

JAKE REYNOLDS MYSTERIES BOOK 1

DEATH OF A YOUNG LIEUTENANT

A biplane with a green and white paint scheme and red struts is flying horizontally across the middle of the frame. It has a roundel insignia on its side and the number '2345' on the tail. In the background, to the left, another smaller biplane is visible in flight. The sky is filled with dramatic, colorful clouds in shades of pink, orange, and blue.

B.R. STATEHAM

A biplane is shown in the process of crashing into the ground in the bottom right corner. A large, dark plume of smoke and fire rises from the point of impact. The plane's wings and tail are visible as it descends. The background shows a hilly landscape with green fields and some buildings under a cloudy sky.

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BOOK ONE

B.R. STATEHAM

CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Next in the Series](#)

[About the Author](#)

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PROLOGUE

“**Y**es, I knew Wilbur Wright,” the white-haired, blue-eyed old man said as he reached for a beer and then sat back in his chair, pushing back the dark cowboy hat draped across his head in the process, “and Orville, for that matter. In fact it was Wilbur who taught me how to fly. I was the only American he taught while he was traveling through Europe. Let me see, it was... uh... in 1908 I think. Yep...1908.”

We sat on the east side of his beautiful ranch home protected from the murderous glare of a Kansas sun in the deep shade of the wide veranda. An ice cooler filled with freshly chilled beer sat at our feet. He sat in the canvas of a folding wooden chair with a cold brew in one hand and a smile on his handsome, weather-creased face.

I knew he was somewhere around eighty or more.

But to look at him and to listen to his stories it was impossible to believe he was much past fifty. The man's hair was absolutely white. His eyes were a mesmerizing gunmetal color that seemed to change from gray to blue depending on how the light reflected on them. There was a fire in those eyes. A fire of deep intelligence and singularity of purpose which became quickly apparent the first moment you laid eyes on him. He was tanned to a chestnut brown and fit and vibrantly alive.

“Now if you ask me if I *liked* the uppity son of a bitch, I’d have to say, ‘Hell no!’ He was a priggish little son of a straight-laced minister who never drank, never smoked, and never uttered a profane word in his life. He believed

cleanliness was next to godliness, and he damn well expected the rest of us to be as godly as possible.”

I was captivated by this man’s hubris the moment he walked into a room. There was something about his personality that made you both instantly relax and trust him all at the same time. The more I talked to him, the more I found myself admiring this unique character. I have often thought how it was a stroke of divine providence which brought the two of us together in such a spurious fashion.

“But let me tell you, Wilbur and Orville were probably the two most hated men in all of France back in 1908. You could not believe the vilification these two bicycle mechanics aroused! My god, thinking about the passion the Wrights inflamed in the hearts of the French seems hilarious today. But fifty years ago, it could almost get a man killed.”

I grinned and shook my head. The old man was unbelievably amazing.

It is even more amazing to realize this man was at one time the world's greatest art thief. Not just an art thief of pedestrian qualities and arcane abilities. But a world class thief of unparalleled panache.

Yes.

I know.

Hard to believe.

I know skepticism fills anyone reading this claim. But I have listened to this man's stories and I have seen this man's evidence. Frankly there is no room to doubt his veracity. Jake Reynolds was, and might still be, the world's greatest art thief.

What evidence persuaded me to this conviction?

I have seen his collection of the world's greatest masterpieces. I have seen the originals. Yes, I said it—the originals. Hanging in some of the most prestigious art museums in the world are his copies of the originals. Copies so precise in detail and composition no one in the first fifty years of the Twentieth Century has suspected otherwise.

They still hang today in those same galleries. Museum curators are absolutely convinced they are the originals. Thousands of people file through the

corridors of these illustrious museums to admire these glorious creations. They see but they do not observe. They are thrilled at the colorful visions before them. But none realize what they are admiring are the most cunningly created copies ever to be created by a master of forgery. The true originals hung for a number of years in his home hidden away in a secret vault under lock and key. No one knew about this deeply personal secret. It was a secret he had kept to himself for more than half a century. He told no one, until by a stroke of unanticipated fortune, he began talking to me on that one fine summer's afternoon after I had driven up from Wichita on an innocuous mission to interview him about his participation in World War One.

At one time I was a newspaper reporter. In 1964, as a cub reporter for *The Wichita Eagle*, a moderately sized morning newspaper for the largest city in Kansas, my editor wanted to find someone who had survived the first months of the First World War and interview him. It was going to be the fiftieth anniversary of this somewhat forgotten conflict and my editor wanted an up-close and personal interview with a survivor. He thought it would be a great lead-in piece for the paper's planned edition of that part of the Twentieth Century. I had no idea what I was getting into when someone suggested I should talk to an old horse rancher who lived a hundred miles north of Wichita on a ranch just outside of a town called Salina, Kansas. He called himself Jake Reynolds. The tipster told me the old man was a much-decorated war veteran and one hell of a storyteller. He was correct on all accounts. Jake Reynolds turned out to be the most intriguing individual I have ever met.

How did I know he was a thief? Why would I believe the tall tales this grand old man wove for me hour after hour as I interviewed him? What proof did he offer, other than the paintings, for his outrageous claims? True. He could have made copies of the originals and claimed them to be the originals. But he knew too much. He knew details and individuals intimately. Too intimately to be mere creations of his imagination.

Jake was like no other person I have ever met. Strong, lithe, with a quick wit and a dry sense of humor, he certainly did not act like the usual octogenarian. First of all he lived in a house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. It was a wide,

spacious sandstone, with natural hardwood paneling and brightly polished hard wood floors. I never found out how Jake met America's most famous architect. Or how this uniquely designed home did not eventually find itself placed on some national register. But that was the *modus operandi* of this old man. In that house and tucked behind a fireplace which, to a casual observer, seemed to be one entire living room wall, was a secret vault only a few people knew existed. In that room were many of the world's greatest paintings of antique and modern masters.

Not the fakes, mind you. Originals.

Monets, Raphaels, van Ecks, da Vincis, Picassos, Degas – names which reverberate throughout the art world were all represented. Hanging in columns of five or more paintings, one above the other, each framed in simple oak frames and lit by soft indirect lighting, were more than sixty of the world's most treasured originals. Originals housed in a private collection reserved for only the eyes of a single solitary person to admire. Art so wonderful and so rare they took my breath from me the first time I followed him into his treasure vault. Even now, thinking about it all these years after the old man's death, my pulse is beating rapidly, and I am finding it difficult to breathe.

Each original had a story. A story Jake was more than happy to relate. He consented to dictate into my tape recorder his entire life as an art thief. At eighty he perhaps knew he wasn't going to live much longer. I am sure he wanted to leave behind some record of his accomplishments when he began dictating his life's story. I agreed to remain silent until he died and his last two surviving relatives, two cherished nephews, passed away as well. With this agreement consummated by a firm handshake, this fine old man began relating to me the most unbelievable series of stories ever to be set down for posterity. To back up his otherwise preposterous sounding claims were the paintings—those beautiful, breathtaking paintings.

One painting, set in the corner of the room on a fine old Louis XIVth table particularly caught my attention. The painting was actually three large oak panels, the wood split with antiquity, with each panel showing some scene of the Madonna and Christ child. Although I was not an art historian, I did remember

my college days and the Art Appreciation classes I took. It seemed to me these wooden panels looked familiar. On that afternoon, as we sat in those comfortable deep leather chairs on that wide, spacious veranda drinking beer and talking about art, I made a casual remark about those wooden panels and how they reminded me of the painting style of Jan van Eck.

"Ah, you are quite right. It is one of Jan van Eck's earliest masterpieces. Hmmm, interesting. You came up to interview me about my war record. Well, would you like to hear the real story? The truth, as this old man saw and lived it? Yes? Very well. You've noticed this painting by van Eck. Would you believe that in the opening weeks of the Great War, when all of the Allied armies were being pummeled mercilessly by the Kaiser's armies, I lifted this piece from under the noses of an entire German army? Care to hear about it?"

I most assuredly did want to hear his story. I recorded the story on my trusty tape recorder and then patiently waited for almost thirty years to fulfill my promise to him. With the release of my promise I decided to publish this man's incredible story. It is an amazing story about an amazing man, living an amazing life in the first part of an amazing century.

A hot summer sun. Interminable heat.
Gray smoke, from raging fires of burning farmsteads, lifting into the air.

He grinned and ran an oil-stained hand through his curly hair. Standing up, straddling the heavy German motorcycle, he half turned and stared at the burning bridge and the wide canal it once spanned. A wide canal cutting through the flat Belgium countryside. A piece of serendipity if he ever saw one.

Perfect.

If he could get across himself.

Blipping the throttle of the cycle nervously he turned again and looked over his right shoulder. A mile away the ghost-like apparition of a company of German cavalry. A Hussars company wearing the incredibly large, furred hat called a *colback* and dressed in field gray with bright yellow braided loops around their right epaulets, caused him to say a few choice profanities under his breath. The Boche horses were sweating and covered in the light-colored Belgium soil. Signs they had been ridden hard.

The horsemen looked unshaven and equally unkept. He watched, standing and straddling the bike, as the whole company of Hussars materialized out of the darkness of the mass of trees like forest wraiths. A number of them began to look at the ground intently while others scanned the distances in each direction. One of the horsemen stood up in his stirrups and pointed toward his direction. As if moved by one hand the two hundred or so horsemen altered course and began

whipping their steeds even more in an effort to reach the captain before he escaped.

A grin spread across his thin lips again just as a lock of curly hair fell across his right eyebrow. A boyish, mischievous grin. A grin which made women want to cuddle and forgive him of his sins. A grin which made even hardened old soldiers—pessimists to the core—nod their heads and grin back. A grin which could make even a serial killer want to become a close bosom friend.

It had always been that way with Jake. That grin. A sudden impish smirk lighting up his face and melting even the coldest of hearts. Because of that grin he could make friends with anyone. Make'em good friends. Life-long friends. Friends that would do anything for him.

He blipped the cycle's engine a few more times as he turned to look at the burning bridge again. He was in the flat irrigated low country of Belgium. Barely five miles away from the French border. On either side of him was an expanse of rolling farmland burnt brown from the incredibly hot summer's sun. In front of him was the irrigation canal. Eyeing it, he thought it was maybe twenty feet wide which cut the country neatly in half for more than two miles in either direction. The water was deep and tepid. The perfect obstacle to stop advancing cavalry if one could figure out how to get over to the other side. Almost everywhere one looked, towering columns of black smoke from burning farms and destroyed villages twisted and billowed into the wind as they rose into the sky. They were grim testaments of the approaching Teutonic war machine as it continued to sweep through the Low Countries.

The opening three weeks of the war had not gone as planned for the Allies. At the start both the French and the British collected their armies and went strutting through the countryside singing patriotic songs and acting as if this war was going to be a summer's vacation and nothing more. With an unbelievable elan and incredible naivete the Allies gaily hurled themselves into the advancing iron fist of the Kaiser's field armies. The French in particular thought Gallic bravery, and thousands of eager infantrymen, would be more than enough to blunt the thrusting arms of the Boche armies.

They were wrong.

What they ran into was a masterful display of Germanic planning and use of new technology. Army units equipped with copious amounts of machine guns, and backed up by superb usage of artillery, shredded the woefully and inadequately equipped French. In a span of barely three weeks all the front-line units of the French armies suffered incredible losses. Wave after wave of French infantry went gallantly charging across Belgium fields only to be mowed down in droves. French army units, wearing the dark blue tunics and red trousers of an era from out of the era of Napoleon, showed the world how to die in mass numbers. They did nothing to slow the Teutonic determination to capture Paris before summer's end.

No commander knew in what direction their flanks might lie.

No one knew what lay in front of them. Nor behind them.

No one knew anything other than an overwhelming urge to get back to France and regroup. This pandemic uncertainty was the reason why he was here, hurriedly surveying the countryside and the burning bridge itself, astride the back of a stolen German Army Signal Corp's motorcycle and wondering whimsically what a Boche prisoner of war camp might be like. His squadron, one of the first to be organized in the newly created Royal Flying Corps, was three miles away on the other side of the canal. His commanding officer asked him to go out on a one-man reconnaissance party. Since there was no contact whatsoever with army headquarters, the squadron was hanging in limbo and dangling by a thin thread over a cauldron of German fury ready to be severed by a Boche's bayonet.

Only one serviceable aeroplane was left. One out of the fifteen assorted machines the squadron had started out with only three weeks earlier. This last machine, in the colonel's opinion, was far too valuable to send up to look for the enemy. He wanted to send it back to France. To a place where it would be safe. But where? Before he could do anything to save men or material, he first had to know how close the enemy might be. He had to know from what direction or directions they were coming.

So he, Jake Reynolds, agreed to go out and find the Germans. And here he was. In the middle of open country with a company of angry German Hussars

riding furiously toward him determined to capture him and send him back to a POW camp. Grinning, he decided he had better things to do than eat cabbage and potatoes behind a barbed wire fence. Using the sleeve of his right arm to wipe the rolling sweat off his dirty face, he took a quick glance at the conflagration consuming the bridge and made a decision. Slapping the cycle's gearbox into gear, he gunned the engine and kicked up dust as he spun around to his right and raced back down the road and toward the hard-riding cavalry.

The narrow bridge was burning fiercely and making a lot of rolling smoke in the process, but it was burning only in the middle span of the bridge and nowhere else. Both sides of the bridge's approaches slanted upward toward the middle, giving him, in other words, a perfect ramp to jump the cycle through the flames and over the burning section if he could get the small cycle up to speed in such a short space. The problem was he would have to race back around the curve and approach the on-coming Hussars before turning around and gunning the engine for all its worth back toward the bridge. Quickly assessing other possible options, he saw there were no other viable choices available. It was either succeed in this one attempt or spend the rest of the war as an uninvited guest of the Kaiser.

Sliding around the curve, going in the opposite direction he had just traversed, Jake twisted the cycle's throttle wide open and bent low over the handlebars as he aimed the front wheel toward the approaching cavalry. Ahead of him the German cavalry saw him coming at them and they began to shout in glee. Their euphoria changed to consternation when they observed the madman on the motorcycle aiming directly at them and accelerating at the same time. Horsemen and cyclist closed in on each other at a furious pace. Cavalrymen sat up in their saddles and started shouting at each other to warn their comrades of this crazy Englishman! Just as it looked as if the cyclist was going to drive right through the middle of the cavalry, the cycle slowed and suddenly its rider was twisting the cycle around and around in the country lane, throwing up a gigantic curtain of dust and almost running over several horses and men in the process.

Horses and riders galloped in every direction to get away from the madman. Some horses began bucking and threw their riders off before galloping off, their

reins flapping in the dust as they disappeared back down the road. The dust was thick, making men choke and eyes water, and still this madman continued circling his cycle around and around in the dirt. Finally, just as several of the Hussars retrieved their rifles slung around their backs and began to aim at the insane cyclist, the British officer gunned his machine loudly and shot off down the road toward the burning bridge in a blinding blur of motion!

Jake, grinning from ear to ear, deftly leaned to one direction or the other in order to slip past a horse and rider as he leaned forward over the cycle's handlebars. The sharp crack of several Mauser rifles firing close by did not bother him as he and his machine shot through the ball of hanging dust and sped into clear space. Accelerating rapidly, he soon left the befuddled horsemen behind him. Leaning into the curve, he used a boot again to keep him upright, and then, with the burning bridge directly in front of him, he twisted the machine's throttle open for all its worth. At forty miles per hour the stolen German Signal Corp's cycle and its rider hit the inclined approach of the bridge and went airborne almost immediately.

Through smoke and flame the machine and Jake flew. He was vaguely aware of a sudden hot sting of flame on the back of his leg. But then they were descending rapidly and he had no time to think of anything else. Lifting the nose of the machine up slightly, he brought the machine down directly in the middle of the approach on the far side and landed perfectly! Gunning the engine wide open again, Jake sped off into the Belgium countryside at a high rate of speed, leaving behind him a company of angry Hussars who could only sit in the saddles of their mounts and watch the madman disappear into the heat's shimmering haze.

When he arrived back at his squadron, he found the personnel in the unit running about like disturbed ants in a disemboweled ant hill. Groups of enlisted men were knocking down row after row of tents with a practiced ease. A second group following behind the first expertly rolled each tent up and threw them into

the back of a slow-moving American-made Model T Ford truck. As he climbed off his stolen bike he saw thirty or so men run to the garish red circus tent, a gift from the famous *Chubbs & Blaine* circus families of London, and deftly drop the cavernous tent in a billowing cloud of dust and leaves in the blinking of an eye. The tent, like all the other equipment of the squadron, was a gift from the British public to the fledgling new Royal Flying Corps, as were the American-made Ford trucks and the aeroplanes. Everything needed to equip a squadron had been hurriedly scrounged up at the beginning of the war and quickly shipped to France.

The blood-red circus tent was the squadron's main hangar. With *Chubbs & Blaine Circus of Renown* emblazoned in bright yellow letters across the very top canvas of the monstrosity, Jake half grinned when the thought occurred to him the tent was the perfect example of a world gone crazy. All of Europe since 1900 knew there was going to be a European war. Grand armies and navies, the collective technological essence of each nation, had been built by each belligerent country. Everyone knew the war, before the shooting started, was going to be a glorious affair with bands playing, women dancing in the streets, and handsome young men in bright new uniforms marching off into glory in long snake-like columns of martial manhood. When war was finally declared, people in every European capital fled to the streets and cheered and danced until the wee hours of the morning. A whole continent was gripped in jubilant frenzy as formal declarations of war were hurriedly telegraphed from one European capital to the next.

The insane carnival of nationalistic lust to kill the enemy lasted all of two weeks. This naive exuberance for martial glory rapidly fell to the wayside as soon as the armies met in the field underneath that blistering sun in 1914. The British Expeditionary Force, relying on the French to provide the needed intelligence to set up lines of defense, was dangerously close to being bagged in its entirety by the sweeping armies of the Kaiser. Without any idea where the enemy was, or for that matter where the French might be, the BEF was setting in the gaping mouth of an elaborate trap about ready to be snapped tightly shut by the hard-charging Huns.

He, like thousands of others like him, quickly signed up and joined the army when war was declared. Being an American with an English mother, and being well connected with many of England's most powerful strata, he found it easy enough to acquire a captaincy in the newly organized RFC. Well-known prior to the war as an international sportsman, especially as a man who loved fast cars and fast aeroplanes, Jake's reputation alone as a daring and accomplished aviator would give him immediate access to whatever he wanted. It was, however, his true vocation, his hidden life away from the sports world and national attention, which acquired for him his rank and posting.

Few people would have suspected the truth. Those few who did know the dark-haired American's occupation vowed to keep silent about it. They had to. If not, they would have been considered accomplices of Jake's malfeasance and subject to arrest.

These people who knew Jake's secretive skills were also the people who had the means to make sure the law never touched him. His select group of clients also walked the halls of power in almost every European country. From Prime Ministers to noblemen, from financiers who controlled the financial strings of entire nations, to lowly police captains who were totally captivated in their madness, all agreed no official inquiry about Jake's unique talents would ever come his way.

Jake was a thief. But not just an ordinary thief. He was not the smash-and-run kind of commonplace criminal found in any back alley. Mediocrity was not in his vocabulary. Jake was a connoisseur. A master at his trade. A specialist who, for a price, would acquire a Renaissance masterpiece and create a forgery so exact in detail, so precise in its workmanship, no art expert ever suspected otherwise in the forty years of his career. Even today – long after his retirement – on the walls of some of the most famous museums and private collections hang many of his superb forgeries. Monets, Raphaels, da Vincis, the rarest of the rare were all, at one time or the other, copied meticulously by Jake and surreptitiously substituted for the originals.

Not once in his clandestine occupation was he ever arrested or seriously suspected by the authorities. None of his clients ever mentioned his name. They

went to their deathbeds telling no living soul of their all-consuming passions. For unlike other collectors, these well-heeled individuals of power collected with a zealot's fever burning their brows. They collected the originals for the passion of being the sole owners, and the sole admirers, of pieces of art the world would never see again.

Thanks to Jake's connections, he was capable of acquiring for his new squadron a number of critically important components any squadron needed to operate. The lumbering Ford trucks the squadron used to move men and material around were a gift from a very wealthy American ex-patriot living in London. Several of the squadron's aeroplanes were donations to the squadron by other clients. The unbelievably gauche *Chubbs & Blaine* circus tent, delivered to the squadron by truck the day before shipping out to France, came their way thanks to one of his phone calls.

That had been the beginning of August. Now they were down to one flyable machine, three trucks, and a gaggle of men running for their lives. One person, in particular, seemed to be quite animated as he watched Sergeant Lonnie Burton running toward him with a worried look on his usually cheery face. The look on the sergeant's face clearly advertised trouble.

"Captain! You're back. The colonel told me to bring you to him just as soon as you showed up. It's a hell of a mess, sir."

Burton was a big NCO who knew how, under normal conditions, to run the enlisted men as well as he knew how to tear down a motor and put it back together. He noted, however, these last few weeks could not be considered normal by even the most liberal of interpretations. The solidly built sergeant, puffing from his long run across the empty field, with sweat drenching his face and tunic equally, looked as if he had seen a ghost.

"What's up, Lonnie?"

"It's Lieutenant Ogleshorpe, sir. He's with the colonel and the colonel is going to charge the boy with murder."

"Murder!" Jake grunted, turning to look at the NCO in surprise. "Who the hell did he get into a fight with this time?"

"It's Sergeant Grimms, sir. Apparently they found the sergeant's body at the

crash site. He was dead and the lieutenant was alive. I really don't know all the details. The colonel is over there in that hut with the lieutenant."

"Hell, they went down yesterday. Our first reports said both of them were dead. What's this about murder?"

Yesterday morning the young lieutenant and the sergeant took off in, at that time, one of the two serviceable machines remaining to the squadron. Their mission was to be a two-hour reconnaissance/photography mission. But forty-five minutes after their departure the squadron got a telephone call from a French infantry unit who claimed they saw a British machine going down in a thicket of woods just outside a little village called Epernay. Since they were the only squadron around in the immediate area it had to be Lieutenant Oglethorpe and Sergeant Grimms who crashed.

"They are in there," Burton said, gulping as he wiped sweat rolling off his forehead and pointed to a half-destroyed peasant's hut still partially standing underneath a large elm tree. Jake nodded silently and then ducked his head to step in through the narrow door.

The startling darkness within the hut momentarily blinded him for a moment or two as he entered the mangled remains of the hovel. The shadows were, however, not so dark as to keep him from seeing the form of the young lieutenant sitting on an empty wooden crate in the middle of the room. Nor was it so dark to note the young officer's bloodstained and tattered uniform hanging like ancient rags on his markedly thin frame. Dirt and oil covered half of the lad's face, along with a nasty and quite bloody track of a bullet that had neatly channeled a deep groove down the right side of the man's forehead. Holding his chest with one hand, the young man forced himself to work through the pain and breathe. Each breath forced him to clench his teeth together to keep from yelling out in agony. Jake lifted an eyebrow in surprise and wondered how much longer the young man would remain conscious.

Quietly the dark-eyed American unbuttoned his right tunic pocket and fished out a pack of cigarettes. Shaking one free he stepped toward the young officer and held it close to the man's lips. A flash of gratitude exploded in the lieutenant's dark brown eyes. Carefully the young officer pulled the cigarette out

of the pack with his lips while not trying to move any part of his body in the process.

“Jimmy, you certainly know how to get yourself into a jam,” the American said, grinning as he lit a match and held it up to the trembling cigarette. “What the hell happened to you?”

“Bloody hell!” a second voice exploded from out of the darkest shadows of the room, followed by the cracking snap of a riding crop slapping hard across a pair of heavy leather boots. “Bloody hell! I’ll tell you what happened, Captain Reynolds. Our hot-headed young friend crashed his machine outside some godforsaken French hamlet in a possible attempt to conceal a crime!”

The voice was filled with a crackling electrical rage one could feel emanating from out of the darkness. It belonged to Colonel Archibald Wingate, the squadron’s commander, who materialized quite dramatically into a sliver of light that illuminated part of the hut’s dirt floor directly behind the lieutenant.

“This incompetent fool’s attempt to hide a crime seems to be the only logical answer. I am told there is no doubt our Sergeant Grimms was a victim of foul play. He didn’t die from some Hun’s well-aimed bullet. Oh, no! Nothing so simple as that, damnit. Do you remember the lieutenant’s temper tantrum the other night? Yes? Well, our young friend here shouted at the top of his lungs he was going to kill Sergeant Grimms some day, and by Jove, that some day happened the very next day!”

“But murder, colonel?”

“Bah, it’s a bloody sordid little tale!” the colonel boomed, turning and breaking into a pacing trot back and forth through the shaft of light. With each third step he brought his riding crop down like an executioner’s pistol exploding in the darkness. “Twenty minutes ago a regiment of French cavalry deposited the lieutenant onto our doorstep just as you see him. The French told me an incredible story. It seems they saw young Oglethorpe’s plane come down into the woods outside of Epernay yesterday. When they went off to see if anyone survived they ran into a Boche infantry regiment and had a hot run of it before they drove them off. But here is where it becomes a preposterous nightmare, captain. They find the lieutenant lying on the ground unconscious. In his right

hand is his freshly fired service revolver. Strapped in the observation seat of the aeroplane is Sergeant Grimms. Grimms is dead with a bullet through his forehead. Shot at close range, the French captain assured me, and shot by the lieutenant's gun."

Jake eyed the wobbly, pale young officer with a critical eye for a moment or two and then took his time lighting up a cigarette for himself. James Oglethorpe was the only son of Brigadier General, Sir John Oglethorpe. Sir John was old army. He had spent years in India and Egypt serving His Majesty's government. As a young junior officer in the 70s, he fought African Zulus. In India he fought Afghan Moslems and Indian Thuggee murder cults. The elder Oglethorpe was wounded and decorated so many times it was said he was the most decorated officer, active or retired, yet living. Tough, iron-willed, unbending yet almost apostolic in his fairness, the general was something of a legend in the British Army. By anyone's measure, the father to this injured lieutenant was one of the rarest of rare jewels. He was a bona fide living hero. Retired now, Sir John held a minister's job within the government. A very powerful job reserved only for the most trusted, and most dependable, of servants the government could find.

Sir John was one of Jake's clients in the surreptitiously secret trade he practiced. In fact, the elder was Jake's first client and his most ardent of collectors. It was a word to Sir John that quickly acquired his captaincy in the Royal Flying Corps. Acquired, in part, not only to help someone who so expertly fed his mania for collecting rare art, but for more personal reasons as well. Getting his commission, and being assigned to this squadron, fulfilled one of the elder Oglethorpe's goals. It had to do with the younger Oglethorpe, now sitting on a wooden crate in front of Jake holding his aching rib cage and dangerously leaning to one side and on the verge of falling off his perch altogether.

Father and son were like oil and water. They were two opposites so extreme in their personalities they guaranteed there would be friction between them. The son was wild, impetuous, spoiled to extreme by his doting mother, and incapable of controlling his anger. It was no secret James Oglethorpe hated his father. It was no secret Sir John was as stoic and as unbending toward his son as he was to the rest of the human race. What no one fully understood was the elder's love for

his son. Years earlier the two had parted company, with only his mother keeping in direct contact with her son. Yet even in this forced estrangement, not a day passed where the general was not well aware of his son's health and well-being. One of the benefits of power the general often employed was the benefit of keeping a discreet and covert eye on someone he loved.

When war broke out, and Jimmy rushed off to join the just-created Royal Flying Corps, it was Sir John who made sure his son received an officer's commission. When Jake called on the good general in seeking help in getting an officer's post, it was Sir John who readily agreed in turn, Jake would accept a posting to his son's squadron and do his best to keep Jimmy Oglethorpe out of harm's way. "War is war," the general said. "No one can keep him from getting killed in combat. But perhaps you could be close by and refrain him from doing something stupid?"

Jake saw no problem with the proviso. It had been Jake who taught the younger Oglethorpe to fly. He had been, on a number of occasions, the intermediary Sir John sent to correct gambling debts and other youthful indiscretions his headstrong son found himself entangled in. To be frank, Jake was already intimately involved in the family secrets without Jimmy once suspecting the contrary. So now the big American stood eyeing the young lieutenant, a cigarette dangling from his thin lips, thinking to himself a court martial and firing squad would surely kill the old man.

"Do you see my dilemma, captain? The entire bloody German Army is descending upon us even as we speak. Our bloody army has packed their bags and ran for parts unknown. Half of my squadron is scattered from here to some strange French village called Coulommiers and now I have this bloody mess fall into my lap!"

Jake broke into an impish smirk as he pulled the cigarette from his lips and half turned to look at the colonel. Hell, why not grin? Everything was going to hell in a hand basket it seemed, so why not just shrug your shoulders and wait for the next bombshell to explode?

"Colonel, just because a Frenchman found our lieutenant with a smoking gun in his hand doesn't mean he killed the sergeant. Ground fire could have killed

Grimms and wounded Jimmy. He could have been firing at the Germans when he was knocked unconscious. Hell, Jimmy, you tell us what happened.”

“I... I wish I could tell you, Old Man.” the boy answered in a soft and pain-filled whisper, speaking with his teeth clenched together and trying to feebly smile in the process. “But I... I can’t. I don’t remember a bloody thing. I don’t even remember crashing. It’s all gone. Gone.”

“Yes, how convenient,” Wingate growled, turning to look at Jake yet sounding not so hot in his rage. “The French officer said he used to work for the Surete. He assures me he and his cavalry regiment ran into the Germans some yards to one side of the crash. In other words, they ran into the Germans before the Germans came close enough to find the crash site. So that eliminates the possibility of Oglethorpe defending himself.”

“But far from any genuine proof of murder, colonel.”

“Under normal circumstances, you would be correct, captain. But after his angry outburst the other night, I cannot dismiss the accusation out of hand. It is no secret our hot-headed young friend here has, on many occasions, threatened to kill the sergeant. If word gets out Sergeant Grimms died unnaturally I would have a far greater mess on my hands!”

“But do you really believe Jimmy killed Sergeant Grimms?”

“I don’t know what to believe, Reynolds. All I know is I have a dead enlisted man on my hands. Half of our squadron are potential witnesses in a court-martial, and all of them would testify Oglethorpe said he was going to commit murder someday. My God, lieutenant. A court martial would kill your father.”

The tattered, raggedly dressed scarecrow of a junior officer, somehow found enough strength to pull his bone-thin frame up to a standing position. Turning to look directly at Colonel Wingate, the hoarse whisper emitting from Jimmy’s throat was barely loud enough to be heard.

“Colonel, I swear to you... swear upon my family’s sacred name... I did not murder Sergeant Grimms. Yes, I hated the man. Yes, I thought he was a liar and a cheat, and... yes... I have a temper I find difficult to control. Yet I swear to you, I did not shoot the sergeant. You have to believe me. I... I am innocent.”

Jake grinned as he silently removed a piece of tobacco from the tip of his

tongue. In a war that promised to kill thousands, if not millions of innocent lives, it did seem incongruous someone would contemplate murder. Yet, oddly, why not think about murder? Assuming the Germans did not kill the sergeant, it suggested someone other than the enemy must have hated Sergeant Grimms enough to want him dead. Someone possibly quite willing to go out of his way to kill the sergeant and pin the crime on the hot-headed young lieutenant? Narrowing his eyes, and looking back at Jimmy, the tall American thought about it for a moment or two.

“Captain, a word with you in private, if you please.” Wingate huffed as he turned to glare at Jimmy one last time before turning and ducking his head to step out of the hut.

Jake followed, bending his head to step through the small door of the hut and emerged into the unbelievably bright sunlight and searing heat, with the unmistakable sound of German 77 millimeter guns growling off in the distance.

“Captain, you know what this would do to the general if his son was brought up on court-martial charges.”

“Yes, I can guess.”

“The general told me why you were posted to the squadron. To be frank I was quietly pleased on two accounts. I served with the general in India just before he retired. I know how the general and his son fought each other. I was happy for him to hear you were going to be, shall we say, a silent guardian angel to the boy. But I was also aware of your reputation in the civilian side of life. As a skilled aviator who knew how to fly, and how to tear a machine down and rebuild it, you were a prize any RFC unit would have leaped for joy over. Unlike many of my peers I am a Brit who actually likes Americans. From day one the men have looked up to you and followed your lead willingly.”

Jake turned to look into the face of the double-chinned older man and then nodded as he smiled.

“Thank you, colonel.”

“Don’t thank me, captain,” the senior officer grunted, shaking his head and frowning before turning to look back at the hut behind them. “You know, and I know if the lieutenant has any chance of clearing his name it rests in your hands.

Maybe he is telling the truth. Maybe he is innocent. But we need to prove it. That proof might be found back at the crash site. You are the only one I know of who has the talents to slip behind enemy lines and get out alive. You speak French and German like a native. You have a talent for slipping in and out of places anyone else would trip over and be instantly apprehended. In short, you are the perfect man to investigate this crime.”

“You need not ask, colonel. I was going to Epernay the moment I heard the story. Jimmy is not a murderer. I believe him when he says he’s innocent.”

“I thought you would.” Wingate nodded and was almost smiling in relief. “But no one can order you on this assignment.”

“Where will I find you when I return?”

“Coulommiers, just north and east of Paris. I think the army is moving in that direction. A courier dropped off our route assignment this morning. God knows when we’ll get there, however.”

“I’ll leave now, colonel. I should get to the crash sight about nightfall if I’m lucky. I’ll meet you in Coulommiers day after tomorrow if everything goes as expected.”

Wingate nodded, returned the salute the tall American gave him, then watched as the dark gray-eyed man ran off toward the last tent still standing in the burnt French field. Seconds later a figure on a motorcycle sped off toward the descending sun in a cloud of dust. Watching the man disappear into the haze, the plump colonel shook his head in wonder then turned, took a deep breath, and began barking loudly for some men to get over and help the injured lieutenant into one of the remaining lorries.

The night was as black as the blackest of India ink.
The air as still as a dead man's thoughts.

Jake pushed the cycle into a heavy thicket growing in a black mass between two old maple trees and then spent some time hiding the machine by covering the bike with fallen branches and twigs. Stepping back he frowned. He hoped the bike was hidden from searching eyes. Shrugging to himself he quickly turned and started walking briskly down the long dark slash of an empty road which cut through a thick copse of trees. For the moment the night was as silent as an unmolested Pharaoh's tomb. No breeze stirred the heavy air. No sound broke through the darkness. But as he walked he could feel a heavy air of electrified tension settling down on his shoulders. Every step took him closer to the oncoming German army. He knew he had to bump into the forward positions of the on-coming enemy sooner or later.

Two kilometers up this road he would find the small French village of Epernay. Just a mile outside of the little village would be the crash site where Oglethorpe and his observer had smashed up the old Bleroit in a patch of trees. But there was something else to be found down that dark, ominous road. In that quaint little village, so delicately deposited onto the banks of the deep Marne River, he knew of a treasure waiting for him. There, on a series of wooden oak panels kept behind the pulpit of the town's church—panels opened only on special religious holidays—would be an unquestioned masterpiece of the 15th Century Dutch artist, Jan van Eck.

Pausing for a moment to listen for any noise, thinking to himself he had to be very close to the enemy's forward positions, he nevertheless was thinking also about the wooden panels in the church and the unbelievable quality of painting the younger van Eck had wrought. Of the two van Eck brothers, Hubert and Jan, it would be the younger who would become renowned as a Master. In fact, it was this unknown northern European artist, if one wanted to believe the art experts and historians, who invented creating works of art by splashing colored oils onto stretched pieces of dried canvas. This new art form supposedly was introduced to the world sometime in the second decade of the 1400s. The younger van Eck, who was at this time a man possibly in his early thirties, was immediately a subtle and practiced artisan of sublime craftsmanship.

It was a sublimity obtained by either pure genius or by the fickleness of capricious gods. In either case, Jan van Eck soared above his contemporaries in applying oil to canvas.

Which made Jake think that perhaps the experts had missed their mark on the original genius who discovered oil painting. If the birth of the Renaissance began in Italy late in the 14th century, how could two obscure artists living in the Netherlands have devised a whole new scheme of art? Jan van Eck's paintings were, if one was but an ordinary curious soul strolling absently through an art gallery, somewhat arcane and even mundane at casual glance. His subjects, as to be expected for such an era, dealt with the Church. Christ and the Virgin Mary in all of their variations and postures, and all telling stories that came piously and with humility out of scripture, dominated the early van Eck paintings. But as the young artist matured, his subjects drifted away from the church and began to explore the everyday life of the common burger of his home country. In these subjects, far removed from the oppressive and even stifling constraints of the religious orders, the breathtaking genius of van Eck could be seen.

Painting, for the true connoisseur, lived and breathed and was a vibrantly living entity. For Jake it had, at an early age, become an obsession. Gifted with the talent to paint he drifted to Europe and became a student. Studying in Paris, Rome, and Vienna, Jake rapidly became an accomplished, though abysmally poor and chronically hungry, artisan of rare ability.

Early in his training he discovered he had a knack for copying exactly the works of the Masters. He even discovered how to age canvas and formulate paints used by Renaissance craftsmen. At first it was an amusing sideshow to create a copy of a renowned Master so exact not even his professors could discern the fake from the original. But one day, while working on the banks of the Seine just outside Paris, an acquaintance he knew rode out of the city on a beautiful white Arabian horse in search of him. Finding him, the art dealer sat atop his steed and, straining to control the energetic animal, talked for a few moments about the art world in general. For some time it was just idle chitchat, but quite unexpectedly, and to Jake's surprise, this important and well-respected dealer of antiquities offered the young artist 10,000 francs for one of his copies—a specific copy of an Italian master. He went on to suggest even larger sums of money could be acquired by creating such superb forgeries. It was a deal Jake found incapable of refusing.

In the first five years of the 20th century, Jake and the art dealer created a lucrative and thriving market for forgeries. Forgeries so good buyers, who found independent experts to accompany them and authenticate their acquisitions, left the dealer's shop convinced they had acquired a priceless original.

In 1908 two significant milestones were surpassed. Jake discovered his partner had been cheating him out of his share of the business and, in fact, owed him hundreds of thousands of francs. With this discovery, and after forcefully compelling the dealer to make restitution, Jake decided he was ready to dissolve the partnership and become an independent businessman.

The second milestone for the young artist was discovering the thrill of flying. In June of that same year, he saw his first aeroplane and knew immediately he had found the second major love of his life. Invited to observe two, as he was informed by friends, rather strange brothers who thought they could beat the Americans, Orville and Wilbur Wright, in inventing a better flying machine, Jake and a small gathering of others watched a man by the name of Gabriel Voisin lift a glider off a somewhat unstable looking platform being towed through the Seine river by a high-powered speed boat.

France, at the beginning of the 20th century, was a hot bed of

experimentation in the development of the aeroplane. The French found it impossible to believe that two upstart American bicycle enthusiasts had created a workable flying machine. For years the dream of flying like a bird seemed to be a singularly French possession. It had been a balloon by the name of *Entienne* and its inventor, Joseph Montgolfier, in 1783, who had lifted men off the hard soil of France for the first time. From that moment on, it seemed it had become a national decree that it would be a Frenchman who would first build and fly a heavier-than-air flying machine.

