Chapter 1

Lieutenant Duncan Gregor tried to push himself up off the ground amid concussive explosions, and realized he was he was pressing against a body that had been coarsely ripped in two through the waist. He had been raised on a farm and was no stranger to the slaughter of animals. But he recoiled and heaved with nausea when he realized his hands were on the warm, clammy skin of a leg, its color fading as blood pulsed steadily from the jagged stump and a savagely shattered thigh bone. If he had eaten more in the past few days, he might have thrown up.

He gathered himself to stand again, before growing dizzy and dropping to one knee. The first thing he noticed was the grit of briny sand in his mouth. He spit, but was too dehydrated to fully expel the feel or the taste.

Duncan and two other soldiers, all separated from their units, arrived at the beach town in northern France after endless days of retreat, eating only what they could forage along the way while German planes and artillery constantly harassed them. When they plodded into town, it had been nearly impossible to find somewhere to stay. They were repeatedly turned away from houses either already filled or unwilling to accept any tired and bedraggled visitors.

Finally a woman answered the door of a modest house, and Duncan could see their rough condition reflected in the restrained shock on her face. But she invited them in, introduced herself as Madame Mesonge, and invited them to sit at a heavy wooden table where she set some simple, hearty bread. When she turned back to the pantry to grab something one of the soldiers unceremoniously tore a chunk off of the loaf and began to devour it. Duncan translated when she chastised him gently but directly. “Young man, I’ll do my best to feed you, but you will not eat like that in my home. Please wash your hands, then sit down and wait until dinner is served.” Thus scolded, they all sheepishly complied.

He blinked hard, unable to rub the coarse grains out of his eyes because of his soiled hands, which looked like crudely made deserts coated in rough sugar. He turned them over repeatedly as if he lost his watch, looking for a relatively clean spot he could use. He eventually wiped the back of his wrist on his pants enough to create a bare space, which he used to coax the grains out of his eyes, though his light complexion and dark blonde hair remained spotted with residue from the beach.

Duncan was alive, he knew, because even after he landed nearly fifteen yards from where the explosion so scornfully threw him, the sheer chaos of the last few weeks came to him and brought his thoughts back into focus. For days, low-flying German planes paralleled the shoreline, the caustic screaming of their dives followed by the jackhammer cracks of machine gun fire as they strafed the clusters of troops on the ground. Artillery shells ka-rumped into the densely-populated beach, throwing up geysers of sand soiled with the blood and pieces of men and animals. The noxious smell of cordite and burning fuel permeated the air like the malicious assurance of a gruesome death.

Madame Mesonge carried her tall frame with a severe dignity, her head perpetually upright but not arrogant, her steps measured and unhurried. Her amber hair was streaked with gray and perfectly shaped into a neat bun. At first Duncan assumed she was in her early fifties, but during their brief conversations, he realized she was likely ten years younger. He wondered what happened to age her so prematurely.

During their brief stay at her house, Madame Mesonge insisted they take all their meals at the table, which she would carefully arrange with all the plateware, utensils, and protocol of a formal meal. The delicate china and careful practice of etiquette were incongruous with the explosions reverberating through the thin walls and the violent end each one seemed to portend.

She doted on all of them but especially Duncan, giving him slightly larger portions of food and engaging with him more frequently. He noticed a framed sepia photo on a small side table of a handsome young man in his twenties wearing a uniform. The soldier had a stern appearance, with the same carved jawline and dark, intense eyes as Madam Mesonge, though with a more prominent nose and slightly dimpled chin that must have come from his father. His close-cropped sandy hair matched Duncan, who began to suspect he was serving as a proxy. The image seemed too small to fill the frame, as if he was trying to stay in the background of the coming calamities.

When Duncan finally stood he quickly checked himself for injuries, sliding his hands over his arms, legs, chest, and back as the sergeants had trained him. He looked for blood, rips in his pungent uniform that had long-since grown threadbare, or movements that felt strange in the body he had otherwise occupied without problems for the past twenty-two years.

Finding himself intact, he looked for his rifle and saw it—or at least one like it—laying a few feet away, partially lodged in the ground. His instinct, drilled into him for years, was to immediately grab it, brush it off, blow into the action to get any grit out, and make sure it was in good firing order.

But he hesitated, and suddenly his hands dropped and every movement felt labored. Then with a guilt coming from a depth he did not understand, he turned away from it and began to walk back to a line of men reforming after the explosion that scattered all of them and certainly killed more than a few.

