite his exhaustion, adrenaline and the knowledge that he had a second chance of escaping kept Peter going. He turned to Himmelstoss, who was standing back up, his back to Peter, his hands raised slightly. Peter had every intention of killing him. He took aim, but then he paused. Peter started again—the pistol was ready to shoot, and his finger was tense on the trigger. But he stopped. Instead of shooting, he lowered the weapon and approached the cautious figure now turning toward him.

“Don’t move,” Peter said in French. With his attention still focused on Himmelstoss, Peter untied the German dingy from Ducey’s boat and let the rope fall into the ocean. “Now, turn around and walk to the back of the boat.” He kept his distance as he followed Himmelstoss, but the young German soldier didn’t try to resist. Peter patted him down and made sure he had no remaining weapons. He did have a few spare bullets, which Peter took, and he also reclaimed the book. “You may step into the boat and leave. You will tell your superiors the feldwebel is dead, I am dead, and my ship is sunk.”

Peter didn’t know if Himmelstoss would obey the orders. Certainly the story would work to both their advantage. Peter wanted any search for him to end, and it was common knowledge that German soldiers who made mistakes usually received a quick transfer to the Eastern Front, where the German mortality rate was significantly higher than it was in occupied France.

Himmelstoss got in Peter’s dingy, started rowing, and didn’t look back. When he was out of sight, Peter went into the wheelhouse, found a match, and burned the book. There were other copies in intelligence headquarters; Peter knew the extra book in his possession was only a liability.

Mission accomplished, Peter thought. The code book was out of enemy hands and would remain that way. Now he just had to navigate the ship back to safety. Peter wasn’t a sailor, but the ship was small, and Ducey had explained most of the controls to him on their voyage to France. Ducey had been teaching men how to sail for several decades, and Peter had been an avid student. *But he won’t be teaching anymore*, Peter thought sadly.

Death was not new to him, and he had long ago learned how to push grief and sorrow aside in order to accomplish what he had to do next. It usually worked, at least until his memories returned as nightmares. As the ship moved away from France and back toward England, Peter had plenty of other thoughts to keep him busy. The sea was rough and getting worse by the minute, but Peter would have been willing to go through a

hurricane to put some distance between him and Nazi-occupied France. The wind howled, his arm ached, and his exhaustion returned.

Peter was steering away from a ship to the west when a bullet whizzed past his head and flew into the glass window covering the front of the wheelhouse. The glass shattered, and seawater and rain splashed into the cabin. Wondering who could possibly be shooting at him, Peter dropped to the deck and drew his pistol. He was out in the open, so he rolled to the edge of the cabin, knocked over a thick steel table supporting a pile of navigational charts, and hid behind it just as another shot whizzed past his ear.

Peter still couldn't see his assailant. He slowly let out his breath, gathered his courage, and peered out from behind the table. He nearly took a bullet to the brain, but he finally saw who it was. Feldwebel Keller was standing just inside the doorway. He had two red splotches on his uniform, one on his upper arm and one on his shoulder. Peter's shots had not been as accurate as he'd first thought. *He must have climbed from the dingy back into the ship while I was getting rid of Himmelstoss and starting the engine.* Peter knew such an effort must have worn the feldwebel out, but he had never doubted that his opponent was tough, determined, and resilient. Peter noted the look of triumph on Keller's face now that the Nazi soldier again had the upper hand. He raised his gun and aimed for Peter just as a wave crashed onto the deck and water swirled around his ankles. His shot hit the table. "Come, little spy," he said in English. "It's time for you to die."

Peter ignored the remarks and the seawater soaking through his clothing. He checked the weapon in his hand and found it had only three bullets left. Quickly he loaded the two extra rounds he had taken from Himmelstoss and readied the pistol. Another bullet hit the table. Peter wondered how much ammunition Keller had. *More than you do,* Peter silently answered himself.

Peter peered over the table. Keller got a shot off that barely missed, and Peter fired off a round in return. Peter heard a grunt of pain from the German. *Not a fatal shot, but it was closer than his,* Peter thought with a bit of relief.