That dream continued to be a deeply cherished French passion until the Wright brothers flew their machine off a sand dune in some faraway place called Kitty Hawk. The entire country of France became agog at the news, and even disputed with vitriolic acidity, the claims of the American brothers. Across all of France inventors, backed by money from powerful patrons, feverishly intensified their efforts to create a machine of their own. Gabriel and Charles Voisin were two brothers who believed passionately in their ideas. But it was this gracefully soaring glider, with Gabriel Voisin sitting in it while his brother Charles controlled the speed boat, which sent a sudden flash of raw energy through every fiber in the American. From that moment on he was hooked on the idea of flying like a bird. For the next year Jake worked with enthusiasm and vigor with the Voisin brothers in developing their flying machines.

He grinned to himself as he thought of those early efforts to fly, for here he was, in the dying hours of August 1914, an officer in the Royal Flying Corps, walking down a dark and deserted French road on a double mission. On one hand he wanted to save a comrade from being shot for a crime he did not commit. At the same time he wanted to pilfer from under the very noses of an entire German Army a priceless painting, and replace it, if a way could be found, with a copy so exact no one would be able to tell the difference.

It was, he thought to himself as he stopped in the road and grinned impishly while reaching for his pack of American-made cigarettes, a proposition which called for luck, planning, and a large supply of chutzpah.

In the darkness off to his left and toward the Marne he heard the faint rattle of a machine gun chattering away angrily at some martial insult. But no other

sound assaulted the impenetrable blackness of the silent night as he shook a cigarette free from the pack and lifted it to his lips. Cupping his hands to hide the flame of his match, he lit the cigarette and inhaled deeply. The moment the match flamed he heard the unmistakable clatter of several German Mauser bolt action rifles being rapidly worked in front of him.

"Achtung!" a guttural snap of a German soldier's voice shot out from the darkness like some errant rifle shot. "Identify yourself! You have ten seconds, or we will open fire!"

Exhaling cigarette smoke through his nostrils, and taking his time to size up the situation, Jake grinned with a cunning rogue's smirk into the direction of the voice as he dropped hands into his trouser pockets.

"You loud-mouthed idiot!" he barked in his best Prussian, even injecting that inflection of authority and arrogance only a proper Junker officer seemed to possess. "Who in hell is barking like a Rottweiler in heat and giving out his position to the enemy! Speak! I demand to know!"

There was a rustling in the bushes around him, the hushed smirks of amusement from two or three unseen men, and some heated whispering that he could not pick up. To his right he heard someone cough and clear his throat. Yet, when answer to Jake's demands came, it came in a voice that was now not so sure of itself.

"Who are you to be calling someone an idiot? Lighting that cigarette almost got you killed. Identify yourself or I will shoot you and make explanations to my superiors later."

"Ha!" Jake shot back, sounding amused, but still with that air of cultured superiority only a German of noble birth could express so easily. "There is at least a spark of independence in you, sergeant! That's good. But keep your voice down. The enemy is only two kilometers up the road, and on a still night like this, voices can carry forever."

"How do you know I am a sergeant?"

"How do you know I am a German officer?" Jake shot back, pulling the cigarette from his lips as he smiled and waited for an answer.

"I...well, uh...I don't know."

"Good. Step forward, I want to see your face so that I can compliment your superior officer. He has at least one sergeant who knows how to keep his head on straight."

From out of the blackness around him, several large bodies wearing spiked *Pickelhaube* helmets, carrying bayoneted rifles, and dressed in the gray campaign uniforms worn by German enlisted men materialized like specters. Cautiously they surrounded him. Most kept their bayonets aimed at Jake's chest as they approached, but a couple of the men shouldered their rifles, and looked genuinely frightened, as they stepped up and looked at the black-clad figure standing in the middle of the road calmly smoking a cigarette. Being simple men they knew what the German Army did to such as if a Junker officer was in any way threatened.

"I am Sergeant Hans Binkleman, Company B, 105th Westphalian Grenadiers," one grizzled, unshaven figure grunted, holding his bayonet toward Jake. "And if you're a German officer, what are you doing dressed in black and coming from the direction of the enemy?"

"I am Hauptman Felix von Hollweg, attached to General von Moltke's personal staff." Jake grunted, pulling out of his trouser pockets a fresh pack of smokes and tossing them to one of the infantrymen who seemed to be shaking in terror. "I was asked to reconnoiter the surrounding countryside and report back to the general. Be so kind as to send one of your men with me back to your battalion headquarters. I need to make an immediate report."

Count Helmuth von Moltke was the Chief of Staff for the entire German Army in 1914. Crusty, old, and the immediate descendant of a German Army legend, Jake knew what the general's name did to most men wearing an enlisted man's uniform and so, casually but succinctly, stressed the name as he spoke. He saw an immediate reaction. The old veteran sergeant of grenadiers scowled savagely but lifted the tip of his bayoneted rifle and reluctantly shouldered the weapon. The rest of his squad followed his actions as the sergeant turned and looked at one of the youngest of his men.

"Take the Hauptman back to headquarters, Schmidt. And don't get lost. I've got enough problems on my hands right now, so I don't want to explain to the

colonel how we lost an officer while standing in the middle of an empty road in the heart of France. You got that, son?"

"Yes, Herr Sergeant!" the soldier, who was, at best, between seventeen or eighteen years old, shouted as he saluted smartly.

"Humph!" snorted the old NCO before turning and melting back into the inky darkness.

"This way, sir," the boy whispered, lifting a hand and pointing down the dark road and toward Epernay.

Jake nodded, grinned impertinently, then turned to gaze into the darkness the dour-faced old sergeant of infantry disappeared into.

"Two kilometers down this road is a brigade of French cavalry and a battery of French 75s. They're fresh and just up from Paris. Keep your wits about you, sergeant. I know the brigade's commanding officer. He's looking for a fight and doesn't mind wading in with fists flying. I suggest you call back to regimental HQ and see if you can get some reinforcements up here. I can almost guarantee you French cavalry will be very active come first light."

In the gloom of the dark forested road came no reply. But he knew the sergeant had heard. He knew the old NCO would send out a patrol to verify his words. So he gave the sergeant the absolute truth. There was a brigade of French cavalry, along with a battery of artillery, down the road and the old French brigadier general commanding them had been, in his youth, a prize fighter of some repute before joining the army. Yet, even as old as the Frenchman was, Jake knew the Frenchman would want a fight, and a big one, the moment the sun peeked over the eastern horizon. Still grinning, Jake turned and looked at the very young, and very scared, corporal.

"Lead on, corporal. I am in your hands."

The boy grinned and slung the rifle over his shoulder before turning and heading down the middle of the country road. Casually pushing hands into his trousers' pockets, Jake started following as he began whistling softly a popular German beer hall drinking song.

"You are from Bavaria, Herr Hauptman?" the boy asked, hearing the tune and half turning to look at Jake.

In the blackness of the night Jake was impressed with the boy's ability to know where he was going. There was absolutely nothing to see neither in front of them, nor to their left or right. He had no idea if they were walking through the middle of a German infantry division or through an entire army corps. He didn't care to know, which made him smile to himself. He would, he concluded, make an absolutely great spy. In the middle of enemy territory, being escorted by a German infantryman so young he wouldn't know what was happening to him, Jake realized he had all the opportunity he needed to solicit a wonderful dossier of German Army movements on this portion of the front. But he wasn't interested. All he wanted to do was find the small church in Epernay and then the van Eck paintings. But before that he wanted to investigate Oglethorpe's crash.

"From Berlin," he answered, pulling out another seemingly endless supply pack of cigarettes. "You smoke?"

"Yes, I do."

"Good, take the package."

"Thanks!" the corporal answered, grinning and accepting the offered gift from the tall officer. "I haven't had a good smoke since I left home on Wednesday."

"Just arrived on the front?"

"Yes, last night. Found the regiment this afternoon just outside Epernay."

"You were in these woods this afternoon?"

"Yes, all day. Sergeant says the regiment has been on the move for an entire month. This is the first day it received orders to stand down and take some time off. It's about time. The men are exhausted."

"Hmmm," the dark-eyed American grunted, stopping in the middle of the road and looking around slowly.

"Is there anything wrong, Herr Hauptman?"

Jake frowned as he looked at the boy. Stepping closer to the young corporal he lowered his head and began speaking in a soft, conspiratorial voice.

"I can trust you, can't I, corporal?"

"Herr Hauptman! I am a loyal son of the Fatherland!"

"Excellent!" Jake whispered fiercely, slapping the boy's back hard with enthusiasm and making the lad's knees buckle in the process. "Then you may possibly be able to help me complete my mission."

"Yes?" the boy coughed, trying to regain his breath from the officer's powerful blow. "How?"

"Today, or perhaps sometime yesterday, a British two-seater observation machine fell into the woods around here. We have reason to believe it was carrying secret documents. I need to find the spot where this machine fell and investigate it before looters arrive and destroy everything."

"I know just the place you are talking about!" the small German lad shouted just as several French 75-millimeter artillery pieces boomed defiantly into the night, momentarily lighting up the darkness with angry flames of violence and mayhem.

Both men heard the shells whistling over their heads and instinctively ducked as they flew by. With thundering explosions the shells crashed into the trees just a few hundred meters off to their left.

"You perhaps saw the plane come down?" Jake shouted as machine guns, French Hotchkiss models, began singing their deadly duets into the night with brightly lit tracer fire.

The sergeant's patrol had stumbled onto the French cavalry's position, and like a nest of wasps rudely awakened in the dead of night, the French were responding with vigor.

"The entire regiment watched it fall out of the sky, sir! It was the strangest thing I've ever seen!"

Three more rounds of artillery boomed into the night and more angry machine guns began stitching the darkness with bright flashes of angry pyrotechnic fireworks. But from the German side came no response. Jake pulled his lips back into a smirk and nodded his approval. The old sergeant of Westphalian infantry was, like the Americans would say, playing 'possum'. He was not making a sound. The French would, sooner or later, come to the conclusion they were shooting at nothing and darkness would again envelope both Poilu and German in comforting obscurity.

In fact, after ten minutes of firing machine guns and artillery at unseen targets, the French did exactly that. Suddenly absolute quiet descended onto the forested floor like some eerie cloak of solitude. Nothing moved or made a sound from the surrounding darkness.

Bending his head in closer to the young man, Jake lowered his voice to barely above a whisper.

"You say this aircraft came down strangely?"

"Correct, Herr Hauptman," nodded the boy, wide-eyed and trembling with terror. "Mother of Jesus... I... I have never heard noise like that before!"

"Wait until next week, corporal."

"Next week?"

"When the real fighting begins. There's going to be a battle soon. A big battle. You'll have your fill of fighting by this time next week."

"Saints protect me," the boy whispered weakly, crossing himself as rapidly as possible before looking at Jake. "How can anyone live through something like that, sir?"

"Some do, some don't," Jake whispered in return. "That's war. We all have to die sometime. But never mind that, son. Tell me about the British aeroplane. What made it so strange?"

The boy gulped and tried to get a grip on his fear. But it was an immense struggle. Shaking violently, the boy tried to keep his voice down to a whisper, but he found it difficult to talk.

"I... we... we all were in the woods just outside of Epernay, you see. And... and we see this British plane gently descending down toward our position. But... but we could only gawk at this. We could see that no one was piloting the machine! The pilot and the observer were standing up in their seats and they were gripping each other as if in some kind of wrestling match. I swear to you, sir, I believe the two men were fighting over a revolver in the hands of the observer. The observer was holding the gun in one hand and using his other to pummel the pilot's face with a fist! The pilot was resisting as best as he could and making an effort to take the gun away from his passenger, but it looked as if the man with the gun was winning the fight.

"Neither of them was controlling their machine as it came down in a gentle angle. It skimmed across the trees a little way before suddenly catching a tree limb with one of its wheels and flipping over."

"You saw this with your own eyes, corporal?"

"We all saw it, sir. Even the regiment's colonel witnessed this spectacle. The moment the plane crashed he immediately ordered a squad of men out to see if there were any survivors. I was one of the lucky ones chosen to go."

"And what did you find?"

"Well, the story becomes even more unbelievable. Half way to the crash we hear two men loudly shouting at each other. Both men were extremely angry and were voicing their anger in English. I didn't think the English could swear like that, sir. But before we could get to the spot and capture them, we heard two gunshots. Both sounded like they were from a revolver."

"You captured these men?"

"No, Herr Hauptman," the boy answered, shaking his head and suddenly grinning sheepishly. "We almost had them, but then up pops twenty or thirty dismounted French cavalry. They begin shooting at us. We dive for cover, scattering like game birds from the bullets. I found myself hiding behind a rather large tree. That's when I saw the most fantastic thing of all about this whole story."

Jake sighed in quiet regret, smiled, and ran a hand through his thick curly black hair. Lady Luck was going to make sure he did not get to Epernay this night. The boy had calmed down enough to speak with some enthusiasm. The small framed soldier was really getting into the story as they stood in the darkness of the country lane and unseen from any prying eyes. What the young lad had related so far was just the evidence that would augment young Oglethorpe's defense. Hoping that something even more revealing might come from the young man's lips, Jake said nothing and waited for the corporal to continue.

"I slid down the trunk of the tree just as bullets chewed up some limbs above me. I started to throw my arms over my head to cover myself, but I don't, you see, because through the trees behind our position... and I know you're going to

find this impossible to believe, Herr Hauptman... I see a man on a bicycle pedaling away from the crash site as fast as his legs can move! A man wearing the uniform of an English soldier riding a bicycle! I mean, I was stunned to see this image of a man flashing through the trees like some ghost. It was just incredible, sir. Just incredible."

"You saw this Englishman on a bicycle with your own eyes?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you are absolutely sure it was a man wearing a British Army uniform."

"Yes, sir. I am positive."

"Could you recognize this man again?"

"Perhaps, Herr Hauptman. Through the trees I saw the figure. But I really did not get a look at his face."

"Hmmm," Jake grunted, lifting a hand up to rub the side of his jaw. "I'm afraid I need to take you to headquarters so you can tell this to my colonel. But I'm afraid you're not going to like it."

"I will be happy to retell the story, sir."

"Not where we are going, I'm afraid," Jake answered, suddenly landing a hard and well-placed right cross on the unsuspecting German soldier's jaw.

The boy did not have time to react. The blow landed squarely and with force, knocking the young infantryman out completely. Catching him before he fell to the roadside Jake tossed the limp body across a shoulder and stood up.

"Now all I have to do is get you back in one piece," he said to himself as he turned and headed back toward the French positions.

He grinned and moved off the road altogether. All it would take would be some measure of patience, some silent navigation through German and French sentry positions, and a pinch of luck some trigger-happy Frenchman wouldn't start shooting at the first twig snapping in the darkness.

The French wanted to fight, and they were not looking for reasons to refrain their instinctively belligerent Gallic spirit. Working his way through the trees he just hoped that Gallic spirit was as terrible at shooting as they were at stopping the German army.

Towering thunder heads filled most of the sky. Blue-gray cathedrals of rain and looming thunder illuminated with the grand pastels of a late afternoon sun.

Kicking a little right rudder he brought the slow B.E.2b around skidding sideways through low-hanging clouds. The diaphanous gray and white mist within the clouds blotted out all sense of reality for a heartbeat or two. Then, like a stinging slap to the face, they were through the clouds and emerging into brilliant sunlight again. Behind him Corporal Angus McDougal waited until they were out of the clouds completely before turning to nod at Jake. The corporal then struggled to stand up in his cockpit, gripping an ungainly-looking box camera in his hands. Slinging it over the side of the plane, the small-framed enlisted man began taking photos as rapidly as he could, changing the camera's bulky photographic plates repeatedly, while Jake fought with the winds and the turbulence to keep the under-powered crate in level flight.

Six thousand feet below was the massed regalia of an entire German army, its meandering light gray lines of men packing the roads from Crepy-en-Valois to Soissons in one unending serpentine line of marching men. The distance was roughly fifteen miles as one might walk. But in that entire distance there wasn't an inch of barren roadway to be observed. It seemed the whole countryside was nothing but massed infantry, artillery, and large blocks of cavalry. General Alexander von Kluck's First Army was pushing hard toward Paris, and from the hour's-worth of flying through gaps in the low-hanging clouds, Jake could see

there was damn little of Allied resistance standing between the mass below and the heart and soul of France itself. If a miracle did not happen soon, Kaiser Wilhelm's troops were going to be marching in goose-stepping parade drill beneath the Arc de Triumph, while the hapless and stranded British Army would be gathered up like so many lost sheep and herded off to a god forsaken prisoner of war camp.

For twenty minutes Jake worked the controls and kept the old machine as level as possible. In the process he continued to scan the skies around him for any possible encounter with German machines. Several machines, from both sides, were clawing their way through the clouds between Coulommiers and Sossions-Soissons. Jake's instincts told him most of the machines had been German two-seaters. But gnawing at the back of his mind was the feeling that something was wrong. They flew close to the few British and French observation machines. He eyed them suspiciously as they flew in parallel formations with the Allied planes, or as they slid in underneath an unsuspecting Brit or Frog, matching speeds with them for some time before banking away and disappearing into the clouds.

In September of 1914, barely one month into the conflagration called World War One, the idea of placing a machine gun onto a flying machine and making it a weapon of war had yet to be born. In 1914, there was no such thing as an 'ace' or a 'fighter pilot.' In the first weeks of the war, pilots flew machines that were barely capable of getting off the ground. Aeroplanes large enough, and with engines powerful enough to carry men and weapons into the air, had yet to be built. War in the air on a mass scale was a year away.

In the first weeks of World War One, it appeared the war was not going to last long enough to develop the concept of aerial warfare. Like their grandfathers who fought in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, the better-trained and better-led German Army of 1914 was using mobility and Teutonic panache, and taking potentially dangerous chances in their efforts to keep BEF and the French armies from linking up. From the beginning both Allied armies moved like punch-drunk prize fighters stumbling around in the ring in a semi-conscience daze. In just two weeks of fighting the Allies were on the verge of being wiped out by a

determined and relentless foe, while the armies of Kaiser Wilhelm were flirting with the possibility of forging out a complete and unconditional victory of unparalleled magnitude!

There were rumors the French cabinet was packing their collective bags and were preparing to flee Paris. There were rumors that von Kluck's army was going to swing past Paris to the west of the city and then encircle the city entirely. There were rumors that an entire French army corps had marched off in the wrong direction and were hopelessly lost or captured by the Boche. Paris was in a panic. Enemy planes, flying usually one at a time and generally in the night, appeared over the city and had dropped both bombs and pamphlets. At night Paris sat in the dark and shivered in terror at the thought of more bombs falling onto them from above. Just one mistake by the Allies, just one little opening left unplugged, and the Boche would be down upon the lost and clueless like ravaging wolves. With fresh blood on their muzzles, these gray wolves smelled victory and were pushing hard to attain it.

But below them, he and the corporal had made a stunning discovery. Through the clouds they had discovered von Kluck's First Army had decided not to swing west and by-pass Paris. Instead the enemy had decided to turn above Paris to the east, forgetting Paris altogether, and was now massing its men and cavalry to the north and west of Paris between Crepy-en-Valois and Villers-sur-Morin. Paris lay barely fifteen miles away. But von Kluck was not interested. Jake knew the photos Corporal McDougal was taking would be conclusive proof indicating the Germans had faltered in their drive. They had made the first strategic error of the war and were inadvertently handing the Allies the opportunity to reinforce the defensive positions encircling the city, and even more, offering the opening for a possible Allied counter-punch. A counter-punch, which, if used properly and with sufficient force thrown into the fray, held the promise it might drive a wedge between the German armies and blunt the Teutonic landslide. All they had to do was get back to Coulommiers and develop the photos.

But disaster almost ruined their chances in relaying the photos to higher command, and in fact, almost immediately claimed them as hors de combat.

The corporal had just dropped the long wooden box of a camera in between his legs into his cockpit and had settled down to strap himself in when, from out of the clouds above them, something small and black and fast whisked by Jake's face at a fantastic speed! Heaving the plane's joystick to his right, Jake dropped the plane down on its right wing and then hauled the stick up and back to the left. The old Royal Aircraft Factory B.E. 2b, not designed to be much for maneuvering, balked and strained to comply with Jake's demands. Through the wind singing in the many bracing wires and wooden braces of its twin wings, the old plane's small four-cylinder engine howled in outrage. Slowly the plane lifted its nose and began climbing to the port side. But just as Jake got the plane climbing and its wings level, more black objects, shaped strangely like elongated crossbow bolts, fell out of the sky from above. Two objects ripped through both wings of the old B.E. with one of them thudding into the area of the fuselage separating the corporal's cockpit from Jake.

Jake heard the ringing twang of bracing wires snapping. On the upper right wing he watched the fabric begin to slowly rip from the wooden ribs of the wing and flap in the wind like angry pennants from a ship's mast. Glancing up as he again threw the joystick to his right, Jake saw the darting image of a single-winged Fokker Einderker monoplane disappear into a fold of a billowing white cloud, the head of its pilot hanging over the side of the plane and actually grinning down at him in some caricature of evil pleasure.

Jake made another discovery. The controls of his plane would not let him turn right anymore. Apparently one of the steel flechettes had severed the control wires to his ailerons. He could turn left. He could go up and down. But he could not turn right. In disgust, keeping his eyes on the growing rip of fabric in the upper wings, Jake decided it was time to get down as fast as possible and in one piece before something else happened.

War had not yet come in its true form into the air. Aeroplane engines were not powerful enough to carry men, machine guns, and hundreds of rounds of ammunition into the air. They would arrive shortly, to be sure. But individuals tried to figure out ways to kill their opposition almost from the start. In 1914, individuals were taking to the skies with small side arms, hunting rifles, and

even bags of bricks which they would try to dump onto an unsuspecting plane below them in an attempt to kill their fellow aeronauts. Both sides, at one time or another, used foot-long steel arrows weighing as much as ten to fifteen pounds to knock planes out of the sky. The concept was rudimentary at best. Climb above an enemy, match his speed, and then drop the flechettes one by one onto the plane below. It was one of these iron bolts which had ripped into Jake's machine.

Between Jake and the corporal, the ugly steel arrow protruded from the fuselage. Another foot in either direction and either he or the corporal would have been killed instantly. It would have been an ugly way to die. Sliding to the left by using his rudder controls, Jake remembered the grinning face of that Boche pilot and knew he would never forget it. He hoped the day would come when he would have an opportunity to meet him again.

A half-hour later Jake settled the wounded bird into the grassy field just outside the village of Coulommiers. As the plane rolled softly to a halt in the grass a large finger of canvas ripped away from the wing and drifted slowly down onto several of the mechanics who came running out to them. Pushing oil-smeared goggles off his face, Jake climbed out of his cockpit and then ordered one of the men to quickly take the corporal's camera and get the plates developed as fast as possible. Among the pilots and enlisted men who came out to look at the wounded bird, Jake saw Sergeant Lonnie Burton step through the crowd and move close to him.

"The colonel said he wanted to see you the moment you landed, captain."

"Okay." He nodded, pulling off his leather flying helmet and gratefully accepting a clean towel to wipe his face clean of the film of oil the plane's tired engine constantly threw out. "How's Oglethorpe?"

"He's resting peacefully, sir. There's an armed guard in front of his tent. But that's more of a formality. He's got three cracked ribs from what I hear plus a busted hand. He couldn't run far even if he wanted to."

"And our other prisoner?"

"Locked up in a shed with an armed guard at the door as well, sir. We need not worry there, either. The little German is scared out of his wits. He doesn't make a peep."

Jake nodded and tossed the dirty towel onto the lower wing of the plane. Grinning, and waving at the others who were yelling at him on how his luck was still holding up, he nodded and started walking toward the farm house the squadron was using as its HQ. Their new field was within walking distance of Coulommiers itself. Scattered out across the wide field were pieces of disassembled machines, boxes and crates, and the starkly barren ribs of various tents yet to be raised into the air. And in the middle of his menagerie sat the blood-red circus tent. Like some motif from a surrealist's painting, the *Chubbs & Blaine* tent stood in the middle of the field with a kind of vermilion garishness that seemed almost appealing to him.

No sooner had the squadron established a telephone hook-up with the nearest BEF infantry unit than word came down, army HQ wanted an observation machine up in the air to observe enemy troop movements. Jake was on duty, so he and the corporal flew. Everyone knew a fight was brewing and everyone knew it was about to explode at any moment. There was only one problem to be solved before the shooting began. In order to fight a battle one had to know where the enemy might be. There was still a dearth of solid information as to where exactly the Kaiser's armies were and in what direction they were moving.

The night before he had walked into the colonel's office with the ashen-faced, and quite terrified, young German soldier in tow. The young soldier again related the tale he had only hours before told Jake just outside of Epernay. The story had not changed. Apparently the lieutenant and the sergeant had been fighting over a gun in the sergeant's hand just before it crashed. More importantly, the young German soldier again related the fantastic story about a British soldier on a bicycle fleeing from the crash scene.

Someone rode a bicycle to where he thought the old crate Oglethorpe was flying was going to crash. How did he know it was going to crash somewhere around Epernay? Was that someone from this squadron? Yet there was an even more puzzling question. Why kill the sergeant and leave Oglethorpe alive? Why not just shoot them both and be done with it?

There were more questions than answers. If there was one thing Jake did not like it was the uncertainty factor. Being a skilled artisan and thief he did not like

working in uncertainty. He wanted things neat and planned out. He did not like dangling threads. He despised having unanswered questions looming over his head. It frankly irritated him that he had not already figured out who had killed Sergeant Grimms.

"Ah, there you are!" Colonel Wingate boomed, coming out from behind his desk and walking across the large room which had at one time been the dining room of a dispossessed farmer. Pouring wine for the two of them, he handed Jake a glass and then waited for the American to take a sip before speaking. "Here, I think you need this, captain. I hear your flight was not without excitement!"

Jake grinned at the colonel's attempt at droll humor and gratefully accepted the glass of wine. Wingate had just the suggestion of a grin on his lips as he lifted his glass and took a quick sip. Turning, he walked back to his chair and sat down.

"I've finally found bloody Army HQ. They are just down the road from us, in Coulommiers itself! They are beside themselves with all this running for safe cover. I tried to tell them about Sergeant Grimms, but they seem to be deaf. They're talking about some big push coming soon and don't want to worry about small matters like this until after the battle starts."

"So what do we do with the lieutenant and with our witness?"

"Be damned if I know," boomed the round, heavy-set colonel as he leaned back in his chair and thumped the top of his desk with a pudgy hand. "I guess we will have to keep Oglethorpe under house arrest and the prisoner under guard here until corps can handle the mess. God knows how long that will be."

Jake frowned, finding himself becoming uneasy at the thought of keeping the only witness for the lieutenant's defense here in camp. If Oglethorpe was innocent, and assuming someone else in the squadron was the murderer, did it make sense to keep the German witness within the potential grasp of the guilty? Quietly he pointed the problem out to the colonel.

"Yes, I know, captain. But there is nothing we can do. The closest British unit near us is a brigade of Cornish infantry just to the north of the village. I've already contacted them about hosting our guest for a couple of days. But they

simply don't have the means to do so. Their commander says they are expecting a major fight to break open at any moment and they'll need everyone in the unit to face the enemy. So that means we have him until HQ comes up with an investigative team.

"But we have something more to discuss, Reynolds. Something more important right now to HQ than our problem. When I was on the phone, they wanted to know if we had a pilot who could fly and land a two-seater in an open field on a moonlit night. I said I thought I had one. If anybody could do it, I am sure you can, captain. Is it possible?"

"Certainly. It's possible," Jake answered, nodding. "Given I know where I am going and where I am supposed to land."

"I haven't got a clue. I was told HQ was going to send someone up here this evening. He will have all the instructions you would need. All we have to do is provide the plane and an experienced pilot. This is a voluntary mission, captain. You don't have to go. I think I can get Lieutenant Dunlop to agree to the mission. But I would feel better if you did it."

Edward Dunlop was a kid of twenty-two, tow-headed and barely capable of flying in a straight line. He would kill himself trying to take off in the dead of night. But he was the next best pilot in the squadron. Jake shrugged, sat the empty glass down on the edge of the colonel's desk, and nodded.

"Sure, I'll do it."

"Good. I suggest you get some rest and then possibly oversee the preparation of whatever machine is available for tonight."

"Yes, sir, I will." the dark-haired American nodded, turning and reaching for the door. "But first I want to talk to Oglethorpe."

"Hmmm, a good idea," nodded the colonel, frowning. "I just can't believe this has happened. This whole mess doesn't make sense. It is like a painting of a deranged mind. Nothing is recognizable to the eye. All jumbled up."

Jake nodded and closed the door behind him. In what once had been the living room of the farm house, now the squadron was using it as the clerks' main office area. Six enlisted men were methodically unpacking crates and setting up desks and cabinets in stifling heat. The first day of September in 1914 was

blazing hot with not the slightest breath of air stirring. Even with all the windows and doors open, the farmhouse was unbearably hot and the six clerks were sweating profusely.

"Anderson," Jake said, looking at one of the younger lads who was trying to lift a heavy box of dossiers.

"Sir?"

"Here," Jake grunted, pulling out some money and rapidly counting off fifty francs. "Send someone who knows how to scrounge around to the village. See if you can find some good wine, cheese, and fresh bread. See if we can make arrangements to have the village supply us with bread on a daily basis. When the food arrives, come and get me. I'll be in my tent."

"Sir!" the eighteen-year-old lad replied, beaming and saluting smartly as he flashed toward the front door.

Outside in the hot sun, Jake unbuttoned his heavy wool tunic, then turned and headed toward the long row of tents which were the quarters for the squadron personnel. In front of one tent was an infantryman standing guard with his big bolt-action Enfield rifle slung over his shoulder. Saluting when the private came to attention, Jake ducked down and entered Oglethorpe's tent.

The lieutenant was lying on his cot, awake, sweat glistening across his forehead and with most of the heavy wrapping of bandages across his chest drenched as well. The heat in the tent was like an oven even with the tent flaps open. He looked pale and exhausted and was still breathing through his teeth.

"Jake! My God, can you get me out of here? I'm dying from the heat. I can hardly breathe."

"We'll try to find a more comfortable place for you. But how you feeling otherwise? How are the ribs?"

"They hurt like hell. I can't sit up; I can't lay down. I can't stand up and I barely can walk. Now I know how it is to become an old man. It is not something I look forward to."

Jake sat down on the empty cot across from the lieutenant and glanced around at the confining quarters. Underneath the younger man's head were three pillows propping his head up with the top pillow soaked with sweat.

"It's like a sauna in here, Jim. At least you'll lose some weight."

"I need to gain weight, Jake," Oglethorpe hissed, trying to smile. "Say, you got a cigarette? I'd pay a month's salary for a good smoke."

"Sure." Jake nodded, finding a pack of American-made cigarettes and shaking one out for the younger man. "I'll send over a fresh carton or two for you later."

"Thanks," Oglethorpe grunted, using his one good hand to pull the cigarette from his lips after taking a deep lung full of smoke. "You know, I've always been amazed at the way you seem to acquire things. Automobiles, aeroplanes, women, money. You seem to have it all."

Jake lit his cigarette and then blew the match out casually, eyeing Oglethorpe in the process. Taking a long drag of his cigarette, the big American thought it over for a while in silence.

"I never understood just exactly what Father saw in you. No, I don't mean that as a negative, Jake. Don't get me wrong. It's just that, well, Father was not interested in aeroplanes or automobiles. Father did not allow himself to be involved with the younger generation and our, as he called them, hair-brained inventions. He preferred to keep himself isolated, and he did not particularly like Americans. But you were different. In you, Father often said he found an admirable soul."

"The general perhaps is more interested in the world than you think, Jim," Jake said softly through a blue bank of spent cigarette smoke. "And you know he will be beside himself when he hears of this mess."

"I doubt it," the lieutenant grunted, frowning. "We haven't spoken to each other in over a year. I doubt if he knows I'm alive. In fact, the last time we talked, he wished I was dead."

A long trickle of sweat began to form in the groove of Jake's spine and he had to wipe sweat from his brow. It was insufferably hot in the tent. Too hot for a convalescent to find any rest.

"Jim, we must quickly get to the bottom of this murder. Last night I came back from the wreck with someone who witnessed the crash. His story will go a long way in proving your innocence. But we've got to do more than that. We

have to find the real killer before he strikes again."

"A witness? You found someone who saw the killer using my gun to kill the sergeant?"

"Not exactly," Jake answered, getting up quickly to assist the lieutenant as he struggled to a sitting position. "A German infantry regiment saw you and the sergeant come down. After the crash they heard two gunshots. But before they could capture you they were driven off by French infantry."

"But how does this help me? Those gun shots came from my own revolver!"

"True. But the witness said you and the sergeant were standing up and grappling each other as the plane glided down toward the earth. In the sergeant's hand apparently was your pistol. He claims just after the plane came down he and his squad of men heard the voices of two Englishmen yelling at each other in a heated argument. Afterwards, he heard two gunshots. But here's where it gets interesting. Our witness saw someone riding away from the crash site on a bicycle. Someone dressed in a British uniform."

"What? My God!"

"Crazy, isn't it?" the American nodded and shrugged his shoulders casually. "Sounds impossible, I'll admit. But our German friend swears it all happened. Do you remember any of this?"

Oglethorpe shook his head no and grimaced from the pain as he hissed out a hoarse reply.

"I don't remember a thing. Nothing about yesterday at all. It's as if I can see some vague images in my head. But nothing seems clear. Sorry."

"You do remember the argument you had with Sergeant Grimms night before last?"

The lieutenant nodded, eyes watering from the pain as he watched Jake.

"Grimms was cheating at cards, Jake. I swear to it. Over the last fortnight he cleaned me out of well over a hundred pounds Sterling. You were there that night. Surely you suspected something!"

Jake nodded, thinking about the night of the poker game and thinking that he had been impressed with Grimm's amazing run of luck. But it had been just that. Luck. He saw nothing in the way Grimms dealt the cards, or in the cards

themselves, to suggest someone was cheating.

"Was that the first time you thought the sergeant had been cheating?"

"No, of course not," Oglethorpe whispered through his teeth, grimacing in pain and slowly sliding back onto the cot. "I was sure of it a week before we left England. He won twenty quid off me in a game, which lasted less than ten minutes. He had three straight winning hands. Three, just like that, one after the other!"

Jake pulled deeply on his cigarette and thought about it, staring down at the plank floor of the tent, before exhaling slowly. Was Grimms a card shark? But how could the sergeant be so adept? He had just taught a number of men in the squadron the game the Americans called Five Card Stud. Grimms barely knew how to play the game. So how could he cheat? Maybe, Jake mused to himself as he sat up and eyed the lieutenant, it was more likely that the lieutenant was terrible at gambling and particularly so with cards. That, matched to his famous temper, spelled trouble no matter how you analyzed it.

"Jim, who would want to harm you."

"Me?" Oglethorpe echoed, blinking up at Jake in amazement. "Harm me? By shooting Grimms? Absurd! That doesn't make sense!"

"Yeah, at first glance it doesn't," the blue-eyed, dark-haired captain nodded, smiling with a rogue's grin. "But harming you by framing you for murder, and maybe in the process, harming your father as well. How is your father going to take the news when he finds out you might be charged with a capital crime?"

"My god, this is something only a fiend would dream up!"

Jake nodded in agreement as he came to his feet and flicked the cigarette through the open tent flap. The lieutenant was losing color rapidly and the heat was unbearable. He doubted Oglethorpe could answer another question.

"Listen, you need some rest. We also need to get you to some place where you can rest comfortably. Hungry? Thirsty?"

"Thirsty," the ashen-faced young man whispered weakly. "But my orderly has gone off to find some cold water. He'll return shortly."

"Good. I'll get out of here so you can rest. We'll move you over into the farmhouse just as soon as we fix a place up for you. Hang in there, Jim. With the

witness I found last night, no one could honestly bring charges against you. So just relax."

"Thanks... old man," the rapidly fading younger man whispered as Jake bent down and slipped through the open flap.

Above him the September sun was burning with a fierce radiance and the entire countryside looked burnt and scorched to the point of lifelessness. Across the field a couple of mechanics labored slowly at spinning the wooden prop of one of the squadron's newly acquired Morane-Saulniers. On the third spin, the motor belched black smoke. It began ticking over slowly sounding very sullen and ill-tempered. Turning, Jake eyed the infantryman, one of the men in the company-sized detachments assigned to the squadron for security purposes, and wondered to himself how many times a day the guard was changed in front of Oglethorpe's tent. Shaking his head he moved away from the tent and started walking down the line of tents to his quarters.

There was a murderer in this squadron. This fiend either killed Grimms because of some insult Grimms might have fostered, or more likely, because of something the young lieutenant might have inadvertently created. In either case, Jake knew the next few days were going to be crucial. Under guard in a shed was the German prisoner who could give Oglethorpe a substantial alibi for his innocence. Only he and the colonel knew the witness' story. For the real culprit, the possibility existed that the witness might be able to make a positive identification. That meant the prisoner's life was in jeopardy, a palpable and real jeopardy one could almost taste in one's mouth. Yet it also meant an opportunity.

If the real murderer was foolish enough to make an attempt on the witness's life, and if they were prepared for it, perhaps this affair might come to a swift conclusion in a matter of hours. Jake turned suddenly, a plan forming in his head, and began looking for Sergeant Lonnie Burton.

Moon beam wraiths slid madly across the open field.
Ghostly silvery-white specters of illusionary delights.

In the middle of a grassy field, Jake stood beside the boxy Avro 504 two-seater and calmly checked the rounds of ammo in his Webley revolver before snapping it closed. Sliding it in his shoulder holster he glanced at the colonel and then turned his attention to the small, wiry man standing beside him.

A non-descript little man with an infinitely forgettable face, Captain Archibald Smythe needed a ride. Presenting himself to Colonel Wingate and Jake at precisely 2300 hrs. in the colonel's office, the small man calmly informed them he needed to be deposited in a field one kilometer east of the city of Reims at precisely 0200 hrs. Reims was approximately 80 kilometers behind enemy lines. There were rumors that the Crown Prince of Bavaria was using the city as his headquarters. All Jake had to do was take off on a moonlit night, fly by dead reckoning using the terrain below in the moonlight for his guide, and land in the field just for a moment or two before turning into the wind and taking off again. Simplicity in itself.

Low-hanging clouds scudded across the face of the moon at a rapid clip. They created the illusion of white pillars of moonlight speeding across the ground like some spectral set of waltzing dancers. If the clouds did not thicken and obliterate the moon entirely, Jake was sure he could get the job done. If the clouds came in, and they were behind enemy lines, the dark-eyed American knew they would play hell finding their way back to safety.

On the other hand, Jake thought to himself as he flashed a mischievous smirk of an oversized kid across his thin lips, this was a challenge he was looking forward to, depositing a spy deep behind enemy lines and using an aeroplane for the insertion. As far as he knew it would be the first time in the annals of warfare something like this had ever been attempted. Why not be a part of history?

"Ready?" he asked, looking at the man who barely came to his shoulders.

Smythe nodded and then turned and climbed into the front cockpit of the 504. Jake started to climb into the rear cockpit. But Wingate grabbed him by the arm and gently pulled him to one side.

