

DODD's ARMY

# Castello



John R. Smith

# **Dodd's Army: Castello**

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# **Dodd's Army: Castello**

## Chapter 1

Those Yanks, when they invaded, they invaded first class. Their soldiers had learnt to fight hard, and when it was over, they expected decent food, and plenty of it, along with showers, bars, cafes, cinemas, and all the comforts of home. Having been previously been shocked and disappointed in the rubbish facilities awaiting them in Africa, nowadays they brought their own comforts with them.

So when the Americans came to Naples, the change was miraculous. When they arrived, there was no electricity or gas, no telephone. Not that that affected the average Neapolitan – Naples was an impoverished city and most people didn't have any of those services anyway, but they didn't have much of anything else either.

And the bombs kept coming – the fact that they were now German bombs, trying to finish the job of disabling the main port and blocking roads, rather than American or British bombs which had been attempting the exact same thing, was of little interest to the pragmatic and long-suffering Neapolitans.

The sudden change in the weather didn't help either: winter issued a fanfare announcing its imminent arrival, a sudden cold wind from the north blasting vicious flurries of rain along the narrow streets and alleys, into every crevice – nowhere seemed safe from it.

But the Americans brought many treasures beyond price with them - soap, tobacco, chocolate, real coffee – and began to repair infrastructure and supply at least some food.

The Americans made it plain they were here to stay, with immediate benefits to the populace, especially those like the youthful Toni and his *scugnizzi*, and Doctor Danielli, who were all anxious to resurrect their pre-war activities, so were inclined to regard the newcomers as tourists rather than invaders. Thus, the Americans had arrived on 1 October, and two days later, Danielli's nightclub, *il Farmaccia*, still run down but liberally

supplemented with beer and spirits supplied by the Americans, was packed with soldiers from several countries.

After a week of loafing around, basking in the acclaim of the Allied troops who were grateful that they hadn't had to bludgeon their way into Naples house by ancient and tight packed house, Dodd's group was becoming a little bored.

Kelly and Tullett were both in hospital: Kelly was there to get proper treatment for the bullet wound to his knee, and the surgeon, having noticed Tullett limping slightly when he went to visit Kelly, had interrogated Tullett about his injury. He'd had trouble understanding Tullett – the extent and range of Tullett's swearing had confused him, but with Kelly acting as translator, he'd been fascinated about Tullett's land mine survival story. The surgeon then insisted that he have his damaged foot X-rayed, after which he'd warned him that while the old doctor back in Casagrigio had done a good job, it could only be temporary and he'd be permanently on crutches within a year or two if he didn't get it sorted out.

Tullett, of course, had dismissed the idea, but when Kelly told him about his mate who'd been crippled after not getting treatment for a nasty kick from a steer, Tullett had reluctantly and with great ill grace, as though he was doing the surgeon a considerable favour, accepted the surgery.

The boredom of hospital was relieved for Kelly by the appearance of Sofia, the girl who'd led him over the Neapolitan rooftops to attack the Germans. Kelly hadn't really realised how much he'd missed her until she showed up in the ward one day, clutching a small parcel, badly wrapped in second hand brown paper.

She'd appeared at the end of Kelly's bed as he dozed, and stood quietly, looking more like an embarrassed and uncertain child than a heroine, not knowing whether to wake him, or just leave.

Luckily for her, and for Kelly, Tullett was awake and gave her a smile and a “shake him awake” gesture. Sofia beamed thanks, moved forward and gently touched Kelly’s shoulder. She got no reaction, and Tullett did his gesture again, this time calling ‘Ted! Ted, wake up fer fucks sake! You got a visitor!’

Kelly awoke, baffled for a moment, then saw Sofia, still hesitant, having retreated to the foot of his bed, and beamed. Of a sudden, he realised why he’d been out of sorts for the last few days. He beckoned Sofia to the chair next to his bed, and in a few minutes, the pair were gaily chattering away, which was a surprise to Tullett, since Kelly spoke no Italian, and Sofia no English. After a while, Kelly reached out and took Sofia’s hand and it was her turn to grin from ear to ear.

Eventually, the nurse came and told Sofia it was time to go. She pouted like a child until the nurse, who spoke Italian, told her she could come back tomorrow, and repeated the news in English for Kelly.

Kelly pointed to his cheek and Sofia gave him a chaste farewell kiss with a promise, in Italian but which Kelly understood, to come back the next day.

Dodd was seriously contemplating collecting his myriad scraps of paper together to begin preparing a proper report of his group’s activities over the last weeks. Somebody was bound to ask for something on paper sooner or later. That’s the way the army works. The demand came sooner.

Colonel Bullivant called Dodd into his office (he’d been shifted out of the magnificent mayoral office, into a similarly splendid but much smaller room, though it shared the aroma of beeswax and cigars) and told him that he had great news: Dodd was to report back to a British headquarters further south, with an unofficial hint to take all his kit: the whisper was he’d be heading for London.

To Bullivant’s astonishment, Dodd reacted badly. Bullivant stirred uneasily: he could see Dodd was deeply upset

and began to wonder if Dodd was going to cry. ‘Say, Captain, are you OK? Are you sure you’ve got this right? You’re going home. That’s great news, right?’

With an obvious effort, Dodd collected himself. ‘Yes, Colonel, I understand.’ He sighed. ‘It’s just that, well, I’m not sure how to explain it, but I feel there’s a strong bond built up between the chaps, and I feel part of it.’

He’d sighed again and spread his hands. ‘And I just wanted to carry on with what we were doing. I don’t know if you’ll understand?’ he added, hopefully.

Relieved, Bullivant leaned back in his chair and smiled. ‘Matter of fact, Captain, you’ve reminded me of a feeling I haven’t felt for a long time, seems like.’

It was the colonel’s time to sigh. ‘Yeah, feels like a real long time. You’ve been under fire with your guys, right? Shared danger, shared being wet and cold and frightened? Yeah, you get real close.’

He leaned forward and nodded earnestly. ‘Captain, let me give you a piece of advice: don’t accept any more promotions - least, not if it comes with a job that takes you away from that closeness with your boys. I don’t often get the chance nowadays.’

He stopped, and unbeknown to Dodd, wondered if he should tell him about being threatened with demotion by General Clark himself if he got himself injured again, but thought better of it.

Dodd was immensely comforted that the American understood: it would have sounded extremely stupid to someone who hadn’t experienced the comradeship of arms.

He continued: ‘I was hoping I’d somehow be able to keep my chaps together and you might help us get back behind the lines again to, er, well, I’m not really clear on that, but we’ve done rather well up to now, don’t you think?’



The two men sat and looked at each other for a long moment, before Bullivant replied ‘You know, Captain, I’d kind of hoped that too. I think I mentioned that.’

‘Yes, I remember.’

‘Captain, the only thing I can say is this: I’d be very happy to have you and your guys working with me, doing your thing. Pretty soon we’re going to bust out of Naples and head for Rome. Seems to me you could be very useful up there, making a goddam nuisance of yourself. But I can’t keep your guys here indefinitely. I guess that now your people know you’re here, they’re going to start wanting you back, don’t you think?’

Bullivant sat and looked out of his window, watching the wind whipping at anything loose, then rapped a hand on his desk.

‘Look, I’ll do what I can to keep your boys up here with me as long as I can, OK? But no promises – that’s the best I can do.’

Dodd replied, a catch in his voice, ‘I’m most grateful’ but found he couldn’t say more. The two men stood and shook hands.

And then Dodd had to announce his departure to his troops. He’d made sure that Kelly and Tullett were being visited by all their able bodied mates at the same time, so he didn’t have to go through what he’d pictured as a gruelling performance more than once and, with his trademark single hand clap to get their attention, gave out the news. He’d been dreading it, but oddly, none of them were particularly perturbed, hearing only that Dodd had to go away for a while – it didn’t occur to any of them that he might not be back, and Dodd had cheered up a little. Maybe he’d read too much into the orders, that he only had to go back and give somebody a report, and then he could come back and they’d carry on as before?

Dodd looked at Brownlow and raised an eyebrow: Brownlow returned that with a tight grin and a little waggle of the head – who knows? The powers that be must surely realise

how useful Dodd's miniature army had been, and it would be madness to split them up and return them to their units? Surely?

Watson translated the news for Sofia, who'd become a more or less permanent fixture at Kelly's bedside. When he was there, Watson did his best, if a little uncomfortably, to translate for them but when he wasn't there, they still carried on chattering away, neither knowing what the other was saying – just happy to be together.

When the jeep came to pick Dodd up, he was almost cheerful. He'd made a solid start on transferring the notes from his many scraps of paper to an official report, which, while truthful, was inclined to emphasise the extreme value of the band's activities, relative to its small size and minimal cost. The report concluded that there was plenty more to be done, provided only that the original team, which was now highly experienced (he'd originally added "skilled" but, realising that wouldn't stand up under questioning, took it out again) should be kept together.

A positive attitude had taken root in the group, though whether from wishful thinking or any kind of realistic assessment was hard to say. So as it turned out, the small ceremony of Dodd's departure, held in the space between Kelly's and Tullett's hospital beds, was conducted in an air of quiet optimism. Dodd had left bearing letters from each soldier addressed to their families and had promised to visit them personally (Kelly excepted) if he did get back to England and the chance arose.

By the time Dodd had gone, the soldiers were all outwardly convinced that the captain would be returning. All they had to do was to work it so that they were all still in Naples when he got back, though nobody had any actual plans as to how they might make that work. Inwardly, though, they weren't nearly so sure. As far as Kelly and Tullett were concerned, their injuries made them safe at least for a little while – they'd been told it would be another week before either of them would be allowed to stand, even, and then it would be weeks before they'd

be fully recovered. But Brownlow and Privates Burgess, Watson and Green spent their days skulking about, trying to keep out of the way of anybody who might ask them what they thought they were doing here, waiting for the hammer blow - their own orders to report back to their previous units.

There were plenty of British soldiers of many different formations in Naples, but they all seemed to have something to keep them busy, and Brownlow and the privates felt conspicuous by their inactivity. Burgess was reminded about his cousin Dave, who'd wangled a rare job on a building site, only to find he didn't have the skills to do anything, so he found a large plank, and spent his days carting it purposefully from one end of the site to the other. He had to give the job up in the end, though – the plank was giving him blisters on his hands and he was unwilling to take a workmates advice to piss on them to toughen them up.

Their Italian mates, Angelo and Dino, were still up in the hills, allegedly helping Dino's relatives with the last of the harvest, so they knew nothing of their comrade's anxiety.

Dodd's men could see the build up of equipment and troops in and around Naples - soldiers from just about everywhere, British, New Zealanders, Indians, Poles, French, including French North Africans, even Brazilians (who everybody made a fuss of, since most people didn't even know Brazil was an ally, or even where it was). It was obvious there was a big offensive brewing, and the rumour was the Germans were going to be hard to dislodge.

*The rumour was spot on: Kesselring had put together a strong defensive line right across Italy - the Gustav line – and on the western side of the mountains, the key to the whole front, and blocking the path to Rome, was at an otherwise inconspicuous little town called Cassino, snuggled under Monte Cassino, on which stood what has since become known as “the monastery.” But to call it a monastery is like saying St Paul's cathedral is a church – it was a Benedictine monastery, to be sure, but it was*

*also an abbey, and more than that, it held the tombs, not only of St Benedictine himself, but of his sainted sister, Scholastica, and was also the repository of many priceless documents, some of which, ironically, had only recently been moved there for safe keeping. (Luckily, officers from the crack Hermann Göring Paratroop Panzer Division recognised the threat and had many of the treasures removed to the Vatican. Without that action, they would inevitably have been destroyed, along with the remaining treasures and the building itself, in what turned out to be some of the most concentrated bombing and ferocious fighting of the war.) Even before the Allies got that far, though, they had to get through yet another defensive line that the Germans called the Winter Line.*

Colonel Bullivant could see for himself that something big would have to happen soon – nobody needed any strategic insight to realise that – and expected that his combat group would be up front, in the thick of it, as usual. The more he thought about it, the more he thought that Dodd and his people could make a big difference behind the German lines. But if the Brits demanded the return of Dodd's miniature army to their previous units, Bullivant would be hard pressed to refuse.

So he did what he could, so that if the order did come through, he might be able to delay compliance until the next push started, when everybody would have more to think about than the whereabouts of a handful of stray limeys.

For a start, he had his motor pool people take the engine out of Dodd's truck, so he could say their transport was tied up, and then he put in place his master plan. He called an old buddy, a Major Downes, who'd been badly injured, but rather than be invalided out, had accepted a desk job as a training officer, and explained his problem. He wanted to send them all on training courses, didn't matter much what courses, just the longer the better. Downes immediately saw what was needed, and said he could smooth out the paperwork, but wanted to go further so that,

while the main point was that the men needed to be kept busy and out of the way, they might as well learn something while they were there. He sent an officer to interview the limeys, which included Kelly, he being a limey as far as Downes was concerned, so they could be taught something appropriate.

Thus, Brownlow found himself doing what was called “field transport management” which turned out to be a grand name for keeping vehicles running in combat conditions, while Watson was sent off to brush up his Italian, Burgess trained as a radio operator and Green learnt to drive trucks. Kelly was delighted to find that as soon as he was up and about, he’d find himself doing an explosives course and almost ironically, Tullett, who had a well earned reputation for knocking bits off himself, would be moving straight from his hospital bed to be trained in first aid.

And that’s exactly what happened: as soon as they were discharged, with the usual conflicting instructions to take it easy but to get plenty of exercise, the two convalescents joined their training courses.

While all this was going on, Angelo and Dino came back down to the town once a week or so, to cadge petrol along with, well, anything else that wasn’t screwed down, really. On these visits, Angelo made a point of making a courtesy call on Dottore Danielli to discuss professional matters, such as how best to dispose of the material they’d scrounged, except, of course, the petrol.

It was during one of those visits that Sergeant Brownlow, who was in the midst of his vehicle management course, happened to bump into Angelo, and suggested he might like to have his truck serviced by the Americans to give his fellow trainees a different vehicle to practice on. Angelo was torn: the idea of a free and thorough service conflicted with his natural reluctance to have his secret revealed, that the ancient body of the Lancia concealed a much more recent chassis and engine, etc.

In the end, he thought it wouldn't hurt for the Americans to know – he was more interested in not troubling the Italian authorities with the knowledge – and his truck disappeared into the maintenance shed.

The American soldiers were entranced by the concept of this wolf in sheep's clothing, and gave the Lancia a thorough working over, very happy to get the experience of a non-American vehicle. In fact, they suggested to Brownlow that they have a go at his Bedford three tonner as well. And then they suggested it might be best if they repainted it in a less obvious colour. Brownlow had to agree that if Dodd's team was to get back behind the lines, the usual British military sludge green might be a bit conspicuous. Brownlow then lost sight of the vehicle for a few days while it was undergoing its metamorphosis, and when the Americans handed it back to him, it looked like a different vehicle.