He took a deep breath and looked out from behind the table again. Once again, both men shot, and this time both hit their respective targets. Peter had hit the man's ribs. Keller's shot grazed Peter's temple, nicking his head and causing rapid bleeding but not injuring him seriously. Another shot hit the table, making Peter's nerves jump. Peter ventured another shot and hit his opponent's leg. Keller fell to the ground, and his next shot went wild.

Peter seized the opportunity and aimed at the Nazi once again. Keller was sitting with his body propped against the cabin door, too injured to support himself. Peter tried for Keller's head and missed. The storm heaved the deck up and down, making accurate shots difficult. Peter was starting to feel considerably light-headed as rain thinned the blood that ran into his face and blocked his vision. He had only one round left. Peter wiped the blood, rain, and sweat from his eyes and forehead and gambled a quick look. The feldwebel was on the ground but sitting up. Keller took a shot, but it missed high. Peter's vision was starting to blur again, this time because of blood loss; he knew he had to hurry. He aimed squarely at Keller's chest, right at his heart.

Peter's shot hit its mark. The German feldwebel fell to the deck and lay motionless. Peter hadn't realized he was breathing hard, but now he gasped for air. He rested with his back against the desk for a moment, breathing deeply, then decided to make sure his opponent was truly dead this time. He tried to stand up, but he was too weak. Instead, he crawled toward his enemy; Keller really was dead. Out of curiosity, Peter checked the status of the man's arsenal. His pistol had only two bullets left, but his pocket was full of extra rounds.

Peter crawled up to the wheel and checked the compass. He was heading nearly due north. Just as he breathed out a sigh of relief, the engine shuddered. Peter nearly cursed when he saw the fuel gauge. The tank was empty. He tried to check the other gauges, but he couldn't see them. He wiped the blood from his eyes but still couldn't see. He was losing consciousness and losing it fast. He ripped another strip of fabric from his shirt and pressed it to his head, but even that took extraordinary effort. He shook his head to try to clear it but only received a fresh wave of dizziness and pain. Everything was turning gray, and his peripheral vision blurred and then was gone. He could no longer see anything, could only feel intense pain and exhaustion. A few seconds later, he collapsed on the deck, and his consciousness faded completely.

* * *

Pierre was not his real name, just one alias of many. The man was certainly not a Communist—rather, he fully expected a war with the Communists as soon as the Fascists were defeated, a war in which he would be an active participant. His real name was Jacques Olivier, and he returned to his farmhouse east of Calais at about 0300 hours. He took off the glasses he

had worn to the rendezvous with Laroux and removed the waterproof putty material he had on the end of his nose. Both were simply part of a disguise that would prevent Laroux from recognizing him unless Jacques wanted to be recognized. It was one of his more frequently used disguises, though Jacques had dozens of others he could just as easily employ when the need arose.

The house was dark, as it was supposed to be. He carefully checked the barn, the cheese cellar, and the bottom floor of the home before going upstairs to his bedroom. A light still glowed in his sister's room across the hall from his own. He slowly turned the doorknob and opened the door.

His sister, Genevieve, was asleep, lying on top of her blanket. An oil lantern burned on her bedside table. Beside the lamp was an old Enfield MK1 revolver. She normally kept it hidden under the false bottom in the table's single drawer, but something must have made her keep it out tonight. The revolver had been a gift from an RAF pilot several years ago. His Spitfire fighter had crashed not far from Calais, and he had been unable to use the revolver himself; he had broken his arm during the crash. The pilot had meant the gift as a show of chivalry and gratitude after the Olivier siblings hid him from the Nazis. He had a daughter—only a few years younger than Genevieve—and he wanted the young French girl in the war zone to be able to defend herself.

There was a need for the weapon, perhaps even more now than there had been at the time. Genevieve was nineteen. She still looked younger than her age, but in the last six months, she had begun to look less like a girl and more like a woman. Her skin had cleared of freckles and other imperfections, she'd developed a few small curves, her hair had darkened, and her cheeks had colored a little. The Olivier farmhouse was at times a safe house for Allied airmen or SOE commandos. Jacques noticed how the men followed her with their eyes. They no longer offered her weapons; now they offered her chocolates or wildflowers. Jacques had taken a few of them aside to make sure they understood she was off limits. He was a small man—five feet, seven inches high, and rather skinny. Still, he could be intimidating. The commandos usually understood his message quickly.