"Be careful, captain. The Boche are summarily shooting anyone in occupied territory whom they suspect as being *francs tireurs*. That's their term for civilian snipers. Smythe is not wearing a uniform and neither are you. Don't get caught. If you do they won't even take the time to place you in custody."

The march through Belgium by the German army had been a costly one for civilians and non-combatants. Stories had flooded back to Allied lines about hundreds of civilians lined up and gunned down on the mere suspicion they were resisting German efforts to move ever southward. Even Smythe, in the colonel's office earlier that night, mentioned this and offered Jake the opportunity to decline this rather hazardous mission. The gray-eyed American shook his head no and said he was going before changing into some warm but dark clothing that held no suggestion of rank or nationality.

The dark-haired American nodded and stepped up onto the lower wing of the biplane and dropped himself into the cockpit. As per Smythe's request, the ugly duckling of an aeroplane was pushed out to the far end of the grassy field and orders had been given that no one was supposed to observe the departure. It was a little past midnight on a hot, almost suffocating September night. The squadron was dark and lifeless in the silence of the night. The soft rumble of artillery fire some kilometers away reminded him there were those who were awake and were looking for a little action. The racing columns of moonlight slashing through the gaps in the broken clouds sped across the field with amazing agility. Seconds later the overcast sky would momentarily swallow up the moon entirely and plunge the entire universe into a well of inky darkness for a few brief moments.

Yet moments later the whitish silver moon light again flashed back into existence and illuminated the country side.

The colonel hurried around to the front of the plane and firmly gripped the wooden prop with both hands and waited. Jake pulled goggles down over his eyes, turned on the magneto switch, then threw his head to one side and yelled, "Contact!"

It took only one try from the colonel to kick the engine into life. Running to one side the colonel lifted a hand and waved as Jake opened the throttle wide and used some rudder to face what little wind there was. In seconds the plane was running down the grassy field and bounced into the air just as clouds swept down and engulfed the moon entirely. For a few seconds Wingate could see the single dot of light from the Avro's fiery exhaust in the darkness as it lifted itself over the trees at the far end of the field and then turned toward the northeast. But then, in a flash, it was gone and only the soft drone of the fading engine could be heard. Yet in moments even that too was swallowed up in the darkness, leaving Wingate standing alone in an empty field, looking remarkably like an animated scarecrow as he turned and walked back to his quarters.

Jake smiled to himself in pleasure. The day's sun had baked the earth to an oven hotness, and now this late at night, the heat was seeping out of the ground and rising toward the heavens in powerful thermal updrafts. Thermal updrafts made his double-winged crate dance and hop around through the sky like a skittish colt as he kept its nose tipped gently up into the darkness. He didn't know how the little man with the bland face sitting in the cockpit in front of him was taking the bumpy ride, but he was enjoying it immensely.

The plan Smythe outlined to the colonel and Jake was simple. Jake was to climb to ten or twelve thousand feet and then descend at a gentle angle toward the landing site. With the engine throttled back, Smythe was counting on Jake to land without power onto the field and let the plane roll almost to a complete stop before throttling up and turning the plane around for an immediate takeoff. Just before Jake whipped the plane around, Smythe would climb out onto the lower wing and then jump. He would roll clear of the plane and disappear into the darkness as the American roared down the field and took off again.

Three days later, at 0300 hrs. sharp, Jake would return to pick up the little spy. Smythe would wait until Jake almost rolled to a halt in the plane before gunning the engine to turn around. At that point the little man would make his appearance and jump into the plane. If there was anything that looked suspicious to Jake, or if the little spy did not reveal himself by the time he turned the plane around, Jake was to take off and not look back.

Fair enough, Jake thought to himself, as he tipped his head over the side of his cockpit for a quick visual check. The moon was out now in full force, its light reflecting off the calm waters of the Grand Morin and Petite Morin Rivers below. In front of them some kilometers away was the wider black ribbon of the meandering Marne River. He was pleased to see they were on course and on time. Whistling some show tune to himself, he sat back in the seat and made himself comfortable.

He had not been perfectly honest with the colonel or the little spy. There was an ulterior motive Jake had, which made him so quickly volunteer for this mission. It had something to do with the three-paneled painting of the *Madonna and Child* sitting in a small church in Epernay. It occurred to him that if this mission with the spy worked, why wouldn't it work a second time? But this time he would settle down into a field outside Epernay and, dressed as a high-ranking German officer, boldly walk into town and take the van Eck. The plan exploded into his head the moment the colonel asked him if he could fly and land a plane in bright moonlight. Suddenly the idea of taking the van Eck in one bold fast stroke seemed infinitely attainable. The best part of the plan was, who would be blamed for this audacious rape of a national treasure?

Of course—the heartless and merciless greed of the malevolent Hun. He smiled in pleasure at the thought of how easy it was going to be.

For the present there was the long trek across the night sky toward Reims. Squirring himself around in the cockpit to make himself comfortable, Jake's mind began thinking about the problem of Sergeant Grimms.

He had been, what seemed like eons ago, in the sergeant's tent and in that infamous card game the lieutenant pronounced the sergeant's imminent demise. Himself, the lieutenant, Lonnie Burton, the lieutenant's batman, and Sergeant

Randal Holmes had heard the fiery accusations from Oglethorpe. At that time everyone shrugged off Oglethorpe's anger because everyone knew how hot-tempered the young lieutenant was. But, frowning, Jake thought perhaps someone in that tent had come up with a plan to kill the sergeant and pin the blame on the lieutenant. With six witnesses present to testify to the death threat it would be almost impossible for Oglethorpe to defend himself. The lucky find of the young German who had, along with his entire regiment, observed the lieutenant and the sergeant struggling with the lieutenant's gun was a miraculous discovery.

He found himself struggling over the central point. Who killed Sergeant Grimms? And what was the motive for the sergeant's death? There had to be a reason for someone to kill at point-blank range. For what reason? To destroy Oglethorpe or Oglethorpe's famous father? Or was it to simply have revenge on Grimms? Jake thought to himself as the plane suddenly hit an updraft and lifted three hundred feet higher into the inky darkness with a bone-jarring suddenness. The quite unexpected surge upward in altitude did nothing to disturb his thoughts, although vaguely, he thought he heard a groan coming out of the forward cockpit.

Sergeant Holmes was a big-boned kid from the Kent countryside. A farm boy who had decided to make the army a career. Not very articulate and somewhat shy, nevertheless the farm boy could tear down a Le Rhone rotary or a Broadmore in-line and have it reassembled and purring like a fine Swiss watch in less than a day. Holmes and Grimms had been, from the instant the squadron was assembled, good friends. Both came from the same background and both enjoyed each other's company.

Lonnie Burton was the sergeant-major in the outfit. The highest-ranking NCO. Cool, assured, confident, Lonnie's background suggested education and breeding. But of course, in post-Victorian British society, and being Welsh, it would be hard for someone without family connections to acquire an officer's commission. The same rigid rules applied to even the colonial armies of His Majesty's British Empire. Nevertheless Jake placed a lot of trust in the sergeant-major. If he wanted a job to be done, and done efficiently and with acuity,

Burton was the NCO to find.

Oglethorpe's little batman was a quirky, strange little creature. The dark-haired American was sure he had seen the small man in the Oglethorpe family estates a number of times prior to the war. Jake had the impression the beady-eyed, balding young man who seemed to slink around on the outer edges of every conversation the lieutenant was engaged in, had at one time been an aide to Sir John. He had been somewhat surprised to see the man arrive in camp just before bumping over to the Continent. But maybe the small man was more devoted to the boy than to the father. Curious about him and why he had joined the squadron, Jake thought a few discreet inquiries might be in order.

Oglethorpe was hot-headed, spoiled, impetuous, and with a wellhoned talent for letting his mouth run off before he thought things through. His temperamental ravings created ill will among several of the officers and most of the enlisted men. But for all that Jake could see no motive for the young man to murder the sergeant.

The dead man had been solid and reliable. An English yeoman from the original roots. Like Sergeant Holmes, Grimms came from a Canadian farm background and joined the army to see the world. Good with his hands, between Holmes and Grimms there was nothing made and flown that these two mechanics could not repair.

He moved the stick a bit to the starboard as he looked down over the side of the cockpit and noticed the bend in the Marne just above a place called Chateau-Thierry. Captain Smythe noticed the bend as well and turned in his seat and gestured downward. Jake nodded and cut the throttle back on the Avro's in-line engine and began a shallow descent downward.

He assumed the spy knew the field they were going to touch down in would be empty. With a sudden explosion of moonlight, Jake sat up in the cockpit and began scrutinizing the terrain below. Off the port wing there were thousands of tiny pin points representing campfires burning and indicating the presence of a large German combat unit. Reims was clearly illuminated by the moon, but the city sat in pitch darkness. Off to the starboard he counted sixteen sets of lights from a Boche truck convoy heading for the front. A few kilometers in front of

the truck convoy he watched the bright flashes of German 77-mm and 155-mm artillery pieces growling angrily into the night. Ahead of them, in the field he was aiming for, everything seemed calm and tranquil.

Clouds covered the moon suddenly, flushing the entire countryside into total darkness. It continued to stay inky black all the way down to just within a few hundred meters above the field. But then, with an incredible brilliance, the clouds moved away and moonlight filled the field just as the Avro's wheels began whipping through the tall grass.

It was a perfect landing. The plane hardly bounced when it touched down. With the engine just ticking over the plane barely took a few hundred meters to roll almost to a stop. Just as it almost came to a halt, Smythe was out onto the lower wing and leaping into the grass, rolling with an acrobat's ease over one shoulder and coming quickly to his feet. Gunning the engine, Jake built up a maneuvering speed, and then used the rudder to swing the plane around and back into the wind. Smythe was nowhere to be seen. Like a mirage, the man had slipped into a dense mass of trees and disappeared. Not waiting for any surprises to be sprung Jake had the Avro bouncing down the field and pulled the stick back the moment enough speed built up and lifted the plane into the air.

Taking a chance and circling the field once Jake tried to scrutinize the dark and catch a glimpse of the spy. But there was nothing to be seen. Casually tossing a friendly salute in the direction of the dark trees Jake dipped the plane's wings to one side and headed for home, hoping that in three days when he returned the average-looking little man would be alive and waiting for him.

Three days later Jake was again in the cockpit of the boxy Avro. As he revved the crate's small engine in the dead of night, the flimsy crate of wood and canvas rattled and groaned.

Darkness hung like the Grim Reaper's hallowed cloak on the trees.

Yet the heat of the day simmered and fumed—sapping the strength from everyone and fraying the nerves of all. At the far end of the landing field he was preparing to take off. Shrouded in blackness it seemed more like a graveyard than a landing field. Some yards off, just barely visible in the night, a row of winged-dinosaurs sat silently staring at them. It was, as the colonel so eloquently said a few minutes earlier, time to pluck Captain Smyth from out of the midst of Philistines. Yet there was a worrisome addition tonight. The Avro's engine began to act up the moment he lifted off the field. In what little moonlight available the biplane struggled into the air, barely slipping over the line of trees at the far end of the field before suddenly recovering from its ailments and roaring into its full throaty roar of power again. Banking to the right, Jake thought about setting the tired, patched old bus down and having one of the mechanics look at the engine. Instead, he leveled the machine, pulled goggles over his eyes and crossed his fingers for good luck. Moving the joystick between his legs back toward him he began climbing for altitude, while at the same time, keeping an attentive ear on the throaty growl of the engine in front of him. He had a little less than an hour to complete the mission which began three days earlier with the British spy.

There was no choice. It was use this old Avro to fly behind enemy lines and

pick up Smythe, or leave the poor bastard there for him to find his own way back. The squadron was down to two serviceable machines at the moment. They were cannibalizing parts from other machines to get this machine up into the air for tonight's mission. Sergeant Burton made no promises the Avro's small four-cylinder engine would last much longer. To make his point crystal clear his concerns for the American's safety, the sturdy NCO rigged a special harness into the cockpit Jake would use to hold a brace of big Webley revolvers... just in case, he said quietly only moments before he took off. Jake grinned at the big NCO and said thanks. But pointing to the shoulder holster and weapon underneath his left armpit he assured the sergeant he was bringing his own personal hardware along with him.

Off to the west a large thunderstorm was building. Flashes of bright lightning filled the darkness with a sudden fury. With each stroke of lightning he would hurriedly look out and down from his 4000-foot perch in an effort to catch his bearings. As luck would have it there was no moon tonight. The clouds rolled in just before dark and the smell of rain became quite distinct. Colonel Wingate found Jake in the hangar around midnight as he and Burton and a few others were putting the Avro's engine back together. He expressed concerns about the mission. Without a moon to guide him how would Jake be able to find his way to Reims? How would he be able to land in a field if there was not enough light to see where any obstacles might be? What if Smythe did not show up?

Jake could do nothing but shrug his shoulders, wipe grease and oil from his hands with a dirty rag, and admit to the colonel he had thought of those problems as well. But he had to try. Smythe was putting his life on the line for his country and he was expecting to be plucked from the midst of an entire German army at the appointed time. Jake said he'd be damned if he wouldn't at least make an effort to snatch the British officer from imminent capture.

To his left, just a little past the French village called Montmirail, he observed a different kind of light flashing spasmodically in the darkness. Like hundreds of immense fire flies illuminating the night, the flashes of the conversing artillery pieces littered the dark ground in a rolling carpet of artificial lightning. Boche and French artillery were speaking to each other in a singularly deadly duet. The

bombardment began late in the afternoon and continued without let up as night fell. So intense was the shelling that, even eight miles away in Coulommiers, the ground shook with the unrelenting hammering both sides were inflicting upon each other.

The battle the BEF headquarters had told them was soon to break out had indeed burst open with a raucous din of destruction that afternoon. The French were stirring what was left of the mauled and bleeding remnants of their armies and digging in to make a stand. They were determined to save Paris, especially so since Jake's return only days before with photos showing the Boche so dangerously strung out and over extended. A new French army, with orders to protect Paris, had been gleaned from seemingly out of thin air and given the orders to vigorously defend the city. The Parisian garrison's new commander, an old veteran of several of France's colonial wars, immediately began preparations to attack the weary Germans.

Miraculously, in the collective Allied camps there was a new attitude. Only days before the constant fighting and forced retreats of the French and British armies had everyone believing they were going to lose the war. Now there seemed to be a new fighting spirit somehow wafting through the weary Poilu and Tommies setting in their trenches. There was this gut feeling the retreating was over. With it came this new conviction it was time to hit back at the mailed fist of the Boche juggernaut. And hitting back, the French were doing with Gallic enthusiasm.

Montmirail was roughly twenty miles south and west of Epernay. Thanks to the winking lights of the dueling artillery to his left, Jake believed that if he could fly past with the small French village on his right wing tip, flying in a northeast direction, he would eventually run into Epernay. From Epernay ran a road almost arrow straight all the way to Reims. He knew the road well. If, as it was likely, the Germans were using this road to haul to the front men and material the road would be a lighted ribbon of moving Boche truck convoys pointing straight to Reims.

To his infinite relief he saw exactly what he anticipated seeing when he slipped past the flashing artillery and then looked over to his left. There was

indeed an unending line of lights, which almost blurred into one long bright illuminated snake, stretching all the way from Reims to Epernay. This was still 1914. The idea of aerial bombardment of long lines of truck convoys in the dead of the night still seemed like sheer fantasy. Bombs dropping from the air had just become a reality when the Boche began using their massive Zeppelin dirigibles to bomb Belgium forts in the opening hours of the war. Zeppelins could carry the bomb loads for such an attack. But not aeroplanes. Not yet.

Grinning, Jake pulled a rag from out a pocket in his heavy leather jacket and quickly wiped his goggles clear of engine oil. With time to kill, from another pocket he found the apple he brought with him and took a big bite out of it. As the plane danced and dipped through the hot September night air, he soon found himself thinking about the murdered Grimms and the hapless Lieutenant Oglethorpe.

When he got back to the squadron he was going to have a long talk with Jimmy's quirky little batman. He had a feeling the little man, who had served the Oglethorpe family loyally for so many years, would have information that might shed some light on the younger Oglethorpe's involvement with the murder. He was also going to ask the colonel to make more inquiries back in England. If someone was trying to ruin Sir John by framing his son with murder, perhaps the general himself might have helpful information.

A pocket of turbulence brought him out of his reverie. Tossing the core of the apple over the side of the cockpit Jake stuck his head out and looked down at the snaking line of slow-moving German trucks below. Nodding, and saying a quick and silent prayer to the finicky gods of internal combustion engines, he reached forward and switched off the engine's magneto before settling back into his seat and gently moving the joystick to his left. Immediately the plane began to drop in altitude. Pushing the stick forward a little Jake realized he had to be exactly on the money as to how much of a rate of descent he could give the old bus. Descend too fast, and miss the assigned landing spot, and he would have to turn on the engine again and give it all its worth to climb for altitude. A roaring engine so low to the ground, and so near to the unseen masses of a German army would have every field commander telephoning each other and shouting dire

warnings for miles around.

Not keeping the nose down and descending fast enough would make the Avro stall and then drop like a stone 4000 feet to his death. The prospect of spiraling into the ground right in the middle of the unending long line of Boche supply trucks did not appeal to his sense of heroic sacrifice. As if, snorting in derision to himself, he believed in that garbage to begin with! Fools died heroic deaths. Idiots believed in laying down one's life for a lost cause. The patriotic idealists had so far been the cannon fodder in this war. But not him. Not Jake Reynolds.

He was a pragmatist. He was in this war not because he was some dreamy-eyed college student who believed in God and Country. He was a realist. He was in this war because... because...?

Hell, he thought to himself as he leaned over the edge of the cockpit and felt the hot summer's pre-dawn air streaming past his face with a fierce intentness, why was he in this goddamn war? Did he believe in God and Country? Was he a patriot? Was he... oh, god!... a hero? Angrily he shook his head in an effort to shake those foul-tasting words out of his skull and used the back of one gloved hand to wipe his goggles clean again. Jake Reynolds a hero? A patriot? How in god's name could a thief be a hero? Why would a pragmatist like himself ever consider becoming a patriot?

But then... why would a realist like himself volunteer for a mission of this nature? Why would he even consider trying to glide a beat-up old bus like this down into a darkened field in a dead stick landing miles behind enemy lines? Was it for the painting? Was he willing to exchange his life, and possibly the life of a terribly brave British officer who was playing the dangerous and rather unheralded sport of being a spy, for a few pieces of wood which had colored oils smeared on it by someone who lived six hundred years ago? Was the vague thrill of stealing a masterpiece out of the ends of the Kaiser's own hand and selling the rare antiquity to a collector for a tidy sum of American dollars that important to him?

Well...

Suddenly in the darkness below a familiar sight flashed underneath his right

wing. Kicking his rudder slightly he lined the Avro's nose up with the field and then reached forward and turned on the engine's magneto switch. With a roar the engine kicked to life just as the wheels settled gently into the field's tall grass. Jake, using now the rudder and the throttle to run the Avro across the field, kicked hard on the rudder to bring the plane around in a tight one-hundred-eighty-degree turn.

Aeroplanes in World War One were not equipped with brakes. One literally dropped a machine down onto a big enough field and allowed the rickety piece of canvas and wood to roll naturally to a stop. There was another problem with such machines. They were without any form of internal starters for their engines. It took at least two men to get a machine's engine running. One man had to sit in the cockpit and control it once it was started while the other stood in front of the wooden prop and used plain, old-fashioned muscle power to spin the prop around fast enough to ignite the gas in the engine's cylinders. Of course engines in World War One were notoriously unreliable. In 1914 they were worse than notoriously unreliable.

Whipping the plane around and lining it up toward a clump of trees situated on the far side of the field, Jake gunned the anemic four-cylinder engine and fully expected the nondescript little English officer to materialize out of the darkness as planned and leap onto the machine's lower wing. But no one appeared rising out of the tall grass to sprint to the idling machine. Only infinite emptiness greeted Jake as he sat in the cockpit and looked out in both directions for any sign of the man.

Frowning, Jake twisted to look behind him in the darkness. A few yards distance from the aeroplane's rudder, an arm—in a startling white shirt—appeared rising out of the sea of grass just as a jagged bolt of lightning ripped through the air. Cursing violently, Jake hurriedly switched off the magneto switch, unbuckled his safety belt, clawed his way out of the cockpit, and leaped into the dark grass. Sprinting to the spot where he saw the hand appear and just as the first large drops of rain began to splatter the oven-baked ground, Jake found Captain Smythe slumped to his knees and bent over into a compact ball of bone and flesh.

“You must leave. They are all around us. It’s a trap,” hissed the little British officer as Jake threw one of the man’s arms over his head and around his shoulders just before lifting the wounded man to his feet. “Quickly, inside my trouser’s pockets. There’s some papers which need to get back to HQ. Leave me here. These papers are important.”

Smythe had a nasty wound in his upper right shoulder. Blood drenched the front half of the white linen shirt. Judging from the rip in the man’s shirt the wound appeared to have been caused by a bayonet thrust. Gripping the weak man firmly, the dark-haired American began leading the wounded man around toward the Avro just as another crack of lightning lit up the immediate area around them.

There, between them and the dark silhouette of the aeroplane, stood four German soldiers with their distinctive spiked helmets on their dark heads and with their long bolt-action Mauser rifles with fixed bayonets pointed toward them.

“A lovely night to die, don’t you think so, gentlemen?” a voice rolled out in a velvety rumble of arrogance from behind the Avro. A tall, well-built form materialized in front of the machine’s nose, with hands stuck deep into his trousers pockets and a monocle hanging rakishly underneath his right eyebrow as he walked around the starboard set of wings and stopped to peer at the two Allied soldiers.

“Tut, tut, tut. Caught in the act of helping a wounded spy. Please do not do anything foolish, captain. You are my prisoner, and as you know, the hour is late. I must be in Berlin by tomorrow night and I want to take you and your comrade, alive if possible, with me.”

Jake grinned. A sudden blinding bolt of jagged lightning ripped through the sky and smacked into the now wet ground not more than one hundred feet from them. In that instantaneous flash of light, two things happened. First, the wounded officer’s legs seemed to buckle and he began to sink toward the wet ground. Jake, bending down in an apparent effort to catch his balance and keep from dropping the weakened British officer altogether, intentionally brought Smythe’s body across his own dark form, momentarily blocking everyone’s view

of his free hand in the process.

The second thing to happen has, over the years, become somewhat disputed by those who survived the incident. Another ragged bolt of lightning exploded across the skies directly above their heads. The bolt of raw energy and the clap of its immediate thunder were so close several of the survivors believed they had at first been struck by lightning. They had not. In that brief second of an involuntary reflexive motion of ducking from the flash of lighting, Jake's free hand suddenly came up and pointed toward the four armed soldiers with a heavy-looking black object in it. Jake squeezed off four shots toward the infantrymen in such a rapid succession no one heard the shots. All four of the young, but exhausted, enlisted men caught a .45 caliber slug high in the upper right or left shoulders, spinning each around violently before pitching them backwards into the high grass.

Dumbfounded, the tall, wide-shouldered German officer stood absolutely motionless as his monocled eye fixed itself on the image of the RFC captain holding his wounded comrade with one hand, while the other hand gripped one of those new American-made Colt semi-automatics.

"Good evening, general," Jake said, a smirk on his lips as he slowly lowered Smythe to the ground and then stepped back a yard or two from the wounded man. "As you said, it is a lovely night tonight to die. Care to join your comrades?"

For a few seconds the general officer stood absolutely still and then, from out of the darkness, Jake heard the man chuckle in an amused fashion as he lifted one hand up to remove the monocle from his face.

"Allow me to introduce myself, captain. I am General Helmuth von Frankenstein, of the Kaiser's Own Imperial Staff, at your service."

The general bent his head formally, clicked his heels smartly, then returned his monocle to his eye and turned toward the moans of his wounded men.

"May I attend to their wounds?" he asked, nodding to his four men lying in the grass and moaning in pain.

"No time for that," Jake said, still grinning and shaking his head no in the process. "They'll live if we get them medical attention soon enough. Kindly do

me the favor of assisting my friend here over to your staff car. We'll drive to the nearest town and send medics out here."

"You are sure they will survive?"

Jake's grin widened as he shrugged modestly. But the business end of the Colt semi-automatic never wavered from pointing at the general's chest.

"I really am quite good at this, general. I know where I hit your men. They will survive if we get to a town and send them medical aid as soon as possible."

Von Frankenstein frowned and paused as he listened to the groans and moans of the four wounded soldiers. Where in Hades had the British officer come up with a gun that large? How could a human being move so fast! Shaking his head in bewilderment, he nevertheless turned and strolled over to the kneeling Smythe and bent down and quickly lifted the wounded officer up with one shoulder.

"I believe Reims will be the closest town from here."

"Yes, it would be if we were going to Reims." Jake nodded, taking up behind the general and his human cargo some yards behind them and keeping a casual eye on the way the Imperial German officer carried the wounded Smythe. "But we're not heading toward Reims. We're going to Epernay."

"Epernay? Why Epernay?" Von Frankenstein half lifted, half threw the wounded British officer into the rear seat of a large German staff car before turning to look at Jake. "What could possibly be in Epernay of such importance?"

"You'll find out, general. Now, get in on the passenger side and don't try anything you're not prepared to die for. Remember, I speak German fluently. The first detachment of troops we run across you will stop the car and order them back to pick up your men.

After that, we three have another job to do before the sun comes up."

A cloud of low-hanging white dust...

The grunt of tired horses and men marching accompanied by the sounds of creaking wagon wheels and the sputtering whine of motorcycles carrying army couriers.

Soldiers everywhere.

The road to Epernay was a quagmire of men marching in both directions. Fresh troops in clean new uniforms and with cheery faces were marching down from Reims. There was a song in their hearts and the apparent glow on their faces of boys marching off to glory. Raucous, loud and profane, they moved with a brisk step and a jaunty air down one-half of the road. Moving in the opposite direction was an entirely different mass of manhood. The other half of the road was occupied by a seemingly unending line of tired men with haggard and exhausted masks for faces and wearing dirty sweat-stained uniforms. They were moving in the weary march of the near dead, each one of them staring out at the world with eyes more dead than alive, and each moving with just enough motion to conserve whatever energy they had left in them.

Behind the wheel of the big staff car Jake watched the side of the road that contained the living dead. Sitting in the middle of the road, the car's big engine idling roughly both he and the German officer sat silently watching the sea of humanity. The visual imagery in contrasts was a startling dichotomy of extremes. And a statement of man's insanity. Both the cheering youth marching off to glory and the dead moved surviving such glory filed past them as the wounded

Captain Smythe continued to moan in a soft voice of delirium in the car's rear seat. For several moments they sat in silence before an infantry sergeant waved an arm and shouted for them to move forward. Pushing the gearshift up into first, the dark-haired American let out the clutch slowly and got the big car moving again, but moving at a rate barely faster than the marching men heading for the front.

"Captain, you amaze me," von Frankenstein began, breaking the silence as he sighed and looked over at Jake and grinned. "There is nothing in the world that should keep me from shouting for help and having the both of you thrown into irons in the blinking of an eye. Yet here you are, sitting behind my car's steering wheel, taking both me and your comrade to Epernay. We are on a road filled with perhaps fifteen or twenty thousand German soldiers and you look as if you are driving us all to a picnic. A picnic!"

The dark-haired American grinned and shifted the big Colt .45 Government Model from his right hip to his left. Just before leaving the field where he had landed the Avro, Jake handcuffed the big German to his car's front bumper before running back to the plane to fish out a small bag containing a second set of clothing in it. Nondescript black clothing, plain and simply cut, denoting no uniform or country of origin whatsoever. Discarding his officer's uniform he hurriedly slipped into the plain pullover sweater and pants and then slid behind the automobile's wheel. Tossing the keys to the cuffs to the general the two began their trip toward the small hamlet in complete silence.

Until now.

"I have met my share of talented thespians, Captain Reynolds. But you, my friend, make those I have met look like rank amateurs! I find myself being immensely entertained by whatever it is you are doing. I can't wait to see how this little charade is going to end."

Frankenstein, watching the American closely, notched his monocle onto his face again and smiled even wider at the other man's reticence. This was the first American he had ever met. Oh, of course he had heard others talk about the unbelievable rashness most Americans seemed to possess in apparently unlimited abundance. He listened to others, those older than him who knew the

Americans well, and heard their genuine concerns over how the Fatherland would suffer if the Americans were drawn into the war. They were brash. They were filled with a unique elan and exuberance so alien to the European mind. They had a country which seemed to be bursting at the seams with a raw industrial power barely tapped into. But the worst possible news of all for the Fatherland concerning the Americans was the idea Americans didn't believe anyone when others said something was impossible. He knew from personal experience the Kaiser and the Imperial Staff were extremely worried about American involvement in the war. His contacts in the diplomatic corps kept him informed about the efforts they toiled in trying to keep the sleeping giant out of the war.

The smile continued to crease the handsome German officer's lips in a sort of sardonic grin, but the big man's brown eyes continued to watch the dark-haired American closely. If many Americans were like this strange captain, he was at last beginning to comprehend the Kaiser's concerns.

Jake hit the brakes just as a recalcitrant German pack mule brawled and tried to lurch the reins of his harness out of a soldier's grasp by leaping directly into the narrow lane in the middle of the crowded road. The car snapped to a halt, throwing both he and the general forward in their seats, while from the rear came the muffled groan of a man in deep pain. For a few seconds both the American and the German watched the enlisted man tug and pull at the mule's reins. Men came out of the ranks to help the struggling corporal and soon a large knot of men were shouting and bellowing at each other in frustration. The mule, however, seemed completely unconcerned over the babbling voices around him.

Grinning, Jake reached for the big semi-auto sitting on his hip bone and turned to look at von Frankenstein.

"Over that hill is Epernay. Ever been to Epernay, general?"

The American's German was flawless without the slightest inflection in it whatsoever. He sounded more like a Berliner than von Frankenstein. This too made the general feel the growing tide of alarm building within his stomach.

"I cannot say as I have, captain. I am not familiar with this part of France."

"Yes, well, let me tell you a little something about our destination. In the

middle of the town is a very old Catholic church. A very old church. In that church are three wooden panels depicting the Madonna and Child. These panels were created by a Dutch painter some six hundred years ago. We... you and I, general... are going to steal them tonight and take them with us to the front.”

In front of them, the growing knot of struggling soldiery grew around the obdurate mule, while others who kept marching on in their separate directions began to find the scene rather humorous. But for the general there was not the slightest interest over the mule’s struggles touching his conscience. Quite the contrary. Sheer amazement at the American’s unmitigated audacity filled the German’s mind. The American was a thief! In the middle of a war, in the middle of a road filled with the enemy, this American was going to steal a painting from right under their very noses and then calmly drive off to the front and disappear into the night as if it was nothing to it at all! For several moments all he could do was blink his eyes behind his monocle and stare at the American in disbelief. And then, to his amazement, he lifted his head and began to roar with laughter!

“My god! You are just going to drive into a town occupied by the German Army and just stroll up to a treasured French relic and claim it as your own! You actually think this absurd plan is going to work?”

The blue-eyed, American split his lips in a mischievous grin as he glanced over at the German officer. He waited for the big man to regain his composure and wondered if the impressively decorated German staff officer was planning something. But the officer’s booming laughter was genuine. Tears began to fill the man’s eyes from the laughter and moments rolled by before the German finally sat back in his seat and sucked in fresh air. Finally, wiping the streams of mirth from his cheeks, Frankenstein turned and looked at the American.

“General, I won’t be stealing this French treasure from its rightful owners. You will.”

“What?”

The grin on the American’s face widened as the light in his dark blue eyes grew in intensity. He was finding himself enjoying this predicament almost as much as the general.

“It is common knowledge the German Army has been... and let me be

generous in my depiction of it... liberating works of art from occupied countries of late. I call it liberation out of a genuine concern for the preservation of priceless pieces of art from the ravages of war. Yet I'm sure others would label this confiscation of property as out right thievery. Whether this is a genuine concern for works of art not being damaged, or simply raping the conquered lands of all their wealth, is for others to decide. In either case, if a general of the Imperial German Staff comes waltzing into a church and demands the *Madonna and Child* by van Eck, no one would ask questions. More importantly, if you do the demanding, it means no one will suspect me. I like that part of the plan most of all."

"My dear captain, what makes you think I would go along with this fantastic scheme of yours? I mean, please take the time to look around you. Yes, you hold a gun on me. But just how good are you? That weapon of yours must be close to empty. Your stunning display of marksmanship at the landing zone was quite impressive, I'll grant you. But you used four rounds in shooting my men down. How many rounds does the weapon hold? Five? Six? One word from me and a hundred soldiers will drag you and your comrade out of this car and throw you in irons! I doubt you could reload fast enough to fend off an entire army division!"

The growing crowd of German soldiers arguing around the obstinate mule was becoming louder, as was the laughter of the men marching past the spectacle and watching the small diversion of reality. It all changed in the blinking of an eye.

There were two mind-numbing explosions in rapid succession which seemed to literally assault all three occupants of the car. The muzzle flashes in the darkness from the big American Colt momentarily blinded the captive general. Something slapped his cheek twice with something that felt hot and cold at the same time. Looking down in his lap he saw two brass cartridge casings lying on his right leg. But more importantly, looking up and through the staff car's wind shield, he gawked incredulously at the dead mule lying at the feet of the men standing around it in a pool of rapidly spreading blood. A number of German soldiers stood around the dead animal, their faces pale and ashen in color, looks

of incredulous surprise clearly etched into their eyes.

The dark-haired American behind the wheel erupted in a barrage of orders, mixed in with choice profanity, in flawless German. The voice was loud, imperial, and sounding dangerously out of patience. The enlisted men around the big staff car reacted as if they had all been electrocuted. Men jumped away from the car. Others, knowing the crazy officer was going to shoot them point blank with that big-bored automatic, turned and started running for their lives. But Jake's voice froze them in their tracks. When he ordered every German son of the Fatherland to pick up the dead mule and remove it from the road, fifty or more enlisted men jumped as one to obey.

When the mule was removed and the crowded mass of men all took three steps back and away from the car, their eyes filled with terror as they gazed up and into the staff car filled with a crazy officer dressed in black and a general of the Imperial staff glaring down at them

"Still doubt I can pull this off, Herr Frankenstein?" Jake asked, the sardonic smile on his thin lips growing as he ejected one ammo clip from the Colt and slapped a fresh one in a smooth motion. "I know how your class of nobility thinks. Act as if you are completely in charge of the situation and five will get you ten you actually are in charge. You are correct. You could say something to warn these men on who and what I am. But I guarantee you would be dead before anyone could react to your shouting. I'm betting your Junkers sensibilities are telling you to play along with me a while longer. I'm sure you're thinking a better opportunity will come along to stop me. No one wants to die foolishly, do they, general? Now slide up onto the back of your seat and order the men to get the hell out of the way, and do it now!"

Shaken, the big German officer nodded his head and numbly pulled himself up onto the back of the seat. A flash of anger ripped through his bod. The anger was clearly heard in his hot demands for the men to move to the side of the road. The general aimed his rage at the enlisted men around him, but the anger was aimed at himself. He never saw the American move! The man had the gun lying on his leg at one moment—there were two rapid shots—and the mule pitched over and dropped to the ground as lifeless as a piece of stone! How in the world

the American found a space between the soldiers to find his target was beyond him. But he had. The display of the American's sheer bravado was so compelling. He found himself angry—yet curious—at what this crazy American might do next.

Sliding back into his seat, eyes still filled with rage, he settled and turned to glare at the American. Jake, inching the big staff car forward gently, had the car moving down the widened path between the stunned infantrymen. As the big Daimler drove by, they all just watched in speechless awe. Twenty minutes later they drove into the small hamlet of Epernay and came to a halt in front of the town's large Catholic church.

In the large town square in front of the church, men and material of a recently arrived German army division littered the area. Men in dirty uniforms with unshaven faces lounged about the square in small clumps of humanity. Some were sprawled out across the stones trying to get some rest. Most huddled around small fires, which had crudely built wooden spits over them with large black containers dangling in the air and filling the immediate area with the strong aroma of brewing coffee. The men looked tired and eager to drink the brewing coffee, and possibly, if they were lucky, eat a hot meal. Yet the constant buzz of large-wheeled German lorries, which periodically growled into the square and rumbled past the men, plus the rattle of the division's signals motorcycle couriers coming and going, almost guaranteed there would be little rest this night.

Climbing out of car Frankenstein eyed two corporals who came running down the steps saluted smartly after coming to attention. Turning to look over his shoulder, he lifted a questioning eyebrow at Jake.

"Your wounded?"

"We'll be here for a few moments," the American said quietly. "See if they have a doctor who can treat him. But don't move him out of the car. We won't be here long."

The general curtly gave the order then turned and watched the American come around the front of the car and step up beside him.

"You are in luck, captain. I happen to know the commander of this division.

He was a classmate of mine at the war college. A Swabian by the name of Otto Rominger, and if I know Otto, he has undoubtedly procured this painting of yours for his own private collection.”

Jake nodded, smiled, and stepped in front of the general, turning to face him. Both men’s eyes met and the clash of wills between the two was very apparent.

“Here’s the deal, general. We walk in and you begin loudly shouting for Rominger and demanding to know why he hasn’t forwarded the painting to Berlin. Scare the hell out of him. Mention something about court-martial and dereliction of duty and then insist that the painting be handed over to you and put in the car. Do that and we both walk out of here alive. Try something heroic and I’ll shoot you in the back and then hand my weapon over to Rominger. Who knows, general? I might even be able to convince this division commander you were a traitor and were trying to escape over the lines. Stranger things have happened in a war.”

From deep within the general’s chest a low rumble of amusement escaped his lips as the big German shook his head and glared into Jake’s face. In the man’s eyes was a deep pit of barely controlled anger. Jake, smiling his own particular sardonic grin, heard the man’s laughter and saw the deep-seated and barely controlled rage seething in the general. It did not bother him one way or the other.

“Captain, for an American, you are quite good at what you do. Allow me to compliment you on your splendid display of unparalleled audacity. But I do so hope the day will come, and under different circumstances, when we might meet again. The German government would find it a pleasure to house you briefly in a prisoner-of-war camp. I know I will personally enjoy escorting you there and interrogating you for several hours before I have you shot.”

“Yeah, it could happen. The war has a long way to go before it runs its course,” the American answered, his sardonic smile growing even wider as he turned and stepped behind the general’s right shoulder. “But shall we go and retrieve our painting? I want to be out of here before dawn.”

Incredibly the plan worked exactly as Jake predicted. With Jake directly behind him, von Frankenstein arrogantly strolled into the church, which was

being used by the division as its headquarters, and began shouting furiously at everyone he laid eyes on. In moments the divisional staff was in turmoil. Numerous enlisted men were scampering here and there in search of some hot food to feed the general and his aide. Others searched for the divisional commander while even more men searched for the finest bottle of wine that could be found. A sergeant told the general their commander was in bed and had given orders not to be disturbed.

Frankenstein exploded in an angry display of outrage which made Jake wonder who was truly the more gifted actor between them. Turning crimson with rage, the general's language was hot with invectives and demands. The enlisted men closest to the general turned ghastly pale at seeing an Imperial Staff officer become almost apoplectic. One portly sergeant, in the back of the church's main entry, actually fainted from the tirade and crashed to the floor in a flurry of reports flying in all directions.