That shouldn't be a surprise, though, because it was, in fact, a different vehicle. The transport pool captain had realised that, no matter what they did to it, the British three tonner would still be a right hand drive vehicle, which would be difficult to explain if they ever got stopped behind the lines. Even the dopiast German sentry giving the truck the most disinterested check would be liable to notice the driver was sitting on the wrong side of the cab. So the Americans had taken one of their ubiquitous Chevrolet thirty hundredweight trucks, one of the four wheel drive versions, and tried to replicate the look of Angelo's. They'd taken the oldest, dirtiest, most patched canvas cover they could find to put on the tubular steel frame behind the cab, and painted the bodywork a dull black, before trashing the paint to match the canvas. By the time they'd finished, this spanking new truck looked as though it was about to collapse under its own weight.

Having overcome his scruples about letting go of one of His Majesty's vehicles, Brownlow was overjoyed. A standard Chevy thirty hundredweight had been transmuted into an

unidentifiable, but obviously ancient vehicle, which no military force would want to be connected with.

The American top sergeant who delivered the Chevy gave Brownlow that “follow me” lurch of the head and clambered into the back. Brownlow followed and noticed a steel trunk, maybe four feet long and two feet square, tucked against the back of the cab. The American handed Brownlow a key and pointed at the padlock on the truck.

‘Uncle Sam’s compliments, Sar’ Major. We figured there just might come a time you’ll find a use for that little baby.’

Brownlow opened the trunk and smiled. But he had a more personal reason for being pleased – he’d come across these Chevys before. He clambered into the driver’s seat and ran his hands over the controls, unconsciously nodding to himself at the familiarity of the feel. He closed his eyes as he remembered when he’d driven one of these before, and smelt again the unique dusty aroma of the desert overlaid with the reek of scorched oil on hot metal and that heavy, smoky sour tang of gunsmoke.

As it happened, it was a Saturday, so the training courses were on hold for the weekend. Green and Watson had wandered up to have a close up look, and saw Brownlow sitting, seemingly asleep, at the wheel.

‘You all right, Sarge?’ asked Green, who’d developed a proprietorial interest in the sergeant, ever since he’d helped him along when he was blinded right at the start of their adventure.

Brownlow came back to life, smiled a half smile and amiably said ‘Yeah, son, thanks for asking. I was just remembering that time I went on a patrol with the Long Range Desert Group. Did I tell you about that?’

Two faces immediately zeroed in on Brownlow’s and gave him that “Are you shitting us?” look. He smiled again. ‘I’ll take that as a no then, will I? Well, we got nothing much to do for a bit. Get the others together and I’ll tell you, all right?’

This set off an excited flurry of activity, as mates were found, supply box seats procured and the tea ritual performed.

Meanwhile, Brownlow got out and did a leisurely stroll round the vehicle, with a stroke here, a pat there, as he marshalled his thoughts. Finally, he arranged himself on the running board by the driver's seat and sat like a benign uncle, smiling and nodding at the preparations. When all were settled in a half circle round him, Brownlow began.



## Chapter 2

‘Yeah, it was a funny old thing, how I got involved, a bit like this turnout really.’ He wafted his hands wide to indicate his audience. ‘I mentioned about clearing the jerry minefield before Second Alemein?’

He saw a couple of confused expressions and explained, ‘Well, them that were there saw there were two parts: First Alemein, which was where our lot, after being driven back almost to Cairo, finally stood their ground and halted the jerries. I’ll tell you what, I happened to be in Cairo for a bit then, and it wasn’t pretty. Lots of very worried people. Panicking, half of ‘em. They were getting ready to abandon Egypt altogether and fall back as far as Palestine. They even started burning secret papers, so much people so started calling it Ash Wednesday there was so much smoke and that, but it was a bloody shambles, o’ course – there was bits of half burnt papers floating about all over Cairo!’

Brownlow’s eyes glazed for a second as he recalled it before bringing himself back to the present.

‘Any rate, that all stopped soon as Monty got there – he said all plans to retreat were to be destroyed immediately, and started from there. All that ended in what we called Second Alemein, when we broke out from our defensive line and started pushing ‘em back.

‘Well, soon as our advance got going through the cleared paths in the minefields - a right fuckin’ shambles that turned out to be too, after the breakout - us mine clearers, well, our job was finished, and we had no orders, we’d been forgotten about, to be honest, so we just turned round and went back. What else could we do? We’d left all our weapons and kit behind – you don’t want to be carting a lot of stuff about in a minefield, do you? Anyway, there was a bunch of us, half a dozen or so, on the way back to where we’d left our stuff, and bugger me, it’d been hit by a jerry shell, wallop! Least, I suppose it was a jerry: if it was one

of ours, well! Any rate, we were left with just a bloody big crater and a pile of junk, really, didn't even have the makings of a brew up.

'Just then, there was this cloud of dust coming our way, and it turns into three trucks, a couple o' Yankee Chevrolets just like this one,' he patted the mudguard beside him, 'and one of our three tonners following up behind. We must have looked a sorry bloody sight, because the lead truck stops and a captain yells out "You chaps all right? Need a hand?" So I says "Not really, Sir. It's just, we've lost all our kit." And I explained what we'd been up to and how we'd lost our stuff. Well, the bloke looked at me for a minute then said "You know about mines then?" and o'course, I said I did – well, I do, a bit – and he said "Can you drive?" and I said I did again. So he gave me a good hard look and said "Look, we're short a man. Fancy a ride, Sergeant?" O'course, I said yes, and he said "Lovely! Climb aboard and Tinker here will show you how to drive this thing. All right, Tink?" And the driver said, sounded a bit like you, Ted, "Right you are, Cap." And right then, I knew I was with a pretty unusual outfit. I mean, an officer calling a corporal "Tink" and him calling the officer "Cap!" Not what I was used to! Not at all! O'course, that was before I got mixed up with you disrespectful buggers.

'So the captain makes sure the other mine clearers are all right, I clambered on, and off we went! Ridiculous, now I stop and think about it: I didn't know who these people were, but I guessed right off they were mosquitos - that's what we called all them chaps that went off behind the jerry lines – but there was lots of them, Special Boat Squadron, Special Air Service, all sorts o' private armies – and it turned out this lot was LRDG, but I didn't know where they were going, and it didn't occur to me until the next day I was more than likely AWOL, officially, like.

'Any rate, it was pretty noisy in them Chevys, and the cabs were open all round, no doors, no roof, no proper windscreen even, just one o' them tiny little things you see on racing cars –

and even that was covered in canvas, so's not to reflect the sun, they told me after, so it was pretty hard to talk. But the Chevys had four wheel drive, so they were bloody handy out there, I can tell you.

'So we carried on all day, almost. 'Cept an hour or so break about noon, when we stopped for a bit – too bloody hot to move in the middle of the day, see? You reckon you know what hot weather's like, you chaps that've been in Tobruk, or round there?' He glanced round, but didn't wait for an answer.

'Well, I can tell you, it gets a lot hotter way down in the desert. And colder too, at night. Bloody freezing – and I mean, freezing. Leave a bit o' tea in a mug overnight, and next day, its frozen solid.' Brownlow shivered at the memory, then shook himself back to the story.

'Any rate, the trucks was all spread out, maybe a hundred yards apart. Everybody knew what to do, got some netting over the vehicles, then filled up with petrol and oil, covered the seats and steering wheel with blankets – to stop 'em getting too hot when we got back in, they told me – then there was a bit o' grub and a brew. I tried to make meself useful, but I had no idea, did I? The officer saw me standing about like a tit in a trance and said "Right-ho, Sergeant, just keep out of the way for now: you'll soon get the hang of it. We'll have a chat this evening, all right?" Then everybody got under the trucks to rest for a bit.

'After a while, we all scrambled out from under the vehicles and the captain told the driver to give me a lesson, but it was easy, same as ours only the driver sits on the left, and just an extra lever or two for the four wheel drive. And there was this thing like a little small sun dial bolted on top o' the dashboard. The driver, this Tink bloke, explained it was a sun compass they used to navigate by. I tell you what, you needed it too. Often as not out there, maybe fifty miles south o' the road, there's not a lot of scenery and anyway, the maps we had, old French or Italian or something, they were next to useless, so as a rule, the navigator worked by the sun and dead reckoning. All you had to

do was keep the truck pointed in the direction the navigator gave you, and that was that.

‘So, we carried on like that for a couple of days, through territory that’d already been mapped. It was getting a bit tedious, funny enough. I mean, there we were, dunno how far behind the German lines, and all we were doing was just driving along on fair going, mostly firm ground with sometimes big stretches of stones and just the odd dried up stream bed, what they called a wadi, but no trouble, ‘til first thing one morning, we took all the stores that were left on the Bedford and hid ‘em in among a jumble of rocks, and the Bedford started for home.

‘So, this was where the job really started. Up ‘til then, it was known country but from now on, it was up to us to keep going west, looking to find the way through for the armour. That was the job, really, trying to find a way that tanks could cope with. But even that was a bit routine – more so, really, because as we went, we had to keep stopping to do the map work, you know, measuring the height of so-called hills and so on, but there was always the chance that Jerry might show up in a spotter plane or a patrol of their own.

‘O’ course, I found out, chatting to the lads, this was a bit of a cushy patrol. A lot o’ times, their job was to drop off or pick up chaps whose job it was to get right in close to the jerries, spy out what they were up to and so on – out there on their own for days and days, some of ‘em, apparently – or to have a go at jerry way behind his lines – stores, headquarters and whatnot, but this patrol, well, just routine. So I was a bit disappointed: we were awash with armament so I thought going up against one o’ their patrols might be fun. My Chevy had twin Vickers machine guns off a RAF Wellington – they put out a thousand rounds a minute, you know – and the other one had a PIAT ...’

Brownlow had to break off for a second to explain to Dodd that this was just another army acronym meaning “Projectile, Infantry, Anti-Tank” before continuing.

‘O’ course, you’d have to be desperate to go up against a tank with one o’ them things – they was only effective to a hundred and fifty yards against a tank – but they produced no muzzle smoke so they didn’t give your position away, so that was handy. They’d tried mounting a Boys anti-tank rifle, but when they tested it, it turned out worse than the bloody PIAT.

‘So, we’d be pretty well off against unarmoured vehicles, but them big German armoured cars, well, they were a worry, and we had to put out a lookout whenever we stopped, just in case.’

The audience caught each other’s eyes and grinned at the use of one of Brownlow’s favourite expressions.

‘It turned out that most of the German patrols didn’t really go looking for trouble: their main job, apparently, was just to be a nuisance and especially to look for our supply dumps and nick what they wanted before blowing the rest up. O’ course, we did the same when we found one o’ theirs. But there was one lot, what they called JG58 or something like that, they were a different thing altogether. They had these big six wheel armoured cars, a bit like that thing we captured in Naples, only with a decent gun on a turret, that could easily do us in from a long way out, and the crews really knew what they were doing as well. Right aggressive buggers, apparently.

‘Well, the next day, middle o’ the afternoon, the good going gave way to sand and dunes. Big bastards, too, some of ‘em. Maybe a couple o’ hundred feet high, maybe higher. Not that we couldn’t get over, o’course, but we were looking for a road for armour, and tanks don’t do well on sand dunes, so we had to look for a way round. So the captain - d’you know, I never found out his name, everyone just called him “Cap” - after they’ve done the mapping work, he sends my Chevy south while he goes north. First off, I thought that wasn’t right, splitting the group.’

Brownlow grinned at Tullett. 'I'd imagine you'd agree, eh, Stan, what with your knowledge of how Custer split his forces and come to a sticky end, eh?'

Tullett thought for a split second that Brownlow was taking the piss, but gave him the benefit of the doubt and nodded wisely so the story continued.

'But o' course, we weren't supposed to fight anybody: we were best off just keeping out of the way and doing our business, eh? Any rate, they'd obviously done plenty o' this before and we could see each other for a while, but then lost line o' sight among some o' them hills, then they kept in radio contact every few minutes, us going along the edge of the sand one way, and them going the other, looking for a way through. See, we're not talking about dead flat country, more a sort of flattish way between these hills, well, I call 'em hills, they're more just, well, I dunno, it's just sort of wavy ground' and Brownlow demonstrated with a gentle waving action of his hand.

'Then suddenly, the Cap came through on the radio and says "Contact. Contact. About two miles, north west. Going hull down. Over." And our radio chap, another bloke talked a bit like you, Ted, it turned out they were Kiwis, now I remember it, he replied "Acknowledged. You want us back to you?"

The Cap says no, just wait 'til he can identify 'em, so we sat and waited. Tink tells me it depends what they are. If it's just a truck got lost, they'll likely leave it alone, but if it's an ordinary patrol, we'll likely have a go at it, and we all start getting the weapons organised. I was OK with that, o' course, and prepared a couple of Brens while the other chaps, Yorky and Darko, get the cover off the Vickers and get it set. I could see 'em looking at what I was doing out the corner o' their eyes, like, and quite right too. They didn't know me – I might ha' been bloody useless, eh, but they soon saw I knew what I was doing, and they sort of nodded to each other and left me to it.

'After a minute or two, the Cap comes through. "It's them, boys," he says, calm as you like. He didn't have to explain who

“them” was – it was obviously that JG58 lot. “Time to go, OK?” So Yorky replies “Righto, Cap, on our way. Are you right?” And the Cap comes back “Not really Yorky, no. They’ve seen us and they’re coming at us. So we’re scarpering right now. We’re going back the way we came in, OK?” And Yorky says “Right, we’re moving too. See you.” I’d been taking a turn at driving and I asked Tink if he should take over, but he said no, he was good on the Vickers, so I should stay where I was, but to spin round and follow our tracks back the way we’d come, quick as I could. O’ course, I was pleased they had confidence in me, and luckily, the sun was low and the shadow of our track was mostly easy to read, so I did what I was told. The track faded out here and there, but we knew to keep the sand on our left and just had to look out for where we had to turn. We found it easy, and started pushing east, then we saw the Cap’s dust plume behind us, but well back.

‘The Cap comes up on the radio, “We might be in a bit of strife, lads. We’re going to have to stop to refuel pretty soon. How are you off for petrol?” and Yorky checks with Tink and says we’re OK and we’re right to keep going until dark. The Cap says OK, keep going, and he will too, so it’ll be a race ‘til it gets dark. See, they reckon the jerry six wheelers’re much faster than us on sand, but about the same on the stone fields and maybe a bit slower on good going, so we just have to hope we can stay on this flat stuff between the hills.

‘Any rate, the sun goes down and we’re still moving, and so’s the Cap, but then we get the message they’ve stopped in a wadi to refuel. Should be safe enough, but we should keep going until full dark, then it’ll be too dangerous to go on for both sides, what with wadis and gullies and so forth.

‘Next thing you know, there’s a brilliant light from behind, then an explosion, then another light and explosion. The Cap gets on the blower and says jerry’s firing star shell! I’ll tell you what, that mob are certainly serious bastards! But the Cap’s already stopped to refuel and they haven’t seen him: if he’d been moving when they fired the star shells they’d be bound to spot his dust,

so he was lucky. And he reckoned he was a mile or two behind us and a good couple o' miles in front of them, but by now we've all had to stop for the night. Too risky, see?