Eventually a runner arrived at her home with a message that more ships were coming, and for them to move to the beach. Duncan and the others began packing up their gear, which Madame Mesonge scrubbed as clean as she could. He was sitting on a stiff-backed wooden chair arranging his pack when he saw her approaching. He stood.

Her long delicate hands, their pale blue veins showing through translucent skin, were steady and dignified as she handed him a small, white ceramic bowl. It was from the same set they used during their meager meals, with a simple blue line ringing the base and the rim. He noticed the word “Longwy” in a delicate blue stamp on the bottom when he helped clean up after meals. Now her careful movements carried the air of a sacrament in which she was entrusting him with a priceless amulet. Only the irregular sound of explosions intruded on the intimacy of the ritual.

Duncan took his first sinking steps along the beach that was pockmarked with shell craters filled with a mixture of blood and water and the foul detritus of war. As he adjusted the shoulder straps of his pack he could tell immediately something was wrong. He used the same equipment since he joined the Army two years earlier, and as with soldiers since Biblical times, it was almost part of his physical person. He could detect the slightest variation in anything but weight, steadily diminished as he consumed whatever ammo and food he had left, as easily as if he put his boots on the wrong foot.

He paused and removed the pack, swinging it around to the front and, out of habit, looking for a dry patch of ground to lay it on. It was only when he saw its condition that he realized the how ridiculous this minor effort had been.

Out of earshot of the others, she said, “This was a gift from my husband’s parents when we got married before the war,” she said solemnly. “Gérard was an officer, like you. He was killed in Belgium near the end of the last war. His body was never recovered.”

She turned towards the picture frame. “My son Philippe was born here, in this house, while his father was at the front. I used to feed him from this bowl. They never got to meet, but he followed Gérard’s footsteps and a few years ago became an officer himself.” Duncan heard the slightest crack in her voice. She looked down briefly while she gathered herself and cleared her throat, then she raised her chin and spoke directly to him.

Whatever hit him from behind had shredded the pack. The straps themselves were the only part still intact, while the rest bore the fearful evidence of the shrapnel that had torn through it. Like a loyal friend who had sacrificed himself to save Duncan’s life, it had borne the brunt of the explosion. Never exceedingly heavy, it had nevertheless been like a second skin since he was issued it, and he looked in disbelief that it was now completely useless.

The force of the impact destroyed everything in it, and the items had either been ejected by the force of the explosion, or now clung desperately to the flaccid shreds of canvas still attached to the warped metal frame. His canteen, empty since the day before when he drained the last few drops of some rancid wine, dangled by jagged pieces of metal clinging desperately to the khaki cotton pouch that once secured it. Even the blade of his steel shovel was dented. Duncan took off his helmet, the one thing specifically designed to keep him safe. He saw without emotion it alone bore no marks.

“You all are leaving, and the Germans will be here soon. They already took my husband, and…” another pause, “…they may well have taken my son. I can only assume they will take my home, and it may not be long before they take my country.” Her fierce cobalt eyes narrowed in defiance as she placed the bowl in his hands. “But they will not take everything.”

She turned away without another word, and Duncan saw her reach up and wipe something off her cheek. He carefully laid the bowl in his haversack, nesting it with care between his last undershirt and a pair of filthy socks. She then brought the three of them what food she could spare for the trip, and Duncan wondered if she believed by taking care of them, she would be ensuring her son would somehow be watched over. He knew the more likely outcome was impossible to wish away.

He shook the shoulder straps in an attempt to rid the sack of the residue of the last bit of food he had saved for when he was safely onboard a ship. He now regretted waiting to eat the paper-wrapped sandwich she had given him. But as the scraps and crumbs fell out he saw, with a surprising pang of sorrow, a fragment of white ceramic with traces of blue trim tumble out and plonk into the moist sand.

Its inside still showed a light sheen of whatever it held, and sand stuck to the curved, varnished surface. Suddenly it felt like ratchet straps were tightening around his chest and he had trouble breathing and he knew how hopeless the whole damned thing was.

Out of habit but realizing the absurdity of it, he swung the remnants of the webbing onto his back and trudged with heavy, fatigue-addled steps to the queue reforming to board a ship. As he got closer to the water’s edge, he realized the line kept going out into the sea along some kind of long, makeshift dock, the infinite column of troops disappearing into the horizon as they fled.