The division commander turned out to be a short man with a bright bald head and three chins. He came running down the central aisle of the main sanctuary hopping on one foot as he tried to pull his boots on as fast as he could. With half his shirt flapping in the wind and the suspenders of his trousers dragging on the stone floor, it was apparent the commander had been hurriedly roused out of bed by a terrified clerk. On the man's face was the same look of terror which so filled the tiny corporal of a clerk following the general.

"Rominger, where the hell is that van Eck painting the Kaiser ordered you to send to Berlin!"

"The *Madonna and Child*? It is... I never... !"

"Enough excuses, you blithering idiot! The Kaiser expects it to be in his private apartment tomorrow night! Do you understand? He has personally sent me down to find this painting and to court-martial the fool who refuses to comply with his orders! How does it feel, Otto, to know that tomorrow you might be a private and peeling potatoes in some god-forsaken hell hole of an African colony!"

The already pale, fat division commander noticeably became whiter at the general's threat. Pulling his boot on at last, the portly general stood up and

looked at the taller man, large beads of sweat already beading out across his forehead.

“I... I never received an order to ship the painting, Helmuth! God is my witness! If I had I would have boxed it up and shipped immediately!”

“Is it here? Now? Or has your greedy little mind already disposed of it privately?”

“No, no! It is here! In my private quarters! I... I was going to have it boxed up and shipped back home, that is true. But I never thought the Kaiser would be interested in this relic!”

“Well, he is,” Frankenstein snapped back, lowering his voice somewhat and looking as if he was beginning to mellow some from his obvious outrage. “I suppose I could inform the Kaiser the order never came down through channels. But I don’t know. He is furious for this delay and insists someone must pay for this incompetency.”

“But it is not my fault, Helmuth!” whined the rotund general, slapping both hands in front of him in a pleading gesture and stepping toward the general like that of a condemned criminal might step forward to ask for mercy. “You must save me, please! If I am relieved of command and sent back to Berlin in disgrace it will ruin the reputation of my family! I will do anything... anything... to prove to you and to the Kaiser that I am a loyal officer! Anything!”

Jake grinned. It was too much of an invention to pass up.

“Might I suggest something, general?” he began pleasantly, first glancing at a surprised von Frankenstein and then at the terrified division commander.

“Certainly,” Frankenstein said, turning to look at Jake with interest. “I am quite curious at what it might be. Please, continue.”

Jake smile, nodded, and then turned to face Rominger. Like a true Junkers officer he clicked his heels together smartly and bowed his head properly toward the general. Dressed in all black, Jake looked most impressive to both German officers watching him. The general watched the American with the narrow eyes of that of a fox watching his prey, while the hapless bald-headed officer’s fear made his eyes blink in a spasmodic nervous tick as he wiped sweat from his brow with a kerchief.

“I am Captain Felix von Hollweg, general, of von Moltke’s personal staff. I have been assigned to assist the general. Let me assure you it has been a most entertaining evening so far.”

“Entertaining!” barked Frankenstein loudly and incredulously. “Humph! I would not quite describe it like that. But go on, captain. Go on.”

“I was just going to suggest if the general would perhaps direct us to the nearest airfield, and telephone ahead to have a two-seat machine ticking over and waiting for us, it might help his situation. Of course an escort would help in getting us over the clogged roads as well.”

“A capital idea, captain!” shouted Rominger, grinning nervously and nodding his head as he turned and shouted for someone to bring him a telephone as fast as possible. “There is an airfield just outside the town. Not more than four kilometers away! I could have you there within the hour!”

“Excellent!” Jake annexed, smiling pleasantly and looking at von Frankenstein before turning back to face Rominger. “Just enough time to box the panels up for traveling—and perhaps we might get a bite to eat before we leave?”

“Certainly, captain! Certainly! I’ll arrange it personally!”

Tables appeared from out of nowhere and enlisted men came running with several steaming hot dishes. Cognac appeared in fine crystal glasses, along with fresh-baked bread. Visibly terrified enlisted men hovered near to leap to whatever order either general or the black-clad and strangely terrifying general’s assistant might give. Waiting for the tall Imperial Staff officer to sit down first, Jake picked a chair across from the table and lifted a large platter of bread and handed it to the younger man with a smile on his lips.

“Bread, general? It has been a long night and I am sure you are as famished as I am.”

Frankenstein eyed the bread and then the American. Shrugging, he lifted a hand and pulled the bread toward him. Suddenly smiling and shaking his head, von Frankenstein reached for the bottle of cognac and poured two glasses full quickly. Taking one glass he looked up at the sweating Otto Rominger and handed the rotund general the glass.

“Otto, let me say that when I get back to Berlin, I will entertain the Kaiser

with an amazing story concerning tonight. He will be so delighted with what I have to say I am sure there will be no talk about punishment.”

“Why... thank you, Helmuth! Thank you... I think,” the portly division commander answered, taking the glass and lifting it to his lips gratefully.

Turning to look at Jake, Helmuth von Frankenstein lifted the filled glass up toward the American and continued.

“To you, my fellow thespian. Congratulations! Your efforts tonight have been most invaluable! My reports to the Kaiser will mention your name often, as well as describing exactly everything which has occurred this evening.”

Jake’s grin widened as he reached for his cognac.

“Please, general, it really was nothing. Inform the Kaiser I was more than happy to help removing the van Eck from its ancestral home. Do remember to inform him of your duplicity in this affair as well. I am sure he would be quite interested in hearing about it.”

The monocle-wearing general lifted his head and boomed out an explosion of genuine laughter and nodded his head with glee as started to drink his cognac.

“Yes, I am sure he will be, captain. I am sure he will be indeed.”

Two hours later the big staff car and its occupants, being escorted by six German enlisted men on motorcycles, rolled onto a large field occupied by four German Air force squadrons and were quickly waved toward a blue-painted Rumpler two-seater observation machine sitting in the middle of the field. Its large Mercedes engine was already running as two mechanics sat kneeling underneath its lower wings, waiting for the orders to yank the wooden chucks away from the machine’s wheels. Rolling to a halt, von Frankenstein and Jake rolled out of the car and Jake ordered two of the enlisted men to load the wounded British officer into the Rumpler’s front seat. Then he ordered two others to tightly strap boxed painting onto one lower wing. Turning to the general, he told the big man to climb into the front seat as well.

Climbing into the rear seat of the Rumpler, Jake waved to the enlisted men to clear the field, and then immediately pulled the engine’s throttle out as far as it would go. The large, shark-nosed machine began to roll across the hard field. Kicking the right rudder pedals Jake brought the machine around into a hard

right turn and then shoved the machine's throttle back into an idle.

"Get out now, general! Your job is done!" he shouted, leaning his head out over the cockpit and watching the big officer quickly unstrap himself and climb out of the cockpit.

The handsome general leaped to the ground and turned to face Jake. Lifting a hand up he saluted the American and smiled knowingly.

"Until next time, captain!" he shouted over the roar of the Mercedes engine.

"Looking forward to it!" Jake nodded as he pulled out the machine's throttle and then waved just as the machine began to roll down the field.

Von Frankenstein watched the large machine increase in velocity and then slowly lift into the growing dawn sky. The machine banked to one side, and in the twilight he saw the American wave to him. He did not return the gesture.

Empty skies. Both of clouds and of patrolling machines.
The rise of the morning sun was spectacular to behold.

Bright yellows and startling blues above and the smear of greens and earthen browns below captured the artist's soul within him.

Jake flew unmolested south and east from where he left the general and eventually slipped over the Allied lines just a little south of the low marshes of St. Gond. Deciding not to tempt his fate by facing a daring Frenchmen hunting the morning skies in their single engine Nieuport scouts, he brought the Rumpler down to a graceful landing in a field containing more than a dozen campfires of a large group of French soldiers. The gruff, tired-looking men turned out to be French Poilu belonging to General Ferdinand Foch's Ninth Army. Jake, sitting at the controls of a German two-seater and eyeing the hundreds of soldiers running from the campfires toward him to gawk stupidly in amazement, rolled to a halt and calmly asked in perfect French if he might find Paris close by.

Four hours later both he and Smythe found themselves being escorted by guards onto a train to take them back to Paris. From Paris, a British staff car would be waiting for them to take Smythe to a hospital, and later on, to bring Jake back to Coulommiers. Arriving late in the afternoon on the fifth day, Jake found himself gleefully engulfed by his squadron's mates. The men were surprised to see the tall American alive. Shaking his hand and slapping him on the back repeatedly, the men of the squadron picked him up off his feet and carried him bodily to the mess tent. There, someone had baked a huge duck and

someone else had found a case of good French wine. Immediately a party broke out when someone arrived with a gramophone and some records. It took him another hour before he eventually broke free and trudged off to his tent to collapse onto his cot. He was asleep even before his head hit the hard makeshift pillow that he had liberated from the possessions of one of the squadron's hapless victims a few weeks earlier.

The next morning bright and early, he found himself fully dressed and freshly shaved and being escorted to Colonel Wingate's office by Sergeant Burton. But for the life of him, he had no recollection of getting up, or dressing himself, or shaving.

"Ah, captain!" boomed Wingate as he stepped into the little colonel's office and closed the door behind him. "Congratulations! You're going to get a medal for your little rescue mission. Both the French and we are going to pin medals on your chest."

"I'd rather have another day or two's worth of sleep, colonel."

"Yes, sleep would be a wonderful thing to experience again. I haven't had a night's good sleep since we arrived on the Continent, and since the death of Sergeant Grimms, I have actually slept less. My god, captain, we must find the killer before he strikes again!"

"How is our prisoner?"

"The German lad?" Wingate mumbled, pouring two glasses of wine and handing one to Jake. "The poor lad is incarcerated in a shed and under armed guard day and night. He's rarely allowed out of his hut for fear our assassin might try to kill him. He is beside himself with fear. He should be a prisoner of war. He is expecting to be shipped off to a prison camp, but with each passing day he remains with us, he becomes more fearful."

"Army HQ is still too busy to come down and collect him?"

"They are in a state of panic, Reynolds. The Boche are stumbling around all over the countryside, and apparently the fighting has become fierce. Paris is still hanging in the balance and our job is to keep the army as close to Paris as possible. But to add to these problems is the dire need for supplies reaching the front. Between the Germans breathing down our necks and our boys not having

enough ammunition to fight and a murderer on our hands, I'm seriously thinking of having a nervous breakdown."

Jake nodded and lifted the glass of wine to his lips. The German soldier was the sole witness to Oglethorpe's defense. Without his story to back up the lieutenant's story, young Lieutenant Oglethorpe would surely be convicted of murder.

So then why hadn't the young infantryman been targeted for murder? Knitting his brows together Jake sat back and began thinking about that problem.

"I've decided to make some inquiries back in England, captain. Discreet inquiries about the general. I have friends who will feed me the information we need. Assuming, of course, there is anything of interest they can find."

"Yes, and we need to gather information about the men, as well. Background information as to where they came from and how they were assigned to us. If the killer is part of the squadron there has to be a reason why he is trying to destroy the Oglethorpe family in such a diabolical fashion."

Finishing his glass of wine Jake set the glass down and stood up.

"I'm going to find Oglethorpe's batman and talk to him. His involvement with the Oglethorpe family goes a long way back. If anyone would have an idea why the lieutenant, or his father, is being targeted it would be him."

"Be careful," Wingate muttered quietly, slowly sitting down behind his desk in a tired fashion. "You know, Captain Reynolds, if you are not careful you may be our assassin's next victim. Asking too many questions may convince our madman you are coming too close. If I were you I would arm myself and never stop looking over my shoulder."

Jake paused halfway through the door, looked back at the portly colonel, and grinned as he nodded and reached behind his back and withdrew the blue-steeld Model 1911 Colt .45 automatic.

"Me and Samuel Colt have become inseparable."

The first person he wanted to track down was the small batman who called himself Higgins. But try as he might he could not find the small man anywhere within the grounds. It was as if he had disappeared. Finding himself uneasy with the man's ability to seemingly vanish into thin air, Jake strolled into the big tent

and found Sergeant Lonnie Burton, and a few of the enlisted men, hard at work rebuilding several motors. The heat of the day made the tent insufferable, but the sergeant and his men disregarded the heat and their sweating bodies. They worked methodically trying to get a few of the dead carcasses for machines operable again. Motioning to the sergeant to step out of the tent with him, Jake watched the powerfully built sergeant move away from the gutted Le Rhone engine and walk out of the hangar vigorously wiping his oil-soaked hands with an almost clean rag.

“Sir?”

“Lonnie, let’s talk a little bit about Sergeant Grimms.”

Burton nodded as he tried to wipe sweat from his brow with the dirty rag. But the day was too hot, and he had spent too long of a time in the tent to stop sweating. No sooner had he cleared his brow than tiny sweat beads flowed into small rivulets, which in turn, met into large droplets of water which eventually slid madly down his forehead and into his bushy eyebrows.

“I am glad you asked about Grimms, sir. I’ve been thinking a lot about him lately and how he used to be such a snoop.”

“Snoop?”

“Oh yeah. Grimms liked to stick his nose into everyone’s business. For some odd reason he liked to goad the lieutenant. But there were several of us Grimms liked to irritate. He used to make Randy... er... Randal, Sergeant Holms... just livid. But when the lieutenant’s little man came and joined us just before we shipped out, I thought Grimms was going to burst at the seams.”

“What do you mean? Grimms was glad to see Sergeant Higgins?”

“I dunno if you can say glad, sir,” the sergeant sighed, wiping sweat from his brow again and glancing up at the sun. “Jeez, what I’d give for a cold beer. Even a lukewarm one!”

Smiling, Jake tilted his head in a gesture telling the sergeant to follow him. Walking across the empty field in front of the bright red tent the two men made their way to the large, and very rectangular, green tent being used as the mess tent. Walking in, Jake turned to look at one of the cooks in the back and held up two fingers. The cook nodded, grinned a toothy grin, and disappeared into the

back of the tent.

“I gave Louie a chore the other day,” the big American began, turning to glance at the sergeant, and then pulling a plain wooden chair out in front of a makeshift table of rough wooden planks nailed together. “I have a friend in Paris who can, shall we say, acquire certain necessities if there is money involved. So I told Louie to get into contact with him and see if he could find us a portable ice box.”

Louie the cook, grinning with a mouth full of bright white teeth, reappeared with two large bottles of beer. Beer which looked as if they had just been pulled out of an icy lake.

“And voila, sergeant! One ice-cold beer, as you requested.”

Lonnie Burton could only stare for a few seconds in stupefied amazement at the proffered bottle of English beer being offered to him by an outstretched hand. He reached up and took it and immediately pressed the cold bottle to his sweating forehead.

“God bless you, sir. Cold beer. I must have died and gone to heaven. Where in the world did you find this heavenly brew!”

Louie grinned and pulled a toothpick from out of the apron wrapped around his large belly and winked at a smiling Jake. Jake laughed and shrugged.

“Ask our resident chef. I told him if he could get us an ice box large enough, we’d find a way to supply the beer. Apparently the man was successful in his search.”

“Nuf beer for the entire squadron.” Louie grinned as he turned and started back to his kitchen. “And I got a supply coming once a month.”

Burton lifted the bottle to his lips and tilted his head back. The cold liquid ran down his throat for several seconds before he brought the bottle down and looked at Jake. Sitting back in his chair the squadron’s chief mechanic sighed contentedly and tenderly set the half-empty bottle on the table.

“Christ, ice-cold beer. Now, if we could just get some of our old busses back together, or better, get some new busses.”

Jake took a sip of beer and felt the cold liquid slide down his throat. It did taste good. It would make the men relax a little when it would be issued out to

them in the next couple of days. Everyone in the squadron knew there was someone among them who was a killer. It was hard to keep that kind of speculation from their ears. Yet, remarkably, the men were continuing to work as a unit. Everyone assigned to a specific job was doing his best to remain at his post. To Jake's surprise no one had requested a transfer. There seemed to be this silent determination to ride this crisis to its ultimate goal. The squadron had been hurriedly scraped together in England and immediately thrown into the thick of the fighting. It seemed this baptism by fire had been a force strong enough to forge the unit together with some kind of invisible bond strong enough to withstand anything.

It occurred to Jake that a major reason why the men bonded into one cohesive unit was due to this man sitting in front of him. Lonnie Burton was a strong-willed hard-working man who had a natural flair for leading men. Almost all of the enlisted men looked to him for guidance. When the hardest work had to be done, or some duty had to be performed that others would shy away from, this man would step forward and place it upon his shoulders without uttering a word of protest. In many respects he acted more like a top-notch line officer than he did as an NCO.

"Why do you think Grimms was glad to see Sergeant Higgins arrive, Lonnie?"

"Remember when Higgins arrived? We were back in England then. It was maybe a week before we shipped out. Raining that night it was. A hard rain that didn't want to stop. Grimms and myself and a few other men were finishing up lacquering the wings of one of the Farmans when this big supply truck comes plowing through the mud in front of the hangar and squeals to a halt. We were expecting some engine parts. It had Higgins, but no parts."

He reached for his bottle of beer and lifted it to his lips to finished it off rapidly. The bottle was still cold enough to roll across his forehead again before setting it back on the table. Shaking his head in lingering disbelief, he grinned and looked at Jake with appreciation.

"Blimey, are all you Americans rich?"

"Not all of us, Lonnie. Some of us had to work to get what we have today."

“Yeah? Funny. I’ve worked hard all my life and I’ll never be rich.”

“If you find a talent, or come up with an idea no one else has had, or even better... marry someone who’s beautiful and wealthy... you might surprise yourself.”

The grimy, sweating NCO grinned in pleasure and nodded his head.

“Yeah, maybe.”

“So what was so interesting about Higgins showing up when he did?”

“Oh. Yeah. Well, it was just odd what Grimms said, that’s all. We were standing in front of the tent, working on some engines that night and enjoying the cool air the rain was making, when we sees Higgins climb out of the cab of the truck with a large duffle bag. Grimms sees him, lets out a yelp of surprise, and goes running out into the rain to shake hands with the little man. Surprised the hell out of me, sir. Watching them, you would have thought they were long-lost brothers or something.”

“So, what did Grimms say which was so interesting?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Grimms and Higgins stood out in the rain for five, ten minutes getting soaking wet and talking earnestly to each other, and then Higgins picks up his duffle bag and goes off to find Lieutenant Oglethorpe. Grimms comes back into the tent with a big, ugly smirk on his face and fire in his eyes, gives me a wink and says, ‘There’s going to be a lively dance for everyone here in the next couple of days, Lonnie me boyo!’ And that’s all he’ll say. Not one word more.”

Jake sat back in the chair and looked speculatively at the sergeant. Apparently Grimms and Higgins knew each other from some other time. Since Higgins had been on Sir John’s staff, did that mean Grimms had been as well? Jake narrowed his eyes as an odd idea exploded into his head. Was Grimms another one of Sir John’s men quietly inserted into the midst of the squadron to keep an eye on his son? Had perhaps the general heard something which might threaten his son?

Damn. It occurred to Jake he would give almost anything to be able to find out what Grimms and Higgins talked about on that rainy night.

“So why did Grimms irritate Sergeant Holms?”

“I dunno. Grimms was that kind of bloke, you know. Just worked on people’s nerves. But want to know something odd? Grimms actually liked the lieutenant, even though he took some perverse pleasure in getting the lieutenant mad. The lieutenant was never far out of Grimms’ sight—er, well, not far out of his sight until Higgins showed up. After that, you could almost say both of them sort of kept an eye on our lieutenant. Know what I mean, sir?”

“Yes, I think I do, Lonnie,” Jake answered and turned to stare out the front of the tent when the unmistakable sound of someone loudly blowing a policeman’s whistle could be heard from across the field.

“Uh oh. Trouble.” the sergeant grunted, coming out of his chair fast and dashing through the tent’s screen door in a blur of motion.

Jake went running after Lonnie who was, by now, racing madly across the open grassy field in front of the blood-red tent. In front of the sergeant was a lone figure who was standing in front of a clump of trees and waving madly toward them. Men were running toward the lone sentry, with half of them being the company of British infantry assigned for perimeter duty for the squadron. The enlisted man waving at them was blowing his whistle loudly as he continued to frantically wave for everyone to hurry.

“Sergeant! Sergeant! Over here! My god, what a bloody mess. You won’t believe what I found!”

It was a bloody mess. It was the body of the little batman lying in a fetal position in a dried black pool of blood at the base of a large tree. His throat had been cut. But not just cut. More like the head was decapitated. The only thing holding the man’s head to the body was the visible dark cable of the man’s spine. Jake and the sergeant slid to a halt and looked down on the body.

“Lonnie, cordon off this area. Get some of the men to cordon off this area immediately.” Jake yelled, glancing at the sergeant, and then kneeling down to look more closely at the body. “And get the colonel out here as fast as possible!”

“Yes, sir!”

More men were running over to see what the commotion was about and the crowd began to grow rapidly in size.

“Get an NCO over to the hut where our prisoner is with more armed guards,

sergeant. And hurry, dammit, hurry!”

Jake glared up at the men before looking back at the gruesome sight lying on the ground. Grimly the realization came to him it may be too late already. Finding Higgins lying dead with his head cut off would draw everyone to this spot. Including, perhaps, the guards assigned to protect the German prisoner.

“My god, it’s Higgins.” Wingate hissed as he pushed his way through the crowd only to stop suddenly and gawk in colorless dismay down at the body. “Bloody hell, captain. Another bloody murder. Another murder.”

Jake wasn’t listening to Wingate. Instead he began to inspect the little batman’s body. As men gasped and even ran off to retch violently behind a tree he began to rifle through the man’s clothing. The first thing Jake noticed was the man was in pajamas. On Higgins’ feet was a pair of slippers, and lying on the ground just underneath his body was a large candle recently used extensively. It seemed very odd a dead man would be found in pajamas in a combat zone. But then, why not? It only added to the strangeness of this bizarre case.

“What in bloody hell are you doing?” shouted Wingate as the sounds of a motorcycle’s engine came screaming from across the field toward them.

“Looking for evidence, colonel,” Jake grunted, not looking up but continuing to do the grisly work in a calm, unperturbed fashion. “Might I suggest we have the men clear out of here and sent back to their jobs? A further suggestion might be to cancel all passes and have everyone confined to base.”

“Ha, a good head you have, captain. Capitol. I’ll get on it at once.” Wingate grunted, suddenly standing up and shouting orders and forcing the men to break up and disperse rapidly.

Someone slid through the dispersing crowd and kneeled down beside him. It was Burton and he looked relieved.

“Captain, our prisoner is alive and well. Bobby Bibbins was on duty guarding him, sir. He didn’t leave his post when the commotion began. Bobby says nothing unusual, other than hearing the alarm whistles blowing, has happened all day. But just in case, I assigned four more men to babysit with the lad.”

“Good.” Jake nodded as he quietly struggled to open up the dead man’s right

hand, which was in a clenched fist. “Find a squad of men you can trust and begin an immediate search of everyone’s tents.”

“Yes, sir, but what will I be looking for, sir?”

“A bloody knife. Boots covered in blood. Clothing. Anything, Lonnie, which might look suspicious. I want everyone accounted for. Everyone, you understand!”

“Yes, sir, I’ll get on it right away.”

The big sergeant leapt to his feet and hurriedly ran back to the motorcycle. As the cycle’s engine faded off into the distance, Jake finally peeled back a couple of fingers on the dead man’s right fist. The hand gripped a ragged piece of cloth Higgins must have ripped off his attacker’s uniform. On the piece of cloth was a thick smear of grease, along with the patch of a sergeant’s rank.

A few minutes later Jake stood up and stepped away from the body and then gazed down at the cloth with the sergeant’s rank sewn to it. It must have been pulled off the killer’s uniform without the killer realizing it had happened. Someone wearing a sergeant’s uniform, someone who, from the way the ground looked and the way the head had been so savagely cut, was quite a bit taller and stronger than Higgins somehow lured the little servant all the way over to this secluded spot and killed him. The murder had to have happened late last night or early this morning while everyone still slept. Sighing, Jake took a towel one of the men assigned to guard the body offered him and wiped the blood off his hands.

Why would Higgins come out here in the dead of night, dressed in his pajamas, knowing there was a killer on the loose? What would compel a naturally cautious man like Higgins to take such a fantastic risk? Shaking his head Jake could not see it happening. But the evidence pressed into the thick dry grass was undeniable. Someone had waited patiently underneath the tree in the gloom before Higgins arrived. They talked for a moment or two before the attacker grabbed the little man and killed him. The way the ground was hardly disturbed told the sharp-eyed American there wasn’t much of a fight offered. That meant Higgins came out here to meet someone he thought he could trust.

Jake took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Damn. Now he was the one

who needed beer.

With each passing second the colonel's crimson face grew darker.
Grew angrier.

Colonel Wingate sat behind his desk with the field phone up to his ear and a look of sullen rage slowly churning his insides into a fine fury. Jake sat across from the colonel, one leg lapping over the other, his chair tilted back and leaning against the wall. Behind the colonel was the only window in the room. As the colonel continued to hold the phone to his ear, Jake counted the number of lorries that went rolling slowly down the dusty road filled with the battle's wounded. In the span of the twenty minutes the colonel had been talking, the gray-eyed American had counted thirty-seven lorries. Thirty-seven big vans filled with the dead or dying, while fighting around the Marne, were heading back toward Paris with their grim cargo. There seemed to be no end in sight of the slow-moving convoy. Disgustedly the colonel grunted something of an assent and slammed the phone down into its cradle as he turned to glare at the American.

"Headquarters is too damn busy to send someone over here to investigate the murders. Too damn busy, mind you," he almost yelled, flying out of his chair as he stormed over to a filing cabinet and withdrew two clean glasses and a fresh bottle of cognac. "What is more important to them is for us to get a machine up and reconnoiter the Heine positions just west of Chateau-Thierry. They think there is a hole developing between two Boche armies and they want us to confirm this as soon as possible. Damn, I am telling you, captain, this world has

gone to hell in a handbasket. This bloody war is going to destroy us all."

"We're down to two serviceable machines, Colonel. The rest have either been cannibalized for parts or have been smashed up. If we don't get some replacement equipment in soon, we might as well pick up a gun and become part of the poor bloody infantry."

"Yes, and that is another problem, captain. Trying to get anything up from supply has been a major headache. So I'm going to send you directly to Villeneuve-le-Roi. Bring back as many brand-new machines as you can, even if you have to fly them up here one by one. As far as the reconnaissance mission we'll send up McAdams in the next hour."

Jake nodded and smiled. Villeneuve-le-Roi was barely ten miles south of Paris. It presented a perfect opportunity for him to make a side track to the city with the van Eck neatly hidden away in a valise. He knew exactly the art dealer he was going to deal with. The dealer would, for a small percentage of the profit, ask no questions. He would deliver the painting to the buyer Jake knew would pay top dollar for the three wooden panels. The dealer, an old friend, would even deposit the transaction into Jake's Swiss bank account for him.

"Take one of the mechanics with you in case you have trouble on the way back. I've already informed the depot you are coming. They've promised to hand over four brand new B.E.s to us. Hump! We'll see."

Jake nodded, finished his drink, then came to his feet and started to turn to leave but stopped and turned to look at the colonel again when he saw something flash across the pudgy man's face.

"Oh, something else, Reynolds. Those inquiries I put in about Sir Oliver and his family? Apparently something serious indeed has happened. The lieutenant's father is resting in an English hospital and cannot be reached. No one in HQ exactly knows what's causing the general's illness, but from what I gather, it appears to be quite serious."

"And the lieutenant's mother?"

"Hmmm," the colonel mumbled, turning even more puzzled as he looked down and into his half-empty glass. "There appears to be some marital problems between the general and his wife. No one has been able to contact the

lieutenant's mother for the past fortnight."

Narrowing his eyes Jake mulled over the last few words. Sir John's wife was the feminine counterpart to her son. Vivacious, witty, charming, and headstrong, the lieutenant's mother had been, for the last forty years, a match to his father's dour obstinacy. Her family walked the ranks of England's power elite even more easily than Sir John's. She was, without a doubt, the most renowned hostess in all of London. When Margaret Oglethorpe gave a party, it usually became the social event of the season. She doted over her only child and had come to James Oglethorpe's rescue from his father's wrath countless times. To suddenly be missing now, with her son at the front and her husband in the hospital, seemed glaringly out of character.

"I'm still in the process of digging for more information," the Colonel went on, looking up from his glass and at Jake. "But it is going to take time."

"And we don't have time, colonel. The question to ask is why Higgins had to die. The killer had to have a reason to do such a reckless act so brazenly, and obviously, he must strike again either at our German prisoner, or at the lieutenant himself. The next couple of days are going to be very dangerous, I think, for the lieutenant."

"I agree," nodded Wingate before quickly finishing off his drink. "I'll have Burton double the guard around both men. I feel good that we have the sergeant in charge of protecting the lieutenant and our prisoner. Too bad. He would have made an excellent officer."

Jake nodded and opened the door and stepped out into the wide room used by the squadron's clerks. For a moment he stood in front of the door and absently watched the five clerks work at their desks. His brain was working over the conversation which had just ended.

The general was ill, and incommunicado, and his wife was missing. What did that mean? What was wrong with the iron man and his indomitable iron will? Where was Sir John's wife? It was the missing woman which made Jake stand in front of the colonel's door and not move. In the back of his mind he had this uneasy feeling, this silent alarm of something which was dreadfully awry. Actually... he had two separate such feelings. One definitely was over the

revelation of the disappearance of the lieutenant's mother. There was something very menacing about this revelation. Not knowing the source of his concerns made Jake even more uneasy.

But it was the second series of mental alarms that perplexed him. They were vague, without form, and unattached. Yet they were quite strong and insistent. They were the kind of mental alarms that would not go away. Over the years he had come to trust his instincts. Especially to trust these vague and undefined alarms. Almost invariably they had saved him from a countless number of pitfalls. But what was the source? Where would he look, how could he be cautious, if he had no inkling as to what the danger might be?

Shaking his head in disgust, he walked out of the farmhouse and started down the row of canvas hangars. Finding Sergeant Holmes and another mechanic, Corporal Walter Mathes, both elbows deep into the innards of a Le Rhone engine, he told the sergeant to pack a bag and be ready to leave in a half hour.

"Oh, sorry sir, but I really must stay here," Holmes began, grinning apologetically as he stepped back from the parts-strewn table the Le Rhone engine lay disassembled on. "I've got a deal going down with a Frenchie squadron close by. I'm trying to trade'em a case of good Canadian bourbon for some parts for the Farmans. If I can get over there this afternoon I might be able to scrounge up enough parts to get both Farmans back into the air by tomorrow. But if you need a good man to go with you, take Wallie here. He's as good as they come with a wrench. You know that yourself, sir."

Jake nodded. Corporal Walter Mathes was just a tow-headed kid of eighteen with a toothy grin fresh off the streets of Calgary. But he had a knack for fixing things and he was a pleasant person to one and all. Agreeing, he told the corporal to be ready to leave within the hour before he turned and headed to a singular tent that sat off and away from the rows upon rows of tents used by the squadron's personnel.

The enlisted men had erected a tent under the shade of a big elm tree close to a creek with running water. The cool shade coupled with whatever breeze came off the stream almost made Ogleshorpe's tent livable. As he approached, Jake

noticed two burly infantrymen standing on guard duty. The soldiers came smartly to attention and Jake saluted as he ducked down to enter the tent.

James Oglethorpe was sitting on his cot with his elbows on his legs and bracing his head between his hands as he stared down at the plank floor in total and complete dejection. One look at him and Jake knew it was more than physical pain which was affecting the lieutenant. Far more than just physical pain. It was easy to see something was eating at the man's insides and it was close to killing him in the process.

"Jim, listen, I'm going to be gone for a few days, so before I leave I wanted to sit down with you and see if we can gather some more information."

"What information?" the lieutenant mumbled. Even the man's spirit seemed to be broken. "What can I say that will bring Higgins back?"

Jake sat down on the opposite cot and looked at the young man. Oglethorpe continued to sit with his head between his hands and looking like the essence of despair itself. Pale and thin, Jake knew the lieutenant had not had a meal in the last two days. Still wrapped heavily in bandages around his rib cage, the young man looked incredibly gaunt and amazingly weak.

"For a beginning," Jake began crossing his arms in front of him, "you can tell me what has happened to your mother."

Distinctly in the distance Jake heard the whistling of German 155 mm artillery shells arching through the air and then coming down with thunderous explosions just down the road. Each explosion rattled the contents of the tent and everything inside it, with the last shell landing quite close. So close it made the tent visibly oscillate as if it was in an earthquake.

"Christ, that's all we need now!" hissed the lieutenant, suddenly sitting up and glaring out his tent flap. "But what the hell? Maybe a shell has my name on it and it'll find me. Blown up in an instant. No pain. No muss. Just instant oblivion."

"Jim, what about your mother? Where is she? Why isn't she with your father while he stays in the hospital?"

"Hospital?"

The last words from Jake brought the lieutenant's full concentration back to

the big American. He looked surprised and confused.

"Father is in a hospital? Where? What is the matter?"

"We're trying to find out," Jake answered as he realized this was genuine surprise on Oglethorpe's part. He obviously knew nothing about the general's illness. "It's hard to get details right now. All we know is he's in a hospital somewhere in England and cannot be contacted. Your mother cannot be found either."

Tears welled up in the lieutenant's eyes and began rolling down his cheeks. He lifted an arm and wiped them away with the back of his hand. Jake sat silently and watched the young man break down emotionally. As he watched he noticed the lieutenant's hand was visibly shaking from the effort.

"Jake, I've made a mess of my life. I've ruined my father. Worse than that, I've disgraced him. I've been the cause of my mother leaving my father and now it seems I am going to be the source of my father's death!"

"How, Jim? Talk to me. Let's get this out into the open. It may very well be the thing we need to find our killer."

James Oglethorpe looked up at Jake suddenly with the bright eyes of the feverish as he lifted his head and began laughing hysterically. Jake, surprised, said nothing but watched and waited until the fit of laughter had passed. But as he watched a cold chill ran down his spine.

"You think you are going to find him, do you!" the young man blurted out between fits of insane laughter mixed in with the pain of his aching ribs. "You think you will stop him before he kills again?"

Overhead the ugly screams of falling Boche artillery drowned out Oglethorpe's mad ravings and was immediately followed by the ear-splintering roar of an explosion just a few feet away from the tent's entrance. The concussion of the exploding shell stripped the canvas of the tent from its poles and threw both men six feet into the air. Landing on his back Jake was momentarily stunned and couldn't breathe or move. But he was aware of the sound of more in-coming shells. The concussions of each succeeding explosion threw him again and again into the air with each impact of Boche steel into French soil. It was as if he was an insignificant ping-pong ball being batted

around by ancient gods. Crashing into the freshly gouged-out shell hole, as falling clods of earth pummeled him mercilessly, Jake rolled over onto his stomach and forced himself to his feet. Staggering out of the hole he began looking for Oglethorpe as more shells continued to rain down onto the airfield.

Across the field he saw the form of Lonnie Burton and a few enlisted men dodging through the erupting hell and rain of earthen clods as they raced toward him. Dante's inferno was exploding all around him as he turned and yelled out Oglethorpe's name. But the noise of exploding shells silenced him, and the raining clods of earth were beating him down and to his knees again... and then he saw a hand lift into the air from out of a hole.

Rising to his feet, Jake ran to the hole and found Oglethorpe lying on his side and coated in a thick crimson slash of fresh blood. Bending down, Jake lifted the wounded lieutenant out of the mud and threw him over his shoulder. He began running as hard as he could. Shells were falling everywhere and ripping the field to pieces. Massive holes appeared everywhere around the running American. The stringent aroma of burnt cordite was stifling. Men were running for safety. But there was no safety to be found. Boche 155-mm shells were tearing the world to pieces. Trees were being uprooted and hurled high into the heavens. The rain of earthen clods and clumps of mud was unending as he ran dodging one explosion after another.

One shell landed just a few feet away with a terrific roar. It sent both Jake and the lieutenant flying through the air and straight toward Burton and his men. Crashing into the soft grass of the field, he felt hands grab him and lift him to his feet. Half dazed and unconscious he did not resist.

Four hours later he found himself sitting at the table on a sidewalk in the middle of Paris. It was a small sidewalk café he was very fond of, and he was sipping hot coffee with Corporal Mathes. He found himself enjoying the idle sport of watching lovely women stroll by in the evening's gathering darkness. Large eyes glanced at him suggestively, pert smiles on their wonderous lips, offered certain

possibilities. It was almost eight o'clock in the evening. The hot summer's night held a promise of cooling off; they sat surrounded by civilians, women, and a smattering of men in various uniforms among the many sidewalk tables. But as he sat at the table sipping coffee, the first real coffee he had had in weeks, Jake's mind kept sliding back to earlier that afternoon.

Jake came to the realization, just before the shells started dropping in like unwanted guests, that James Oglethorpe was hiding something from him. Hiding important information which was critical to finding the killer. He could not shake off the idea it was possible, just possible, the lieutenant was the killer and that whatever it was which was affecting his mind was making him slowly fall into a pit of insanity. Was the man going to confess his sins? Or was there an even more sinister possibility here? Did Oglethorpe know the identity of the killer and was being held to secrecy by some nefarious means? Some great mental anguish was tearing the lieutenant to pieces. The dark-haired American had a feeling the lieutenant was about to reveal it. But thanks to the Heine's display of indirect artillery fire, such revelations would have to wait until he returned to the squadron on the morrow.

He and the corporal left later in the day, after the barrage had ceased and after the collective damage of the squadron had been assessed. Oglethorpe was seriously wounded in the attack. A jagged piece of shrapnel buried itself deep into the lieutenant's thigh, grazing an artery in the process. The young man was in the act of bleeding to death when Sergeant Burton and his men finally reached them and rushed them to safer ground. Now resting comfortably in a temporary field hospital just two kilometers away from the field, Oglethorpe lay in his bed unconscious and too weak to talk. The doctors informed him the lieutenant would be too weak to talk for several more days. With this news there was nothing left for Jake to do but to complete the mission the Colonel had assigned him.

The Kraut barrage had been launched to attack the headquarters of the BEF in Coulommiers. But in their attack, the Boche basically walked artillery fire from one end of the small French village to next, in the hopes of blasting away Army HQ and anything else which might have proved valuable. The squadron

had been but a secondary target. Except for the field being severely holed from falling shells, very little damage had been absorbed in physical property. Hard work by the squadron members would soon have the field repaired for operations.

Tomorrow, early and bright, Jake and Corporal Mathes would climb into the motorcycle and sidecar they had used and leave Paris for Villeneuve-le-Roi. From there, Jake would take possession of a new B.E. 2c and fly it back to Coulommiers, with the corporal following along on the cycle. It would be a slow process ferrying four brand new aeroplanes back to the squadron. He would have to fly slow and low in order for the sergeant, who would be chasing along on the cycle, to stay in visual contact with him. But Jake was hoping by the end of the day all four machines would be with the squadron and he would be able to get back to finding the killer before another victim was discovered.