'So we see to the vehicles and get ourselves some grub – I bet jerry was doing exactly the same – ready to carry on the chase first thing.

'A few hours later, we were all up and doing well before it got light. It was bloody cold overnight – I'll never get used to that, it's supposed to be boiling hot in the desert – and we're all ready to go when the Cap comes on the radio and says their truck won't start! He reckons they've driven it too hard yesterday and the engine won't turn over, and he tells us to scarper and his lot'll try to slow jerry down with the PIAT. O'course, Tink goes back and says "Bugger that, Skip, we're coming to get you." The Cap says no but Tink says he can't hear him, but to get ready, then says to us "All right boys, let's get back there. You're driving, Sarge." Funny how they all called themselves by nicknames, but called me Sarge, and I think I was the senior man on that truck but Tink was always the boss.'

The audience nodded knowingly. It was the same with Dodd and Brownlow.

'Any rate, soon as we got going, Tink and the other lads were scrambling about the Chevy, chucking stuff overboard, anything that wasn't bolted on, really, except a good bit o' petrol, some water and grub, and ammunition for the Vickers.

'So we're racing back along our track and I see 'em in a couple of minutes. They're out of their Chevy, running towards us carrying bits and pieces – I saw the PIAT and a box of ammunition - so I spin it round, they all scramble on, shouting, "Go, go" and we're off again so quick I don't think I actually stopped. We've only been going a few seconds when there's a big bang behind us, and I thought jerry must be close enough to have a shot, but it turned out the Cap had set a charge on a time pencil to destroy his Chevy and kit.



‘But a minute later, there’s another bang, and this time it’s the real thing. Tink shouts “Keep going Sarge, but weave!” Well, I didn’t need telling twice, I can tell you. Every so often, they have another shot at us, but they’re a good way off, a mile or more, probably, and I thought they’d have to be lucky at that range and if they stopped to get a decent shot, we’d get away again. Problem was when we struck a wadi, you know, a dry river bed. We had to track alongside the bank to find a way down, then along the bottom on sand to find a way up again, and that slowed us down a lot. Jerry always caught up a bit every time. And they kept on shooting too. One shot came too close for comfort and I heard a yell from the back: I turned to see what was going on, but Tink shouted “Sarge! Sarge! Spin it round! Doggy’s been hit and fallen out!”

‘A couple o’ the chaps had already jumped off and were racing back to Doggy and by the time I got there and turned it round again they were ready to put him on board. Amazing, really – there’s these two German armoured cars racing at us and shooting as they came, and these chaps calmly eased Doggy onto the Chevy, and Tink shouted ‘Righto Sarge, time to go!’ I was off before they’d got on properly, but the other boys dragged ‘em on, and the race was on again, only by now, o’course, the jerries were a lot closer. So we just kept going - what else could we do? We had nothing that would do any damage further than a hundred yards or so, and if they got that close, they could blow us to bits, so we just had to keep moving east as fast as we could and hope something would turn up.

‘And then, just as I’m beginning to realise we’re in deep shit, the wind gets up. I tell you what, I’ve never been so pleased to see the start of a sandstorm, and just like that, visibility was down to fifty yards or so, so we had to slow right down, but then so would jerry. And then, well, I couldn’t believe it! I’m just about to go down into a little dip when the Cap tells me to stop the Chevy so the Vickers is just clear. So, I’m concentrating on that and the boys all jump out, all ‘cept Doggy, o’course, and

gather round the Cap who starts giving orders, and by the time I'm sorted and jump out, they're pulling stuff out o' the back while Darko – he's our medic - looks after Doggy. I'm thinking we're going to form some sort of defensive line when they all go charging off into the storm. But not away from the armoured cars – towards 'em! All gone in thirty seconds, all 'cept Tink, who's looking right pissed off. It turns out he's had to stay back with me to man the Vickers while the others attack the jerries! Well, they reckon there's a fine line between bravery and madness, and I tell you what, these blokes were well over it. I mean, infantry going up against two bloody great armoured cars, tanks on wheels, really. Us in the Chevy, we're the last line of defence, apparently, though I don't know what Doggy could do – his shoulder's a right mess and he's got dressings all over him. Any case, you'd have to be bloody desperate to go up against a proper armoured car with a machine gun, wouldn't you?'

Brownlow looked round at his audience, who all nodded knowledgeably, as though they might have considered it at least a bit tricky.

'Still,' Brownlow continued, 'we did have the point five inch, and they were twins, remember, so we just might stop one if we were lucky.

'Now, what happens next, I only heard about afterwards, o'course, but this is what they told me. The Cap reckons that in a sandstorm, they've got a good chance of getting close enough to get a hit with the PIAT. So off they go, fanned out in a line so as to have the best chance of finding the jerries and sure enough, after a bit, they see one of 'em, buttoned up tight, sitting the storm out. So they creep round to the side – better chance of a kill from the side, the armour's not so thick at the sides, see - and somebody gets on the PIAT and well, from fifty yards, I reckon even you could hit the thing, eh, John?'

Burgess looked offended for a second, but grinned acceptance.

‘So, wallop! Big hit on the side of the jerry, nothing happens then suddenly, the top hatch opens and there’s a cloud of thick smoke and a couple of chaps come piling out. Our blokes get ready to fire their Brens, but the jerries’re pulling another chap out, and you can’t shoot a chap trying to rescue his mate can you? So our lot left them to it and started thinking about the other armoured car. But just then, the wind began to die down and visibility started to come back. So it was a bit of a stand off, eh? The other jerry was a couple of hundred yards away, too far for the PIAT, but it could easily reach our chaps and they could see the turret swing round: on the other hand, the jerries could see that we had their mates bang to rights.

‘So the Cap, he realises what’s going on, puts his Bren down and walks to the three jerries on the ground. He looks ‘em over, one of ‘ems pretty bad, they told me after, and the others are still coughing out smoke. The Cap signals to the other armoured car to come closer! Nothing happens, so the Cap tells our boys to back off a bit and put the PIAT down, and after a bit, the hatch on the other car opens, and out comes an officer, and he walks towards them, he’s got his hands spread wide, to show no weapons. So the Cap goes to meet him and bugger me, beg pardon Skip, they shake hands! Next thing you know, they’re back with the others, looking at the injured chap. The Cap offers to give him some help - Darko’s a trained first aider – the jerry agrees, and the Cap tells one of the lads to come and get us, we’ve got first aid stuff on the Chevy.

‘So by the time we get back, they’re all standing about smoking and chatting, as best they can, and we all watch while Darko looks the chap over and does what he can for him. But he says the chap’s real bad, needs proper treatment straight away, and so on. The Cap even offers to bring the chap with us, we’re only a day and a half out from our forward lines, and they must be more, so they ask the chap and he says he’ll take his chance with his mates. Well, I would too, wouldn’t you?

‘So Darko hands over a few dressings and a couple o’ shots of morphine, and we all help to get the poor buggar into the other car, then there’s handshakes and salutes all round, and we all go off in our separate directions. Would you credit that?’

‘Now, as a rule, on the way home these LRDG patrols usually find their way northish, closer to the road, so they can shoot up any passing convoy, and sometimes, they might find a jerry airfield or a stores dump and shoot it up a bit. I’d been looking forward to that, but now, minus one truck, hardly any supplies and a man injured, we just had to hope we’d get home. So we just poodled along, trying to save petrol as much as we could, and by dusk the next day, we’re back behind our lines. And that, boys, is the story of my previous encounter with a Chevrolet thirty hundredweight.’

### Chapter 3

October turned into November and then December, and still the assault on the Gustav line didn't come. Brownlow and the boys had figured out what was going on with all that training, and were grateful, but were getting a bit anxious because they were getting to the end of their courses. Of course Major Downes was right on top of things: as soon as any of them finished their course, they were sent off on another one. The four privates found "fieldcraft" particularly interesting, since it primarily involved playing an advanced form of cowboys and indians, chasing around the countryside, sneaking up on unsuspecting farm animals, trees and occasionally, their mates. If only the weather hadn't been so continually awful, they'd gladly have put themselves down to do it again and again. Even Tullett, whose foot repair was still not quite right, managed to get stuck in, doing his best to conceal his problem, but by the end of the day, he was glad of a rest.

Over the weeks and weeks they'd been in Naples, Dodd's men had adopted, without consciously planning it, what had become their customary meeting/loafing place, the foyer of the abandoned hotel where they had first met the Italian children, the *scugnizzi*. They'd dragged in the big old table from the store room, along with the handful of ill assorted and dodgy chairs, and added an unmatched pair of sofas and a coffee table, minus a leg and supported by a petrol can. The once majestic and ornate reception desk now did duty as the stand for Dodd's little petrol stove, which he'd passed on to Kelly before he left, in an embarrassed little ceremony, the unspoken message of which was that the corporal was in charge of it until he got back, and he *would* be back.

Somehow, the air of dereliction and decay was accentuated by Sofia's attempts to bring a little cosiness to the yawning space – the wine bottles with bedraggled flowers picked from the

roadside, the tatty scenic posters taken from the tourist bureau, the once bright cushions strewn around the chairs, pinched from goodness knows where.

Outside, on a wide verandah facing the sea, sat a rag-bag collection of all-but-ready-for-the-fire chairs, where the men could sit when the weather permitted, drink US army coffee and scoff whatever snacks came their way from the PX, or its very poor relation, the NAAFI canteen. It had become a spot universally acknowledged to be theirs, where all and any visitors were welcome, subject to the provisos that they brought something with them, and it was not the proper thing to do to be there if none of Dodd's group happened to be "at home."

One Saturday afternoon, the biting wind had fallen away for a change, allowing the men to take their customary good weather places outside the hotel, and they sprawled about, taking in the feeble sunlight. It didn't seem to add any warmth, but it did make the atmosphere a little less glum. They were all there, as was usual on Saturdays and Sundays since the Americans did not consider any training course urgent enough to interrupt the weekend.

And "all" these days seemed to include Sofia, who spent all her free time at Kelly's side. She liked to encourage him to take walks so as to strengthen his injured leg, often threatening, via Watson, to take him back up to the rooftops they'd scampered across before she could be satisfied he was properly recovered. The pair was unmistakable as they walked, he tall, she tiny beside him, since their conversation was largely supported by ever more florid hand gestures but amazingly, they seemed to get by pretty well. It was only occasionally that Sofia had to call 'Bill-ee! Bill-ee!' and ask Watson for a translation.

Without warning, the thing the men had all been hoping for for two months suddenly came to pass. A jeep cruised up and stopped in front of the hotel, and the men watched half interestedly as a British Army major clambered out, but they

didn't recognise him until a familiar voice said 'Oh come on chaps, aren't you going to give old Doddy a hand with his things?'

At that, of course, after overcoming their amazement, the men crowded round Dodd, taking turns to pump his hand, all talking at once, asking questions, vying for attention, getting more and more excited, like kids at a birthday party.

'I say chaps, give a man a chance!' Dodd complained, but he was obviously as delighted at his reception as he was to be back. 'Is somebody brewing up? You still the brew-master, Ted?'

'Yairs, right-ho Boss, tea coming up, quick smart – I'm really getting the hang of that bomb of yours. But it'll be coffee, Skip, the yanks don't get much tea, and our lot, well, there's not much of anything coming our way.'

The men were beginning to settle down now, and Brownlow offered Dodd the central seat, a once elegant but now down at heel dining chair, the sort with arms. Dodd accepted gratefully, and sighed with pleasure as he settled in. He smiled round at the group, nodding an individual hello to each man.

For a second, it looked as though he was ignoring Sofia, but in truth, was simply saving her until last. He stood and moved towards her and she stood too. Dodd was about to hold out his hand to shake but, on impulse, took an extra pace and hugged her before pulling back and saying 'And Sofia! What a treat to see you again!'

The girl, who had wondered if she would even be remembered, laughed a woman's laugh of delight and hugged Dodd in return.

Sofia ushered Dodd back to the chair of honour and he beckoned her to sit beside him in the seat vacated by Kelly while he brewed the coffee.

Dodd smiled all round again and said 'You know, you cannot imagine how I've looked forward to this' and he wriggled himself comfortable. 'But no tea? How's that?'

The men looked at the sergeant, who replied ‘Well, Skipper, we’ve been keeping a wassname haven’t we? You know, keeping our heads down. Low profile, that’s it. Yeah, low profile.’

The men nodded.

‘Oh? Why’s that?’

‘Didn’t want to draw attention to ourselves, in case the powers what be thought to ask what we were doing here, and got us sent back down the line, see? We’ve all been shitting ... I mean, very worried about that.’

‘But if that was going to happen, you’d have been found out at the first pay parade, wouldn’t you?’

Crafty glances batted around the group. ‘Yeah, Skip, that’s what we thought, too. So we didn’t go: we’ve been scrounging off the yanks ever since ...’ Brownlow was about to say ‘ever since you pissed off’ but managed to stop himself.

Dodd was delighted –it was his turn to clap like a child. ‘Well in that case, chaps, I’ve some wonderful news for you. You’re all officially TD!’

There was a silence reminiscent of Watson’s announcement that he and Green were with CPU. Only Brownlow jumped up and did a little jig, while the others grimaced their annoyance.

‘Tell them, Sergeant.’

‘Best news all week, boys’ grinned Brownlow. ‘Temporarily Detached, see? That’s what TD means.’

He was met with five blank faces. After a minute, Kelly asked ‘OK, Sarge, I’ll be the bunny. Temporarily detached from what?’

‘From your old unit, o’course! You’re officially with Mr Dodd, see? We can collect our pay, rations, kit, the lot. And nobody’s going to send you back without a whole new lot of orders, all right? As you might say, Ted’, and here he tried an Australian accent, but it came out sounding vaguely Welsh, ‘You bloody beauty!’



As the news sunk in, everybody was on their feet, even more excited now than at Dodd's arrival, leaping about, shouting and yahooping up and down the road, punching each other's shoulders and carrying on like, well, like young men who've had a great weight lifted from them, which, of course, they had. All except Brownlow, who would have loved to join in, but felt it would be beneath the dignity of a seasoned soldier.

He let them get it out of their systems for a few minutes before calling them to order. 'All right lads, settle down - you're prancing about like a bunch o' bloody wassnames. Let's hear what else Mr Dodd has to say, eh? Including why he's swapped his captains pips for a major's crowns, eh, Skipper? Or should that be Major Skipper?'

Dodd grinned. 'Yes, I'm having an amazing career, aren't I? First of October, I'm a lieutenant, and now, here we are, middle of December, I'm a major! Shouldn't be surprised if I get a field marshal's baton for Christmas, eh!'