More disturbing to Jacques was the way the German soldiers watched her. *Heaven help the man who tries anything*, Jacques thought. Concern for his sister in their very dangerous world often kept him up at night. He was glad she had a revolver but wondered if it would be enough. *And what will happen when she returns interest?* Jacques didn't want to think about that.

Sighing, he adjusted the wick in the lantern on Genevieve's table until the flame disappeared.

"Jacques?"

"Yes, sorry I woke you."

"Did you sink it?" she asked sleepily.

"Of course." The memory of the ship blasting into an inferno flashed through his mind. The secondary explosions had thrown out enough light that Jacques had seen them through the rain, even without binoculars.

"You should have let me come. I could have helped."

Jacques knew that was true. She had assisted him in the past with his sabotage projects, and she would have been useful as a lookout at the harbor.

"I was working with someone new. I don't trust him yet." Jacques admired Laroux's skill—and appreciated his access to explosives. He doubted Laroux had any Nazi sympathies, but as they'd sat in the warehouse, Jacques had noticed that Laroux had seemed prone to bragging. One word to the wrong person . . . and he might as well be a Nazi agent. In addition, Laroux considered himself a Casanova and was rumored to visit the local brothels quite regularly. Jacques had no desire to introduce someone like that to his sister.

"You don't trust anybody," Genevieve said.

"You're exaggerating."

"Only a bit."

"Good night, little sister." Genevieve was accurate in her accusation; Jacques trusted very few people. The pattern of their conversation was familiar. Genevieve always offered to help, sometimes insisted on it. Jacques usually found a way to exclude her—not because she lacked the ability but because he was worried about her safety. Jacques sighed again and left her room, glad his sister was too sleepy to argue.

* * *

A few hours later, Peter awoke to the sound of a ship's horn. His head ached and so did his arm. He slowly rolled over and pulled himself to his feet, unsteadily stepping through the door of the wheelhouse. It was still mostly dark outside—the eastern sky was light, but the sun had not yet risen above the horizon. Peter could tell that the sound's source was a vessel larger than the one he was on and that it was heading toward him, but he couldn't make anything else out. He bent over the dead German, took his Mauser, and reloaded it. His head swam as he shuffled onto the

aft deck and knelt down out of obvious view. Peter might have compared the feeling to a horrible hangover, multiplied by influenza, but he had never been drunk so he couldn't be sure.

This is ridiculous, he thought. *An injured, half-conscious agent armed with a single dinky handgun against an entire ship and her crew.* Peter tucked the pistol into his belt and weighed his options of surrendering or swimming the English Channel. The ship was closing in, and he knew it would overtake him soon. He thought seriously about jumping overboard but knew he wasn't accomplished enough as a swimmer to make it to the shore beyond the horizon, especially in his current state. And so he waited and worried. As his anxiety rose, he suddenly saw the most beautiful sight he had ever seen—his country's flag. *By the dawn's early light*, he thought. *Is this how Francis Scott Key felt when he stared across Baltimore Harbor?*

Peter waved his right arm as energetically as he could. As the ship cruised closer, he realized it wasn't a large ship, just a patrol craft, but size didn't matter to him. He went into the wheelhouse to hold Ducey's ship steady as the patrol craft pulled beside it. A smiling, redheaded captain jumped onto the deck, followed by a few other navy men.

"Are you Private Eddy?" the captain asked, looking at the dead bodies on the deck and at the blood Peter knew was smeared on his face and clothes.

"That's me, sir." Peter gave a sloppy salute and broke into a grin. "Boy, am I glad to see you guys."

"We've been keeping our eyes out for you the last few hours. My name is Captain Flanney." He extended his hand, and Peter gave him a weak handshake. "I was going to debrief you, but I think you'd better see our corpsman instead. I do need to ask you one question first: was the item you went after destroyed?"

Peter nodded but instantly realized his mistake. Dizziness flooded his head, and gray patches clouded the edges of his vision again. He reached up to hold his head, and the captain put out a hand to help steady him. But Captain Flanney had grabbed Peter's left arm, and the resulting flash of pain was enough to send Peter back into oblivion.