"Corporal, I've got some business to attend to," Jake said, coming to his feet and setting the small valise on the table as he pulled out some money and paid their bill. "I'll meet you back at the hotel in two hours. We need to get onto the road before dawn so we should get as much sleep as we can. Frankly, a hot bath and clean sheets sounds like heaven to me right now. I'm looking forward to a good night's sleep."

"Me too, sir!" nodded the grinning mechanic as he sat back in his chair with a brimming glass of wine in one hand. "I'm just going to sit here in the evening's cool and watch the bloody world go by, if you don't mind. But I'll have the hotel staff up and hopping to get that hot water you need for your bath, sir. Don't you worry about that."

Smiling, Jake nodded and tossed a couple of bills onto the table.

"Buy yourself a couple bottles of good wine, son. Don't get too drunk. But enjoy yourself tonight. It might be a long time before we see Paris again."

Mathes lifted his glass and nodded in pleasure as Jake gripped the valise and started walking down the congested boulevard. Not more than four blocks away he would find the art dealer's storefront. Smiling Jake found the walk under the tree-lined boulevard, a relaxation he had long missed. Around him, strolling arm in arm, were young men in uniforms and their young ladies, each looking at each

other with hardly concealed amour in their eyes. War, it seemed, had a way of breaking down normal conceits of etiquette when it came to romance. There was a sense of urgency for these lovers. With the promise of not surviving the war becoming a stark reality, it was hard for lovers to restrain themselves.

On the other hand, war also guaranteed that almost every male observed on the street would be wearing a uniform. Only the very old, or the deformed, were not wearing one kind of uniform or another as he walked leisurely down the sidewalk. Few of the uniforms he saw were the uniforms of combat units. Only staff officers and personnel, with a scattering of a few pilots who had been wounded and were recovering from their wounds, dotted the streets. Men in uniforms assigned to combat units, especially infantry units, were not to be seen. It was clear with a grim clarity that every young male between the ages of eighteen and forty had been rushed north to save Paris from the approaching Hun.

Turning a corner and heading down a small side street, carrying the valise with the three panels of the *Madonna and Child* hidden safely in it, Jake stopped suddenly when he heard the wailing of a loud siren.

"The Turtle Dove!" someone shouted as he stepped into the street and pointed upward.

Hundreds of men and women rushed into the street and stared up into the semi-darkness just as Jake heard the unmistakable clatter of a German Taube four-cylinder engine above him. Stepping out into the street, Jake flinched and almost threw himself to the cobblestones of the street, when several of the uniformed men around him pulled out their various side arms and began shooting at the slow-moving Boche machine flying overhead. But calming himself he turned his attention and looked up into the night and saw the Taube directly over him.

The Taube—German for Dove—was a graceful two-seater monoplane with wings and a tail assembly made to look like a bird. Flying in slow, lazy circles above the city and only a few blocks away from the rising mass of the Eiffel Tower, he watched in fascination as the observer in the rear cockpit leaned over the side of the plane with something heavy in his hands. As several men on the

streets around him blazed away with revolvers, a number of powerful search beams scattered throughout the city suddenly lanced through the night with searing columns of white light and quickly silhouetted the Hun in the velvet darkness above. Standing in the street and looking almost directly up, Jake watched the Boche observer open a heavy leather bag and dump the contents out into the night. But before ending the night's entertainment, the Heine waved to everyone below just as his pilot turned and headed for the wrought-iron mass of the Eiffel Tower.

In a shower of falling leaflets the warm night air was filled with the rustling hiss of gently floating paper. Grabbing one out of the air Jake read it in amazement before bursting out into raucous laughter.

People of Paris! Surrender!

The Germans are at your gates!

Tomorrow you will be ours!

My god, Jake thought as he laughed so hard tears began to water his eyes. Surely the diabolical Heine would render the city into abject terror falling from the skies! Paper threats! Instead of dropping bombs, they were dropping paper threats. The diabolical mind of the Heine knew no limits! With such a horrible weapon so mercilessly unleashed upon the defenseless masses below what else could the hardy French do!

Run! Run! Save yourselves! The sky is falling! The sky is falling!

Dark shadows hid him from immediate view.

Pausing, he took the time to study the street behind him and in front of him intently.

Paris—at night and in the middle of a war—was very dark and ominous.

The streets were barren of the usual pedestrians and lovers strolling toward the Seine or to some new bistro or club. Not this night. War had a way of making a city's streets very barren. Satisfied he was not being followed, he put the heavy carpet valise he was carrying down on a doorstep and from a pocket inside his tunic pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a cover of matches. Lighting up, he exhaled blue smoke and stayed in the darkness as his ears and eyes continued to survey his immediate surroundings.

He couldn't shake off the feeling he was being followed.

He felt edgy—nervous. Since leaving the sergeant back at the café he had this gut feeling someone was following him through the dark streets of Paris. But that was all it was. A gut feeling. Three times he backtracked, crossed streets and reversed course—and stopping in places where he could not be seen and waiting for whomever it was to make his presence known. But no mysterious creature revealed himself. The streets in this part of residential Paris were almost deserted. Devoid of any light and deserted. If anyone was following him he would have observed him by now. But there was no one.

Nothing.

Still. He continued to feel tensed—suspicious.

The heavy weight of the American-made .45 caliber Colt Government Model semi-auto he had tucked inside his tunic felt good. Inside the canvas bag was the van Eck so recently removed from the German army. If he could reach his apartment, he could make arrangements to have the valuable piece of art shipped off to a buyer he knew would pay handsomely for it. No questions asked. Across the street and half a block away was 15 Rue de Compiègne—his permanent residence in Paris. It was a large four-storied building set in the middle of a quiet tree-lined residential street only two blocks from the Seine and less than two miles from the Eiffel Tower. He bought it just before the outbreak of the war; it was a building he used as his residence and as a business.

The ground floor was an art gallery featuring rare pieces of art—legitimate rare art—for sale. It also showcased some of the best talent found in Europe. The top floor was his apartment and studio. The second and third floors were small apartments rented to various individuals and couples who had been screened closely by the gallery manager. The burly, walrus-cheeked fellow and his cheery, gregarious wife were two old friends from back in the days when he had been a struggling art student. Monsieur Gerrard had been one of his art instructors at the academe. And he and his wife—like Jake—struggled just to survive on a daily basis.

But that was before Jake's discovery of his latent talents in forging masterpieces. Yet not too soon after forging his first piece and finding a certain kind of client he needed, he bought the building on 15 Rue de Compiègne and persuaded Monsieur Gerrard and his wife to come and work for him.

Now they were employees and trusted confidants in his various businesses. More importantly the jovial old artist and teacher was a shrewd businessman and a talented courier. He knew how to move rare pieces of art in and out of countries in ways that were almost fool-proof. He would be the one to move the van Eck to Switzerland. The old man would arrive in Zurich first, soon followed by the painting. From there a suitable buyer would be contacted and financial transactions would be completed. The entire process would be done quietly, unobtrusively, without the slightest hint of impropriety. The whole process would take less than two weeks to complete. And Jake would be fifty thousand

dollars richer.

Flipping the cigarette to one side he bent down and picked up the valise and began moving. Only the clatter of his shoes on the street's pavement came to his ears as he approached his residence. Mounting the three steps to the front door of the building he stopped suddenly and turned to his right.

A shadow within a shadow fluttered past the corner of his eye. Or... he thought it was a shadow. Down an alley just to the right of tall brick residences, it disappeared. But making no sound. No sound at all. Frowning, holding the key to the front door in his hand, he couldn't decide if he actually saw a shadow moving—or perhaps it was just his edginess playing tricks on him. Opening the door he entered and closed the door behind him. Making sure the door was tightly locked he quietly began ascending the stairs up to his apartment. Entering his rooms he gently deposited the valise onto the dining room table and then moved to the large set of French doors which led out onto the apartment's balcony and pulled the drapes closed before turning on the lights.

Stripping off his uniform he hefted the big Colt into one hand and started to put it down on the bedroom table beside his bed before he went to shower. But he paused. That nagging feeling something was wrong was still bothering him. But he shrugged and decided he couldn't shower and hold the gun in his hand at the same time. And besides, if there was trouble, he really didn't want to use the Colt anyway. The noise would be deafening and it would wake everyone in the building. The police would be summoned. There would be an investigation. Questions would be asked. Questions that eventually would lead to what were the contents inside the valise sitting on the dining room table. No. Better to keep the police away from 15 Rue de Compiegne.

He grinned impishly. It was just his nerves playing with him. He was nervous about carrying the stolen masterpiece through the empty streets of the city so blatantly. He was nervous because of what the colonel had so casually mentioned earlier—that the killer might be hunting him as his next victim. His imagination was getting the better of him. A long, hot shower would calm him and dissipate his nerves. Grinning to himself he turned and headed for the shower.

But it didn't. If anything, he felt even more edgy. Had he seen a shadow move outside? What had made him so sure he was being followed earlier tonight? Why couldn't he shake off this feeling? As he toweled himself dry he couldn't relax. He knew something was wrong. Walking back into the bedroom he dressed in a set of fresh pajamas and then turned toward the bed. Reaching out to pull the covers down he paused. Frowning, he glanced at the large set of windows. Heavy curtains hid the light from view. But he was going to turn off the lights and throw the curtains back and then open the window for some fresh air.

With a swift, decisive motion he reached for the several pillows at the head of the bed and stuffed them quickly down into the bedding before covering them over with the blankets. Slapping them with his hands Jake quickly shaped the pillows into looking as if a body was lying in bed and in a deep sleep. Stepping back he retrieved the Colt lying on the table and then reached up and turned off the large lamp setting on the table beside the gun. Switching off the light, holding the gun in hand, he walked across the room and slid open the first set of drapes and opened the large window.

Across from him the row of tall residential apartment buildings lining the other side of the street were black and silent. The night air was quiet and decidedly warm. The panorama of the city at night was strangely dark where normally it would be lit gaily with bright lights everywhere.

About to turn away from the window, he heard the sudden howl of a cat-like the howl if someone stepped on its tail—and then the bang of a trash can being hit with a sizeable weight. Tensing, gripping his gun, he pulled his body away from the open window and tilted his head around just enough to peer into the blackness and into the direction originating the sound. He relaxed, however, when he heard a dog bark excitedly. A dog barking as he was chasing a cat.

Grinning, running a hand through his unruly curly hair, he shook his head in disgust at himself and his worries and walked across the room to the big cushioned chair opposite his bed. But before sitting in it he walked to a closet and pulled out a heavy blanket. Sitting down into the chair he threw his feet up onto the footstool in front of the chair, wrapped the blanket around him, and then

laid the heavy Colt on his lap.

He would sleep a few hours in the chair before getting up to go meet the corporal.

Or so he thought.

Twice during the night he woke up alert and tense at some odd sound. The first time was two hours after he had turned off the lights and rolled up in the chair. The noise of the same dog and cat chasing each other again from across the street made him reach for the heavy-framed semi-automatic. But a quick scan of the blackness engulfing his bedroom told him all was well. Sighing, he relaxed and settled back into the chair.

The second time he awoke was much different. Something—soft and barely a whisper—made him open an eye and slide a hand toward his weapon. And there, directly in front of him, black on black was the form of a man standing in the darkness beside his bed and lifting an arm up and over his head with some object long and narrow in it! Twice the arm went up and down, viciously stabbing the bedding. Coming out of his chair, gun in hand, Jake threw the blanket to one side and leapt straight for the dark figure!

But the assassin, realizing he had been set up, reacted rapidly. From the nightstand beside the bed the dark form gripped the heavy lamp and, turning, hurled it straight at Jake's head. Jake ducked but not in time. A grazing blow across the side of his head made him stagger to one side. The dark figure, not waiting to take further risks, raced to the open window and was out into the night before Jake could recover. Running to the window he took a chance and glanced one way and then the other to see if he could see the departing figure. But like a wraith, the creature was gone. Disappeared into the night's gloom completely.

Cursing quietly to himself Jake closed and locked the window, angrily throwing the drapes closed, and then walked across the room and switched on the light. He looked grim when he glanced at the bed. The mattress had been shredded with two long strokes from the knife-wielding killer. Still gripping the Colt, he turned and flipped off the lights and trudged back to the chair.

The odds were the killer would not return for a second attempt tonight. But he knew sleep would not come as he wrapped the blanket around him again. The

killer knew who he was and where he lived. Somehow he had been followed all the way from Coulommiers to Paris unseen and unanticipated. A realization Jake did not relish. From here on out, he would have to be doubly on guard. Whoever killed Sergeant Grimes was now hunting him.

The game had gotten infinitely more personal in the last few minutes.

He sat in the cockpit, his uniform soaked with sweat. As the plane rolled to a slow stop, he knew he'd be going after another one. Grinning, he reached up and unsnapped the snaps on his flying cap. Three more machines waited for him back at the depot.

Tossing his cap into the forward observation cockpit, he used a rag to wipe the sweat off his face before climbing out of the new B.E. The sun was hardly into the sky and already the heat of the day, combined with the heat of the plane's engine, was turning him into a wet rag in the short hop from the supply depot to the squadron. Hearing his name being shouted excitedly, he glanced to his right and noticed several of the enlisted men running excitedly toward him. As he approached they kept gesturing toward one of the hangars.

"Captain, captain!" one of the men yelled as he leaped onto the lower wing of the brand-new B.E 2c and pointed behind him with an insistent finger. "It's General French, captain, General French! That Frog general is with him as well. They need you, captain. General French's interpreter went suddenly sick and General Joffre is trying to talk to the old man. The general can't speak French and it's a hell of a mess."

Crawling out of the cockpit, and leaping off the wing into the grass, Jake turned and saw the group of British and French officers standing in front of one of the Henry Farmans. They apparently were in a heated argument, with a number of Joffre's staff officers shaking angry fingers at several of the British staff officers, while Field Marshal Sir John French looked on with obvious

irritation written on his face. He also saw Colonel Wingate peel himself out of the gaggle of officers and walk swiftly over the pock-marked field toward him looking as if he was a volcano on the verge of a major eruption.

"Reynolds, you had better get over there," Wingate huffed, sitting down on the lower wing of the B.E. and wiping his wet forehead with a handkerchief. "Sir John hasn't a clue what General Joffre is trying to tell him. My French is too limited to translate rapidly enough to get the full meaning. I gather Joffre wants the bloody army to strike fast and hard at the Krauts and Sir John isn't moving fast enough to satisfy the General in Chief. You'd better sort this mess out, captain. If I know John French, he is about to explode, and god knows what he'll say if he loses his temper!"

"How did both generals decide to meet here, Colonel?"

"God, what a mess," sighed Wingate as he looked up into the oil- smeared face of the American. "Sir John decided to personally come over and look at the photographs McAdams and his cameraman brought back from the lines. Joffre drove over to Army HQ and found out Sir John was here. He and his entourage just arrived moments before you came in for a landing. But if we don't get this cleared up immediately, I'm afraid Sir John is going to order the BEF to attack the French!"

It was worse than that when Jake inserted himself into the gaggle of screaming officers and calmly introduced himself to Joffre in flawless French.

Joffre was a big, gregarious bear of a man with a startling white walrus mustache. When he spoke he was expressive with his large hands. He spoke with passion and when he did his facial complexion turned a light crimson. On the other hand, Sir John French was a small man, trim and compact, and distinctly taciturn in his deportment. Barren from any flamboyant personality, Sir John, as it was rumored from the beginning, had taken a real disliking to Joffre and found it extremely difficult to work with the French Commander in Chief of Allied Armies. In the middle of this heated exchange of words, and with neither side fully understanding what the other was trying to say, tempers were boiling over while they stood under a hot sun and slowly cooked underneath their heavy uniforms.

"Sir," Jake said, turning to Sir John and saluting. "Permission to translate?"

"Yes, yes, dammit!" snapped Sir John as he stepped up closer to hear what Jake had to say while the rest of the surrounding group of officers continued to harangue each other with scurrilous accusations.

"The general is asking why aren't you attacking with your army? He says a great opportunity is setting before you and the British army is moving at a snail's pace."

"I can't attack if I don't know where the enemy is or how he is deployed. Tell the general that is the reason why I am here. I need information."

Jake quickly and concisely translated and then absorbed the barrage of French curses Joffre hurled toward the British commander.

"General Joffre," Jake began, deciding to deliberately edit the more colorful French profanity out of the translation in order to maintain mutual working relations between the two armies, "would like to point out that Von Kluck's First Army is pulling back toward the north and von Bulow's Second Army is hinging itself back toward the east. Between the two Boche armies is nothing but a large contingent of Hun cavalry. He says if you can move your men just a little faster toward the Petite Morin River, there is an opportunity to encircle von Kluck's army and destroy it entirely."

The junior officers of both general staffs were still heatedly arguing and tempers were beginning to get out of control. But through this din of vituperative cacophony, the American heard Sir John's words.

"Tell the French idiot that I cannot move any faster. My men have been on the move for the last fortnight and they are exhausted. My artillery is still collecting itself and my supplies are abysmal. I cannot push too hard or I will lose the entire army."

Jake translated, leaving out the descriptive phrase Sir John had used in describing the French general and hoped Joffre's limited English had not informed him of the insult. But it did not matter. This time Joffre exploded in outrage.

"Rest! Rest!" boomed the Frenchman's bull voice, his face turning almost florid in outrage. "Tell that bumbling ass he and his men have been sitting on

their duffs for almost two weeks while my armies have clawed and died in their boots trying to stave off disaster! Inform your general that he must act like the cavalry officer he once was and not like some dim-witted house servant who's somehow misplaced her virginity."

Jake translated, shouting over the screams of the men around them, and tried not to burst out laughing in the process. Joffre had just called Sir John basically a whore, and a slow-moving whore at that, and the tall American found the whole scene around him incredibly hilarious. Here were the two most powerful military officers the Allies had selected to command their armies, and they were standing face to face shouting insults like two unruly boys in the middle of a schoolyard. As they shouted and hurled foul insults, with Jake in the middle trying to translate, just a few miles north, men were dying by the cart load in the battle for the Marne.

"Inform the general," said the British general, sticking his face up close to Jake's ear so he could be heard over the din of voices and looking as if he could have shot Joffre with his own revolver. "Just as soon as I confirm there is cavalry in front of my men I will give the order to push out immediately. But I will not budge, sir, not budge one inch, until I am absolutely convinced I am not sending my men into a trap. Tell the general that, captain. And tell him I wish to end this conversation and return to my command."

Jake nodded and turned to the French general and quickly informed Joffre of Sir John's decision. Joffre glared at the petite British general and curtly nodded his head before turning on a heel and moving back to the line of cars which had brought his entourage to the field. The large bear of a man was halfway across the field before the rest of his staff realized their commander was retreating to the cars. The silence which descended onto the field as the two parties separated was deafening to one and all.

"There goes a blathering idiot, captain. With him in command this war is going to drag on forever," Sir John growled as he watched Joffre's large train of staff cars roll off the field and disappear down the country lane.

The general turned and for the first time truly looked at the American who had so effortlessly stepped into an interpreter's role.

"You are very good in their language, young man. I commend you on your calmness in the face of all this hot fury. You are a pilot in this squadron?"

"Yes, sir. Reynolds, Jake Reynolds, sir."

"Ah yes, I remember." The general beamed suddenly as he reached out to shake Jake's hand. "You were that officer who brought Smythe back to us alive the other night. My god, man. What an adventure, eh? Superb work, captain. Superb! I've put you down for a commendation, you know."

"Thank you, sir."

"Right," nodded Sir John, smiling again, before he turned and headed for his staff car, "Keep up the good work, captain. Please, do try to stay alive. We need men like you in this war."

The crowd of officers turned and hurried to their autos as Sir John climbed into his and sat down in the rear seat. In moments they were gone, leaving the aerodrome quiet and sedate at last.

When the last of the British staff cars pulled onto the road and turned to head toward Coulommiers, the thumping growl of Corporal Mathes' two-cylinder motorcycle roared down the road before breaking hard to turn into the airfield. Accelerating rapidly over the grassy field, the young, enlisted man had a big grin on his dirt-caked face as he hit the brakes and slid to a halt in front of Jake.

"Sorry, sir, but this old bike is not as rapid as a B.E."

Jake ran a hand across his sweat-stained face and said it was time to get down the road to fetch the second B.E. back. Climbing into the sidecar, the gray-eyed American said he was going to take a nap and to not wake him unless it was important. Mathes, gunning the bike's engine a couple of times, grinned like a kid and slid dirty goggles back over his eyes and nodded. In seconds the corporal had the bike and sidecar screaming down the dusty road at a furious pace, throwing up a high-flying plume of dust for a mile or more in their wake.

War, as one pundit after another throughout the ages has often pointed out, is hell. In September 1914 the Allies had a rare opportunity to inflict a severe blow on the German war machine. General Joseph Joffre had been correct. Often he was described as a man who could not see much past his nose and was entirely myopic in seeing the big picture spread out before him; nevertheless, from

September fifth through September eighth of 1914 he was suddenly filled with divine inspiration. His armies, and his generalship, had been severely shaken by the rude handling they had endured for more than a month from the hard-charging Hun. But suddenly, with his back against the proverbial wall, Joffre saw an opportunity to turn and maul the unsuspecting enemy with a terrible ferocity. A ferocity which, if pushed to its murderous extremes, literally held the promise of shortening the war.

Germany's war machine was being stretched dangerously thin in their effort to fight on two fronts. In the West were the French and British. In the East were the Russians. In both theaters of war, the Hun was fielding armies as fast as they could put them together in the hopes of staving off disaster. In fighting this two-front war, Germany did not have the luxury to make a major mistake. The loss of equipment and horses could be replaced, but the replacement of manpower already was revealing its ugly menace to the German Imperial staff. The conflagration around the Marne was rapidly twisting into a series of haphazard fire-fights for the Germans, and the growing viciousness of the battle was something they felt they had no real control over. In particular, a gaping hole was opening right in the middle of the combined German armies. A hole large enough for an entire Allied army to go marching through and all the way to Germany if it so chose.

Between von Kluck's First Army and von Bulow's Second, a gap had materialized. Von Kluck was a hard-charging army commander who thirsted for glory. Bulow, on the other hand, was far more conservative and definitely more cautious. When the newly organized French army under Maunoury bumped into von Kluck's Sixth and began the fight, at first von Kluck thought he saw an opportunity to gather about him those martial glories he so yearned for. But Maunoury and his men turned out to be far more than von Kluck had bargained for. In a matter of hours on the sixth and seventh of September, von Kluck realized he had to readjust his flanks in order to protect his army. But to readjust meant to take a tactical side-step back to the north and east of Paris, a move just enough in distance to separate his left flank from that of von Bulow's Second Army. To fill that gap, the German High Command ordered cavalry to cover the

flanks of both armies.

At the same time, von Bulow was beginning to feel pressure on his left flank and he decided to side-step toward the north and northeast. The gap widened and stretched the covering screen of Hun cavalry dangerously thin. Joffre, in a sense of divine inspiration, realized the gap developing between the German armies. He also saw sitting just south of this widening gap the three army corps of the British Expeditionary Force commanded by Sir John French.

In his earlier career the British commander had been one of those dashing cavalry officers of Victorian England. Cavalry officers are, by the very nature of their chosen arms, supposed to be hard riding, bold, and willing to take chances. Joffre felt sure once the British commander saw this opportunity folding open in front of him, his British counterpart would drive his Tommies hard into that yawning gap and slice the Hun to bloody pieces.

What Joffre had not figured on was the possibility Sir John was not the hard-riding British cavalry officer of old. The BEF did not move with clarity and purpose. And they certainly did not move with any haste. The longer the British commander lingered and lounged around in relative comfort, while every French army was pushing as hard as he could against the enemy, the more furious Joffre became.

Hindsight in history is often a clear pool to look into. Sometimes it makes one wonder what would have happened if a historical event might have unfolded in a different way. On the Marne in September of 1914, if the BEF had moved with vigor and elan, von Kluck's First Army would have been soundly thrashed, if not outright encircled and destroyed. If this happened, the Hun war machine on the Western Front would have had gaping holes tens of miles across to fill, and not enough reserves to fill them. Retreat all the way back to Belgium would have been the only choice left for the Kaiser's armies. Even ending the war in the winter of 1914 was a dim reality. But certainly staving off defeat, by transferring large amounts of manpower from the Eastern Theater to the Western Theater, would have had major historical ramifications for the Russians.

None of these possibilities became a reality. The BEF moved, but moved with extreme caution, thus giving time for the German Sixth and Second Armies

to readjust their positions, and ultimately, for all the German armies to retreat back to the Aisne River. This retreat solidified the defensive positions for the Germans, and consequently established trench warfare along the entire Western Front. This defensive alteration by the Germans moved them back some seventy miles away from Paris. They would never come as close to capturing the French capital and winning the war as they did in the first weeks of 1914 when they were on the Marne.

But Jake knew nothing of the grand strategies which were playing out before him. He was but a captain in the Royal Flying Corps who had the misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. And this unfortunate stroke of bad luck was about to tap him on the shoulder again.

Just after one in the afternoon Jake brought the second of the five new machines down onto the field. The fragile-looking B.E. 2c rolled to a stop beside the first machine he had brought in earlier. Men hurried out to help him out of the cockpit and escorted him into one of the hangars where they had prepared lunch of cold ham, fresh bread, and warm beer. Famished and thirsty, Jake ate and drank as he waited for Corporal Mathes to arrive with the cycle. The corporal, when he arrived, was as dirty and sweat-stained as Jake and equally as thirsty. But within the hour, both men, their thirst slackened and their hunger subsided, were on the road and roaring down the country lanes back to Villeneuve-le-Roi when the attack came.

Both were tired and felt grimy and gritty from their efforts. The dirt road they were traveling on was bone-jarring to endure as they rode the cycle back to the supply field. Neither was expecting trouble.

Which was a fatal error. Trouble always comes when one least expects it.

With Mathes behind the handlebars and feeling half sleepy and wonderfully content, he never felt the bullet hit him squarely in the chest. Jake, asleep in the sidecar, heard the sharp report of a rifle firing, a Britishissued Lee-Enfield rifle firing, and then felt himself hurling through the air and watching with interest as the motorcycle and side-car went sailing end-over-end through the air beside him.

Cycle and Jake all crashed into a ravine filled with brush. The brush was just

enough to cushion the landing and save him from any major harm. Yet not enough to keep him from being knocked out. Oddly, just before blackness overwhelmed him, Jake's last memory was that of hearing the squeaking sound of a bicycle needing its chain oiled. The noise was very close to where he lay, but was fading rapidly as the darkness slowly engulfed him. Hours later he pulled himself out of the deep ravine and staggered onto the road. He discovered the corporal's broken body lying in the middle of the dusty road. The lad's lifeless eyes were staring up into the clear blue sky and looking amazingly serene. All he could do was pull the body to one side of the road and sink to his knees in exhaustion.

It would be two hours of slowly trudging through the heat of the late afternoon sun before Jake arrived at the squadron and informed Colonel Wingate of the killer's latest attack. It would be Colonel Wingate who would, in turn, have grim news to tell the American.

War's unmistakable calling card had arrived.

The smell of cordite and burning petrol was overwhelming.

When Jake stepped onto the field after his long trek down the country lane he found the field in a shambles. Two of the three large canvas hangars, including the several machines which had been in each building, were nothing but charred and smoldering remains. Smoke still lifted out of the blackened remnants as he walked around the gaping holes of raw earth. Craters gouged out of the field from some gigantic Boche cannon. The aromas of freshly dug earth, mixed with the smells of turpentine, burnt hair, and canvas hung in the air. Worse yet, both brand new B.E.2c's he had delivered this morning had been hit by the barrage and were nothing but thousands of fragmented shards of wood, canvas, and wire strewn across the pasture. The field looked like an insane asylum inmate's nightmare.

All the enlisted men sat in the shade of the last remaining hangar stripped to their waist and painted almost midnight black from the soot and ash of the fires. Exhaustion was clearly written on their stained faces as they sat, or lay on the ground, trying to catch their breaths. Even Colonel Wingate and Sergeant Lonnie Burton were stripped down to their undershirts and coated with the greasy soot.

"Soon after you left, captain, the shelling began. It was unbelievable," the colonel said in a hoarse whisper, his round face black and streaked with sweat, his bright eyeballs looking up into the American's face. "The shells literally ripped the earth apart in some kind of biblical fury. Their second shell hit hangar

three and started the place afire. We've been fighting fires the entire day."

"I'm afraid the new machines are gone," Burton, looking even more charred and exhausted than the colonel. "In fact, we haven't a machine around which can get into the air. But what happened to you, sir? You look as if you've had it rough as well."

"Corporal Mathes is dead," Jake grunted, looking at the colonel and then at the sergeant. "Shot in the chest by our friend. About two hours down the road. He sat in the woods and waited for us and then drilled Mathes in the chest."

"But why Mathes, sir?" Burton asked, frowning, as he wiped grime and soot from his wet forehead. "What did the corporal know?"

"The bullet was for me. It had to miss me by less than the width of a hair. Mathes had the misfortune of being right beside me."

"The corporal was driving the bike," Wingate whispered, his voice too raw and drained from his exertions directing the men on extinguishing the fire.

"Yes. The moment he was shot the bike went out of control and flipped. The bike and myself both wound up in a deep ravine. Hell, that's the only thing that saved me. Our killer was on his bicycle and rode over to finish me off. But I was covered up in underbrush and he couldn't find me. Colonel, I need some transportation. I need to get back down there and look the place over. Maybe I can find some of his tracks and trail him back to the squadron. If he stood around waiting for us, maybe I can recognize a footprint or something. But I need to get back there before the sun goes down."

"Yes, yes," nodded the colonel, frowning, hesitating somewhat and looking uncomfortable. "But there is more news, captain. News which, I'm afraid, is hard to fully comprehend. Someone tried to kill the lieutenant during the shelling. Worse, I am afraid during the bombardment one of the shells hit the area where we were confining our prisoner. The little prisoner and two of our men were totally obliterated in the blink of an eye."

For a moment or two all three men stood in front of the remaining hangar and said nothing. Jake, running a tired hand through his hair, took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Burton made a face, started to say something but paused, then plunged into a few words quickly.

"While the Krauts were hitting us here, our killer went to the field hospital and tried to kill the lieutenant by strangulation. I guess he pulled a curtain closed to hide the lieutenant's cot from the rest of the ward. He was in the act of actually holding the pillow over the lieutenant's face, when fortunately a nurse on the hospital staff, opened the curtain and disturbed him."

"He got away?"

"Sorry, captain," Sergeant Burton grunted, nodding his head sadly while offering a weak smile of regret. "At first the nurse did not think anything was amiss and just allowed our murderer to walk out of the hospital scot-free."

"You were at the hospital when this occurred?"

"No sir," the sergeant answered, shaking his head no and then wiping soot and sweat from out of his eyes with a grimy hand. "Randy... er, Sergeant Holmes told me, sir. He was over at the hospital checking up on a couple of our men when it happened. Randy said he and the entire hospital staff searched everywhere for the bugger. But they found nothing."

The American nodded grimly and then glanced over at the gutted and smoldering hangars. They would be out of action for days. New machines had to be flown in and replacing the huge canvas hangars would be difficult. With the Marne being ripped asunder, every ounce of strength and every resource available would be channeled in that direction.

"I'll use a motorcycle, colonel. It makes it easier to get through the trees if I find a trail. I should be back later tonight, if not sooner, with hopefully something to share."

"You should take someone with you, " Wingate whispered. "Take an armed enlisted man. Two of you on the trail will provide some level of protection."

"But it will also slow us down," Jake replied, shaking his head. "By myself I can move faster and cover more ground. Our murderer had to leave in haste, so he did not have time to cover his trail. I'll find something out there and I want to go to the hospital. Maybe I can find that nurse and she can give me a description of who she saw bending over Oglethorpe."

"Very well," nodded the colonel. "I'll impose quarantine on the squadron and post armed guards. No one will enter or leave our little field until you return."

Jake nodded and hurried off to change into a fresh uniform. He would have preferred wearing something more comfortable. But so close behind the Allied lines while a major engagement was going on, and tracking through the trees alone, he did not want to take any chances of being spotted by some trigger-happy Poilu or Tommy. The idea of being mistaken as a spy was one worry he did not want. Washing off the dirt and dried blood from his face, he quickly changed, and then armed himself with the .45 caliber Colt he preferred over all other weapons. The big American semi-auto could throw a huge copper-coated slug around with some accuracy, and because it was a semi-auto, he could pump out three shots for every one anyone using a revolver might shoot. Slipping spare ammo clips into his pockets he walked out of his tent and headed for the last remaining hangar.

A little over an hour later, and deep into the woods beside the road he and the corporal had so recently traversed, he found the place where the killer had sat beside a large oak tree and waited for them to pass by. Kneeling beside the tree in the deep shadows of the forest he touched the empty brass cartridge of .303 caliber Enfield. He closely examined one of the two cigarette butts the killer had discarded. They were the typical brand issued to army personnel. In a patch of bare earth beside a tree he found a footprint of a large right boot. In the middle of the sole was a large hole that had not quite worn completely through the leather. Yet what intrigued the blue-eyed American the most was a carving the killer left on a tree. Deeply grooved into the bark were three words. The first word was 'Death' and it had been leisurely, even lovingly, carved out in neat, uniformed lettering. The second word was 'Death!'... with an exclamation point... but this time it was large lettering, not uniformed at all, and more hacked out of the bark in fury than carved out carefully. The third word was 'Jocko.' It was hewn into the thick bark hurriedly, as if the carver was furious. When he had finished with the last word he used the tip of the knife slashed through the name, over and over, in some insane frenzy of destruction. A good three feet of the tree's base had been ripped to pieces with long ribbons of severed bark dangling in the air and littering the forest floor.

Jocko was the nickname Sir John Oglethorpe was called when he had been a

young cavalry officer in India. It was obvious whoever the killer was, he was a madman. Frowning, Jake came to his feet and began searching for the location of where the killer had set his bicycle down. As he searched he kept his senses acutely tuned. Through the thick copse of trees, shafts of late afternoon sunlight cut brightly illuminated pillars of light through the gloom. Birds flew and chirped around as he examined the forest floor. Twice he saw small deer flash through the forest from one dark shadow to the next. As long as the birds chirped, and the animals moved, he knew he was safe. Old experience in hunting as a child had taught him that. When the forest suddenly went silent, and nothing stirred whatsoever, he knew he could be in danger. Somehow animals knew when a human was in the forest to either enjoy the forest or to hunt. It did not matter whether the human was hunting game animals or hunting other humans. The forest knew and it held its collective breath until the hunt was over.

But the forest was alive to the soft sounds only an experienced woodsman would understand. Kneeling to one knee again, Jake felt relatively assured he was safe as he reached down and found the first tire tracks of the killer's bicycle. In the thick matting of the forest floor, he found the two ribbon marks of indentations where bicycle tires had recently been over. Fairly easy to discern, Jake noticed they cut through between trees in a general northerly route. It was also fairly easy to see the front wheel of the bicycle was bent somewhat. It wobbled erratically as it moved across the grass. Coming to his feet he turned and walked back to the tree where the killer had sat and carved. Looking at the startlingly white and remarkably cruel piece of carving, Jake's mind kept revolving around in a maelstrom of hot questions. The murders had a direct relationship aimed at Jimmy Oglethorpe's father. The killer was definitely a member of the squadron, and someone who knew all the intimate details of the investigation. But what motivated this maniac?

The original questions remained to be answered. Why had James Oglethorpe and Sergeant Grimms stood in their respective cockpits of the old B.E.2c and struggled over the lieutenant's revolver? Was Grimms trying to murder the lieutenant? Or was there something else? Why didn't Oglethorpe remember this struggle? Or did he remember it and refused to admit any guilt? Was James

Oglethorpe a murderer? If that was the case, it meant he had an accomplice within the squadron, an accomplice who was quite willing to murder as well.

But why would the accomplice be willing to take such outrageous chances and try to kill the lieutenant in the hospital? The lieutenant's wounds from the first shelling put the young lad in a coma. From the mental anguish Jake witnessed in the lieutenant just before the shelling began, he would not be surprised if the lieutenant never came out of the coma. Oglethorpe acted like a man who wanted to die. It looked to him as though guilt festered within the lieutenant's soul, which would be the cause of death.

Walking back to the cycle, which he had leaned against a far tree, Jake's mind kept examining two points over and over. Who in the squadron was at that fatal card game when the lieutenant made his death threat? Which of them would have access to privy information concerning the investigation? He would have to be a fairly decent shot with a Lee-Enfield rifle and have at the same time the freedom to move about without arousing suspicions. Only two names kept popping into his head. Just two... and he didn't like to think about either one of them.

Swinging a leg over the seat of the cycle, he used a foot to open up the cycle's kick-start, then jumped up slightly to come down with force. The engine barked to life with a vengeance. Toeing the cycle into gear, Jake started out slowly over the matted, moss-covered floor of the forest and began slowly trailing the bicycle tracks through the trees.

For a few moments Jake wove the cycle through the thick trees as he followed the tracks in front of him. Slowing, he came to a halt and killed the engine. Blue eyes swept through the growing gloom of the late afternoon forest. Ears were sharply attuned to hear anything amiss. He was sure the killer would come back to try a second time to finish him off. That was the reason why Corporal Mathes had died. The lad had been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The killer had to strike again. Strike soon before too much time elapsed. Jake was getting too close. It would be only a matter of time before his identity would be discovered. So why not strike here, in the forest, away from everyone, and be

done with it? Pulling his thin lips back into a cruel, almost snarling grin, Jake wondered when the bullet would come. Would he use the Enfield rifle again? Or would he set up an ambush and use some technique that would be silent in its deadly blow? It didn't matter. Sometime before returning to the squadron, Jake knew another attempt was going to take place. He was waiting for it. He knew it was coming. All he had to do was keep his guard up and his senses attuned to danger.

But as evening fell, Jake rolled out of the small forest and onto the dirt road which led back to the squadron. No one had taken a shot at him. Nothing out of the ordinary had occurred within the trees. Rolling to a stop just before climbing onto the road, Jake threw a leg out and stood up off the bike feeling a bit puzzled. Empty countryside and the road cutting through flat farmland was plainly visible in front of him. Behind him was the dark mass of the surprisingly empty forest. To his left just a few kilometers of the road would be Coulommiers. On the far side of the village would be the squadron. On this side of the village would be the large field hospital where the lieutenant was resting. Jake sat back down on the bike, gunned the engine a couple of times, and wondered if the killer would try shooting him while he roared down the road back toward the village. Kicking the engine into gear he grinned and decided to go find out.

The bike's engine purred with a sweet growl of authority between his legs as he sped down the soft dirt of the country road. The hot September wind blew on his face and brought with it all the aromas of another dying summer's day. The stars were coming out rapidly and the night promised to be stifling hot without the least promise of a cool breeze. To his right, in the distance, he could see the flickering flashes of unceasing artillery fire, the voice of the massive battle currently going on. This constant rumble soon became a normal part of the background noise one didn't even hear anymore. But no other sound disturbed him as he leaned the bike into one curve after the other and headed for the field hospital. A half-hour later, and surprised he was still in one piece. Jake walked into the hospital and found the cot occupied by the young lieutenant.