He stopped and grinned again while doing his wide armed all-inclusive gesture. 'And it's all thanks to you chaps. You see, when I got back to the main HQ, way back down south, they sat me down and questioned me this way and that for a solid day. Got me to repeat things, then went back to them again and again, but I knew what they were doing, of course, I've done it often enough myself. So I just kept calm and gave them the true answers. But to be honest, I could sympathise with my questioners - half the time, as I gave them the simple truth, I could hardly believe it myself!'

He chuckled, and wafted his mug in an unspoken request for a refill.

'I mean, if someone told you they'd blown up an army camp using half a dozen mines stolen out of a minefield, you'd have a bit of trouble believing that, wouldn't you Bill? And capturing the railway bridge, how would you explain that away, Stan? See what I mean? The whole adventure seems utterly preposterous when you look back on it, doesn't it?'

‘But it seems they’d already quizzed the locals from Casagrigio and the prisoners we took at the bridge, *and* that uppity captain in the armoured car – remember, Sergeant, the one you told I was a colonel? And of course, the whole story stood up.

‘Then there was the evidence of all the damage to the road at the foot of the hills – I say, that *was* an adventure, getting round that spur, wasn’t it – absolutely incredible, eh! And of course, there are plenty of people in Naples to back up our story too. So in the end, they accepted my account completely. I was treated a lot better then, I can tell you. I was presented to the top dogs, even had a quick word with General Alexander! I couldn’t believe it! There were a couple of others there, General Leese, who’s taking over from Monty, and another chap, American – I don’t remember his name – and it seems I only barely missed Monty himself, but he’d had to dash off to sort something out over the mountains before he left for England himself. Extraordinary, eh, chaps?

‘Alex thought I should go back home for a spot of leave, and repeat my story for the press. He’s worried there’s not enough good news about the war, everything here seems to the people at home to be taking far too long, and of course, there’s literally millions of soldiers hanging about in England not doing much while Rommel’s building up the French coastal defences. I told Alex - I didn’t call him that of course - I’d just as soon come back here and get on with it. I explained our, er, unofficial status and said I was worried you chaps would all be split up ...’

This got a sympathetic cheer from the audience.

‘Alex understood immediately, but insisted that I had to go back. But he called to an aide to get our paperwork sorted out, and to get messages sent back to tell your families that you’re all right, and so on. So, we’re all fixed up and raring to go, eh, Stan? Wouldn’t you say, John?’

He gazed round at his audience like a loving uncle telling the children stories, then did his characteristic single hand clap that served both to focus attention and as punctuation.

‘So, there we are. Ready to go, but the question is .....’ He caught Corporal Kelly’s eye, ‘where to? Any thoughts, Corporal?’

Kelly scratched the back of his head. ‘Yairs, Boss, that’s the question, right enough. No point in us waiting about here, is there? And whatever all these blokes hanging around Naples are going to get up to, banging away at the jerries front lines, well, not our style really, is it? So I reckon we’d be best off getting back behind the lines, eh? That’s what we do, isn’t it?’

Watson was translating for Sofia, who scowled at Kelly.

Dodd nodded at Kelly and allowed him to continue. ‘But I reckon there’s a bit of a problem there. Far as I can gather, the jerries’ve got pretty much wall to wall defences up there. Fair dinkum, it’s going to take more than a couple o’ trucks to get past ‘em, my bloody oath it is.’ Kelly gave Dodd a crafty look. ‘Unless you know something different o’course?’

Dodd smiled but replied ‘Matter of fact, I know no more than you chaps, with one exception. Did you wonder why you all got to do all the training courses you’ve been doing? And how you got away with not being investigated by the authorities?’

He examined each face in turn, and continued. ‘Well, in case you didn’t know it, somebody’s been looking after you. Colonel Bullivant – you know, the American who we met that first day they got to Naples? Well, I’ve been keeping in touch with him and he tells me he’s been hoping we’ll be able to get up to mischief to help him out when the next push comes. You’ve probably guessed he’s been keeping you together and out of official view ever since I left. I gather you’re all highly trained in all sorts of things now. Well, that’s excellent, of course, but the main point was to keep you busy. Seems to have worked well, since you’re all still here, and now we’re officially TD, that’s even better. Excellent, in fact. But as to where we’ll be going,

and when, I don't know, and I don't think the colonel knows either. I did get a message from him to say that when Alex starts to push forward again, he'll try to find a way out for us, by LCT – that's some sort of boat for putting heavy vehicles ashore, I think?'

He glanced at Brownlow, who nodded and added 'That's right Boss: landing craft, tank.'

Dodd continued 'That's it – that's all I know. Oh, except for one other thing. You noticed my crown, Sergeant' he added, touching his shoulder, 'Yes, I thought at first it might be some sort of reward for what we'd done back there, but I was told later that it was General Alexander's idea: he didn't want the people back in England to even suspect that all our good works had been done by a mere lieutenant and a handful of odds and sods, if you'll excuse my language. He thought it'd be much better if the public relations people could sell us as a highly trained group of specialists, deliberately put behind the lines by a far sighted commander – Alexander himself, for example, so the powers that be thought I'd better have a bit of extra rank. And there it is – lowly lieutenant made up to captain in October, and now I'm a major! Excellent, eh? Kitty, that's my wife, you might remember, well, she's awfully pleased. Seems we've moved quite a way up the social ladder, you see. She can't understand it, of course, and I can't say I blame her. I spent my entire academic career pottering about as a lowly lecturer, and suddenly, it seems, I'm a military marvel!

'But the people down south also thought it'd be helpful for you, Sergeant, to get a bit of extra rank in case the yanks started getting, well, you know. So let's just say, all your excellent work has been recognised, and I've got a crown for you too. My most sincere thanks and congratulations, Sergeant *Major!*

Dodd stood and held out his hand: as the two men shook, the others applauded and took Brownlow's hand in turn. Brownlow said nothing – it was the high point of his career, if

not his life, and he had no words to express how he felt. Dodd saw he was stumped, and took the spotlight from him.

‘And as for you, Corporal, I’m delighted to say there’s an extra stripe for you. How does *Sergeant* Kelly sound? Again, Ted, thanks and congratulations.’

He let the moment hang, while everyone congratulated Kelly – everyone, that is, except Sofia, who was still fretting about the thought of Kelly going off again – then went on, ‘And then someone in higher command realised we’d most likely be working with the Americans, and they’re famous for promoting anybody who’ll stand still long enough, plus they’re inclined to promote trained specialist soldiers, so HQ thought the rest of you chaps should get a bit of a bump up as well. Naturally, I told them you were a bunch of completely useless no-hopers – I think that’d be fair comment, wouldn’t you, Sergeant Major? – but it seems they didn’t believe me, because as of now, you’re all corporals! Not even lance corporals, *full* corporals!’

There was a long silence then, while the men looked at each other with that *what? Did I hear that right?* expression, then they were all on their feet again, shaking hands and giving each other small embarrassed hugs, with particular attention being devoted to Brownlow once more, who, they all knew, as the only professional soldier among them, would have wanted this most of all, and deserved it most of all too. While they were rightly proud of what they’d done and, as they got used to the idea, thought their promotions were entirely justified, they all realised, Dodd more than the others, that without Brownlow and his seemingly limitless skills, they’d all have been prisoners, or worse, by now.

Dodd continued: ‘Now, I think we’re entitled to a little celebration, chaps, don’t you? So I suggest we pop up to the *Farmaccia* this evening and see what the *Dottore* can do for us. Does that sound all right?’

The idea was welcomed enthusiastically. ‘Good, because I’ve already arranged it. But just at the moment, I have to go and

pay my respects to Colonel Bullivant. And I'll try to find out what we're going to be getting up to next.'

By the time Dodd got back, all the men had moved back into the hotel lobby, where they'd been excitedly but carefully stitching their new stripes to their uniforms. Brownlow finished first at a canter, of course, since he only had to sew his crowns into the valleys in his stripes.

Sofia was still cranky with Kelly, but had relented sufficiently to snatch the needlework from his hands to finish the job.

Dodd strolled back into the lobby to meet the erstwhile privates all ostentatiously strutting about the room, pointing to their own stripes and yelling stuff like 'Git yer fuckin' 'air cut, yer scruffy little bleeder!' at each other. He shook his head like a disappointed primary school teacher, but couldn't help meeting Brownlow's grin with a smile of his own. He let them carry on poncing about for a minute, then did his single hand clap thing, to call them to order.

'Gather round, lads, and I'll tell you what I've found out, though it's not much, to be honest. Except that the colonel is thrilled that we're all still here, and officially, too. He says he still doesn't know anything specific, and I believe him – but it seems there's definitely going to be a big push northwards pretty soon. No surprise there, of course, but what we're interested in is that he wants us back behind the lines as soon after the advance starts as we can get through the lines. Or possibly, he hinted again that we might bypass the fighting all together and be dropped onto a beach further north, some quiet night.'

Kelly recalled the near calamitous first landing in Italy from the wrecked aircraft's liferaft and laughed. 'You'll be pleased to hear that, won't you, Bill and Gilbert, what with all your experience of beach landings.'

They both looked affronted for a second, but realised Kelly was just joking, and Watson replied, in a horrible parody of an Australian accent, 'Bloody oath, *Sarge*, no bloody worries!'

Dodd continued: 'That's all I know, except to say it could start at any time, so we're on twenty four hours notice to move, and if Angelo and Dino want to come with us, they'll need to stay down here or arrange to be sent for as soon as we get the call.'

He smiled and did his all-encompassing hand waving gesture. 'So, lads, off we go again, it seems. So we've really got something to celebrate at the Farmaccia this evening, eh? Any questions? All right, ready in half an hour, then?'

Brownlow did have a question though. 'Just one thing, Sir – what're we going to call each other, what with all these extra stripes flying about?'

He got uncomprehending looks. 'See, it's been easy up 'til now, eh? Mr. Dodd's OK, he'll stay Boss or Skipper, if that's all right with you, Skip? You don't want us to start calling you Major?'

'Oh, my goodness no. Let's just keep on with that. But I'm beginning to see what you're leading up to, *Sergeant Major*. A bit of a mouthful, isn't it?'

Watson cottoned on next. 'Yes, and we can't carry on calling you *Sarge*, because we've another sergeant now. And we've got four corporals, as well, so that could get confusing too.'

In the end, having thought up and discarded numerous possibilities, they decided to stay with the previous arrangements among themselves except that Kelly would be known to all of them as Ted. Brownlow would still be *Sarge* or *Sergeant*, and the corporals would be addressed by their first or surnames, depending who was doing the addressing and their frame of mind. Thus, Kelly would always call them by their first names, as was his laid back wont, and Dodd and Brownlow would

continue to use surnames, except when they wished to bestow a mark of special favour.

That settled, they got themselves spruced up and ready for their celebration at the Farmaccia.

An hour later, they were all gathered round the special table reserved for them in a side room, the group presided over by Dottore Danielli himself. He usually spent his evenings nowadays at the much grander officers club, rebuilding his reputation as *the* tour guide for the better class of people, and keeping his ear to the grindstone, as he would have said, for any business opportunities for himself and Angelo, his new associate and representative in the *mezzogiorno*, the southern part of Italy.

The change since the group had first met, at this very table, was extraordinary. Then, the club had seemed on its last legs – as indeed it was: hardly anybody there – at least, nobody with any money, nothing much to drink, no electricity for light or heat, the air of shabbiness and decay typified by a geriatric trio, tottering through a series of unrecognisable and largely independent tunes which would have brought complaints from a funeral that the music was too glum.

Now, the mirror ball twinkled gaily, the place was full of soldiers who'd willingly paid a premium to buy the beer provided by their own army, the air was thick with cigarette smoke and laughter, accompanied, when it could be heard above the noise of people enjoying themselves, by a group of very competent soldiers playing the latest dance music.

But one thing had hardly changed – Danielli was his urbane self, though the worn cuffs and collar had gone, replaced by a dress shirt whose brilliant whiteness was only outshone by the beauty of his shiny new midnight blue dinner suit.

The last time they'd all sat there, the side room was to protect the party from prying ears, but this time, it was the reverse – in here, they could converse without having to shout.



As before, Danielli was the perfect host, chatting to each of his guests, engaging everyone in the conversation, making a particular fuss of Sofia, who'd dashed home to put on her best frock, ie, the one that wasn't as tattered as the other one, and put her hair up, which transformed her from a child to a beautiful young woman. Meanwhile, Danielli was also making sure the drinks were flowing at just the right rate, and as before, Dodd was deeply impressed by his gift of making everyone comfortable.

After a while, Danielli tapped a spoon against a glass.

'Well, my *Colonello*, if I may continue to address you so? And who knows, perhaps it will soon be true' he began, and after acknowledging the tiny nod from Dodd, continued 'and gentlemen, as you see, circumstances have changed a little for me quite recently', he waved a languid hand around, and added 'and for you too, I see,' smiling and tapping Watson's stripes. 'As for my condition, perhaps I should explain, in case you should think I am the cat that spilt the beans, or similar!'

He accepted the titter of laughter and went on. 'You see, as soon as the Americans came, I realised that all of a sudden, Naples would be host to thousands of soldiers with plenty of cash and anxious to have a good time. So of course, I immediately searched out the officer in charge of administration, a US Colonel Bowker, and made the existence of the *Farmaccia* known to him.

'Well, you can imagine, finding a readymade place for what our American friends call Rest and Recreation was a blessing to Colonel Bowker – one less problem for him, among many, I imagine. But of course, I had to tell him of our severe shortage of alcohol, except, of course, for the execrable local wine. It was only fair to mention that, wasn't it? The good colonel saw the problem immediately, and arranged for supplies of beers and whiskey to be delivered immediately.

'It seems the only problem the Americans had with giving me their own alcohol and then buying it back was that officers

and enlisted men were obliged to drink together, something neither group was comfortable with. Of course, I agreed it would be best if there was a separate, more elegant, bar for officers, but I explained to the good colonel that while I'd love to help, I was now very busy at the *Farmaccia*, and I did not have the building, the cash or the materials to provide another facility for officers. It was impossible, you understand.'

Dodd could just imagine Bowker immediately falling under Danielli's charm-heavy spell and following a short debate, Danielli, after a show of reluctance, agreed to open a new establishment further up the hill, in a better area, for the use of officers, provided the Americans would commandeer a building recommended by Danielli, fit it out and stock it.

Danielli shrugged. 'Gentlemen, what could I do? In the interests of respect and admiration for our visitors, I bowed to Colonel Bowker's pressure. But in return, I sought a quid pro quo - I mentioned that my beautiful old Hispano-Suiza coach would be available to officers for tourist trips to Vesuvius, Pompeii and the other wondrous sights the area abounds in, if only the vehicle could be rehabilitated after its time hidden up in the hills. I had kept it out of the gaze of the Germans, you understand. I mentioned that I would be honoured to personally escort the tourists myself, and I felt that possibly, the service should perhaps be a little exclusive, only available to senior officers, say colonel and above. That convinced the colonel of the extreme common sense of the idea, and he ordered the overhaul straight away. So there it is! I now have this modest place, the officers club, which we call *L'ospidale*, and my old tourist business to keep me out of the frying pan.'

He was interrupted by the arrival of the first course of the evening's banquet, the local speciality, a large flat disc of dough thinly spread with tomato paste and sprinkled with cheese and cut into segments. At first, the Americans had found this dish hard to like, on the basis it was too bland for their taste, but they experimented with ways to make it more appealing to them,

loading it up with all sorts of additional ingredients, like ham, anchovies, or, well, pretty much anything really. Before long, demand was outstripping supply and in the end, the Americans adopted the dish with such enthusiasm that it became almost their national dish.

While that was being served, the dottore made apologies that he would have to be excused – he had urgent business to attend to – but would return later, he explained, if he wasn't barking up the wrong shoe.

With his departure, the conversation flagged a bit while the guests warily studied their pizza, something none of them had ever seen before, until the newly minted Corporal Tullett asked Dodd to tell them more about his time back in England, and was backed up by a chorus of support.

Dodd thought for a minute, then shrugged and held up his hands in a gesture of submission.

'It's not particularly exciting, really. It turns out that there are flights back and forth to England all the time, reports, senior officers coming and going, and so forth, so I was bundled onto one of those. As you can imagine, I wasn't too happy about flying again, after the crash, but at least this aeroplane had proper seats, so it was a lot more civilised. And it had four engines – I counted them before I got on!

'Of course, when I got to London, I had to go through the whole story all over again. You know, I was getting a little bored with the whole routine – a couple of officers read the report, they make it clear they don't believe a word of it, quiz you over and over again, trying to trip you up, until eventually, they have to accept the truth of it. Then you never see them again and you're shunted up the line and the whole thing starts all over again. The whole process took several days, I'm not sure how many, but eventually, I was spat out of the end of the machine and given a couple of weeks leave before having to go back for a briefing en route to coming back here.'

Brownlow interrupted. 'Hold on Boss. Whereabouts in London was this?'

Dodd looked uncomfortable. 'I'm embarrassed to say I can't tell you. Mad, isn't it? As though some spy might hear us talking here, or you might let it slip to, er, well, I'm really not sure who, or what they might do if they knew. Suffice to say, the place where I was interrogated and where I received my briefing is a closely guarded secret. Because, it seems, I'm with Military Intelligence. Extraordinary, eh? Military Intelligence!'

Dodd snorted at the preposterousness of it.

Watson piped up 'What, MI5, MI6, all that?'

'Absolutely, Bill, all that. Apparently, I should have known that all along, what with being there to question prisoners of war. It seems that I was with MI19, the section responsible for intelligence from refugees and enemy prisoners, not that I recall being told about that. You'd think that sort of thing would stick in your mind, wouldn't you, but apparently not. Or quite likely, they didn't tell me at all. That lot are so secretive, they'd probably think I didn't need to know.'

Dodd saw Watson half raise a hand, about to ask another question, and got in first.

'And Bill, in answer to your question, no, I don't know what all the other departments before 19 do. And if I did, I probably couldn't tell you. I believe that MI5 is about catching spies in Britain, and MI6 looks after our spies overseas, but that's common knowledge, I think.'

He rubbed his forehead, a little baffled by all the machinations, and wondered for a second if he should tell the men that while it was MI19 that had quizzed him about his exploits to date, it was MI9, responsible for escape and evasion by British prisoners, that had given him his briefing before his return. He decided against – it all seemed too unlikely, and anyway, he'd been told not to say a word until and unless it became necessary.

‘So I managed to get back to Oxford eventually – honestly chaps, you wouldn’t believe how difficult travelling is in England now. Not because of bombing, you understand, there’s not much of that these days, but there are so many people, hundreds of different uniforms – soldiers, sailors, airmen from all over the world, it seemed, everywhere is just jam packed all the time. But I did get back eventually.

‘You can imagine, I’d been beside myself, couldn’t wait to see Kitty, Mrs Dodd, that is, and my girls. And then there was the college, our rooms, my colleagues, just so much different from what we’ve been through.’

He did his waft of the hands to indicate he was talking about the group at the table. But then Dodd went quiet, as he remembered again how awkward things had been after that euphoric reunion with his wife and family. Suddenly, after the emotion of greeting, a gap seemed to have opened between them, somehow – there seemed to be so little Dodd really wanted to know about how things had been for them while he’d been away, even though it had been, what eighteen months since he’d last been home.

And it was even worse with his social group: men, mostly men anyway, he’d known and worked with for years, yet when they met at the inevitable cocktail parties in his honour, Dodd realised there was no comradeship, hardly any common ground, even. It seemed all they had to talk about was the same old college gossip, and pitiful complaints about shortages of decent scotch and the impossibility of getting hold of a really nice brie. And he realised at once the impossibility of addressing these colleagues by anything other than their surname. There was no closeness, no bond. He’d never realised that before, thought their shallow relationships, such as they were, were normal. It wasn’t until the last few weeks in Italy that he’d discovered what the Australians called mateship – and the recognition made him yearn for a telegram summoning him urgently back to Italy. He’d

felt a guilty disloyalty to his family but a strange lack of any feeling at all for his university colleagues.

He felt he was just passing time while he waited for the summons back to Italy and he took to taking long walks through the Oxfordshire countryside, to stay fit, he told himself, but really, if he'd been honest, just to keep out of the way. But even then, his surroundings looked a bit soft, a bit, well, unexciting, bathed in their late autumn light. Wherever he went, he was sure there wasn't going to be something dangerous round the next corner, something to get the excitement going. And he was shocked: he'd known and loved this country for many years, been completely happy with his family, satisfied with his career, and now, well, it all looked so different, so, well, not uncomfortable, exactly, just bland.

Kelly nudged Dodd and asked 'You right, Boss?'

Surprised, Dodd did his face washing gesture and brought himself back to the room in the nightclub.

'I'm fine, Ted. Just remembering my leave, you know. I'm fine.'

But he was noticeably quiet for the rest of the evening. The men put it down to his being a bit deflated at having to come back here after such a lovely leave.

## Chapter 4

After all the excitement of Dodd's return and the promotions, the pace of life at Naples began to weigh heavy. The weather continued horrible – some locals were already saying it was the coldest, wettest winter in living memory – and it was only mid December. Angelo reported that things up in the hills were bad, and further up, on the high slopes, the peasants were already beginning to wonder how they'd get through. There's been a good harvest of mushrooms and chestnuts, but neither kept well enough to support them through the winter.

For the soldiers hanging about in and around Naples, things were not too uncomfortable, but for the poor sods up in the lines, life was a misery, with no let-up in sight. The attacks on what the Germans called the Winter Line had started in November with little evidence of success, and everyone knew that, even when the Allies breached that, they would simply move up to the even more redoubtable Gustav Line. And the conditions at the front were awful. The troops lived in a sea of mud, huddled against biting wind and seemingly constant rain or snow, and the random German artillery barrages didn't help either. But by the middle of December, the constant pressure finally cracked the Winter Line and the Allies were able to continue their weary plod northwards, but only until they bumped up against the mighty Gustav Line.

Not that it made any difference in Naples.

Christmas came and went, but even the munificent hospitality of the US Army only lifted spirits temporarily.

On New Year's Day, Dodd called on Colonel Bullivant, ostensibly as a social call, but in addition, to remind him that what everybody was now calling Dodd's Army was available and keen to move.

Bullivant pointed out once again that there was no chance whatever of getting through the German lines: the countryside

was awash with mud, completely impassable to tracked vehicles, never mind trucks, and the only possibility for movement was along the heavily fortified, and fiercely contested road. But, taking pity on Dodd, Bullivant did mention that the scuttlebutt was that there just might be a landing further up towards Rome, but as to where, when and if Dodd's Army might be involved, Bullivant had no idea.

*The Abruzzi region, north of Naples, contains some of the wildest country in Italy. Amid the mud, rain and cold of the worst winter in memory, Allied troops had by mid January forced their way north and had broken through the German Winter Line only to face a more fearsome barrier. Buttressed by snow-capped peaks flanking the Liri Valley, and protected by the rain-swollen Garigliano and Rapido Rivers, the Gustav line guarded the natural corridor and only practicable route through the Liri valley to Rome.*

*The famous Benedictine monastery atop Monte Cassino dominated the entire area, forming the hinge on which the whole defensive line swung and Fifth Army faced another long and arduous mountain campaign. Allied high command looked for alternatives and developed a plan that, it was hoped, would stretch the German defences to breaking point, believing it would not be possible for the Germans to bring down reinforcements in time.*

*Main Fifth Army was to attack the Gustav Line and drive up the Liri Valle in sufficient strength to draw in most of the available German reserves. Then, while the enemy was fully occupied, a surprise landing would be made in his rear. Once established, the assault force was to thrust inland to block vital supply routes and threaten to cut off the German troops holding the Gustav Line. The Germans, so the thinking went, would be forced to rush troops northward to meet the threat to their rear, which would so weaken the Gustav line as to allow the attacking*



*troops through, so they could race to join hands with the landing force.*

*The plan for the landing was called SHINGLE. U.S. VI Corps, selected to make the amphibious landing, employed British as well as American forces under the command of Maj. Gen. John P. Lucas. The assault force, a mighty armada of 247 vessels, was to be dispatched from Naples.*

*On the other hand, while the Germans realized that they did not have sufficient forces to prevent an Allied landing behind the Gustav Line, they believed that they could contain and then destroy it by hurrying reinforcements into Italy to meet the emergency. Their plans did not contemplate the withdrawal of any substantial number of troops from the southern front to meet such a threat to their rear.*

*At dawn on 12 January, Fifth Army began its drive on the Gustav line from the south. In spite of successive assaults neither the British nor the French were able to break through the wall of German mountain defences. In the centre, the U.S. II Corps attacked across the Rapido but after gaining a precarious foothold in two days of bitter fighting, heavy losses forced it to withdraw. By 22 January, the attack on the Gustav Line had bogged down in the midst of savage German counterattacks. Allied intelligence believed that the Germans had been forced to commit most of their reserves and high hopes were still held that the landing would break the stalemate in the Liri Valley.*

*A hundred miles north of Naples and thirty from Rome stood the little port of Anzio, ideal for a landing since it had a decent harbour and good beaches either side.*

*In the early morning hours of 22 January 1944, as the first wave of craft hit the beach and men rushed for the cover of the dunes, there was no enemy to greet them. Pushing rapidly inland, the astonished troops soon realized that they had caught the Germans completely off guard. The two divisions that had been assigned to guard this coast had been sent to the southern front*

*only three days before, and the coastal sector and whole area south of Rome were held by only skeleton forces.*

Major Dodd shivered and shook himself out of his doze. He stared ahead, trying to make out the point where the grey of the water met the grey of the land.

Dodd had been sitting in his usual position, in the passenger seat of “his” truck, leaning uncomfortably to his right, against the passenger door. Odd, he mused, the vehicle sitting still, but he was still feeling the movement. But this time, instead of the jarring and jolting of the wheels over the horrible mess that passed for a road in southern Italy, this was a lullingly gentle dip and sway. And the noise, or rather, lack of it. Customarily, sitting next to Sergeant Brownlow, he was used to having to yell to make himself heard over the roar of the engine, the whine of the gears and the incessant thumping of the suspension, which competed with the racket of all the kit being jounced around in the back. But now, the gentle slap of half hearted waves against the hull of the ship was remote and soothing, alongside the distant thug thug thug of the ancient diesel from far below.

He and his team were about to be thrust back into the war, but they’d been sitting out here for hours now, getting colder and stiffer, waiting their turn to face the noise and chaos that awaited them somewhere on that barely discernable line that marked the land. Of course, they’d known that they’d be among the last to go ashore – they had no part to play in the actual landing – but it seemed they’d been hanging around out here, what, two miles out?, four?, pretty much all day, just chugging round in lazy circles while the real soldiers were getting on with it over there. But the odd thing was, there was nothing to let Dodd know if the landing was successful, or being resisted, or even being thrown back into the sea – little in the way of noise or flashes of explosions, just the hint of a flash or a cloud of smoke from time to time, and what did those few clues signify?

Dodd sighed, and wondered if he should stir himself to go in search of a cup of tea, but the distant thudding and oily smoke from the engine had given him a headache and he decided he couldn't be bothered. He wedged himself back into his preferred posture, half against the seat back, and half against the door. Strange how quickly he'd become used to leaning on a door to his right, instead of his left, as in the British Bedford. Thinking about it now, he was sure the Americans back in Naples had been right: you couldn't keep driving about behind the German lines in a standard British army three tonner – a standard British army *right hand drive* three tonner, could you? It'd be bound to draw attention sooner or later, wouldn't it, even if they'd painted it? Lucky they'd got away with it before Naples really. Just as well the Americans had made the point: none of his group had thought about it, but it was no good trying to spread the blame. He was the officer, he should have realised. He awarded himself an irritated tut. Still, no point in worrying about it now and, as the sergeant-major had pointed out, the Chevrolet truck did look a lot more like a civilian than the Bedford, which, with its stubby bonnet, just seemed more military, now you came to look at it.

Dodd speculated for the hundredth time how much longer they'd be out here, and peered out towards the horizon again, as though searching for a sign. It was hard to see out of the windows, what with the spray and condensation. His hand squeaked on the inside of the glass, but he had no real hope of improvement. He thought of clambering outside to try for a clearer look but as though in response, the wind smacked a spray of spume against the door, rocking the truck, so, shuffling about to try to find a more comfortable position, Dodd retraced recent events in his mind, wondering once again how it could possibly be that a middle aged university lecturer could find himself right here, right now, waiting to play his part in the invasion of Anzio, and the battles in Italy.

Dodd was brought back to the present by the sudden quickening of the rhythm of the ancient engine and the vessel turned its prow towards the darkening streak of land.

This change of pace caused Kelly to stir a little from his gloom. He'd been the odd one out when the news came that the landing up the coast was "on": everybody else was delighted to finally be on the move again, but Kelly was torn. He'd become accustomed to having Sofia around – they'd even begun to learn a few words of each other's language – and the thought of ending this sojourn didn't sit comfortably with him.

And Sofia, as though she hadn't anticipated, or had blocked out, the reality that the soldiers would be leaving, was all but inconsolable. The pair still spent all their spare time together but now, with the cloud of separation hanging over them, they seemed to have little to say to each other. Even their arms and hands, usually such a vital part of their communication, hung limp by their sides.

One morning when the icy wind had abated, Sofia had taken Kelly's hand – she still called him "Kell-lee" – and led him to the bomb damaged building they'd first used to scramble onto the rooftops. Her intention was clear: if Kelly couldn't cope up there, he was unfit to go with the others. Kelly didn't try to explain it wasn't a choice he could make, to go or not, but as it came to pass, he was fully able to, well, not keep up, exactly – she moved like the wind up there. As he scrambled after Sofia, though, he realised how tricky it was up there, and he wondered how he'd managed that first time, in darkness, and carrying a satchel of explosives.