The hospital was like an oven with its incredible heat. Rows upon rows of

groaning men on cots barely strong enough to hold an adult filled the gloomy interior. The sides of the tent had been thrown up to allow a breeze to enter, but the September night was too hot and deathly still. Only the muffled moans and groans of those in pain stirred the growing darkness outside. Walking into the tent, he asked an aid where he would find the lieutenant, and then silently walked down the long aisles of bandaged and bloodied men to where a curtained-off area separated several beds from the rest of the hospital.

James Oglethorpe lay in the third bed behind the curtain. On either side of him were unconscious soldiers lying with only a thin cotton sheet covering them. Both had massive wrappings of blood-soaked gauze wrapped around missing body parts. Each one had a combination of either arms or legs being amputated. The soldier on the lieutenant's right had both of his legs and one arm cut off. The one on the left had only a leg left and nothing more. Blood-soaked bandages around the stumps of their limbs told a grim story as he quietly pulled the curtain closed behind him.

"May I help you, captain?" a soft French voice purred into the night in clear English.

"Oui, mademoiselle," Jake nodded, turning and smiling down into the face of a green-eyed blond who barely came to his shoulders. She had a pleasant, though plain-looking face that somehow perfectly fit this horror. In her eyes and her presence, he felt the men under her care were in the best possible hands. "I was wondering if I could talk to the lieutenant for a moment."

"I am sorry, captain. But the young man is suffering a fever and is delirious. I do not believe he will break his fever and begin to recover for quite some time yet."

"Ah," Jake mumbled, looking at the emaciated young officer, frowning. "Is he going to survive?"

"That is in God's hands, I'm afraid. He is very weak and does not drink or eat. He keeps having difficulty breathing as well. The doctors think he may have punctured a lung in an earlier accident. They believe the lung may slowly be filling with blood. It does not look good."

The American nodded, not taking his eyes off Oglethorpe.

Christ!

Sir John Oglethorpe was in a country hospital back in England. The lieutenant's mother was mysteriously missing, and now James Oglethorpe, the only heir to the Oglethorpe fortune, lay here in fevered delirium and possibly on his deathbed. Somewhere in the night the fiend who seemed to be stalking the Oglethorpe family probably was laughing with delight at how his mad plan appeared to be coming together. Looking into the night Jake shook his head, turned and started to walk out. But he stopped and turned to look at the nurse again.

"Last night I understand someone came in and tried to kill the lieutenant?"

"What?" the young nurse with the bright green eyes yelped, startled, as she turned to stare at Jake. "Captain, what are you saying? Someone came in here and tried to kill one of my patients? That is absurd! No one came to see the lieutenant. I was on duty last night from six until midnight. I assure you the lieutenant was closely attended to by either me, or one of my aides, all night long. No one came in here to visit anyone last night. No one."

"You are sure? No one at all?"

"I am positive, captain!" the firm reply came as she stepped up closer to Jake with her eyes afire with conviction. "Why would anyone want to kill the lieutenant?"

"I am afraid he is somehow involved with a series of murders which have happened recently. My colonel and I have concerns the killer will try to strike again, and strike at the lieutenant."

The nurse's angry eyes gazed up into Jake's face for a moment or two as she tried to read the American's face, apparently coming to the conclusion that the good-looking American was an honest man. Her anger subsided and was replaced by an expression of curiosity.

"Ah, perhaps some of his ramblings now begin to make sense," she mused, nodding her head as she stepped even closer to Jake. "The last two nights he has been suffering a very high fever and has been semi-conscious. When he dreams he keeps repeating over and over this one strange phrase. I found it so odd that I wrote it down on a piece of paper. Hmm, what did I do with it?"

She was wearing a uniform with several large pockets in it. Quickly she rifled through all of them before finally discovering a folded-over sliver of paper. Pleased in her discovery she handed it to Jake and then looked at the lieutenant.

"He would say that phrase several times over and then he would call out to his father. Sad. Very sad."

Jake unfolded the paper and read what the nurse had hurriedly scribbled down the night before. Frowning as he read it a second and third time he looked up at her again.

"A chameleon? 'He's not what you think! He's a chameleon.' That's what he keeps mumbling?"

"Yes," she answered, nodding and looking at Jake again. "He occasionally will mention someone by the name of Jake, and then he would call out to his father, and then for several minutes on end he would say "'He's not what you think! He's a chameleon! He's not what you think! He's a chameleon!'"

Jake looked at the slip of paper again. A chameleon. Someone who could disguise himself so well he blended directly into his environment. But who? Who?

"Thank you, nurse," he mumbled, folding the paper and slipping it into a trouser pocket, "but what I said about the lieutenant's life being in danger is quite true. I'm afraid our killer will attempt to enter this area and silence the lieutenant. We must take precautions to prevent this."

"I shall inform our commanding officer immediately. We will post armed guards throughout the ward to make sure no further harm is inflicted upon your friend."

Jake nodded and took one last look at Oglethorpe. Sweat matted the young man's face and the short, shallow breathing wracking through the young man's bandages were quick bursts of energy and nothing more. He doubted the young man would make it through the night. Whispering thank you to the nurse, Jake turned and walked out of the hospital

Sliding back onto the hot bike he paused before kicking it to life. Sergeant Burton told him earlier in the evening that a nurse had stepped in just in time and

accidentally saved Oglethorpe's life from being extinguished by the killer. But this nurse had just said no such incident had ever happened.

Was Lonnie Burton lying? Or was Randal Holmes lying? Why would either one of them lie in such a blatant fashion? Could one of them be the elusive chameleon the lieutenant was talking about? God knew Burton acted more like an officer and was far more educated than the normal NCO. What was it the colonel said off-handedly the other day? Something about it being too bad the sergeant wasn't an officer?

But what about Holmes? He seemed to act like a simple man with a simple goal in life. Survive the war and return home to his simple garage. Could there be more to this man than met the eye?

Kicking the bike into life, he slapped it into gear and began the short trek down the dark road toward the field. With the only witness to the lieutenant's confrontation with Sergeant Grimms dead, and with the lieutenant apparently on his deathbed, it was more important than ever to find out what had happened in Sir John Oglethorpe's life which might be the source for this conundrum.

It was also important to remember he too was being stalked by a killer.

Who killed Sergeant Grimms?

Who was trying to kill James Oglethorpe?

Who was stalking the Oglethorpe family with undeniable maniacal malevolence? All these questions kept revolving within Jake's mind as he rode slowly through the semi-deserted hamlet of Coulommiers astride the heavy-framed British-built motorcycle.

The night was hot. Incredibly dark and silent.

Whenever a slight breeze stirred it was like the breath of hell rustling with malicious intent between the houses and down the narrow streets of the hamlet. Not a light could be seen in any of the buildings. He knew there would be no lights burning. Coulommiers was only five miles from the fighting. On a dark night like this a single lantern lit and hanging in a window could be seen with distinct ease. So each house and each building emerged from out of the darkness looking desolate and deserted, like sullen hostages standing in the darkness waiting for their fates to be meted out to them.

Who was in the squadron who had the opportunity to disappear on a bicycle and ride to the crash site where Oglethorpe and Sergeant Grimms lay in the wreckage unconscious and shoot the sergeant? More importantly, how did this unknown person know exactly where the B.E.2 was going to come down? Was that a planned mishap? If so, for what purpose? Who had the ability to leave at will and stalk him and Corporal Mathes? Who could convince Sergeant Higgins to walk straight up to his killer and have his throat slit without once suspecting

anything? Finally, why did Sergeant Lonnie Burton lie to him about an attempt on the lieutenant's life when no attempt had been made?

Slowing down Jake tilted the bike and turned onto the road which would take him across the Morin River over an ancient stone bridge. Just a kilometer up this road he would find his squadron, or what was left of it after this morning's shelling, and hopefully a warm bed and fresh sheets to flop into. He was exhausted. His bumps and bruises from this morning's close call with an assassin's bullet were nagging at him for immediate attention. But as he accelerated toward the high arching 14th Century stone bridge, Jake's mind was not thinking about his aching body. Instead, he was thinking this was a perfect place for a potential ambush. The bridge arched so high he could not see the other side of the river. At this point the Morin was steeply banked and the blackness of the calm waters ran deep. An assassin with a rifle sitting on the other side close to the road would have a perfect shot of someone riding a cycle across the bridge and not suspecting anything amiss. All the killer would have to do would be to wait for the cycle and rider to reach the very top of the bridge's arch. Even in the night's deepest gloom, he would be momentarily outlined by a heaven full of stars. The shot would come the moment the rider's form became outlined in the sky. The best chance for completing a botched attempt was here—on this bridge—in this hour of darkness.

Jake, mouth dry and feeling tense, suddenly twisted the throttle on the handlebars and made the heavy machine leap like a racehorse into the night. The bike's two-cylinder engine erupted into a bellowing roar as the cycle shot forward and accelerated like a greyhound onto the bridge. Lying forward across the bike's gas tank, Jake's form blended into that of the bike itself and offered in the darkness no clear shot. The cycle hit forty miles an hour as it came flying over the bridge's center and actually flew for a few feet through the air before the tires again touched the bridge.

Crack! Crack! Two rapid shots from a .303 Enfield ripped through the night while Jake's bike was still in mid-air. One of the bullets so close it actually tugged on Jake's baggy right trouser's leg, drilling a neat bullet hole clear through the material and barely missing his thigh in the process. With a thud the

bike landed upright on its wheels and sped down the far side of the bridge and across the river. Jake, still hugging close to the machine's tank, glanced to his left and then to his right in the hopes of finding something give him an idea where the shooter was hiding. But on this side of the river was a meandering copse of thick oak and birch trees. In the darkness of the trees he could see nothing.

Hitting the brakes hard, Jake slid the bike to a halt in the middle of the road. A thick curtain of dirt caught up to the now motionless bike and engulfed man and machine completely. Perhaps the half-second's worth of suddenly being obscured saved Jake's life, for suddenly a third shot ripped through the night in an ear-splintering roar. The rifle bullet thudded into the broad mass of the bike's gas tank and the aroma of raw gas immediately filled the air. A heartbeat later the ruptured gas tank exploded in a blinding ball of fire and fury. The explosion momentarily lit up the dark night with an eerie yellow-white ball of expanding light. The heavy cycle was thrown almost a hundred feet into the night sky on a blazing tongue of fire. It arched over the river and then fell still in a raging inferno toward the river. With a huge splash the cycle disappeared underneath the dark waters.

The moment the bullet smacked into the gas tank Jake threw himself to one side, landing in a thick mat of grass where he tucked and rolled over one shoulder and came to his feet running all in one smooth acrobatic motion. When the gas tank blew up he was some yards away from the explosion and kneeling in the grass, gun in hand, and scanning the immediate area looking for the assassin.

For some seconds he saw nothing even though the fireball from the explosion illuminated most of the immediate surroundings. But then as the cycle plunged into the black river he suddenly caught a glimpse of a shadow dart from one tree to another within a small patch of trees. Holding his breath Jake willed for the specter to move again, to offer just the merest of opportunities to take a shot at him with his Colt. When he did, the big semi-auto angrily boomed twice into the night.

Bullets ricocheting off tree trunks whined into the night as Jake jumped from his position and began racing across the road to the copse of trees. Keeping low

and changing directions as he ran Jake plunged into the trees expecting to see the muzzle flash of the assassin's rifle at any moment. But no return fire came his way. Worse, nothing could be seen or heard in the heaviness of the thick night air as he crouched low beside a tree and waited for someone to move. Controlling his breathing, Jake sat motionless in the forest blackness. Holding his gun close to his face he squeezed on the trigger just enough to get the play out of the trigger's movement to its very limits. He wanted to snap off a fast shot the moment he found something to shoot at. For more than twenty minutes he kept still. But nothing happened. The night was absolutely still. No insects chirped or squeaked. No wind rustled through the boughs. Nothing moved. With beads of sweat rolling freely down the bridge of his nose, he took a chance and stood up. He began moving cautiously through the trees.

The killer was gone. Evaporated into the night like the ghost he was. Furious that again his prey had eluded him, Jake searched through the trees for a few more minutes. But there was nothing to find.

"That's twice in one day this sonofabitch has tried to kill me," Jake growled as he slopped whiskey into a glass and turned to look at Wingate. "Twice he came after me with that Enfield and twice he put a bullet so close it should have found me."

Wingate glanced at the bullet hole through Jake's trouser leg and wondered how the bullet had missed the leg. Shaking his head, the rotund colonel walked to his desk and turned up the flame in the lantern sitting on his desk, and then made sure the thick canvas covering the single window of his office was sealed tight.

"Grimms dead, Mathes dead, Higgins cruelly murdered, and the lieutenant as good as dead. Not dying in war, mind you, but at the hands of a madman. Incredible!"

Jake worked on finishing the glass of whiskey quickly and then poured another large measure for himself before turning to look at the colonel.

"I went to the hospital tonight. I tried to talk to Oglethorpe but he's out of his head with a fever. But I did find out two interesting items."

"Yes?"

"The nurse in charge of Oglethorpe told me no one tried to kill him last night. The lieutenant is in a section of the hospital with patients who need to be monitored twenty-four hours a day. No one enters or leaves without a nurse or aide close by. "

"What?" Wingate mumbled, lifting an eyebrow quizzically. "But the sergeant had this detailed story about the killer trying to snuff out the lieutenant's life with a pillow."

"Either Lonnie Burton or Randal Holmes lied," Jake answered, pausing as he lifted the glass of whiskey to his lips. "We need to find out the who and the why."

Wingate's quizzical look turned into total puzzlement. Scratching his jaw he thought about what Jake had implied and then shook his head in disbelief.

"You think one of those two may be our killer?"

"Right now they look like our best candidates, colonel."

"But not Sergeant Burton. At least, he certainly can't be the person who shot Mathes. The sergeant was here fighting the fires with me from the moment the first shell landed to the last bucket of water thrown onto the last flame."

"Are you sure, colonel? At no time did he slip out during the confusion and run down to take a shot at me?"

Wingate blinked a couple of times at the big American as he thought it over and then emphatically shook his head in the negative. Getting up from behind his desk he headed for the bottle of Canadian whiskey sitting atop a file cabinet.

"Captain, the sergeant could not have done it. If he rode a bicycle down to this position in the woods to wait for you it would mean he had to leave early in the morning. I know for a fact Burton was working with a group of other men to get one of the old B.E.s up and running. When the shelling began it was the sergeant who was out in the middle of the field directing the fire brigade. God, his voice carried over the shells, for chrissake. You could hear the sergeant's voice over the pits of hell! After the fires were out, I had Burton surround the

perimeter of the field with armed sentries. I saw him several times walking from one post to the next to make sure no one shipped out of here."

Jake watched the colonel for a few moments and then quickly snapped his wrist as he drained his glass. Setting the empty glass on the colonel's desk he turned, took a deep breath, and thought it over.

Someone in this squadron had left early in the morning on a bicycle and hurried down to find the perfect shooting spot. That someone knew which road he and Mathes were going to take on their journey to the supply depot. Find that someone who left, and who could not possibly have been around when the fires began, and you would have your killer.

But there still was the matter of why the sergeant would have believed so implicitly the story given to him about an attempt on Oglethorpe's life without checking it out personally.

"We need to talk to Burton and to Holmes. Let's talk to Burton first. If he is not our killer, then he can at least tell us why he believed Holmes' story about an attempt on the lieutenant's life."

Wingate nodded and lowered his glass of whiskey.

"Just as soon as he returns from the Frenchie squadron up the rode we will talk to him."

"I thought you said no one was supposed to leave the field?"

"Yes, that I did," nodded the bald and pudgy officer. "But just before you arrived we got an urgent call from a French squadron commander. He somehow heard about your night-flying adventures. His squadron of Henry Farmans are supposed to make a dawn bombing attack on some very important supply base over by Reims. He called and asked if you would be so kind to lead the way. I took the liberty to accept the mission on your behalf, captain. The French on their right wing of this battle are getting mauled by the Boche. If we can hit this base and knock it out of commission, HQ thinks the enemy will pull back to a new position."

"The sergeant went over to the French squadron to do what, sir?"

"Both he and Holmes went over there. They have some spare parts they're willing to give us in order to get the lone Henry Farman we have flying again.

The idea is you will lead their machines to the supply base and bring them back. They will do the bombing. Just as soon as he gets back, we'll stick Holmes and some other men on getting the Farman working, while you and I ask the sergeant some pointed questions."

"And this mission is supposed to shove off when?"

"Ah, yes," sighed the colonel, smiling weakly and hurriedly finishing his drink. "At 0300 hours, captain. They want to arrive over the supply base exactly at 0500 hours to do the bombing. Just as twilight becomes bright enough to make out the terrain below."

Jake glanced at his watch. It was ten minutes past eight. In eight hours' time, the enlisted men were going to rebuild the engine of the last flyable machine available, and he was going to lead an entire French squadron, deep into enemy territory, in the dead of night. All of a sudden he felt tired and worn out. He wanted a bath and he wanted something to eat. But most importantly of all, he wanted some sleep.

Telling the colonel he was going to get something to eat and then get some rest, Jake turned and walked out of the small office and headed for the mess tent.

But how was he going to rest with his mind racing down a million different directions at once? How was he going to sleep knowing that someone within the squadron was a multiple-murderer and was even now trying to figure out how to murder him at this very moment?

Lonnie Burton stood in front of Wingate's desk at formal attention. Sitting in a chair, leaning against the wall beside the single window adorning the office, Jake eyed the good-looking, affable mechanic with a sympathetic eye. He didn't believe Burton was the squadron's mad killer. But on the other hand he could not be positive. Whoever had killed Higgins had to have been a large and very powerful individual. One just doesn't casually cut off a man's head with a bayonet as a weapon. Further, the murderer was a crack shot with a rifle. God knew everyone in the squadron had seen, on more than one occasion, Lonnie Burton's deft handling of a rifle. Clouding the issue was the reality that, on several occasions, Lonnie's whereabouts had him away from the squadron's immediate surroundings. The opportunity to commit murder was present.

But the question was motive.

If this big Welshman was a killer, there had to be a reason, a reason that somehow tied him to Sir John Oglethorpe and his family.

"Sergeant," began Wingate as the colonel saluted and told the NCO to sit down in an empty chair directly in front of the desk. "This is, for the moment, an unofficial inquiry into the deaths of Sergeant Grimms, Corporal Mathes, and Sergeant Higgins. Official inquiry cannot begin until Army HQ sends down someone with authority to investigate this mess. But as you know HQ is currently preoccupied with winning a major battle."

Burton, looking somewhat uncomfortable sitting in his chair, nevertheless

grinned at the colonel's last words as he folded his hands into a neat pile and sat them on his lap.

"You are here to answer a few generalized questions, sergeant. Questions which may or may not help us find the murderer."

"Colonel, am I considered a suspect?"

"Lonnie, everyone is considered a suspect," Jake growled somewhat irritably, pushing his chair down and coming to his feet to walk over and sit down on the edge of the colonel's desk. "But our investigation has narrowed the chore somewhat. We know a few things which might focus our inquiry. But we don't know enough."

"I see,." The sergeant nodded, sounding uncomfortable and vague at the same time. "What do you want to know from me?"

"Well, for starters," the colonel began, frowning as he stood up and walked to the opened window and looked out before turning to look at Burton, "do you use a bicycle?"

"A bicycle?"

"Yes, do you use a bicycle extensively when you travel away from the unit?"

"Uh... well, yes. Sometimes. We've been able to collect a number of bikes since we've been over here, colonel. They come in handy when we need to go after parts from adjoining units. If a squadron is not too far away it's easier to pedal over and get a part than find a lorrie. Or a horse."

"On the day Sergeant Grimms and Lieutenant Oglethorpe took off for their recon mission, did you leave the squadron for any reason on a bicycle?" the colonel asked, folding arms across his wide girth and turning to watch the sergeant closely.

"Yes, I... uh... was scouring the countryside trying to find transportation large enough to pack up our gear and get out as rapidly as possible. The way the Boche were moving, I suspected we would be bugging out at a moment's notice. We barely had enough lorries and wagons on hand. So I decided to see if I could find more."

"So you were not on the field when the lieutenant and the sergeant crashed outside of Epernay?" Wingate asked again.

“That is correct, sir. I was not.”

Wingate glanced at Jake and frowned before turning to stare out the open window again. Jake, glancing at the colonel for a moment, kept his face blank and returned his gaze back to the sergeant.

“Before joining the squadron, Lonnie, did you know Sergeant Higgins and Sergeant Grimms from somewhere else?”

The big, good-looking sergeant did not immediately answer. His face flushed and he looked oddly embarrassed as he gazed down at his worn boots. Squirming uncomfortably in his chair he cleared his throat and started to say something. But he hesitated, and his hesitation made Wingate turn from the window and look at him with interest.

“I... uh... yes, I knew both men prior to coming to the squadron. Higgins was Sir John Oglethorpe’s private secretary back in India just before the general retired from the service. Sergeant Grimms happened to be in the unit I served in back then.”

“You personally knew Sir John Oglethorpe?” Wingate asked as he walked over and sat down on the opposite corner of the desk and peered down at the NCO. “Explain, in detail, your relationship with the general.”

“I was a junior officer on the general’s staff back in India, sir. Fresh out of officer’s school and posted immediately to India and the general’s cavalry division.”

“You were an officer?” the colonel mumbled in a confused fashion as he shook his head in an effort to clear his confusion. “I must confess, sergeant, I don’t understand. If you were a line officer in 1905 with the general’s cavalry division in India, how did you wind up in an RFC unit as an NCO serving as a mechanic?”

Burton gave a side-long glance up first to the colonel, and then over to Jake, before looking down at his hands again. Taking a deep breath, the uncomfortable-looking man exhaled slowly and then lifted his head to look directly at Wingate.

“I fell in love, colonel. In love with a woman above my station in life. Amazingly, she fell in love with me. You know I am Welsh, sir. My family is as

poor as they come. My father died before I was born. My mother and two uncles were the only ones in our household while I was a child. How I got into Sandhurst still baffles me. But to Sandhurst I went and graduated with honors. I was immediately shipped off to India to the general's division and I was as happy as a lark. I was in a colorful foreign land, serving in one of India's best units, and rubbing elbows with some of England's finest society who momentarily found themselves away from their rarified society.

"But then this brown-eyed, red-headed little lass, the youngest daughter to the Secretary to the British Representative to India, decided to make me fall in love with her. Worse, she came up pregnant. There was bloody hell to pay for that. A scandal of Olympian proportions was narrowly averted thanks to Sir John's intervention. Somehow he convinced Adele's father it would be best for all if Adele married me and the two of us quietly disappeared off to Canada. Of course I would have to resign my commission and neither of us would ever return to England again. But hell, for Adele I would have gladly walked through the tar pits of Hades! I would do anything to repay the debt I owe the general in getting Adele and myself permanently together."

"Hmmm, interesting," growled the colonel as he eyed the sergeant suspiciously. "And why did you return to England and join the RFC?"

"Adele and I moved to Canada and bought a small farm just outside of Saskatoon. We had three boys. Our lives were full and we found ourselves seemingly blessed in life. Adele, although coming from a place in life where she never had to physically work for anything, became a wonderful farmer's wife. She still is! She and the boys are back in Canada waiting for me. But colonel, even a blind man could see war was brewing. A big war. I found myself becoming fitful over the idea a war was going to threaten my family while I was safe from harm over in Canada. Adele saw my growing gloom. One day she came out to the field I was working in with a packed suitcase and a rail ticket to Toronto. She said she had been in contact with the general. He promised her I could come back to England. He had connections to get me back into the army. True, I am no longer an officer, but I'm in this war and doing my best to win it."

"Sir John got you posted to the squadron, Lonnie?" Jake asked quietly.

“Certainly. I was the first man assigned to the squadron. I was here before you arrived, colonel, before anyone arrived.”

Jake nodded, frowned, and rubbed a hand thoughtfully across his chin. The sergeant’s story was a wonderful tale of love and devotion. But was it true? Without a way to factually check out his story, Jake realized it could be a fantastic tale and nothing more. With the Marne raging on, no one at HQ had time to check with authorities back in Canada. So where did that leave them?

“Lonnie, why did you think Grimms was assigned to the squadron?”

“Hell, sir, at first I didn’t think anything about it,” the sergeant answered, sheepishly shrugging before sitting up in the chair. “It didn’t occur to me the general had a son. I thought the name was just a coincidence. But then, Grimms came walking into the hangar I’m working in one day and gave me a conspiratorial wink. Told me the Old Man had him shipped over to this cushy job with orders to keep an eye on his baby boy. That is the first time I realized the lieutenant and the general were related.”

“And that rainy night when Higgins arrived?”

“Just as I told you the other day, sir,” Burton answered, nodding his head. “Happened just like I told you. I never found out what the two talked about. But then, I really didn’t have to, did I? Higgins was here to be the lieutenant’s batman. I didn’t know anything about the falling out the lieutenant had with his father until after the murders began. When the little man arrived I assumed the general was establishing a link home with his son.”

“Hmmm,” Jake mumbled thoughtfully and stroked his chin again with one hand. “The other day, when Mathes died, did you leave the squadron for any reason?”

“Absolutely not, sir. That’s when the Germans began pounding us with their big guns. All hell broke loose around here. The colonel and I fought for hours trying to put out all the fires and save as much as we could of the squadron.”

“I can vouch for that, captain,” Wingate put in quietly, confirming the sergeant’s statement. “The sergeant was close to me all through the fires. At least half of the squadron could testify that the sergeant was in the middle of everything for more than twenty-four straight hours. There is no way he could

have left the field then. Absolutely none.”

Jake nodded his head and stood up. Scratching the back of his head he turned and walked to one side of the room and paused, then turned and looked back at the big Welshman.

“I guess that’s about it, then. Except one question, Lonnie. You know just about as much as we do as to what has happened. Surely you have suspicions. Who do you think killed Sergeant Grimms?”

Lonnie Burton looked back over his shoulder at Jake and then toward the colonel. There was a look of worry on the big man’s face. It was obvious he did not want to answer Jake’s question. Curious, Jake folded hands across his chest and waited for an answer.

“Sergeant, Captain Reynold has asked for an opinion. You have shown evidence of being an intelligent man. I agree with the captain, you probably suspect someone. The question is, who do you suspect?”

“Colonel... captain,” the big man began, grinning sheepishly and coming out of his chair to face the two officers directly. “What can my suspicions prove? We need absolute, undeniable evidence to find our killer. Mentioning names of personnel I suspect might do more harm than good.”

“What do you mean, Lonnie?”

“Suppose I mention Sergeant Holmes as a possible suspect. I’ve always suspected him, to be frank, but that means nothing. I know for a fact Holmes speaks Latin and Greek and loves to read. But why he acts like a simple mechanic mystifies me. That’s the first thing which made me suspicious about him. I also know he was once in the army and served in India. But what does that mean? What if the real killer planted evidence to make it look as if Randy is guilty? We’d accuse and condemn an innocent man.”

“You suspect Sergeant Randal Holmes then, is that it, sergeant?” Wingate asked pointedly.

“Yes, I do. It’s occurred to me he’s been the only one with authority to be gone from the unit on almost every moment you’ve been gone, sir. I know he can take an Enfield rifle and pop off five or six shots so fast, his shooting almost sounds like a machine gun. Like I told you, sir, he didn’t like Grimms one bit. I

got the suspicion he didn't like the lieutenant much, either. Although that can't be completely true since I saw Randy coming and going out of the lieutenant's quarters a lot prior to Grimm's murder. But as to proof he's the killer, I haven't one piece of evidence to back up my claims. Not one."

Jake nodded and stood in silence for a moment or two as he thought over the sergeant's words. Glancing at the colonel he saw the portly officer was doing the same thing. Suspicions were one thing. But absolute proof was quite another thing. To bring a murderer to justice required unequivocal evidence.

"Thanks for answering our questions, sergeant. I think that will do it for the moment."

"Yes, you may go, sergeant," Wingate nodded and headed back to his desk but stopped and looked hard at the sergeant again. "But what was said in this room will be kept in this room for now, understand? Talk to no one and answer no questions."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant replied, coming to attention and saluting smartly before turning and leaving the two men standing in the office.

For some seconds neither man said anything. Absorbing and settling all of the sergeant's testimony took a few seconds for both men. But finally Wingate sighed, shook his head, and collapsed into his chair. He threw his boots up onto the edge of his desk as he leaned back into his chair.

"Well, what do you think?"

Jake glanced at the colonel and shrugged before walking over to the window and peering out across the field.

"Unless we can verify a lot of his story I think we cannot write him off as a suspect."

"But he couldn't possibly have shot at you when Mathes was killed. Last night's attempt was equally impossible. We both were here when you arrived back from your little adventure."

"But what if he had an accomplice, colonel?" Jake asked quietly as he watched the sergeant walk across the field and toward the circus tent hangar. "What if Sergeant Burton and Sergeant Holmes are working together?"

"Bah!" exploded Wingate angrily, dropping his feet loudly to the floor and

coming out of his chair. “What if, what if, what if...! Bloody hell, captain! We could go on forever like this spinning out fantastic theories. What we need is to find the proof to point to one or both men. I’ll get on the phone and see if I can get a line directly back to England. If we can prove, or pick apart Sergeant Burton’s story, then maybe we might have something. In the meantime, I think you had better find Sergeant Holmes and interrogate him.”

“Yes, that’s next on the list.” Jake nodded, turning from the window and opening the door before pausing and looking back at Wingate. “You realize, don’t you, that once the lieutenant dies, there will be nothing compelling our killer to stick around. If he came here solely to destroy the Oglethorpe family, I would have to say he has done an admirable job. The only reason why he stays is apparently to witness the lieutenant’s death. But when that happens our man will disappear and we probably never will find him.”

“Yes, I came to that same conclusion, Reynolds.” The colonel nodded grimly as he reached for his field phone. “So it is our job to find him before the lieutenant succumbs to his wounds.”

He found Sergeant Holmes in the circus tent.

The NCO had his hands deep into a bucket of fresh petrol, vigorously brushing a series of gears free from rust. Holmes was as big as Burton but with more muscles packed on his thick arms. Dark hair fading rapidly gave the big man a high, intelligent-looking forehead. Dark brown eyes were quick to see Jake walk into the semi-empty and partially burned tent.

“What can I do for you today, sir?” Holmes grunted casually as he continued to scrub the parts of a lorrie’s disassembled transmission which lay eviscerated in its various pieces on the ground around him. “Say, I heard about your wild ride last night. Damn, captain. You must have the lives of a cat. Anyone else would have been dead by now.”

Jake grinned, found an empty five-gallon can and lowered himself into a sitting position, wondering to himself if perhaps there was a note of sarcasm in the sergeant’s words.

“Not a cat, sergeant. Just lucky. Too lucky. Sooner or later luck like that runs out.”

Holmes glanced at Jake, smirked, and continued to clean.

“The colonel and I have begun asking a few questions concerning the recent murders. I wanted to ask a few questions before I took off on tonight’s mission.”

“Going off to bomb something, eh? Jeez. You must like flying in the dark.”

The tent was empty except for him and the sergeant. Outside nothing stirred, but off in the distance someone was firing artillery again. Holmes said nothing as

he continued to wash the parts in the dark petrol. With practiced ease he deftly used the steel brush on the gears like a surgeon used a scalpel. When finished he carefully wiped each gear dry and neatly stacked them in a wooden crate to his right. Aware of the silence, Jake noted something else. Whereas Lonnie Burton looked and acted rather nervous at the thought of being interrogated, Randal Holmes was just the opposite. He looked almost bored.

“Are you pretty good with a rifle, sergeant?”

That smirk of a smile etched across the sergeant’s thin lips again. But he didn’t look up from his work as he answered in a soft, even bland, voice.

“I used to be, sir. Back home I used to do a lot of hunting.”

“Good enough to hit a moving target going more than forty miles per hour?”

“Why... maybe, captain. If I thought I had to. Does that make me a suspect?”

“Everyone is a suspect.”

That enigmatic grin flittered across the sergeant’s thin lips as he looked down into the bucket filled with petrol and fished around for another part to clean.

“Well, to answer your question, sir. Yes. Yes, I think I could hit a moving target going that fast. However, the person who tried to shoot last night missed. I don’t think I would have missed.”

“Everyone is entitled to a mistake, sergeant. Even an expert marksman sometimes misses the mark.”

“Yes, even the Pope makes a mistake or two now and then, I suppose. Which, frankly, is a refreshing thought. One can always rectify a mistake, can’t they? I suspect the person who shot at you and missed might consider that a mistake. Perhaps a costly mistake.”

Jake leaned onto both elbows and looked closely at Holmes. Not once had the man looked directly at him. Not once had the man’s voice varied one way or the other in its calm monotone. Other than that quirky, irritating smirk that played across the man’s lips every now and then, the sergeant might as well have been a gramophone record. He was devoid of any emotion.

“Sergeant, tell me. Why did Grimms make you feel... oh, what was the term used? Upset. Yes, that’s it. What made you upset with Grimms?”

“I never became upset with Grimms. Why should I be? He and I served for years together back in India. I liked the bloke, although I’ll admit, he had a way of making others irritable. If you want to talk to someone who didn’t like Grimms, you should find Burton.”

“You were in India?”

“Yes. Grimms, myself, and Higgins.”

“Did you serve in Sir John Oglethorpe’s calvary division?”

“Oh no, not in that famous man’s unit,” the sergeant answered, half smiling again and shaking his head as he began wiping off a large piece of metal. “We were in an infantry unit up near Afghanistan. The three of us were. Never rode a horse in my life, captain. Never want to.”

“That’s strange. Sergeant Burton said he, Grimms, and Higgins all served in a cavalry regiment. The sergeant said he was even an officer serving on Sir John’s divisional staff. But if Grimms and Higgins were with you in northern India that means Sergeant Burton lied. Why would the sergeant lie about something like that?”

Holmes shrugged, laid the piece of metal down and slipped his hands back into the can of petrol. The man’s eyes glanced casually to the left and to the right. But Jake noticed they never looked at him. It was as if the sergeant was deliberately trying not to look at him.

“I can’t answer for Burton, sir. You’ll have to ask him. Just like you’ll have to ask him why he was walking back from that line of trees, over there where Higgins died, a couple hours after the body was discovered. Walking with a shovel over his shoulder and looking as if he’d just finish digging a deep hole or something.”

“You saw Sergeant Burton with a shovel?”

“Yes. Looking tired and quite dirty. I happened to be sitting in here when he came walking smartly back looking like the cat who just ate the canary. It was quite late and I am sure he did not see me.”

Jake grinned and looked down into the dirt and shook his head in amusement. He was positive he could send a man out to look for recently upturned earth and find it. He also had no doubt excavating the hole would

reveal the bayonet used to kill Higgins and possibly the tunic with a set of missing sergeant's chevrons. What he wouldn't find would be evidence clearly pointing to either Burton or Holmes as the murderer.

"Tell me, sergeant," Jake sighed, lifting his head and looking up at Holmes again. "Did you know General Oglethorpe before the war?"

"Never, sir. What would a general have in common with a lowly enlisted man like me? No, I didn't know the general. I didn't even think about him until the lieutenant arrived. I thought I saw a family resemblance; I guess I was right."

In his own quiet way Sergeant Holmes was accusing Sergeant Burton of being a liar and possibly the murderer. But if Burton was the killer how did he shoot Mathes? How would he have shot Grimms? The day before they bugged out and headed for their residence just outside Coulommiers, the sergeant was a dynamo of energy and drive. He remembered Burton running around all over the place trying to get the men packed and ready to go. There would have been no way for the sergeant to have pedaled out into the forest, kill Sergeant Grimms, and then return to the squadron and not be missed.

"Sergeant, have you ever lied to an officer?"

"Not without a reason, sir," Holmes answered matter of factly, sitting back and wiping his hands off, and for the first time, looking directly at Jake with unflinching eyes. "Do you have any more questions, sir? If not, I have to get this transmission back together. We're down to our last heavy truck and we need it to go for supplies by tomorrow afternoon."

The eyes were unblinking and dull in color. They never wavered. They were just pools of cold emptiness.

"I'm through for now, Holmes. But when I come back there will be more questions."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant said, coming to his feet and turning to pick up the crate of transmission parts. "And good luck on tonight's mission. I hope your lucky streak hasn't worn out yet."

With that he easily picked up the heavy crate and threw it over one shoulder before turning and walking out of the tent completely. Alone, Jake shook his head and came to his feet. What had he learned? Nothing. Was he any closer in

solving the case? Not really. Did he have a gut feeling who was the killer? Absolutely. But the question was, how did you turn a gut feeling into evidence you can submit to a court of inquiry?

The healthy roar of the 80 horses of the rotary engine behind him was steady and reassuring to Jake's ears as he peered over the edge of his cockpit and looked down into the night. But the sluggish controls of the aeroplane worried him. The broken fuel gauge only made the situation more irksome. The gauge was working when he lifted off the field at the French aerodrome, followed by six French Farmans loaded down with bombs, and struggling to climb into the air after him. But twenty minutes into the flight the gauge suddenly sent its needle sliding over to the far right. No amount of tapping on the instrument's glass would make it work again.

Below, the night was as black as the darkest bottomless abyss. There was only an occasional brush of moonlight across the surface of a river to give him a vague reference to their whereabouts. Glancing over his right shoulder, he saw the six French machines stacked up like a long line of geese off his right wing. They looked as slow and as sluggish in the air as his machine felt. But they had an excuse. The French machines were carrying four 75-mm artillery rounds in their cockpits to be used as bombs. Each round was jury-rigged with a set of ad-hoc fins snipped from sheets of tin. They were attached to the artillery shells in an effort to give them some form of stability when they were dropped over their targets.

In the second month of the war there were no such things as aerial bombs. Only weeks before the idea of using an aeroplane as a weapon of war seemed like a wild fantasy. Before the war most experts and military planners looked

upon the aeroplane as a contraption that would, at best, extend the eyes of the army on the battlefield and act something like aerial cavalry. Or at its worst, the aeroplane would turn out to be nothing of significance whatsoever. But as a genuine weapon that might have true offensive capabilities, the same experts loudly proclaimed was beyond even the realm of fantasy. The idea of dropping explosives over a military target seemed even more far-fetched.

But the necessities of war have a way of changing one's ideas. War forces the staid and complacent, the frozen-in-a-previous-time generals and the incompetents, to either become creative and inventive, or to become one of the millions of statistics historians will cite years later to bored students in forgotten classrooms. War quickly demands change, rapid change, and it is a merciless taskmaster who does not forgive those who cannot comply with its wishes. Those who can change and adapt usually have the edge on surviving.

Yet, in the first few weeks of the war, no country had a supply, or even a design, for an efficient aerial bomb. True, in wars past some hardy souls tried to use balloons to drop explosive devices onto the enemy. In most cases those attempts were inconsequential at best. But now, with the aeroplane capable of sustained powered flight over long distances, the idea of bombing the enemy from the air became an all too evident reality. Out of necessity each belligerent military service became adaptive and innovative. Some built crude devices using dynamite and contact triggers from artillery shells. Some tried primitive designs of Molotov cocktails, petrol poured into a bottle with a burning piece of fuel-soaked rags for a fuse, and hurled immediately at the enemy below, the moment the rags were lit. But most countries simply decided to use various-sized artillery shells to drop onto the heads of the infantry, as well as the innocent. It would not be until 1915 before bombs designed to be dropped from above were manufactured in quantities.