Best not to dwell on the last day, the young soldiers larking and laughing as they prepared the trucks for loading, all except Kelly, who'd done his work silently and morose. He'd kept looking out for Sofia, but she didn't appear, and in the end, when the ship

was ready to move out, he had to accept that she wasn't coming to see him off.

But as the vessel trembled into life and began to inch away from the wharf, a diminutive figure had appeared at last in the deepening gloom of dusk. There was no waving, no yelling of last messages: the two just stood, silent and still, and held each other's eyes until they were no more than outlines, and still watched, long after they'd become invisible.

*By noon, the assault troops were pushing inland, and unloading of the initial convoy proceeded at a rapid pace. Against negligible opposition, the port of Anzio, which was to be the key channel for supplies, was captured almost intact. By midnight, some 36,000 men, 3,200 vehicles, and large quantities of supplies were ashore.*

The landing of Dodd's Army took place in the early hours of 23 January. The men clambered off easily enough, stretching and moaning, but glad to be ashore, even though they were now exposed to the wind and flurries of rain while they waited for their vehicles and equipment to take their turn at being hoisted to the dock by the ships ancient crane. Dodd tried not to think about the low priority given to his vehicles - even the mobile cinema had been unloaded before his two disreputable looking trucks - but to be realistic, he knew there was no hurry. He didn't expect the beachhead to stabilise and the Allies to break out so that his party could sneak through the lines for, well, maybe several days.

*The Germans reacted swiftly to meet the emergency. Two divisions and many lesser units started at once from France, Yugoslavia, and Germany itself. Three divisions in northern Italy left for the Rome area on 22-23 January and all available reserves from the southern front were rushed toward Anzio. While these forces were assembling, the German air force bombed the beachhead area and it's supporting naval craft to*

*delay the Allied advance inland. For the first two days, the German defenders believed that they were too weak to stop the Allied advance, but from the evening of 24 January they were confident that they could contain the invading forces and, as soon as they had substantially completed their concentration, launch a counterattack that would wipe out the Allied beachhead.*

*Before the end of the first day the Germans were estimated to have 20,000 troops in areas from which they could drive rapidly toward the beachhead. With the advantage of good communications, roads, and railways, and in spite of Allied air interdiction, they had doubled that figure in two days and continued to increase it to more than 70,000 within a week.*

*General Lucas realised that the German reaction made the prospect of linking the southern force with the beachhead remote. Also, Lucas believe that if VI Corps extended itself too far inland, it would risk being cut off by a sudden German counterthrust. Consequently, VI Corps concentrated on consolidating its positions. By 29 January, VI Corps had expanded its beachhead, but it was clear that an attack in greater strength would be necessary to continue the drive. On 30 January three divisions were to attack. The drive out of the beachhead was to coincide with a renewed offensive on the southern front on 30 January.*

The news soon filtered through via the usual mysterious means that both Allied offensives – at Cassino and Anzio - had been beaten back, with significant losses on both sides. An air of quiet pessimism flowed through Anzio like a fog, as realisation dawned that this was going to be yet another slogging match, the winner most likely to be decided by which side could build up an irresistible force quickest.

In one area, the battle was already over, however. The Allies had overwhelming superiority in the air, and had all but cleared the skies over Anzio.

The German artillery was placed for defence of its own lines, ragged as they were in the difficult country surrounding the little town, rather than firing on Anzio. Within a day or two, though, Anzio began to be rocked by several big explosions each day, and it was quickly realised that the Germans were using a gun of very heavy calibre. The Americans immediately sent out aircraft to locate the gun so it could be bombed into silence, but flight after flight reported no sign. It was a mystery: the gun must have been massive to be capable of throwing a projectile big enough to cause the explosions, but of course, it would also be able to fire the projectile from a great distance – the Allied experts estimated it had a range of at least fifteen or twenty miles, probably more – which meant the search area would, in turn, be enormous.

But surely, such a gun would have to leave evidence of its existence: a freshly laid roadway, an easily visible concrete platform, or even new railway lines. Something that big couldn't just disappear: it needed hard standing to support the heavy equipment required to serve it, deliver the gigantic shells and so on. The scars on the landscape should be obvious. Even if the thing was concealed in the forest that cloaked much of the hinterland, it was difficult to see how it could be completely hidden. Nevertheless, the many aircraft sent to look for the gun found no trace, and the German gunners were too smart to fire in darkness – the muzzle flash would be visible for many miles at night.

Of course, as is the way of these things, the gun quickly acquired the name “Anzio Annie.”

Not being part of the main line of command, Dodd's group were pleased to be left to fend for themselves as regards somewhere to live, and soon found themselves a place to call home in a laneway that led nowhere, its far end having been blocked by one of Anzio Annie's donations.

Actually, though they called it a lane, which sounded better than “alley,” it was, by the Italian standards of the time, wide enough to be called a road, since they had been able to reverse their vehicles in and leave just enough room for the men to squeeze between the trucks and the ancient walls. That was a little inconvenient, but they were happy to trade that off against the privacy of the site, especially since the walls on either side had no windows. The men had set up camp behind their trucks and, with a little scavenging of odds and ends of timber and corrugated iron, and even a proper portable stove, had managed to make themselves quite comfortable. Not for the first time, they decided they were better off “detached” from the general line of authority, thus being exempt from such inconveniences as discipline (except as personified by Brownlow), work (ditto), and training (ditto again).

The place was pretty quiet, too: a great asset in a little town running alive with thousands of bored but apprehensive soldiers. Their neighbour to the right was an obviously abandoned shop, at one time a butcher or perhaps a delicatessen, judging by the marble slab counter, thick wooden chopping block and steel hooks dangling forlornly from the ceiling, but the layer of grime and dust spoke clearly of the long period since there had been anything to sell.

On the other side stood a terrace of ancient and tiny houses, also mostly uninhabited, though the one right next door, whose side wall formed the edge of the soldier’s laneway, was occupied: at least, the ground floor was – the upstairs windows were boarded up. Most days, weather permitting, a little old lady, dark eyes gleaming pinpricks behind folds of skin weathered into leather, took her place in the doorway making pasta shells. Dodd’s soldiers found it fascinating to watch: she sat with a wooden board on her lap, on which was a large bowl covered with a cloth. Every so often, she would delve into the bowl and withdraw a lump of dough, then, holding it in her left hand, would pinch off a portion with her right and, in a movement too



quick to follow, press the pellet against the board with her thumb and somehow, the next in an endless line of perfectly sized and shaped pasta shells would emerge.

When the tray was full of pasta shells, the old woman would stand and transfer the shells to a much bigger wire mesh tray mounted on the window frame, leaving them to dry. She would then return to her place and start the process all over again.

The men would often form an enthusiastic but respectful audience, trying to work out how she did it, and also trying to be friendly, when any of the Italian speakers were there to attempt to engage the woman in conversation, complimenting her on her skill and dexterity, and, although she clearly didn't understand what even the Italians were saying, she understood the friendly tone well enough, and smiled and responded in the local dialect, which, in turn, even Angelo and Dino didn't understand either.

Not that the language barrier was a problem, especially after one small episode: Tullett had made coffee and, on a whim, took a mug to the old lady, who was ensconced, as usual, in her doorway. She put down her tray, accepted the gift with a smile and a dip, a curtsy, almost, and went inside with it. Tullett was thinking that was a bit fuckin' rude, but in a few seconds, she was back, with the mug only half full.

Tullett did a spread hands, questioning gesture, which the old lady recognised, and responded with a hand waving gesture of her own that said, "look inside."

Beyond her, in the deep gloom of the interior, Tullett could just make out another, even older woman, who was slumped in an armchair, or, to be honest, *the* armchair, clutching in both hands a cup which contained her share of the coffee, and studying it as though it was something rare, delicate and precious. Which, to her, it was.

The younger woman (who the men had taken to calling "the pasta lady") called to her and she lifted her head so as to be able to look at Tullett. Even through the gloom of the interior, he

saw immediately that she was frail and ancient enough that she gave an air that she might at any moment be making the gentle transition from elder to ancestor. But she managed to raise her cup in salute and muttered something, which the less ancient woman repeated for Tullett, as though in translation, but of course, he had no idea what either of them had said. Their tone and expression, on the other hand, made their thanks clear.

A couple of days later, Kelly was just leaving the alley when he found the younger woman, or perhaps it would be better to call her the less old one, dragging her chair down the alley in one hand with a tiny posy of flowers in the other. Kelly tried to help, but couldn't really see what she was wanting to do, so he let her continue. After a moment, she stopped and placed the chair against the wall on her side of the alley and commenced a slow and dangerous looking clamber onto the seat. For a moment, Kelly was baffled, until he noticed, for the first time, a small terra cotta object set into the wall maybe six feet up. It was not unlike a miniature men's urinal, except it was only eighteen inches high, and of the same dingy reddish material as the brickwork.

Intuitively, Kelly realised it was some sort of shrine, and understood that the woman was determined to add the flowers herself, so he restricted his contribution to holding the chair steady while she removed the withered flowers and fussed over placing the fresh ones. She then climbed unsteadily down and only then gave Kelly a grin and a bob, before dragging the chair back to its usual place in the doorway.

After that, the relationship between the neighbours became even more cordial and, often as not, at some point in the day somebody wandered up to the end of the alley with two coffees and maybe a bit of cake for the women.

One day, the men received a visit from an elderly priest, which first of all set the soldiers wondering if everybody in this town was ancient. But at least he spoke a form of Italian that

Dodd's Italian speakers could undersatand, and he explained that the pasta lady he asked him to call to thank the soldiers for their kindness, and to apologise on her behalf that she had nothing to offer in return for the treats she'd been given. The priest said their only source of income was the pasta shells: it turned out that early each morning, a local restaurant worker delivered a lump of dough which the pasta lady contracted to turn into pasta shells, which were in great demand and for which, it seemed, she was famous. Nevertheless, she and her mother (who the aged one turned out to be) only barely managed to scrape by. But, the priest pointed out, they were happy enough – it was what they were used to, and since everybody else around them was equally skint, and always had been, they didn't expect anything more.

Dodd visited his mentor Colonel Bullivant regularly, but the chances of getting back behind the lines hadn't improved. In fact, they'd got worse. Bullivant reported that all the landing craft, every one, had been sent back to England in preparation, Bullivant guessed correctly, for a major landing onto French beaches later on, so there was now no possibility of Dodd's vehicles being slipped onto some deserted beach one dark night. The only way out was through the lines.

A few times, Dodd and his gang went forward just to see what was going on, but it was so dispiriting, they soon left off doing that. The conditions for the front line troops were indescribably awful: when it wasn't snowing, there was rain, driven by freezing wind, not to mention the occasional burst of artillery fire from the Germans. Obviously, the Germans were conserving their artillery ammunition, so they made do with irregular salvos, interspersed with mortars and the odd spray of machine gun fire. The Allies did the same, except that their field guns and howitzers were supported by the guns of the naval vessels standing off the beaches, so if was any consolation, conditions for the Germans were probably worse. That didn't

make Dodd's people feel any less helpless, of course. They even gave up taking cigarettes and other little treats up to the poor buggers manning the front line. They didn't seem grateful, somehow: it just seemed it was a reminder that civilisation and a hot bath was only a couple of miles away.

As the days turned into weeks, the stalemate continued and the likelihood of a surreptitious breakout by Dodd seemed as remote as ever. There was only one road out of Anzio to the north, and that was heavily guarded by the Germans, of course. The surrounding country to the north was riddled with steep gullies, which made passage by tanks impossible, never mind trucks, and the few minor tracks leading away east to the mountains were a morass of mud. Even the locals on foot had given up trying to get out that way.

Tullett and Burgess sat in the back of the Chevy, swigging coffee, since tea was all but impossible to get in Anzio, staring in glum silence at the rain bucketing down.

'Fuckin' weather, eh?' mentioned Tullett. 'I used ter reckon the weather was fuckin' shite in London, but fuck me dead, mate, this is more worserer, eh?'

'You ain't wrong Stan' Burgess agreed.

After a long pause, Burgess added 'One thing about the weather, though, d'yer remember the weather forecast on the wireless?'

Tullett was suspicious. 'Yeah, so what?'

'Well, what come after that? On the wireless, I mean?'

Tullett studied his mug, as though the answer might be in there. 'Fucked if I know. What *are* you on about?'

'The shippin' forecast! Remember? I used ter like that: it made it all seem far away, like. All them funny soundin' places, comin' out o' the wireless, eh?'

Tullett admitted to vaguely recollecting, which encouraged Burgess to continue.

‘Yeah, remember? All that stuff about Dogger, and Cromarty an’ that. An’ Viking? I partic’ly liked Viking. O’ course, I dunno where they are, but I jus’ liked ter imagine, know what I mean? An’ all the strange stuff, like “Cromarty, Dogger, Fair Isle, westerly three or four, five later, rain later. Good becoming poor.” I dunno what that all meant either, come to mention it, but I used ter imagine bein’ on a ship out Viking way, in a lashin’ storm, gettin’ bounced about all over the place, hangin’ on fer grim death, eh? Did yer ever do that?’

He suddenly realised he might have made a pratt of himself, and added ‘When you was little, like?’

Tullett digested that for a bit, wondering if he’d missed something, but then sat up. ‘Nah, chum, I dunno ‘bout that, but I did like what come first, or was it after? I’m talkin’ about the football results, eh? We used ter listen fer them ev’ry Sat’dy, reg’lar as reg’lar., the old chap sittin’ there, markin’ down on ‘is pools coupon. We all ‘ad ter sit quiet while the football results was on, or we’d get the back of ‘is ‘and, no trouble. An’ come ter think of it, I used ter like some o’ their names – I s’pose that’s the same as yer shippin’ forecast, eh? Like, Hamilton Academicals an’ that, Accrington Stanley, all them.’

That got Burgess interested. ‘Yeah, tha’s right. Good, some of ‘em, wasn’t they? The names, I mean, not the teams. If it weren’t Leyton Orient playin’,’ he said, not realising the irony of the oddness of that name, ‘or West ‘Am, I weren’t really interested. An’ you weren’t bothered neither, as I rec’lect.’

‘No mate, I’m same as you. Went ter see the Orient now an’ again, an’ the ‘Ammers too, sometimes, but nothin’ special, not like *some* I could mention.’

He delivered a shudder of contempt, but didn’t name any of the mad keen soccer devotees he’d known.

‘So’ he continued, ‘can yer remember any more good names?’

Tullett did that screwed up face intended to indicate intense thought, then mentioned ‘Sheffield Wensd’y - I used ter

wonder ‘ow they could be playin’ of a Sat’dy. Then there’s Brighton and Hove Albion, an Spurs o’ course, Tottenham Hotspur, that’s their proper name,’ as though Burgess might have been unsure about the football club whose ground was ten minutes walk from where he’d once lived, ‘Blackburn Rovers, Plymouth Argyle ...’

Burgess broke in. ‘Yeah, Bolton Wanderers, an’ ...’ but shrugged into silence, before adding, ‘What about the Scottish teams, d’they count?’