The wind blowing in Jake's face felt good as he adjusted his goggles and then glanced above him. Off in the west a storm was brewing, the far horizon literally glistening with jagged flashes of lightning. He did not want the approaching storm to blot out what little moonlight there was coming from the quarter moon above and behind his right shoulder. If the moonlight would hold until they got

to Montmirail before the clouds rolled in and extinguished it, he could at least use the compass. From Montmirail to Epernay was a straight northeasterly flight. Once he and his French comrades reached Epernay, it was a roughly thirty-minute flight directly north to Reims. With enough light he and his crew might be able to follow the dim outline of the road connecting Epernay to Reims. But glancing up at the clouds he could see the moon was going to be veiled permanently at any moment. Frowning, he glanced over his shoulder again and looked at the staggered flight of French machines, then peered downward.

Off to his left just a fraction, and sitting momentarily bathed in a sliver of bright moonlight, was Montmirail. But the moment of illumination was brief. No sooner had he recognized the small French village than the clouds squeezed out the silver beam and cloaked the countryside into total oblivion. Looking back at his flight, he hoped the nearest Frenchman would see him begin his shallow descent. If he did, hopefully the remaining pilots would follow and the flight would stay together. He had to get down lower. But to go lower meant to alert the Boche of their approach. The rotary engines of the seven Farmans were incredibly loud. On a calm summer's night, they could be heard for miles if a pilot decided to fly low. Jake, after having his plane shot to pieces underneath him by a Kraut machine gunner sitting in a church tower only a week earlier, knew he had to take the same risk again. Without moonlight there was no way he could keep his bearings straight from six thousand feet up. Taking a deep breath of air and exhaling slowly, he pushed the joystick forward and turned to see if the nearest Farman followed.

Jake saw the French two-seater continue to hug close to his upper right wing and smiled in relief. In the night he saw the fiery exhausts of the other machines hanging in a perfectly staggered formation behind the French machine. With all his little chicks still tucked in close to his machine, Jake returned to the task at hand. He leveled out two hundred feet above the rolling hills just to the southwest of Montmirail and began weaving and bobbing his way across the hills and dales of the countryside in a private dance of military daring. In front and slightly below him dark masses of trees and farmhouses slid underneath his wings as his machine raced along at almost eighty miles an hour. He knew it was

sheer insanity to fly this close to the ground. One wrong move, one error in judgement, and it would be instant oblivion. Still, the thrill of flying through the night as fast as the old Farman could run had the big American grinning in delight. Forgetting about the others behind him, Jake edged his plane even lower. He wanted to see how close he could get to the terrain. Trees now zipped underneath his wheels with less than ten feet clearance, going by so fast he just saw forms slightly darker than the night flash underneath him. Finding himself enjoying the experience immensely, Jake began whistling a favorite Broadway show tune as his hands and feet moved with cat-like agility in his efforts to keep the machine from crashing.

Briefly a shaft of moonlight broke through a narrow gap in the clouds and illuminated the countryside with silver-white light. In that brief glimmer of illumination Jake glanced to his left and right. By sheer luck they were flying down the middle of the country road which lead from Montmirail to Epernay and were, in fact, almost to Epernay. Pulling back on the stick slightly Jake wanted a few more feet of clearance before they zoomed over town. If there were any hidden Kraut machine gunners tucked away in second-story windows, or church towers, he wanted his chicks to have enough height to make it difficult for anyone to shoot at them. Glancing over his shoulder he saw he still had his six machines in tight formation behind him. Nodding in satisfaction he turned back to the task at hand and suddenly there was Epernay directly in front of him.

Sliding the joystick to his left, Jake felt the old Farman tilt steeply to the left just as the town flashed underneath his left wing tip. A mile or two ahead a pillar of moonlight knifed through the cloud cover with a bright column of light. The moonlight bisected the road from Epernay to Reims. It also revealed an ominous sight. The road was filled with the black mass of German troops as far as the eye could see. Almost instantly the road below lit up with the bright flashes of weapons firing up into the darkness. Thousands of little blossoms of light and snaking streams of tracers from angry machine guns began crisscrossing the skies above the road and making the immediate environment around Jake's machine a living hell. Throwing the stick to the right, Jake banked the Farman as hard as he could in an effort to get away. But as the old machine slid over a line

of trees bracketing the road he felt bullets repeatedly hitting his machine.

Straightening up Jake pushed the stick forward and brought the machine down even lower to the ground. To the east were patches of thick forests dotting the countryside. If he could keep his machine from running into a wall of trees, Jake was going to use the forests as a covering blanket for a few minutes before rising up and heading north again. Just a few kilometers north of the forests he would find the Vesle River. If his luck held out, and none of the bullets had hit anything important, he knew the Vesle River would take him straight to Reims and to the supply depot just outside the city. Glancing over his shoulder he saw only one Frenchman still hugging close to his wing. He glanced left and right and saw that the night was quiet and empty and no one was shooting at them.

Pulling back on the stick he climbed to five hundred feet in a gentle ascent and then banked to the left. The first gust of the approaching thunderstorm hit his plane head-on and made the ungainly machine shiver from stem to stern. Not too far away, the storm itself was painting the darkness with a fantastic aerial display of electrified fireworks. Disregarding the storm he saw in the distance, he saw the Vesle River meandering its way through the countryside and he grinned. Maybe his luck would hold. Even one Frenchman with four bombs might be lucky enough to hit something which would ignite and cause considerable damage. At the moment, however, he was happy no one was firing at him. Flashing over the banks of the river, he banked again to the left and began following the river's course in a northwesterly heading. In less than fifteen minutes they would be over Reims looking for the supply depot. That would be when the real hell would break out. By now every German commander this side of the Rhine knew French bombers were flying around in the night looking for some target to bomb. Jake knew the supply depot would be ringed with every kind of weapon the Krauts could dig up in their efforts to defend it.

His suspicions were immediately confirmed just five minutes later. As they were approaching the city from the southeast, the night air south of the city lit up into a deadly maelstrom of flares and powerful search lights cutting through the blackness above in efforts to find aerial intruders. After the flares and searchlights lit night skies, the arching trails of hundreds of machine guns going

off at once made the night literally glow with pyrotechnical displays of instant death. Amazingly one or more of his lost chicks found Reims on their own and were even now trying to find their targets. Thanks to the concentrated mass of fireworks filling the sky south of the city there was no doubt in his mind as to where they would find the ammunition depot.

Three large explosions lit up the terrain with thunderous pronouncements of destruction. Fires erupted in a vast conflagration, followed by hundreds of secondary explosions, and Jake realized one bomb must have found its mark. But there was no time to gloat because searchlights caught Jake and his machine, along with the single French Farman behind him, in a glaring column of white light and immediately from a hundred different directions bright machine gun tracers etched their way through the night in an effort to cut them down.

But there was more than machine guns trying to cut them down. The Krauts were using artillery fire as well. Large bursts of cannon shells filled the sky close to Jake, their explosions whipping his plane almost out of control from their shock waves. One such shell exploded just underneath his machine and flipped it onto its back. With only five hundred feet of clearance space underneath him, Jake knew he did not have much room for error. With an agonizing slowness to its motions, the old Farman rolled over one wing and righted itself just as a line of tracer fire reached up from the ground and sliced through his left set of wings. Shuddering from the impact the Farman staggered in the air for a moment and dropped a few feet before it raced out of the danger.

Jake didn't wait for any other Boche to find his mark. Throwing the plane hard to the left he banked into a steep turn and then pulled back on the stick to gain altitude. Behind him he heard another gigantic explosion, followed by several hundred smaller explosions, and he grinned and shouted in delight. His French wingman must have hit its target as well. But he had no time to turn and observe the damage. The force of the first massive blast hit his plane from the rear and he found himself whirling through the night sky completely out of control. He fought with the machine to regain control as more machine guns began angrily singing their songs of death up and toward him.

Suddenly he noticed he was in the darkness again and alone. No lights from

below outlined him to the hundreds of Boche gunners. No angry trails of machine gun fire lifted out of the darkness to cut him down, and most amazing of all, there was not the dull throb of his aeroplane's engine humming away behind him. Only darkness and total silence filled the air. With no power, the machine began to drop. Pushing the stick forward slightly, Jake stabilized the machine and then looked around quickly to see where he might possibly be. Two things became instantly apparent. First, he was over the city itself. Reims sprawled out in the darkness below him to his left and to his right barely one hundred feet below him. Secondly, looming out the darkness in front of him was the tall and narrow mass of the bell tower of the Reims cathedral. With the engine shot to pieces, and hardly enough speed to stay under control, there was nothing he could do except jab at the stick and the rudder in an attempt to steer the machine's fuselage into the yawning gap of one of the bell tower's openings.

Crashing into the stone structure, the sound of wood splintering and canvas ripping to pieces filled the night. Holding on as best as he could, Jake was thrown from one side of his machine to the other. But the safety belt around his waist held. Wings were ripped away from the fuselage, and the fuselage itself, free from any further hindrance, slid across the oak floor of the bell tower before coming to a halt directly underneath the tower's massive bronze bell. Amazed he was still alive, Jake unbuckled himself and crawled out of the splintered remains of the machine.

Below the night air was filled with the raucous din of hundreds of men blowing shrill police whistles, followed by the thudding roar of hob-nailed boots running down the cobblestone streets surrounding the cathedral. Leaping to one tower opening he looked down and scanned the streets below. A long file of German soldiers was rushing down the street and entering the gutted remains of the cathedral. Behind him he heard men racing up the wooden stairs of the tower. Rushing to the stairwell Jake threw the trap door closed. Leaping to one side he pushed a large piece of rubble onto the door. Weeks before the Germans had laid siege to the city and bombarded Reims mercilessly. In that bombardment, shells had ripped through the 13th Century cathedral and laid it in complete ruins. It was now nothing but a mass of rubble. Only the tower he was in remained more

or less intact.

Running to a different tower opening Jake braced himself and leaned out into the night to peer at the tower's exterior. Like all Gothic cathedrals, the outer walls of the tower were carved into intricate patterns and bedecked with hundreds of small religious statues. For a person with his talents, such an ornamented edifice offered a perfect escape route. Smiling thinly into the night he did not hesitate. In the blinking of an eye, he was scaling down the outer wall and into the darkness, moving with incredible speed.

In his line of work, one not only had to be an excellent artist, but he also had to have the skills of an acrobat. One usually could not enter palaces and museums in the dead of night from the ground floor. An art thief rarely entered the front door. A thief had to be a second-story man if he wanted to ply his trade. He happened to be the best in business.

Above him he heard the heavy thudding of men trying to break through the oak flooring of the bell tower. Below him, and off in the distance, he heard the growl of German lorries rumbling through the city's street heading his way. He knew he had only a few seconds of freedom left to him. If he could get down to one of the side streets before troops surrounded the cathedral entirely he might yet escape. But he had to move fast and he had to be damn lucky. Leaping off the base of the tower and onto a segment of the cathedral's roof which remained intact Jake slid over the edge of the roof and began working his way down toward the street below.

Silently jumping off the wall he landed on the sidewalk beside the cathedral and leaned against the wall of the bombed-out building. Buried in the deepest of shadows he held his breath and listened. On the other side of the church, he could hear the sounds of men running and the screeching of brakes from lorries filled with more troops. But for the moment the street in front of him was void of any movement. Glancing right and left he paused. In front of him on the far side of the street were a series of three-storied business and apartment dwellings. Most of them were hollowed-out shells from the early siege, but a few remained undamaged and still occupied. His idea was to move across the street and hide in the ruins and wait. With luck he might be able to exchange his officer's uniform

for some borrowed civilian clothing. He knew he could blend into the city's population and never be found. After a few days of patiently waiting for the Germans to end their searches, he would make his way back to the front, find a gap in the lines to sneak across, and eventually return to his squadron.

Stepping into the street he started to cross but stopped and turned to his right. The growl of a large German lorrie ripped the night's silence as the lumbering machine turned onto the street and began accelerating toward him like some prehistoric dinosaur. Quickly sliding back into the dark shadows, Jake pressed himself up against the cathedral wall and waited.

The lorrie's brakes protested loudly as it rolled to a halt almost directly in front of him. Immediately the back of the lorrie was thrown open and several large Boche NCOs leapt out onto the street and began shouting orders. Soldiers came leaping out of the truck in two columns and began running down the street. But the soldiers were not what caught Jake's attention. Instead the form of a large framed German officer climbed out of the passenger side of the lorrie's cab. In the man's right hand was the ungainly looking Mauser broom-handled automatic as he walked around the front of the lorrie and came to a halt. There was something instantly familiar about the dark silhouette. The way he walked, the way he stood with his feet apart and draping the barrel of his pistol across one shoulder in a bored fashion, seemed all too familiar to Jake.

"Come out, come out where ever you are, captain," the voice of General Helmuth von Frankenstein growled into the night with casual and arrogant ease. "I know you are close by and can hear me. There is no use in trying to escape. Not this time. This time I will be the one holding the gun and you will be the prisoner. So make it easy on yourself, my friend. Step out into the street with your hands above your head. I promise you we will not harm you."

Jake glanced to his left and right and counted more than thirty German soldiers lining the streets and facing the cathedral. In front of the large lorrie, Frankenstein stood with his feet apart and his free hand riding his hip while he continued to prop his pistol over his right shoulder. On the man's lips was this sardonic little grin that irritated Jake immensely. The man was just too confident, too self-assured. But, quietly taking a deep breath, Jake had to admit the man

was in control of this situation. There was nothing to do but to give up.

"My compliments, general," he said in a voice loud enough for the German general to hear.

Raising his hands high into the air Jake stepped out of the shadows and into the street.

"Ah, a wise choice, captain." Frankenstein nodded as he grinned even more broadly in pleasure, yet making no effort to point the broom-handled Mauser at him. "I told you we would meet again, my friend. It is a point of honor for me to always keep my promises."

Men surrounded him and threw his hands behind his back roughly. Shackles materialized from out of nowhere. He was hustled to the lorrie and thrown into the back of the vehicle, surrounded by twenty or more infantrymen. Two grizzled-looking sergeants were pulled up into the truck, each pointing big Mauser rifles at him, and sat down on either side of the American. As the lorrie's engine was cranked back into life, he heard the pleased rumble of Frankenstein's laughter as the young general climbed into the cab of the lorrie and slammed the door shut.

"Well now, my American friend," shouted Frankenstein from the cab as he continued laughing. "At least you will survive the war, eh? That is, if you can survive one of my interrogations."

The man's laughter exploded into a frenzy as the large vehicle lurched into motion. Jake, manacled and surrounded by his captors, said nothing as he sat stoically against the cab of the vehicle. But his mind was working furiously. He was going to escape. He was going to escape and he was going to find a way to slap the arrogance permanently out of Helmuth von Frankenstein.

In the darkness he dimly heard the sounds of several German aeroplane engines revving up and then fading off in the distance. Blinking eyes in the darkness for a few moments to orientate himself, Jake's nostrils took in the dank smell and felt the wet coldness of a strange environment. Lying on something hard and rough he could see absolutely nothing in the blackness surrounding him. But he could feel the pain beginning to radiate across the right side of his face. Lifting a hand to touch his jaw he heard the rattle of the heavy chains and felt their weight wrapped around his wrists. And then he remembered.

A German soldier had used the butt of his rifle and hit him square in the jaw after he had said something which the general took umbrage over. Smiling, and wincing in pain from the effort, Jake remembered what he said. After two hours of sitting underneath a very bright light with his hands strapped mercilessly behind the wooden chair and being interrogated by Frankenstein himself, Jake looked up into the sneering face of the arrogant general and said:

"Does your mother know you are out at night and being very nasty with the peasants again?"

Now, wincing again as he smiled and rubbed his jaw tenderly, the general did not like that remark. Pushing himself off the cold slab he suspected he wasn't going to be invited to the next year's gala birthday bash for the Kaiser.

In the distance he heard another German engine, a four-cylinder Daimler he thought, rev up and then slowly fade off into silence. Glancing around in the darkness he realized he must be close to a Boche airfield. Coming to his feet, he

took a step forward and was immediately restrained by the chained manacles around his ankles. Though it was too dark to see any detail around him he nevertheless began using his hands to touch the walls and whatever else he could find. It did not take long for him to realize he was chained to the walls of a potato cellar. In one corner of the room he found a large pile of hardened potatoes covered by a mat of thick straw. In the darkness he found something else.

He felt in the thick hay covering the cellar floor something flat and hard. Kneeling, his manacled hands sifted through the hay until he found the cold steel of a broken knife. The piece of metal was about four inches long and about two inches wide. Grinning, he started to stand up and stick the blade into his trousers. But behind him he heard boots quickly stepping down stone steps and the rattle of keys. Dropping the metal back onto the floor he covered it with hay with one boot and turned to face his captors. Someone unlocked a large padlock and rattled it out of its position before the large wooden door opened. A beefy hand, which needed to be scrubbed thoroughly, stuck a blinding orb of light into the room as two Kraut infantrymen stepped into the room. He lifted manacled hands up to protect his eyes from the glaring light. The guards, one holding a lantern high above their heads, and both of them holding pistols, moved on either side of him cautiously.

"Ah, you are finally awake," the guard with the lantern grunted. "The general wishes to see you, American. Step out of the cell very slowly. Do not make any strange movements. We've been warned about you. Even think about trying to escape and we will shoot."

In the lantern's light the guards could see the black bruise covering half of the American's face. But they also saw the American smile painfully and hold up his the chains which girdled both his wrists and his ankles on a very short leash.

"I doubt I can crawl, much less walk, gentlemen. Might I persuade you to remove the chains? Or at least give me enough slack to walk with some dignity?"

Both soldiers shook their heads no and motioned with the barrels of their Lugers for Jake to move on. Seeing that neither one was going to accommodate

him, the American turned and hopped up the steep cellar stairs, and into the bright light of a farmhouse kitchen filled with Boche mechanics and enlisted men. In the air wafted the smell of potatoes and knockwurst. The aroma of hot food and fresh coffee made Jake's mouth water. But he hobbled through the crowded kitchen as the enlisted men watched Jake in silence and continued to eat with the dulled mechanical rapidity of exhaustion.

"To the left and upstairs, American," one of his guards grunted behind him, motioning with the barrel of his Luger to climb a set of stairs that hugged one wall of the large dining room. "The general is expecting you upstairs. First door on the right."

Glancing up at the darkness of the second floor, Jake gripped the chains dangling from his wrists, and began hopping one step at a time up the steep set of stairs. Below the two guards waited until Jake was halfway up before the one without the lantern told his partner he was going to go get something to eat. The other nodded but did not take his eyes off Jake, nor lower the barrel of his 7.62 mm Luger.

Seeing he was going to be watched closely until he entered the general's quarters, Jake shrugged, and returned to the task of ascending the narrow stairs. At the top stairwell he found the door to his right partially open.

"Ah, Captain Reynolds." the general's voice boomed out jovially as he threw the door open and grinned. "Please, come in. Come in."

It took some effort for Jake to enter the small bedroom. But as the general stepped away from the door he swung in through the opening. The bed had been removed recently. On the polished wooden floor Jake could see the indentations of the bed frame's four posts. Replacing the bed was a round table and two high-backed chairs. The table groaned from an assortment of foods and wines as the bemedaled Kraut general, in a freshly pressed uniform, smiled warmly at Jake and sat down in a chair.

"Please, sit. Eat. I regret I do not have much time to spend with you. But the little time we have, I wish to savor."

Jake smiled and lifted his chained wrists up in front of him.

"Hard to eat with all this hardware on, general."

"Ah, yes." Frankenstein nodded, speaking perfect English as he came out of his seat quickly and produced a key to the several padlocks of Jake's chains. "My apologies, captain. I found it necessary to make sure you were securely bound. You understand. After our first encounter I have come to appreciate your rather amazing agility, as well as your ability to conjure up something out of nothing."

Free from bondage, Jake rubbed a little life back into his wrists and sat down opposite the general. Keeping his eyes on the tall Junkers officer he said nothing as the general poured wine for the two of them.

"Hungry? Personally, I'm famished. I wish to have something to eat. But in less than thirty minutes I have to return to Rethel and board a train which will take me back to Berlin. But before I go, there is a business proposition I would like to discuss with you."

Frankenstein handed Jake his glass of wine and then turned and sat down in his chair, crossing one leg over the other as he lifted his glass up for a toast.

"To our mutual interests in the world of the clandestine, captain."

Returning the salute, Jake lifted his glass and emptied it quickly before setting it on the table.

"Please, help yourself. I don't mind if you eat while we discuss business."

Jake poured himself more wine and smiled. Setting the bottle onto the table he reached for a carving knife and quickly sliced himself a large slab of steaming hot ham. He had not eaten for more than twelve hours and he found himself famished.

"You know my name, general. And we're speaking American, instead of the King's English. I would say you have been busy in these last few hours."

Frankenstein's dark eyes burned with a fire as he watched Jake fill his dish. Dressed in a tailored uniform, with the bright blue cross of the Pour le Merit dangling from the man's throat, the general looked like a man who was bred to lead in times of war. There was that air of supreme confidence Jake found so irritating. In Jake's eyes it was apparent the haughty Prussian felt infinitely superior over any of the rank and file.

"I have been on the telephone for hours, my friend. I must say, as the time went by, I became even more impressed with your talents."

"Talents? What talents?" Jake asked just before stuffing half a buttered baked potato in his mouth.

"Through a friend, of a friend, of a friend... you know how these unofficial connections work... I was informed of your talents as a procurer of fine pieces of art. I certainly witnessed with mine own eyes your flair for such transactions. I was impressed the first time we encountered each other. My admiration for your unique skills has grown considerably after I made some inquiries."

"I'm sure I haven't a clue what you are talking about, but don't stop; I am curious to hear about this business proposition."

The general smiled as he poured himself a second glass of wine and then sat back in his chair. Jake continued eating, disregarding the general altogether.

"My sources have informed me you do this for an occupation, captain. You steal pieces of art and replace them with forgeries. Very good forgeries. Too bad you did not have the opportunity to replace the van Eck."

Jake said nothing as he reached for his wine and drank. But his eyes were on the general, and the general had this thin, almost sardonic, grin on his lips.

"In fact, some of my sources have informed me they have used your services on several occasions. Well, being a person who holds genuine respect for an accomplished tradesman, and especially that of an accomplished thief, I wish to acquire some selections for my personal collection. Oh, you need not worry about reimbursement. I can afford, as the Americans say, the going price."

"You must have me confused with someone else, general. What I did the other night was an opportunity which just came along. I am as surprised as you that we succeeded so easily."

"I don't think so," the general said, shaking his head and smiling like a coiled viper ready to strike. "You knew what the van Eck was and had a plan the moment we climbed into my car. A simple thief does not have the, how shall I describe it, flair as you exhibited? No captain, you are far more resourceful. That's why I wish to open negotiations with you over a certain piece of work I have been eager to obtain."

With his hunger satisfied, Jake pushed his chair away from the table and crossed his legs as he folded his arms across his chest. Eyeing the general with

mild curiosity he said nothing but waited... waited and thought to himself this man did not look nor act like the type of clientele he catered to. There was not the streak of controlled fanaticism in the man most collectors radiated when the conversation turned to art. In the general, Jake saw a controlled reservoir of power and unlimited confidence. But not fanaticism. Not madness.

So what was the general really desiring?

"My dear captain," the Prussian officer began as he smiled pleasantly. "You realize, of course, the Fatherland is going to win this war. For those who assist the Fatherland in certain, shall we say clandestine operations, I am sure the Kaiser will be quite generous."

"Why, general," Jake said as he painted an exaggerated look of stunned surprise on his rugged face, "are you suggesting I become a spy?"

"Hmmm," mused Frankenstein, narrowing his eyes as he rubbed a finger around the rim of his wine glass. "That is what I like about you Americans. Straight and to the point. No bantering around the edges of a delicate subject. No side-long reference and innuendo. Just straight to the point."

"Yeah, that's what we are... uncouth. I'd even say downright obnoxious."

"Perhaps uncouth at times, I'll agree. But efficient, and in your case, Captain Reynolds, an opportunity which cannot be overlooked. With your talents at forgery and your bravado, you would make the perfect double-agent. It does not hurt, I might add, that your squadron is based in Coulommiers and only down the road from Sir John French's army headquarters."

Jake grinned, and in a boyish gesture, rubbed a hand through his thick black hair. The general was watching him closely, and to Jake's surprise, that ugly black mass of a Mauser broom-handle automatic materialized from out of thin air and was now lying on the table in front of the smiling general.

"Let's assume you are right and I am a thief. Not that I am admitting anything, mind you. But for supposition's sake, let's just play this line out. You mentioned something about compensation. Generous compensation. Can you be a little more specific?"

The general lifted his head and chuckled in an amused fashion, sounding very much like a man who had just won at poker. But as Jake smiled and relaxed

nevertheless he watched the general's right hand. It remained close to the Mauser.

"If, upon the successful completion of the assignment, I believe the amount of half a million American dollars was suggested."

"Half a million," Jake echoed, sounding impressed. "And what would I have to do to earn it?"

"Yes. A fortune by anyone's standards, my dear captain. But it would only be the beginning. Just the beginning."

Downstairs the voice of a gruff German sergeant ordering the enlisted men out of the house drifted up to Jake's ears. Men complained and grumbled but reluctantly began tromping out of the comfort of a house filled with the aromas of freshly cooked food and fresh coffee.

"At your army headquarters are plans for whatever offensive push the British and French are going to launch in the next day or two against us. With your surreptitious abilities and deceptive talents, I believe you could acquire a copy of these plans in a matter of hours without anyone suspecting anything amiss. I suspect it would be child's play for you, captain."

"Supposing I did acquire the plans? What then?"

Frankenstein's right hand slid a little further away from the big automatic as he smiled in a relaxed, pleased fashion. Pouring himself a glass of wine he sat back in his chair and emptied half the glass before answering.

"A mission over the lines and a rendezvous at a pre-arranged site where you drop the plans down to one of my men would be the scenario I have in mind."

Jake watched the general closely as he lifted his glass and smiled. Frankenstein was beginning to believe he had convinced the American to become a spy. The man was relaxing and lowering his guard. The Mauser still lay on the table. But the general's hand was now in his lap. Jake glanced at the room's open bedroom window. Outside the silence of the night drifted in along with the soft warm breeze of the summer's night. In the distance he heard the sputtering cough of one Boche aeroplane engine sullenly kicking into life and he wondered if this airfield was near Reims. If so, he felt confident he could find his way back to the lines if he could somehow figure out a way to commandeer a

machine.

"Suppose I said I was interested in your proposition, general, and agreed to do your work. What then?"

"I have made arrangements for you to be escorted through our lines, creating of course, just the proper side-show to indicate to the French you were escaping. Twenty-four hours later you deliver the goods at the rendezvous point. Forty-eight hours later you will receive a telegram from a Swiss bank with the news an account has been opened in your name. My dear captain, it is a simple plan. I find clean, uncluttered plans which work efficiently."

Jake grinned and scratched the side of his unshaven jaw. He had to admit the general's plan was rather elegant in its simplicity and its viability. It actually would work. And it had the added benefit of actually offering him an income which, frankly, would compensate for the war's rude intrusion into his earnings.

But there was only one thing wrong. Just one. He didn't like Helmuth von Frankenstein. He especially did not like the general's overriding air of cultured superiority. Still grinning, Jake slid the chair back and stood up, and as he did, he watched the general's smile turn brittle and his hand begin to slide across the table toward the Mauser.

"Nice, general," Jake said, nodding in agreement as he walked over to the open window and bent down to look out into the night. "Very nice. Half a million clams is quite tempting. But one question. How would you make sure I would do your work once I got back across the lines? I could just say yes, allow you to let me go, and then forget about you and your offer altogether."

In the distance he could see the dull orange-red glow of fires burning and he frowned. Fires from the burning supply depot? He could see nothing of Reims. But that could mean anything. He had been right about one thing, however. He was being held prisoner at a German aerodrome. A quite large and permanent-looking German aerodrome by the number of machines parked in efficient razor straight lines on the far side of the field.

"Yes, that is a possibility," Frankenstein began, the general's voice sounding unconcerned and even mildly amused behind Jake. "But I don't think so. You will either agree with my proposition, or firmly decline it altogether. In every

man's life there are those indiscretions, those dirty little skeletons hiding in our closets, which all of us want to hide from the world. In your case, my dear captain, you have a rather intriguing set of indiscretions which could be used by someone as unscrupulous as myself."

"Indiscretions?" the American grinned, turning to look at the large-framed German officer behind him. "Are you talking about this fantasy of my being an art thief? Why, general, I deny any such allegations. Even if I was this master crook you think I am, I damn well would make sure no evidence would ever be left behind to incriminate me."

"I didn't say you did," the general answered, lifting his handsome face up slightly and laughing easily. "But a man in my position might be able to pull a few strings here and there and perhaps create that piece of incriminating evidence. I understand you have been quite successful in France with your acquisitions, captain. Perhaps the French art authorities would be pleased to receive an anonymous communication tipping them off concerning your pre-war activities."

Frankenstein continued to laugh as Jake stood up and turned away from the window. Sitting himself down, he knitted his eyebrows together and rubbed his jaw with one hand thoughtfully. The general's eyes were burning bright as he gazed at Jake. The general believed he had won and he was openly gloating over his victory. There was a grin on the Prussian's lips as Jake reached for a bottle of wine.

"What if I simply refuse, general?"

"Tomorrow, at dawn, you will be marched in front of a firing squad and shot. I will be saddened, of course. But I can't take any chances with you and your, uh, expertise, captain. You have cost me dearly already for your escapades. But unlike you, I do not have a magnanimous bone in my body. I clearly live by the adage of removing one's obstacles as quickly and as ruthlessly as possible. You could become a most dangerous obstacle in my line of work. Very dangerous."

Pouring a glass of wine, Jake nodded his head in acknowledgment of the general's backhanded compliment and then raised his glass for a salute.

"Well, general, there is little to be said."

Frankenstein reached for his glass, smiling even more pleased with himself, and lifted it into the air.

"You have made a decision?" he asked as he pulled the glass up to his lips.

"Yes, I have," Jake said after quickly downing his wine and turning the glass in his hands and setting it down in an upside position on the table. "General, you can go to hell. Take your money, and your Kaiser, and skip off into the night like the thugs you both are. I'd just as soon face the firing squad."

Frankenstein's fist slammed down on the table with such ferocity plates and bottles of wine went crashing to the floor. Coming to his feet the general snatched the broom-handle Mauser from the table and took one step toward the door and threw the door open with a bang.

"Heinz! Heinz!" he bellowed at the top of his lungs into the hall before turning to glare with radiating malevolence at Jake.

Boots came pounding up the stairs in a swift cacophony of haste. The same two Boche enlisted men who had escorted him to the general entered the room with Lugers in their hands.

"Take this piece of filth downstairs and throw him into the cellar. Tell Sergeant Berthold that the firing squad will assemble sharply at dawn tomorrow. I want this man dead before anyone sits down for breakfast, do you understand!"

"Yes, Herr General!" the sergeant nodded and looked terrified at the Prussian officer.

Grabbing Jake roughly by one arm, the sergeant almost threw Jake out of the room and then pushed him down the stairs violently. The chains wrapped around Jake's legs threw him off balance and he went rolling down the stairs in a chattering curtain of flying chains and flailing arms. Above, Frankenstein, with a look of dark malicious hate painted on his handsome face, stepped out of his room and glared down at the collapsed ball of the American lying on the floor at the bottom of the stairs.

"Too bad I have to leave in a few minutes, captain. I would dearly love to stay and watch you die. Ah, what a pleasure that would be to see you ripped to pieces. But what a waste. We could have become a very interesting team, Captain Reynolds, and very rich."

The two enlisted men stepped beside Jake and hauled him roughly to his feet. On both men were a ring of keys dangling from their belts as Jake came to his feet and was violently buffeted against one jailer and then the other. With little patience they began pushing him through the now empty and dark bottom floor of the house. Throwing him down the cellar stairs, the three had to stand very close together as one of them unlocked the cellar door, while the other covered Jake with his weapon.

"Throw him in there, Karl," the sergeant growled as he opened the door and stepped out of the way. "I must hurry up and wake up the general's chauffeur. The general has to be in Rethel by midnight tonight and catch a train back to Berlin. You had better stay in the kitchen above and remain on guard until they come and get him tomorrow. We do not want our American friend to escape. If he does we will be the ones in front of the firing squad at dawn."

The younger man pushed Jake into the blackness of the cellar. Stumbling over his chains Jake fell into the thick straw of the floor, and at the same time, heard the heavy oak door behind him slam shut and the clank of the heavy lock firmly snapping into place. The sound of retreating boots up the cellar stairs and a door being firmly closed was distinctly clear as Jake rolled over onto one shoulder and sat up in the darkness.

Leaning against the cold stone of the cellar wall the Jake grinned. In his right hand was a set of keys he had lifted from the younger of the two guards. In the jostling and stumbling, Jake made sure he had physically stumbled into both men. From the young Kraut's belt he deftly purloined the ring of keys thinking it would be the sergeant who would reach for his keys first to open the cellar door. In the blackness he tried all the keys onto the locks which clasped the chained manacles round his feet and ankles. Finding the right one he swiftly undid himself and leapt to the locked cellar door.

In the darkness Jake ran his hands over the rough wood of the door and smiled in relief when he found what he was looking for. In the middle of the door, just at eye level, was a small opening large enough to stick a hand and arm through. He had to twist and turn, and ultimately stand on his toes, as he leaned against the door and stuck his arm through the peep door and reached for the

padlock. But reach the lock he could, and one by one, he tried every key on the lock until he found the one that worked.

Grimacing when the lock clattered to the stone floor, he pushed the door open and stepped out of the cell. Silently he moved up the stone steps and paused in front of the cellar door. Outside he heard the whine of a large engine growling in first gear circle around the house and stop. Through a series of cracks in the cellar door he saw Frankenstein sweep through the kitchen followed in his wake by three enlisted men loaded down with boxes and suitcases. The tall Prussian did not glance one way or the other as he moved across the empty kitchen and stepped out the kitchen door and into the night. But he did hear voices shouting. Someone was giving instructions to the men who were going to follow the general. They were to keep their motorcycles twenty meters behind the general's car at all times unless there was an emergency. Then he heard the spluttering of motorcycle engines barking into life, followed by the growl of the general's car starting.

In a roar of the assembled engines the motorcade drove off, leaving the farmhouse, and especially the kitchen, deserted. Smiling, Jake started to open the door. He paused when he saw through the cracks the form of the younger enlisted man assigned to be the night's guard enter the kitchen through the door the general had disappeared through. Walking across the room the corporal pulled a plain-looking chair away from a table and sat down in it, back facing the cellar door. Sighing in exhaustion the young man dropped his Luger onto the table and then lifted his booted feet up and dropped them onto the table. Leaning back in the chair he clasped both hands behind his head.

Jake grinned with a Machiavellian gleam in his eyes. Waiting to see if anyone else entered through the kitchen door, he did not move for a good half hour. In that half hour he watched his guard slowly drift off to sleep and the house itself settle down into the dull solitude of a tomb. When he was convinced all was quiet he reached for the door's handle and opened the cellar door.

The young Kraut corporal did not know what happened to him when he finally woke several hours later. All he knew was that he was bound, gagged, and lying in the potato cellar where only hours ago the dangerous American had

been lying. But what was more frightening when he was found by his comrades, the very same comrades who had been selected to be the morning's firing squad was they found him bound and gagged and lying in the straw in just his underwear. For the life of him he had no explanation which made any sense to his onlookers. It was as if a ghost had reached out from the grave and stole the clothes off his body while he slept!

My god, the general was correct! The American captive was as dangerous and as slippery as a poltergeist!

Darkness bathed the airfield with suffocating intensity.
Giving it a sense of impending disaster.

He stepped out into the night wearing the tight fitting, and foul smelling, uniform of the unconscious corporal. Instinctively he moved into the shadows surrounding the house. For a moment or two Jake stood in the cool of the night air and reviewed his options. His eyes found what he was looking for. Across the field he saw two men who were half buried in the engine compartment of a two-seater Albatross B.II. Four large lanterns burned intensely in the night, creating a bubble of light in a sea of surrounding darkness. The machine's engine was idling smoothly as he watched the mechanics with interest. In the stillness of the hot summer's night, on such a field currently empty of the hustle and bustle of a working aerodrome, it would be child's play to unilaterally requisition the Boche machine and escape.

He needed to escape. He needed to get back to his squadron and find a killer. But even more importantly he needed to stop Frankenstein. Jake firmly believed the Prussian's coercive threats. There was no doubt in the American's mind that, once the general found out he had made his escape, the supremely confident general would fabricate evidence of his past work and quietly alert the French. Frankenstein would be very convincing in creating a web of evidence impossible to defend. He was convinced enough fabricated evidence would be produced which would send him to prison for a very long stay. He had to do something to stop the general and he had to do it quickly. Frowning as he glanced to either

side, Jake felt the cold steel of the corporal's 7.62 mm Luger hugging the small part of his back as he began walking across the dark field.

Frankenstein had a half-hour's start on him. It was undoubtedly an hour's drive on the rough back roads from Reims to Rethel. Maybe even longer, depending on how the roads might be cluttered with German units on the march and heading toward the front. An aeroplane was the only way to catch up to the general. In order to obtain an aeroplane he had to forcefully acquire one. Reaching behind him he gripped the Luger firmly in his right hand. Pulling it out into the open he held it close to his leg as he glanced around quickly to make sure nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

Stepping into the bubble of light, just as one mechanic lifted his head out of the engine compartment and snapped the cowling down firmly into place, Jake waited until the man lowered himself down the small ladder. The mechanic didn't know he was around when Jake, using the Luger as a cudgel, brought it down on the back of the man's skull. The man collapsed immediately without making a sound. He caught the man quickly and dragged him over and away from the machine's landing gear and laid him in the grass before hurriedly moving the ladder out of the way. With that done he calmly circled around the rotating prop of the engine and found the second mechanic standing beside the plane with his back turned, wiping the grease from his hands with a dirty rag.

"Excuse me," Jake asked calmly in German, pointing the barrel of the Luger at the back of the mechanic's head. "Which way is it to Rethel?"

"Rethel?" the young German echoed, continuing to wipe his hands as he turned and then stared with bulging eyes of terror down the working end of the Luger's barrel. "My god, are you crazy?"

"Not crazy. Just escaping. Now quickly which way to Rethel."

Dropping the dirty rag the man lifted a hand and pointed. But the lad's white eyes, double-crossed as they stared transfixed at the Luger, grew even wider in terror.

"The machine, how much fuel does it have?"

"Just topped off the ta-tank! It is scheduled to go out on a reconnaissance patrol at first light tomorrow. Please... please, don't shoot!"

Large beads of sweat cropped up across the lad's dirty forehead and tears filled his eyes. The boy's facial color was fading rapidly. Jake grinned. It was only a matter of moments before the young mechanic would roll his eyes up into his skull and faint.