‘Oh yeah, o’ course! Fuck me! Partick Thistle an’ that. Mind you, ‘arf of ‘em, I dunno if that’s the name o’ the town, or just summink made up, like. Cowdenbeath, Is there really a place called Cowdenfuckinbeath? Or Stenhousefuckinmuir?’

‘West Bromwich Albion,’ Burgess added, and Tullett gave him a look, wondering if he really thought West Bromwich was in Scotland, but he didn’t press the point, not being entirely sure himself.

Burgess continued: ‘Yeah, good though, weren’t it, all sittin’ round the wireless of a Sat’dy night. An’ then, after the football results, often as not we’d all go down to me Auntie Lil’s for a bit of a sing song round the pianner. Pity about Uncle Alf, we all missed ‘im after ‘e died.’

Burgess sniffed. ‘Yeah, ‘e was the only one what could play it.’

Anzio Annie was becoming a severe nuisance and a source of frustration. The little town was getting seriously crowded now, and every day brought more troops, more vehicles, more supplies. It seemed that you could drop a shell pretty much anywhere in Anzio and you’d have a very good chance of doing damage. Shooting fish in a barrel, the Americans said. The people crammed into Anzio soon realised that there was little point in taking cover when Charlie appeared – if a quarter ton shell landed anywhere near you, crouching in a shop doorway wasn’t going to be particularly helpful. Even so, it was natural

enough that most people tried to find somewhere where they could at least feel as though they were safer.

And it was worse, somehow, than an air raid - at least you could fire back at an air raid - but there were few air raids now, the Allied air forces massively outnumbering the Germans, and had complete control of the air. Well, almost. Most days, Anzio was visited by a tiny German aircraft that chugged in very low circles over the town, always appearing seconds before the arrival of the latest offering from Anzio Annie, so it was immediately obvious that it was being used as a spotter for the fall of shot.

The Germans had a very simple procedure: Anzio Annie would first fire a shell that caused little damage but created a pall of smoke. This would be followed a few minutes later by the real thing after, it was correctly assumed, the fall of the smoke canister had been reported back by the spotter and the gun adjusted accordingly.

The fragile looking little plane was immediately christened "Charlie" after Charles Lindbergh, the American who'd become famous after his epic solo flight from New York to Paris in 1927. Charlie's performance, though, was a little bewildering, because his appearance became a warning to the troops that a donation from Anzio Annie was about to arrive. Of course, the aircraft's ridiculously slow speed and fragile appearance quickly made it a target for soldiers on the ground but it flew so low that shooters risked firing on their own: indeed, one American soldier, two townsfolk and a pig were shot before orders were given not to shoot unless there was no danger to bystanders. Naturally, this extra degree of difficulty added a heightened degree of sportsmanship, especially when it was remembered that the appearance of the little aircraft presaged the arrival of a mighty shell from Anzio Annie. It made the whole contest seem a lot more sporting than just trying to knock a slow, defenceless aircraft out of the sky.

But the pilot appeared to get into the spirit of things, too. Sometimes, he flew almost at rooftop level, as usual, then, apparently just to make things a bit interesting, suddenly zoomed upwards (as much as he was capable of zooming at all) before half stalling back to his usual height. And after he'd done that, he could be seen laughing and waving at the soldiers who'd taken the opportunity to snap a shot or two away. It at least gave the soldiers something to do, and the children of the town loved it, absolutely loved it. As soon as they heard the putt-puttering of the aero engine, the children appeared from nowhere to watch the fun. The sound of the motor was often drowned out by the shrieks of the mothers, exhorting their charges to get inside, out of the way of the imminent explosion, but as is usual in these cases, the children became mysteriously deaf.

It was only a question of time, of course, before a lucky shot hit some vital part of the aircraft, or its pilot, but while it lasted, the kids, and the grown up kids with rifles, took full advantage. One thing was certain: when the aircraft was brought down, if the pilot survived, he would be chaired through Anzio as a hero.

The senior Allied officers took a pretty dim view of all this, publicly, at least. Indeed, Bullivant happened to be chatting to Dodd one morning when a gift from Anzio Annie landed uncomfortably near, sending the ghosts of ancient dust leaping from the walls of the little office Bullivant had commandeered.

He carefully relit the stub of a cigar and studied the cloud of blue grey smoke as it combined with the airborne dust. 'Goddam gun! Our fly boys must have flown over every inch of country for thirty miles around here: can't find a damned glimpse of the damned thing. They must have some extra special kind o' camouflage out there, eh? You gotta hand it to 'em, eh, Dodd? Damned thing has to be thirty yards long, so they tell me, and has to weigh, what, a hundred tons? How can you hide a thing that goddam big?'



He studied the cigar butt. ‘I’ll tell you what, Dodd, if we ever get you out of here, first thing you’re going to do is locate that goddam gun and radio back the co-ordinates. If I have my way, the whole area’ll be bombed flat one hour later.’

With a small flourish, as though to demonstrate, he ground his cigar into an overflowing ashtray.

One afternoon Green and Watson were swigging tea and playing their usual game with the kids. The game went like this: once or twice a week, Green and Watson had fallen into the habit, when the weather allowed it, of taking their mugs of tea and a couple of boxes to sit on out to a corner of the nearby piazza, just to watch the people passing. As though by magic, within a couple of minutes, the word had got around and a mob of maybe a dozen children appeared at the corner of an alley about twenty yards away from the two soldiers. The children began calling out, begging for sweets, and edging closer, while Watson translated what they were saying for Green. Mostly, Watson translated correctly, and Green stood and threw a handful of sweets, which, of course, initiated a stampede of kids to grab what they could. So far, so good, but from time to time, Watson introduced a little excitement by misinterpreting the calls. On these occasions, when the kids started shouting, Watson would say nothing, and they began to get more and more excited as they sidled closer, until Green lost patience and asked ‘Come on Bill, what’re they saying?’ And Watson would invent something like ‘Well, mate, they’re saying “Hey *Pazzo*, you’ve got a face like a horse’s arse!”’

At this, Green would leap to his feet and give chase, shouting terrible threats, at least as far as the corner. The kids would disappear, screaming, but would be back in a few minutes, to begin begging again.

Of course, the kids had understood the rules almost from the beginning, and had even given Green his nickname, *Pazzo*, which means the crazy one. In fact, the only one who didn’t seem

to realise what was going on was Green himself, but he enjoyed the game anyway, and always made sure he had a good pocketful of sweets, courtesy of Uncle Sam.

On this particular day, a little girl had been pushed forward by her mates, and, at a respectful range, whispered something to Green, who asked Watson what she'd said. Watson said he hadn't caught it and beckoned the girl closer. She was a pretty little thing, maybe eight years old, with those enormous liquid black eyes Italian children are famous for. She studied Green nervously for a moment and edged a little closer before whispering again. Green looked at Watson, who shrugged and beckoned again. She shook her head, but this time, found a louder voice. Green turned to Watson again, and Watson said 'She says, "Hey *Pazzo*, you stink of shit!"'

Green, immediately enraged, jumped to his feet and gave chase, but the little girl had already fled in a panic and the mob of kids behind her scattered in all directions too, so Green was left to bellow insults and threats until he charged to the far end of the square, by which time the kids had disappeared among the alleys.

## Chapter 5

Green came back to his place and sat with a satisfied grunt. ‘That gave the little bastards a bloody good scare, eh, Bill. I reckon they won’t be back for their sweets for a while.’

Charlie chose that moment to come puttering overhead, and the men watched it pass over the square. Settled in their corner, they were as safe as anywhere, so they ignored the threat of the imminent gift from Annie. Green nodded. ‘Good little aircraft, that stork.’

Watson was baffled. ‘What?’

‘Charlie’ explained Green. ‘It’s a Fiesler Storch, a stork. Have a look at it, you can see why they call it a stork, eh?’

Watson looked, and saw the great gangling undercarriage, the wide wings, and exclaimed ‘Yes of course! I’d not noticed before, but now you mention it ...’ and he let the sentence fade as he watched the little aircraft potter over the rooftops and out of sight.

‘A lot like our Lysander, eh?’

‘What?’

‘I’m saying, the Storch is much like our Lysander.’

‘Sorry, chum, I’m not really sure what you’re on about.’

‘Oh, right. Sorry, I’m a bit of an aircraft enthusiast, and I’m inclined to forget other people aren’t that keen. Funny enough, it was Lindbergh’s flight that got me interested in the first place. Of course, I was just a little kid then, what, five or six, but my dad was very keen, and I suppose it rubbed off on me. Speaking of Charlie’ continued Green, ‘do you happen to know the story of Charles Lindbergh?’

‘What?! His flight across the Atlantic? Of course! Everybody knows that.’

‘Yes, but the rest of the story, I mean?’

Watson had to think about that for a second. ‘Yes, there *was* something else, wasn’t there?’ He rubbed the back of his

head in unconscious mimicry of the gesture Kelly sometimes used to denote serious thought.

‘Yes, I know,’ he went on, but uncertainly, ‘something about his son was kidnapped, was it?’

‘Well, you’re right as far as it goes but there’s a lot more to the story than that. I’ll tell you if you like, unless you’ve got something more pressing ...?’

Watson grinned. ‘No, not really chum. Unless you call sitting here waiting for the kids to come back more pressing?’

Green cackled. ‘I reckon they won’t be back for a while. I gave ‘em a bloody good scare this time, eh?’

“Anyway, like I said, my dad and I’ve taken a bit of an interest in Lindbergh’s career. Of course, everybody knows about his flight across the Atlantic in 1927, even though he wasn’t the first to do it. The first, as you would know, were two Englishmen, Captain Alcock as pilot and Lieutenant Brown as navigator. Typical gung ho amateur English job. Brown had never navigated from the air before – he’d learnt the theory as a prisoner of war, you know. Anyway, this was in 1919, eight years before Lindbergh’s flight. But the fact that he did it alone seems to be the main reason for the public interest, don’t you think? And he went from New York to Paris – a lot further than Alcock and Brown’s flight from Newfoundland to Ireland - it took over thirty three hours, so it was pretty amazing, eh? He immediately became the most famous, the most photographed man in the world. But he soon realised he hated all the publicity, although he also made a fortune: apart from the prize money, his book was a best seller, and he picked up a lot of consultancy work and so on.

‘And then there was the kidnapping of his son, which only made him more famous, and when the son was found dead, well, the press went crazy.

‘Of course, the fact that he tried to avoid the press only made them more fanatical about getting pictures at every opportunity, and that, in a way, changed the course of his life.

You see, he was surveying a possible route for an airline, when one evening, he set down in the desert in Utah, I think it was, just to avoid landing at the local town where he was expected: he knew he'd be hounded by the press, see? And as he settled down for the night under the stars, he had a vision of his future and realised he didn't like what he saw. He decided then and there to get away from what he was doing and devote himself to science. He'd always thought of himself as a scientist, you know, even though he was untrained, and thought of his Atlantic flight as a scientific experiment.

'Now, as it happened, his sister-in-law had had an illness that left her with a very weak heart, and Lindbergh designed an artificial heart for her. He took the idea to a chap called Carrel, who was a brilliant surgeon, who'd won a Nobel Prize for something medical. Carrel pointed out the problems that made the idea impossible, but the two men immediately hit it off and Carrel showed Lindbergh the experiments he was working on. Carrel explained his theory that the human body was like a machine, and he thought that that damaged or worn out parts might be able to be removed from the body, then repaired or replaced. If he could do that, maybe he could prolong life indefinitely. Now, you might think a clever man like Lindbergh would simply laugh and walk away, but Carrel's thinking touched a nerve. He was excited by Carrel's work, but astonished by the crudeness of the machinery Carrel showed him. He'd been working on a mechanism to pump nutrient through a chamber containing a fragment of an animal's organ, so as to keep it alive, but his pump always let him down, or allowed the specimen to become contaminated.'

Watson interrupted. 'Hang on, hang on. If Lindbergh was so secretive, how d'you know all this?'

'All right, fair question. As I said, my dad and I were big fans of Lindbergh and we joined the Lone Eagle Club – that's what they called Lindbergh in America, you know – and we got a regular newsletter from them, but mainly, we got our information

from a business contact of my dad's in New York. Dad works for a big shipping agent, so he has contacts all over the place, and he found this chap in New York who was a Lone Eagle man too, so he passed on all the news. Lucky, eh?

Watson nodded both to agree and to allow Green to continue.

'So, back to the equipment. Lindbergh set to and eventually they constructed a pump that worked and kept the specimen alive. The next challenge was to make the whole thing bigger, so that an entire organ could be maintained. And while all this was going on, the two men talked, or rather, it was mostly Carrel that did the talking. He had very strong views about all sorts of things: for example, that democracy was a grave danger to mankind. Why, he asked, should the weak and the simple minded have a vote of the same value as the strong and the clever? Lindbergh agreed completely, and some people might say he had a good point, eh?

'So, Carrel's idea was that when they succeeded in extending human life, it wouldn't be available to all, but only to a very small and select group, who would be the guardians of the world. Lindbergh agreed with that too, especially when Carrel hinted that he'd be one of the chosen ones.

'Carrel also considered that western civilisation was in danger of being overwhelmed by the black, brown and yellow races, who he considered inferior. And all the while, while they chatted over their experiments, Lindbergh absorbed Carrel's thinking.

'They were completely immersed in their work until, in 1938, Lindbergh received an extraordinary invitation –would he care to visit Germany to inspect their new air force? Of course he would! So off he went, with his wife, as the guests of the Nazis: Goering personally looked after them on a tour of Luftwaffe facilities. It was another life changing experience for Lindbergh: he was astonished at the enormous size of the air force, but even more amazed at the advanced designs and brilliant engineering

he saw. And, away from the airfields, Lindbergh saw for himself how well organised everything was even in civilian life, how clean, how well designed, how well managed was every aspect of life in Germany in 1938.

‘Lindbergh came away with deep respect for the Germans and a belief that in a war, they would be utterly unbeatable. But he also thought, having listened to Carrel’s philosophies for years, that Germany formed the frontier of western civilisation, and should be left alone to defend western Europe from the second rate hordes from the east, and especially the Russians. Surely, Lindbergh argued, it would be more sensible to allow the Germans to hold back the inferior races, even if they had to conquer western Europe to do it. Lindbergh returned to America and for the first time in years, began to accept invitations to speak all over the USA so as to let the people know his views.

‘As you can imagine, his new philosophy met with plenty of opposition, though it seemed that half the USA agreed with him. At every meeting, tempers on both sides of the argument got out of hand. And then, of course, Hitler invaded Poland, and, well, we know the rest, don’t we?

‘Lindbergh was still against America’s entry into the war, but could see what was going on in Europe. Then in ‘41, when the Japs attacked Pearl Harbour, that pushed Lindbergh into action: he went straight off to join the air force, but they turned him down - they said they didn’t want a man with his opinions leading men. So he went to all the American aircraft manufacturers, but the government had got there before him. They all turned him down. All except one: Ford. They had major problems with their B-24 bomber – it was a terrible aircraft to fly, and worse to build: they even had to employ a squad of midgets recruited from the circus to work inside the wings! So Ford put Lindbergh in charge of sorting it out.