"If you want to live, get under the plane and pull the chocks away from the wheels," Jake grunted, lowering the pistol and stepping around the boy. "Do it now!"

The terror-stricken enlisted man dived underneath the plane like a rabbit and grabbed the ropes of the chocks just as Jake climbed into the machine's front cockpit. Glancing over the side, Jake saw the boy scrambling like a rabid dog away from the machine in an effort to remove himself from the apparently deranged madman. He smiled and opened the Albatross' throttle wide before lifting a hand up and saluting the young mechanic smartly. The Albatross began to slowly roll over the grass and past the double lines of various German machines parked in precise rows. With each second the machine built up speed and its controls began to respond in his hands. In moments Jake had the machine racing down the grassy field as the young mechanic just stood and watched the Albatross lift smoothly into the air and disappear into the darkness.

Banking to the right, Jake glanced to his left. Large fires burned below and off in the distance. It was the supply depot he and his French comrades had hit the night before. It was burning in a sullen and angry dullness just outside Reims. He leveled the Albatross out and pointed its nose toward Rethel. Sweeping over Reims barely five hundred feet above the streets Jake smiled and glanced up. There were no clouds and the sliver of moon was just enough to give him references below. Easily recognizing the road that led off to Rethel he corrected the machine's drift and began following the road.

Ten minutes into the flight and Jake pulled his thin lips back in a wide grin. From Reims to Rethel was one un-ending convoy of Boche lorries and horse-drawn wagons cluttering the road. All of the traffic was heading toward Reims in a winding snake of thousands of crawling vehicles. But Jake realized a piece of luck was working in his favor. Looking down he saw the clogged roads and realized any traffic moving from Reims north and east to Rethel had to fight this

traffic. Consequently, all wheeled vehicles were moving at a snail's pace. Jake was convinced the general's earlier departure meant nothing. Somewhere below him in that congestion of man, horse, and machine he would find Helmuth von Frankenstein and his motorcycle escorts. The general would be railing away in unequivocal rage at the snail's pace of all the traffic facing him. But there would be nothing he could do to move any faster. Pushing the machine's joystick forward Jake decided to go lower for a better look.

Five kilometers south of Rethel he found the general's motorcade suddenly breaking through the mass of vehicles and sweeping into a long segment of open road. The long staff car of the general had pennants whipping in the wind from the front fenders while behind him, six motorcycles in files of two abreast, kept their prescribed distances with machine precision. Accelerating rapidly the car and cycles began to move quickly down the dirt road toward Rethel. Jake pushed the nose of the Albatross down as he pulled the throttle back in an effort to slow the machine down. He knew he did not have much time. Once the general's car entered the outskirts of the city he would be in an envelope of safety. If Jake was going to have any opportunity to stop the general it had to be done now. Now while Frankenstein sat in the rear of his vehicle and suspected nothing amiss.

It was a simple plan. A plan the general would have appreciated. Jake slid the machine down in a shallow glide and cut back even more on the throttle. The aeroplane came down behind the rear column of riders and almost touched its wheels on the road before Jake leveled off. The reaction of the rear cycles was immediate. One of the riders glanced over his shoulder and saw the whirring propeller of the aeroplane almost on top on him. He instinctively jerked the handlebars of his machine hard to the right. The cycle and rider immediately ran over the machine riding abreast of him and both men and machines went tumbling down the dark road in a series of pinwheels of flailing legs, arms, and flying metal parts.

Pandemonium swept over all the cycle riders. Twisting and turning to get out of the way of the aeroplane, which was apparently trying to run them down, each of the riders took evasive action. Actions which caused them all to crash in spectacular fashions. Men went flying through the air and riderless cycles roared

off into the night across the ditches and into farm fields before tilting over and crashing into the earth. In seconds all the cycles were down and their riders were either unconscious or injured enough to be of no help for their commanding officer.

Jake pulled back on the machine's stick just enough to lift the machine over the canvas top of the big Daimler. He cleared the fast-moving car only by inches and immediately dropped down in front of the car, bouncing his machine's wheels hard onto the road in a landing. The driver of the large staff car savagely whipped the car's wheel to the right. Immediately losing control the staff car went sliding broadside over the bumpy dirt road, throwing up a huge cloud of dust in the process.

Jake cut the plane's ignition switch and fought to keep the machine on the road until it came to a slow stop. He was out of the machine and running through the rolling cloud of dust, Luger in hand, just as the big Daimler slid like some inebriated whale into the roadside ditch and rolled onto its side. With the sound of glass shattering and fenders crumpling like tissues, the car bounced to a halt. It immediately disappeared when a large veil of dust enveloped it momentarily. Throwing up an arm to protect his eyes from the thick dust Jake ran to the automobile and leaped onto its exposed side. Looking in he saw the general's chauffeur rolled up like some baby's doll in the auto's floor with blood streaming down a mean gash across his forehead. Yet the driver was alive and would survive. Forgetting him Jake turned and looked in the rear seat for the large frame of an unconscious general. But there was no general to be found. Surprised, Jake felt a jolt of panic sweep up his spine as he brought the Luger up and looked hurriedly around him.

The dust cleared slowly from the road as he sat hunched down on the side of the Daiiamler. But, just before it cleared altogether, from below and to one side of him he heard the suddenly violent coughing of a man groggily coming back into consciousness. Leaping to the ground he stood up as the staggering form of a tattered Frankenstein, hand to his bloody forehead, appeared like a mirage from out of the dust. Jake stuffed the Luger into his trousers and grinned as he stepped up in front of Frankenstein and rolled his right hand into a hard fist.

"Goodnight, general. It hasn't been nice knowing you!"

With this Jake threw a hard right cross straight into the general's classically chiseled jaw. The staggering Prussian had no idea what hit him. Dropping like a rock to the ground, Jake quickly used the belts off the man's uniform and tied him up. Then finding a piece of ripped cloth in the car he hurriedly gagged the man before bending down and throwing the general over one of his shoulders. In the distance, he heard the sound of someone trying to start a motorcycle engine. One of the outriders was trying to come to the general's assistance. Wasting no time he ran as fast as he could with the heavy form of the general draped over his shoulder down the road and back toward the Albatross. Tossing the man into the front cockpit he reached in and switched on the ignitor switch before running to the front of the machine. Gripping the prop with both hands he gave it a powerful heave. Instantly the hot engine snapped into life and the plane started rolling slowly down the road. Ducking under one wing as the aeroplane rolled by, Jake was in the rear cockpit of the machine in one step and gunning the engine wide open. In three large bounds the machine lifted into the air banking to the right just as two motorcycles came whistling down the road and slid to a halt in front of the staff car.

Pulling back on the machine's stick, Jake began climbing for altitude as the dark form of Frankenstein in the front cockpit stirred somewhat and then slumped again back into unconsciousness. In an hour he would land at Couloummiers and personally hand General Helmuth von Frankenstein over to British authorities. A long interrogation, followed by an extended stay in a POW camp, would be the general's fate.

Grinning, Jake knew the general's tales of art thieves and stolen paintings in the dead of the night would sound to the authorities like some madman's hallucinations. People would laugh at the accusations. Laugh. Like he was laughing now as he flew on into the night.

North of Coulommiers.

Over the deep trenches both armies had buried themselves in.

Jake brought the Albatross down into a field containing a regiment of sleeping British infantry. It was a rude awakening for the Tommies. Just as the first slivers of light began to glow in the east, the large German two-seater drifted in silence out of the clear skies, and with two bone-jarring bounces across the packed ground, landed hard. The machine rolled across the crowded ground, in the process smashing into campfires and turning over pots of steaming coffee while scattering men in every direction before finally rolling to a stop barely six inches to spare in front of the regimental commander's tent. Yet that was not half the surprise the Tommies had as they clustered around the machine with their rifles ready, their suspenders slapping the back of their legs, and openly gawking at the German aeroplane and its occupants.

From out of the rear cockpit climbed a dark-haired, dark-eyed Yank wearing a Kraut uniform, while in the forward cockpit, bound up like some prized wild boar, was nothing less than a German general!

Every British Tommy just stood and stared at the sight in front of them. They stood like deaf-mutes in astonishment as they watched the Yank climb out of the machine, grin at them all and say good morning before asking to see the regimental commander.

Jake found the reason why the Albatross ran out of gas miles short of Coulommiers. Apparently one of the cyclists who came racing through billowing

clouds of dust on the road to Rethel had decided to use his pistol. Neatly drilled through the upper wing's single gas tank was a bullet hole. Why he never caught the scent of leaking petrol, he could not fathom. He was happy that enough fuel remained for him to get this far. As he watched, several of the burlier infantrymen lead the still bound and gagged general away. Jake quickly shrugged out of the German uniform and hurriedly crawled into some civilian clothes one of the junior officers loaned him.

Two hours later he stepped out of the moving cab of the infantry's regimental truck and waved to the driver. The British regimental commander decided to have his men drive him back to his squadron. It was the least they could do, their colonel said with a grin, after being aroused from their sleep in such an unusual fashion. Watching for some moments as the lorrie rolled off into the distance Jake turned to enter the building and almost walked into the arm of an exiting Sergeant Burton. The big Welshman gave out a shout of glee at seeing Jake was alive and back in one piece. Within seconds the entire squadron was surrounding him and demanding to hear his story of escape. Even the colonel's voice chimed in as one of those who clamored for the story.

It took an hour to satisfy everyone's curiosity. But eventually everyone left the mess tent and went about their duties. When the mess tent finally emptied completely, leaving only Jake and the colonel sitting at a table nursing large mugs of coffee, the big American peered into the face of a worried Colonel Wingate.

“Captain, I have terrible news. News that can’t be said except brutally and dispassionately. But I find it... difficult... to say.”

Tears were in the colonel’s eyes. There was no color in his usually ruddy complexion. But there was a look of infinite sadness.

“Lady Oglethorpe, the lieutenant’s mother, has been found murdered. An investigating officer called me a few hours ago and wanted to talk to the lieutenant. Apparently someone broke into the general’s country estate and—Oh god, how I can say this—murdered Lady Oglethorpe by decapitating her. She has been dead for at least a month.”

Jake heard the words but could not comprehend for quite some time. The

lovely woman who was such a staunch defender of her temperamental son, dead at the hand of a killer? Who? Why... and what about the frail old man? How was the general?

"He is confined to a private hospital, quite out of his mind, I'm afraid. The killer murdered Lady Oglethorpe but left the general unscathed. Scotland Yard thinks a madman who knew the general some time ago in India, and who had for the last few years been in England and working in the theater, has been stalking the general's family for years now. They are still trying to find motives why this madman wished to exterminate the general's family."

"I know who the killer is, sir."

"You do? My god! Who? Who is this bloody fiend? This creature has killed again, here in the squadron, and he must be stopped!"

There was unexpected heat in the colonel's words and the colonel's complexion turned crimson from exasperated rage.

"Someone else is dead?" Jake answered, seeing the hot flash of anger in Wingate's eyes. "Oglethorpe?"

"No, no! Not Oglethorpe, captain. He's still in a coma in the field hospital and guarded by four armed guards twenty-four hours a day. This time the bloody viper took out Sergeant Holmes! Bloody hell! Blew the poor bugger up in his own tent. Couldn't even give the poor bloke a proper burial. There wasn't that much left to bury."

Jake narrowed his eyes and stared intently at the colonel for a few seconds before grunting to himself as he reached for his mug.

"What happened?"

The colonel glanced at Jake before twisting around in his chair and began drumming fingers irritably on the table.

"Last night Sergeant Burton and a few of the enlisted men observed Sergeant Holmes walk to his tent. It was a little past evening mess. Burton was posting a few of the men on guard duty when they saw Holmes enter his tent. Seconds later the entire tent went up in a ball of flame and smoke. Poor Holmes' body was hurled fifty meters into the air. We only found his lower torso and nothing else. But that's not all, Reynolds. We can't find Corporal Fiske either."

"Fiske?" repeated Jake, scowling as he watched Wingate. "How would one of our armorers be involved in this?"

Wingate glanced over his shoulder, and then in the opposite direction, to see if anyone was in the mess tent. But the large voluminous tent was devoid of life except for him and Jake. Satisfied the colonel turned back toward the American and leaned across the table as he lowered his voice to speak.

"Remember your suggestion of checking out the records of all the personnel who joined the squadron while we were at Dover? Well, I did that. Sergeant Holmes and Corporal Fiske both transferred out of a couple of infantry divisions and straight into ours just before we left for France. Corporal Fiske, as it happens, turns out to have direct ties to the general. It seems the corporal had a gambling problem when he was younger and serving on the general's personal staff. The problem was severe enough to have the young man busted down to private and shipped off to a different command."

"And Holmes?"

Wingate frowned as a cloud of confusion shaded the man's ruddy face momentarily. Sitting back in his chair the colonel shrugged and reached for his mug.

"To be honest, Reynolds, I'm a bit up in the air with Holmes' records. For the last five years he's served in an infantry regiment as a mechanic before transferring over to our squadron. His records indicate his father is Canadian and his mother's English. He specifically requested a transfer to our squadron three days before we shipped out. But what he did before he joined the army, I haven't the slightest idea."

Jake sat back in his chair as his mind raced back and forth over the colonel's words, analyzing them. Fiske was missing and Holmes was dead. But there was something wrong. Jake was convinced Fiske was another victim of the phantom murderer and not the murderer himself. As to Holmes...

"Colonel, are you're positive the body you found was actually Holmes. You said that there was little left to identify. Correct?"

Wingate nodded as he lowered his mug and eyed Jake curiously.

"What's on your mind, captain? What are you trying to say?"

"I've been thinking lately of something the lieutenant said the last time I talked to him. He said the killer was a chameleon. A chameleon, colonel. Someone who blends into his surroundings so completely no one would have suspicions otherwise."

"We thought Sergeant Burton was that chameleon, captain. He seemed too good to be just a sergeant. He knew how to handle men and he was articulate. Not that sergeants can't be articulate, mind you, or that they can't handle men. But he was just too good. We were wrong. He turned out not to be our killer."

"That's right," nodded Jake and smiling slyly. "Burton came out straight forward and as honest as the day is long. More importantly he wasn't a chameleon in one respect, colonel. He never attempted to hide his intellect or his upbringing. A real chameleon would do that. He would go out of his way to make himself look and act entirely different from what he truly was."

Wingate thought it over and nodded in agreement. Yet he said nothing as he waited for Jake to continue. For his part Jake glanced out the mess hall's screened door and gazed down the enlisted men's tents lined up in straight rows, one after the other, on the far side of the field. In the middle of one row was the ugly charred gash of blackened earth where Sergeant Holmes' tent once sat. Frowning, Jake continued.

"But there was one person in the squadron who acted like a simple man with simple tastes. A man who, although he appeared to be merely just competent, actually was a consummate actor. This same man turns out to be very good with a rifle, and more importantly, he was in a position to be gone from the squadron at critical times on legitimate business."

"Who in blazes are you talking about, captain? Identify him and let us have him placed into custody immediately!"

"Our murderer is Sergeant Randal Holmes. The man who supposedly died in that horrific explosion last night."

"Holmes!" shouted Wingate in stunned disbelief as he gaped at Jake in amazement. "Holmes! But... but... it can't be!"

Jake grinned impishly and shook his head no. Coming to his feet he moved to the screen door of the mess tent and halfway opened it before he turned and

waved an index finger at the colonel in a sign to follow him. Not waiting to see if the portly colonel came out of his seat, Jake stepped out of the tent and went striding briskly across the field as he headed for the blackened gap in the enlisted men's tents. He moved across the field with Wingate hurriedly following him.

"But how can it be Holmes?" the colonel yelped, breathing with difficulty as he caught up with Jake. "Six men saw him get blown to kingdom come last night! We found his body for god's sakes!"

"No, colonel. You found *a* body," Jake said, grinning as the two hurried past the first few tents, with the colonel half running in short, choppy steps as he tried to keep up with the long strides of the American. "I repeat, you found a body. But it wasn't Holmes. I'll lay a month's pay down and bet the person you found was the dead body of Corporal Fiske."

"Fiske!" the colonel bellowed, coming to a standstill and dumbly looking at the receding form of Jake in amazement. "But why was Fiske in Holmes' tent, and how would Holmes have survived the blast?"

"That last question is a good one, colonel," Jake shouted, half turning to look back at the colonel and grinning. "And I've got an idea that should give us that answer."

Jake came to a halt in front of where the sergeant's tent once stood. Instead there was the blackened orb of burnt grass and one or two charred slivers of what once had been the tent's frame still standing in the air. Also in the air was the strong aroma of raw petrol. It was a very strong odor. Strong enough to suggest that, if someone lit a match, the immediate area would again be engulfed in a violent conflagration. On either side of the blackened earth, the surrounding tents were severely charred from the blast. Still littering the ground were pieces of clothing once belonging to the sergeant. But Jake wasn't interested in the litter or the smoldering tent frame. What he was interested in was the dark and still smoldering wooden flooring the tent once sat on and a large tin bucket lying in the grass at his feet. Eyeing it for some moments he heard the colonel come wheezing up behind him. Grinning he placed hands on his hips and turned to look at Wingate.

"Remember what you learned from your contact at HQ? He said Scotland

Yard was looking for a deranged person who had been at one time an actor."

"Yes, yes. Go on." The colonel nodded as men started drifting across the field and coming over to where the two officers stood.

"In the theater, Colonel, deception plays a critical role in an actor's life. Sometimes an actor must disappear in one place on the stage and reappear somewhere else. In order to do that, one must take the audience's attention away from him and direct it to something else."

Kneeling to one knee, Jake reached down and took hold of the twisted mass of blackened metal and tossed it toward the portly colonel.

"The idea was to get everyone who saw Holmes enter his tent to believe he died in that explosion. But how do you create an explosion which looks violent enough to kill yet not so violent one could take precautions and survive?"

Wingate peered down at the pail in amazement and then back toward the kneeling American. There was a look of horror on his face mixed with an expression of grudging admiration.

"He filled a bucket full of petrol and then exploded it?"

"That's right," nodded a grinning Jake as he stood up and turned to look at the smoldering wooden platform. "An explosion of petrol creates a tremendous fireball and a lot of noise. But you can shape the explosion and force it to go in one direction if you're smart enough. Holmes took the bucket and put just enough petrol in to get the proper effects he wanted, but not enough to truly destroy everything. Notice how much of his belongings are still intact? Notice how the surrounding enlisted men's tents survived the blast? An excellent piece of illusion, colonel. Just enough to look spectacular. But not enough to be harmful."

"What about the body? What makes you think it is Fiske?" Wingate asked as he watched Jake step onto the wooden flooring and kneel down to peer at it intently.

"Remember when we found Higgins' bloody body? Remember me looking closely at all the tracks left behind? Whoever the killer was had relatively big feet. I know Fiske had small feet. Very small for a full-grown man. I believe, if we look at the feet of the corpse, we will find them to be petite in size. But

there's something else. Unfortunately the corporal had the misfortune of fitting perfectly into the sergeant's plans. Because of his association with the general, if the corporal came up missing after the apparent murder of the sergeant, all suspicions would be cast toward the missing person. That person would never be found because he became a victim himself. Holmes killed Fiske and then tried to make sure the corporal would never be identified. The mutilated body hurled from the tent was Fiske, colonel. That I am sure of."

"My god! This man is more than deranged. He is a madman of the first rank! But wait a minute. So far this is all wonderful conjecture, Reynolds. But there is not a shred of evidence to prove anything!"

"Ah," Jake shouted, looking up quickly at the rotund colonel with a wide grin of pleasure painted on his thin lips. "But there is, sir. Voila!"

Jake turned his attention back to the flooring underneath him and reached with a hand down to his foot for something. Standing up he threw open a small trap door and stepped to one side as it banged loudly on the wood planks.

"His safety net, colonel, while the fireworks were going on."

The colonel, and several of the enlisted men who had gathered around to listen to Jake, quickly leapt forward and stared in amazement at the six-foot hole which had been roughly carved out of the hard ground underneath the flooring. Standing around the hole they all peered down and saw a pair of boots. They looked as if something dark had spilled all over them. Beside the boots was a blood-caked bayonet.

"Holmes wasn't going to take any chances of someone observing him getting rid of the boots and the weapon," Jake began, looking down at the hole and then glancing over at a ashen-faced, stunned-looking Lonnie Burton. "So he decided to dig a hole underneath the floor and hide everything. He was fairly positive Sergeant Burton would not think of looking for secret hiding places. It turned out the hole became even more important in creating the illusion of last night."

"He goes down into the pit, closes the trap door, and sets off the explosion!" Wingate muttered almost in a whisper, shaking his head in disbelief. "Poor Fiske is murdered so the body can be used to throw everyone off the scent and we all believed Holmes was the victim. My god!"

"Sometime early this morning, when everyone was asleep, Holmes came out of the pit and sneaked off into the night. I'd say right now he is somewhere close to the hospital and figuring out a way to finish off the lieutenant. We don't have any time to lose, colonel. If we want to save Ogleshorpe, we need to get to the hospital as fast as possible."

"Captain," Sergeant Burton mumbled, looking at Jake with a frown on his lips. "It all fits. But for the life of me, sir, how in the world did you figure out it was Holmes? I mean, I had my suspicions. But nothing more than that. I actually convinced myself I was making an innocent man a monster. I let him in on everything which was going on in this investigation. But this whole affair is more like that of a genius!"

Everyone was looking at Jake and in their eyes the same question was being asked. Jake gazed at everyone and then held up a hand and extended his index finger and began listing his ideas.

"First, the sergeant made the mistake of killing Higgins in a fashion which left too much evidence behind. There was blood on the ground, lots of footprints, and the method of killing meant the weapon, if found, would be identifiable. Apparently there was not enough time to dispose of the weapon and the boots without arousing suspicions. I felt relatively confident we would find the murder weapon and the boots if we looked hard enough.

"Secondly, you told me yourself, sergeant, Holmes knew philosophy and could speak Greek and Latin. How many plain-speaking mechanics do you know who are that well-educated? Not many these days. Someone with that background would have been promoted to an officer by now.

"And thirdly, I asked Holmes to go with me the other day to ferry the new machines back from the supply depot. He said he had to stay because he had to go over to a French squadron and find parts for the Farmans. But he never went for those parts. You did. He took a rifle and tried to nail me but missed and killed Mathes instead."

Burton's confused look turned to admiration as Jake reviewed the evidence. From the gathered group of men a low murmur of approval rippled through the crowd. Several nodded their heads to their crew mates as if they had come to the

same conclusions and were agreeing with the big American's analysis. Even Wingate looked impressed.

"Incredible, captain," he said as he looked up and into the eyes of Jake. "But why did Grimms and Higgins have to die? Grimms' death puzzles me the most. I can come up with a theory on Holmes removing Higgins from the scene. But Grimms? Why him and how did the killer know the lieutenant's machine was going to crash in those woods?"

Others voiced their puzzlement as well and everyone turned toward Jake and waited for the dark-eyed American to answer.

"Higgins died because Holmes could not take the chance and have the orderly remain in the squadron. Sooner or later the little man was going to recognize him. Remember, the lieutenant's father had sent his orderly to protect his son from a madman. That Higgins did not immediately recognize Holmes suggests Holmes must have masked himself in some fashion and was unrecognizable. But sooner or later Higgins would have spotted Holmes. As to the need to kill Grimms, well, we may never know. Not unless the lieutenant comes out of his coma and tells us. Or unless Holmes confesses after we capture him."

"If we capture him, sir," Burton declared and shook his head sadly. "Someone as crazy as the sergeant, I doubt if the man will want to be captured and sent to prison."

"Right!" nodded the colonel, clearing his voice and regaining his authoritative stance again. "That's the mission. To capture Sergeant Holmes alive and bring him to justice! Now, all we need is a plan."

Again, all eyes turned to the American. Jake smiled and then rubbed his jaw with a hand thoughtfully for a few moments before speaking again.

"An idea did come to me. It's a long shot at best. But it would bring Holmes out into the open for a few moments. Maybe just long enough to have a go at him."

"Very good!" Wingate snapped, beaming with energy and slapping his hands together and rubbing them with enthusiasm. "What's the plan and how can we assist?"

Two hours later Jake sat down in a chair beside the prostrate form of the dying lieutenant and glanced over to one side and at the white-robed figure of the field hospital's chief surgeon.

"He won't last much longer, captain. Pneumonia has set in. That and his internal injuries are just too much to overcome. But he came out of his coma for a few moments and asked for you. I sent word over to your squadron. I'm glad you got here so quickly."

Oglethorpe appeared to be a living corpse. There was an ugly rattle in his lungs with each breath he took and the lieutenant's fingers and hands were a distinct blue in coloration. Looking at the young man, Jake could not help but feel helpless. The entire Oglethorpe family was about to pass into oblivion thanks to the maniacal genius of an insane killer. He should have done more. He should have figured out the identity of the killer more quickly than he had. But it was too late. Far too late to save the lieutenant or anyone in the lieutenant's family.

"He's sleeping right now," the doctor said, turning to leave and motioning for the nurse to follow as well. "If you call out to him I'm sure he has enough strength to talk for a few moments. But only a few moments, captain. No more than a couple of minutes. I want to save his strength as much as possible."

He nodded and waited for the doctor and nurse to step out of the screened area within the hospital ward. When they were alone he reached over and softly gripped Oglethorpe's right hand and squeezed gently.

"James? James? Can you hear me? It's me. Jake. You wanted to talk to me, James. Can you hear me?"

The heavily bandaged lieutenant moaned softly and then stirred somewhat underneath the sheets. An eye opened and then blinked a few moments before it focused and came to rest on Jake's face.

"Jake... Jake, I'm glad you came!"

The lieutenant's voice was the soft whisper of a dying man with just a few moments of life left in him. As Jake stood up he stepped closer to the bed and

bent down to listen to the lieutenant. Jimmy Oglethorpe tried to grin but began coughing instead. For a few seconds the phlegm-filled lungs whistled and chortled while the lieutenant's body was wracked with the coughing spell. But eventually he controlled the spasm and took a shallow breath before whispering again.

"Jake, I'm dying. I know I'm dying, so don't try to lie to me and tell me everything is going to be all right. But before I die I want to make a confession. I want you to be my confessor, Jake. I want you to hear what I have to say. I can't die and not confess my sins. God knows I've sinned. I want to get it off my soul before I am judged."

The dark-eyed American said nothing but continued to hold the lieutenant's hand. Standing over the lieutenant he waited patiently as the lieutenant fought to regain his breath and whatever strength he had left to continue.

"Jake... I'm a murderer. I've killed my father and my mother, and all the others as well. No, I did not personally shoot Grimms. But I am just as guilty. I'm going to hell for my sins. I know that is my punishment. It should be my punishment for what I did to my father and mother and all the others."

Another spasm of coughing overcame the lieutenant, with this spasm far worse than the last. It took a supreme effort for Oglethorpe to suppress it and regain his breathing. But he did, although his voice was weaker and more indistinct.

"Six weeks ago, when Higgins came to join us, I learned my mother had a nervous breakdown. She and my father had been fighting over my banishment from the family and my running away to join the squadron.

"But you know my mother, Jake. She is not in the same class of a fighter as my father. She had no chance. But she tried. Tried to cajole and twist my father around into accepting me for what I am. It didn't work. Her health gave out and she had a complete collapse. When I heard the news of my mother's illness, I went out of my mind with fury. I ranted and raved and swore I would get even with my father even if I had to kill the bastard with my own bare hands!

"That's when Holmes approached me with a wonderful plan to ruin my father. Holmes told me he had once been a subaltern under Father's command.

He had been cashiered out of the service on some trumped-up charges Father had accused him with. He was in the army now only because he was using a *noms de plume*. In my hatred against the old man, I accepted Holmes' story without question and eagerly listened to every word he had to say.

"His plan was an exquisite one, Jake. Exquisite. I was going to surrender myself and my aeroplane to the Germans. I was going to volunteer my services and help them in any fashion I could in defeating our army. I was even going to insist they specifically mention my name and my invaluable assistance to the press once they captured Paris. Can you not imagine what my traitorous actions would have done to my father? It would have destroyed that unbending, heartless martinet. Utterly destroyed him!

"It was Holmes' idea from the beginning. He said he would join me in a pre-arranged spot where we thought the Germans would be. But that night while we discussed our plans... that was the night of the card game and after I had angrily accused Grimms of cheating... we didn't realize Grimms had overheard us. The next day the sergeant and I took off on our patrol without me having the slightest notion he knew what I was going to do later that day. But when it came time to implement the plan, Grimms reached for my revolver and tried to stop me. We struggled while the machine was descending. We crashed, and that's all I remember."

Wheezing from the effort of speaking, the lieutenant relaxed and fought to breathe again. Tears welled up in the man's eyes as he forced himself to breathe, and the grip on Jake's hand lessened considerably. But opening his eyes again, he looked up into Jake's face and began speaking again with barely enough strength to be heard.

"Holmes had to have killed Grimms, Jake. Used my gun and just blew the sergeant's brains out and then laid the gun beside my outstretched hand. He tricked me, Jake. His real plan was to have me convicted of murder and face a firing squad. Once I was convicted and sentenced, he was going to desert the unit and disappear to South America.

"But you spoiled his plans. I found out from Higgins that Father had sent him to protect me from someone who was threatening to harm the family. I

confronted Holmes and told him I was going to confess everything to Wingate and stop him. But the man laughed at me. Laughed and told me I would do no such thing because, if I did, he would accuse me of being just as guilty as he was. Not guilty of killing Grimms, mind you. But guilty in killing Higgins! Jake, this lunatic murdered my father's trusted friend with a bayonet the very night I confronted him! I... I did not know what to do after that. I was confused... lost. I was an accomplice to two murders. I didn't know where to turn. I was about to tell you everything on that day you came to see me in my tent. But the shelling interfered and now... now I'm too tired to talk anymore. But you have got to stop Holmes, Jake! There is this terrible desire to destroy my father and everything father cherishes! I'm... I'm sure he has plans to harm Mother. He must be... stopped. He must be brought to... justice!"

There was a sudden twitch in the lieutenant's hand and a long rattling release of air escaped from the man's chest. At the end of the breath, his entire body went limp. His cold hand slipped from Jake's grip and fell onto the white sheets of the bed. Lifeless eyes bored into Jake's face before the American reached up and gently lowered the lieutenant's eyelids.

He turned away from the dead lieutenant and stood motionless for some seconds. Taking a slow, controlled deep breath, Jake let it out softly and regained his composure before he stepped out of the screened area and informed the doctor of the lieutenant's passing.

And then moving closer to the doctor he quickly outlined to the physician what he wanted the hospital staff to do in his efforts to capture the lieutenant's murderer.

Four burly hospital orderlies moved with the accelerated speed of a medical emergency as they carried the stretcher containing the bandaged figure of a wounded man out of the ambulance and out into the open. In the growing twilight of a hot night, the four men hurried across the space between the two large hospital tents and quickly disappeared into one tent which everyone knew was used as the surgery unit. Doctors and nurses came running out from the long hospital wards as dozens of army ambulances drove into the compound and slid to a halt. Freshly wounded men hobbled out of the ambulances or were carried

out on stretchers, as fast as personnel arrived even as more ambulances continued to arrive.

The chief surgeon stepped out into the hot night and loudly demanded more help. Ordering all security personnel to assist in removing the wounded he turned and looked at the nurse in charge of the small ward the lieutenant was in, and told her to send the guards assigned to protect the lieutenant out as well. He said it loudly and clearly over the moans and groans of the wounded. In seconds the open ground between hospital tents was filled with wounded, hospital staff, and arriving and departing ambulances in one mad melee of medical chaos.

The entire hospital staff was called to assist. Wards were denuded of medical personnel and everyone's attention and curiosity was drawn to the crisis outside. No one, therefore, paid any attention to the patient who threw off his bed sheets, rolled out of his cot, and then quietly palmed a scalpel from medical tray sitting on a table beside his bed. Every patient on the ward who could move had hurried to one side of the long tent to watch the antics of frantic doctors and nurses trying to help the wounded outside. No one paid attention to the thin man in the white patient's gown who hobbled down the middle aisle of the ward and slowly made his way toward the screened-off area at the far end of the tent.

Pausing with a hand on the screen, the patient turned to look at the curious onlookers behind him and smiled grimly when he saw no one was paying him any attention. Quietly slipping through the screen, he closed it softly behind him and stood for a moment or two gazing at the bandaged figure of Lieutenant James Oglethorpe.

Oglethorpe was the only one in the unit at the moment. Completely isolated from the rest of the ward, the bandaged figure helplessly in the bed. Smiling to himself in malicious pleasure the white-clad patient flicked into his right hand the cold steel of the scalpel and moved with a viper's silence across the floor of the unit and came to a halt beside the bandaged lieutenant.

"James Oglethorpe," the thin man said in a soft, almost angelic, voice as he bent down close to the bandaged head of the figure. "Listen to me. This is Randal Holmes. I am going to kill you, James. I am going to kill you exactly like I killed your mother a few weeks ago. You know what I did to her? I cut her

throat and then I decapitated her. Yes, I did it, James. I killed her while she was in the sanitarium recuperating from her mental breakdown. It gave me a wonderful thrill doing it to her, James. Just like it is going to give me a thrill cutting your head off! Revenge is such a powerful emotion, my friend. I will have my revenge on you and your father!

"I am going to kill you, James, and when I'm finished with you, I'm going to go back to England and finish off your father. And you know what? There's not a damn thing you can do about it. Ha ha! What a pleasure it is to shed Oglethorpe blood again! How I will miss it all once I have finished with your father. Goodbye, James! Send my regards to your mother for me, won't you?"

Holmes reached out with one hand and gripped the neck of the bandaged figure firmly while the hand holding the scalpel lifted high over his head and started to plunge downward. But the bandaged figure moved and the sheet covering the lieutenant whipped to one side with incredible speed. A hand came up from out of the sheets and in the hand was the cold blue steel of a very large semi-automatic pistol! With some force, the bandaged Jake rammed the pistol's barrel between Holmes incredulous eyes with enough force to make the madman's head snap back. Sitting up in bed, Jake reached with his free hand behind his head and pulled off the bandages covering much of his face.

"One twitch of a muscle and I can send you to eternity, sergeant. Drop the scalpel and don't move."

There was a hard edge in the American's voice as he threw his legs off the bed and stood up the large Colt .45 still aimed at the stammering Randal Holmes. But Holmes suddenly screamed in rage and threw the chromed scalpel straight toward Jake's face before turning to run.

Jake threw his head to one side in time to miss the blade whistling past his ear. But he refrained from pulling the trigger. Lowering the Colt he watched Holmes angrily rip aside the large white canvas screens separating this part of the ward from the rest of the hospital. But he did not go any further in his attempt to escape. The butt of an Enfield rifle, wielded by the powerful form of Sergeant Lonnie Burton, appeared from behind a discarded screen and viciously smashed into the madman's nose. The blow was delivered with incredible

strength. Holmes staggered back one step and then buckled at the knees and toppled backwards onto the floor like a felled tree. He was immediately surrounded by the colonel and half of the squadron who quickly roped him into complete immobility.

Satisfied that the killer was incapable of moving a finger voluntarily, Colonel Wingate nodded in satisfaction and moved to stand beside Jake.

"Well done, captain! Your idea of using the entire squadron and every ambulance we could borrow to make it look as if the hospital was going to be flooded with casualties was a brilliant plan. We have bagged our man, and even more importantly, we have him alive and capable of standing trial. He'll face a firing squad or a hangman's noose if I have anything to say about it."

Jake nodded and slipped the Colt down the groove of his spine and into his trousers. Eyeing the men standing around the fallen Holmes he could see the joy and the relief painted on each face. But there was no joy in him. All he could think about were the three dead innocents of the Oglethorpe clan, along with the deaths of Grimms and Higgins and Mathes. In a war filled with killing why did this insanity have to happen? Why did the innocent have to suffer so cruelly?

Shaking his head sadly he turned and looked at Wingate.

"Did you hear the news, colonel? The surgeon told me as they were assisting me with the bandages an hour ago. The battle is over. The Boche are pulling back to the Arsène River and digging in. Paris is saved. We've won the battle and the enemy is moving back. Now the real war will begin, I'm afraid."

But the colonel wasn't listening. Slapping Sergeant Burton heartily on the back the portly little officer vigorously pumped the sergeant's hand in animation and congratulated the sergeant on his timely use of the rifle. Someone produced a bottle of champagne and the hospital's medical staff appeared with wide grins and more champagne bottles. Jake watched for a few moments as the squadron and hospital staff quickly evolved into one large party. But in the end, he turned and removed from the hands of a private a full bottle of booze without the man realizing it. Expertly slipping through the throng of celebrating men he walked out of the hospital ward and began looking for a spot where he could be alone.

He did not feel like celebrating. A madman had been apprehended. But

madness still filled the air. The war had folded itself over into a new monster in these last few days. It was a monster promised to remain the active wolf all wars become, hungry with an insatiable appetite for the lives and souls of every nation's youth. How long it would last no one knew. How long he would last Jake could not guess. Turning to look back at the hospital tent Jake felt relief in the knowledge he had survived the homicidal fury of a madman's thirst for revenge. But what about tomorrow? Next week? Next month?

Shaking his head, thinking it was a good time to get drunk, he turned and walked away.

Next in the Series:
Death of a Cuckold Knight
(Jake Reynolds Mysteries Book 2)



Jake Reynolds is an art thief. Perhaps the greatest, luckiest art thief ever. He steals rare paintings and replaces them with forgeries so exact that nobody can tell the difference.

It's 1915 and WW1 rages across Europe. After finding the owner of an unknown Rembrandt killed in his own mansion, Jake cannot let it go; a quirk of his personality refuses him to allow anyone to get away with murder.

The problem? How to find the vicious killers and bring them to justice without revealing his own felonious act.

A historical mystery set in early 20th century Europe, DEATH OF A CUCKOLD KNIGHT is the second book in B.R. Stateham's Jake Reynolds Mysteries series.

[Death of a Cuckold Knight](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



My name is B.R. Stateham. I am a 72 year-old male with a mind still filled with the wonders and excitement one might find in a fourteen year old boy. I write genre fiction. You name the genre, I've probably got a short-story, a novella, or a novel which would fit the description. I've been writing for over 50 years. Which, frankly, means very little in reality. Most writers can say the same thing. For a writer, story-telling is something built into one's psyche. From birth on, a writer was probably telling some kind of story to himself, or anyone close to him. Whether they listened or not.

For the last 37 years I've been married to the same patient woman. A school teacher, now retired, who has this thing of sitting down with me and discussing, or verbally outlining, concepts for stories knocking around in my head. We have three grown adults for children and six (if I got the current number correct) grandchildren. None of the children or grandchildren think that me being a writer is of any particular significance. As it should be.

I like writing dark-noir. Or hardboiled detective/police-procedural novels which border the demarcation line between dark-noir and hard-boiled fiction. In fact, I like mixing up sub-genres in my fiction. Don't be surprised if you read something of mine traditionally found in the dark-noir niche with tinges of Science-Fiction or the Supernatural thrown in to spice up the tale.

That's it. There's nothing else to say. I'm just a writer. But I hope you'll find something of mine to read and find it enjoyable.

To learn more about B.R. Stateham, visit his [author page on Next Chapter's website](#).