‘After that, he got involved in research into high altitude flying, you know, low air pressure, and all that, and the last I

heard, that was more than a year ago now, of course, he was back in favour and doing testing of high altitude aircraft. Pretty impressive history, eh?’

Watson agreed and said ‘So, that’s the end of the story?’

Green nodded. ‘Well, the story so far.’

‘Well, that’s good timing, because the kids are starting to come back. I hope you’ve got plenty of sweeties.’

Out of the blue, literally, the skies had been clear for a few days, and on the odd occasions when the wind dropped, the days were quite mild. The locals weren’t getting excited though, gloomily predicting a return to deep winter conditions any day.

As though to celebrate the mini-spring, there was a commotion not far from the end of “Pall Mall” as the men had christened their laneway one afternoon. That wasn’t particularly uncommon – as might be expected when thousands of fit young men of several nationalities were penned together and shot at from time to time, there were regular scuffles that sometimes escalated, for no known reason, into major brawls involving dozens, and sometimes hundreds. Then there were the games, soccer, American football, and so on, that almost as a matter of course degenerated into violent international clashes, so the members of Dodd’s Army who were there took little notice. The noise seemed to be getting closer, but didn’t carry the usual harsh resonance of fisticuffs – it was louder, but sounded less threatening, more lighthearted. Green finished his mug of coffee and stood, preparing to go out to find out what was going on, but before he could move, Tullett clambered in, past the parked trucks with the amazing announcement ‘It’s a fuckin’ circus! Would you fuckin’ believe it! A fuckin’ *circus*!’

Tullett was hopping about like a child, looking as though he was only barely restraining himself from clapping. ‘Would yer fuckin’ credit it? A fuckin’ circus! I never even seen a proper fuckin’ circus before, an’ now there’s one jus’ come wanderin’ up the fuckin’ road! ‘Kin’ ‘ell!’



Dodd, quite reasonably, thought there must be some mistake. ‘Calm down, Stan, there’s a good chap. It must be some sort of special equipment the Americans have put together, surely? But I can’t believe it’s a circus, can you, Gilbert?’

He wafted his hands about to indicate he was talking to everybody. ‘How would it have got here? We’re surrounded by the German lines, then ours, remember.’

But Dodd’s thinking was interrupted by the arrival of Brownlow and Kelly, with Angelo and Dino hot on their tails. Both groups confirmed that it was, indeed, the arrival of a circus.

They all went out together then, barring Watson and Burgess, who were already out and about somewhere, to find the whole of the little town in uproar.

There was a busy triangular *piazza* where the *Viale Severi*, the main road from the south, met the *Via del Faro*, which led up from the harbour. The caravan of gaily painted circus vehicles had been forced to a halt by the crush of soldiers anxious to get a look and soon, the street and *piazza* was at a standstill: the circus vehicles had somehow become intermingled with yet another army convoy bringing yet another load up from the little harbour.

Everybody, it seemed, had an opinion as to what was to be done, and was keen to put their opinion forward, but to be honest, almost all the soldiers and townspeople were quite happy for the pantomime to continue for as long as possible – they saw anything to break the monotony of life in Anzio as a good thing, and watching the military police getting more and more enraged as they tried to get the road clear was classy entertainment, almost as good as visiting the circus for real.

Eventually, an Italian speaking US army military police captain managed to push his way to the leading vehicle, assuming that the boss of the circus would be there, and, climbing onto the step of the truck, started yelling through the open window at the driver, an elderly but handsome man with a great mane of silver hair and strong features, surmounted by a

roman nose of epic proportions. The old man sat looking straight ahead, completely ignoring the intrusion, looking for all the world like an ancient roman statue. The captain's Italian meant little to the circus master, who spoke almost exclusively a Sicilian *dialetto* and had few words of Italian. In any event, he would have ignored the captain. Was he not the *padrone del circo*, the master of the circus? So not should this young man treat him with a lot more respect?

By now, things were now completely out of hand: the circus vehicles, mixed with the army trucks, were blocking the narrow road almost completely and whatever space was left was crammed with spectators. The noise was getting worse, not helped by yelping from the cage containing a mixed pack of performing dogs, though the elderly and fleabitten lion, in his cage, raised one eyebrow for a quick glance round before returning to his dream of the olden days in the African veldt. The elephant, minus one and three quarter tusks, rocked quietly from side to side and wished he could reach his old mate, the lion. They comforted each other, these two old hands: when their cages were close enough, the elephant would poke his trunk through the bars and nudge the lion, who would nibble the end of it contentedly.

The old man jutted his chin and stared ahead. However, the young woman sitting next to him, who so much resembled him she had to be his daughter, or more likely his granddaughter, began speaking to him, trying to settle him. The ancient chin went out a little more, but after a while, as the young woman continued to talk, his face began to soften. Still staring ahead, he lifted both hands from the steering wheel and waved them, like an archbishop offering a blessing. The gesture was so clear, he had no need to speak. How *could* they move?

The young woman turned her attention to the captain. At least she could make herself understood in Italian, and she posed a reasonable question.

‘What would you have us do, soldier? All we want is to get to the football park but you can see the road ahead is blocked. You make a path for us, we will go.’ She jutted her chin, just like her father. ‘And you must immediately stop all this commotion: it is upsetting for the animals.’

That set the captain back a bit. ‘The football park? Why must you go there?’

‘It is where we set up our tents, of course.’ she replied in a tone that suggested that the captain must be half witted. ‘As we do every year.’

The soldier knew the area the young woman referred to, and winced. He pictured it for a second – it was crammed with vehicles of every kind, which were in turn surrounded by enormous mounds of equipment and supplies. There was hardly a blade of grass unburdened with something military.

‘Ma’am, you won’t be doing that this year. It’s completely full already. But I’ll find somewhere for you to stop overnight, OK? Then I’ll organise for the road to be cleared, so you can get there. But ma’am, I don’t think we’ll be able to find a place where you can set up your show: I just don’t think there’s a vacant space big enough in the whole of Anzio. So maybe you’ll have to move on in the morning. In the meantime, ma’am, you need to get the gentleman to move your vehicles. You’re causing a heck of a logjam. It’ll take hours to sort it out as it is, so please, ma’am, as soon as I clear a path for you, ask him to hurry.’

The captain obviously lacked imagination: he didn’t stop to wonder exactly how the circus would move out of Anzio if an entire army wasn’t able to do so, any more than it had occurred to him to consider how this brightly coloured and noisy caravan of vehicles had managed to get into Anzio in the first place. But he was aware of the growing buildup of military traffic coming up from the harbour. He expected someone senior to arrive any second, breathing fire and demanding that the roadway be cleared.

The young woman told her grandfather what the officer had said. His expression hardened again, and he continued to stare ahead and say nothing. She spoke to him again, coaxingly, lovingly, and after a while, he muttered something, while still looking straight ahead.

It was the woman's turn to grimace as she turned back to the military policeman. 'This is not satisfactory to my father. We need the football park to be cleared for our use. And he wishes to speak to the *Colonello*. He says he will speak only to the *Colonello*. It is no disrespect to you, soldier. My father is from Sicily – he does not trust anybody who is not Sicilian, not even the Italians. So, if you wish co-operation, you must bring the *Colonello*.'

A few minutes ago, the soldier had been dreading the arrival of a senior officer, but now he was relieved. It was clear that this situation was beyond him, so passing it up the line would be a good thing.

'Sure, ma'am, sure. Just wait there a minute,' as though there was any possibility of movement, 'I'll organise a colonel for you.'

He stepped down onto the roadway and instructed the nearest soldiers 'OK, you guys, we need a colonel. Someone get a colonel up here right now.'

Within a minute or two, a surge in the crowd indicated the arrival of a US army colonel, who had already been on his way, since it was his convoy from the harbour that had been held up. The captain explained the position to him and was rewarded with a withering stare that said as clearly as any words that the captain was hopelessly incompetent for allowing himself to be taken in by these yokels. He climbed up and immediately started shouting at the old man, who, after a single fleeting glance in his direction, resumed his jut chinned pose. After a minute of this, the young woman took pity on the soldier and spoke in halting English 'There is no point in you shouting at my grandfather – he speaks

no English. You must speak to me, and do not shout. I can hear you well enough. Do you understand?’

Suddenly sheepish, the colonel admitted that he did.

‘Very well. Now wait.’ And she began speaking to the old man once more, softly and respectfully. The aged eyes swivelled for a more detailed study of the colonel, then he muttered something to the woman.

‘He says you are not the *Colonello*’ she said flatly.

The colonel blinked. ‘Miss, I *am* a colonel, truly. Look,’ he added, fingering the emblem on his collar, as though the fact of a brass eagle would be sufficient evidence of colonelcy for a circus girl from rural Italy. ‘See? I’m Colonel Waters. *Full* colonel’ he added, in case she’d thought he was only a lieutenant colonel.

The old man, still looking straight ahead, mumbled again.

‘He says you are American. He wants the *English* Colonello.’ That really threw the officer, who suddenly realised she was referring to a specific colonel, not just any colonel.

‘Miss, there has to be dozens of English colonels all over Italy. I can’t find a particular one.’

He threw up his hands in exasperation and exhortation, almost falling backwards off his perch on the step of the truck.

The daughter translated this for her grandfather, who gave his longest response yet and she explained to the American. ‘He wants the one who was at the bridge at Casagrigio. The one who blew up the old castle. The one who was at Naples.’

That rang a bell with the officer: he’d heard about some gang of English cowboys who’d been prancing about behind the lines, and was now hanging about in Anzio, waiting to get up to a whole new lot of foolishness. He was just beginning to feel he was getting a grasp of the situation when she added, ‘the one who is a lieutenant.’

That might have thrown a lesser man, but Colonel Waters was sharp: yes, he’d heard about the limey lieutenant who posed as a colonel. ‘Goddam limeys!’ he thought. ‘What sort of rubbish

army allowed that? No wonder the yanks had to come and sort the war out for them. *Again.*

As all sensible officers do, when things are getting out of hand, the colonel turned to his sergeant. 'You getting all this, Donovan?'

'Sure, Colonel, sure. You want me to bring this guy?'

Waters wasn't at all surprised that the sergeant sounded as though he knew exactly who the lieutenant was, and where to find him. In his experience, sergeants generally knew everything.

'Yep. Quick as you can, OK? We need to get this road clear right now.'

While he waited, Waters gave some thought to where he might send the circus vehicles, should they ever deign to move, and came up with the grounds of a large house not far away, that was being kept apart for General Clark, should he come this way. Waters figured that by tomorrow, the circus would have gone and he was pretty safe in betting Clark wouldn't be showing up any time soon. Waters then set a posse of military police to clearing the road in front of the truck.

Soon, the sergeant returned, pushing a way through the throng, with Dodd right behind. Having had the situation explained to him, Dodd had brought Angelo along, thinking that the Italian might be able to assist with interpreting what the old man said. After a quick word with Colonel Waters, Dodd clambered up onto the step of the truck.

Dodd nodded to the woman but spoke to the old man in a friendly but respectful tone.

'Good afternoon, Sir. My name is Dodd – I am the one they call the *Colonello*, although that is merely my *nome di battaglia*. Perhaps not even that, more of a joke, really. I wonder if it would be convenient for us to have a chat?'

The woman translated and immediately, the old chap began to visibly relax, having been treated with due deference.

He turned to study Dodd, then spoke, the woman translating back into Italian.

‘My grandfather says that he was expecting a lieutenant, but you are a major.’

Dodd shrugged and jiggled his head slightly. It said as clearly as words could that yes, he had been a lieutenant, but was now a major: it was of no consequence. The old man nodded understanding and spoke. The woman translated: ‘My grandfather will talk about things, you and he, as is the way of civilised people. If you will go to the rear of our vehicle, my grandfather will expect.’

‘Excellent. And my colleague here, Angelo, who is from Casagrigio, he is invited?’

The old one’s gaze turned to Angelo, who caught his interested look and returned it.

The shock of white hair moved as he nodded. And with that, the woman pulled back a curtain behind her and began to assist the old man to move into the rear of the vehicle. Dodd climbed down and moved to the back of the truck, Angelo in tow. They knocked at the door and waited.

After a minute, the woman opened the door and in a miniature pantomime, expressed surprise and pleasure at seeing her apparently unexpected guests as she waved them in.

Inside, the caravan was ornately and beautifully fitted out in polished timber: Dodd was immediately put in mind of an exquisite dolls house he’d seen on display at the Victoria and Albert museum. There was scarcely room for all three of them to move among all the lovingly polished furniture and fittings, towards the old man, who was already seated at a small table. He waved a languid hand at the chairs opposite him and as Dodd sat, he caught the aroma of tobacco and garlic amid the scent of beeswax and lavender.

‘And now, we will talk’ said the woman. There then began a conversation, ostensibly between Dodd and the *padrone del circo*, assisted, if that is the right word, by the granddaughter

and Angelo in translating and, quite possibly, adding their own views. It would be tedious for the author, and boring for the reader, for the exact details of who said what, and how that was translated. Suffice to say, setting aside the head smacking, table thumping, expressions of incredulity and so on which form an indivisible part of ordinary Italian conversation, the gist of the conversation went as follows.

Dodd opened: 'Thank you for your invitation, Padrone.'

The old man shrugged. 'It is nothing – a gesture only.'

'Nevertheless.'

'But I must know who I am speaking with, you understand. Who have I invited into my home?'

'I understand completely. What can I say to satisfy you?'

The old man nodded. 'I see that you understand my position. There are many bad people about these days. People who should not be trusted.'

'Yes.'

'You were at Casagrigio?'

'It is true: I made some fine friends there. Indeed, they saved me from the Germans. How did you know I was there?'

The old man ignored the question and said 'Then you will know the priest.'

'Yes. Father Verdi treated me very well. We ate together on many occasions.'

The old man shrugged again. 'Hmmm. It would be easy enough for a spy find out his name.'

'That is true, but why would I bother to do that unless I knew you would be coming to Anzio, and would be asking for me?'

The padrone considered that, but moved on. 'Somebody hid you?'

'That is correct. I will not mention who, you understand, until, well, until we are *both* satisfied that the other can be trusted.'

The old man let that pass.



‘Were any of your party injured?’

‘Yes – a soldier had his foot badly damaged by a land mine.’

‘What happened to him?’

‘He received excellent treatment, and is fully recovered. Would you like, perhaps, to meet him – examine his scar?’

‘Who treated him?’

It was Dodd’s turn to jut his chin and stay silent. Dodd was beginning to thoroughly enjoy himself; it was as though all his early experience of speaking Italian to everyday Italians was coming back to him, and though this man was Sicilian, he knew he was on familiar ground.

The old man glared at Dodd, who returned his gaze, half expecting him to take exception to this refusal, but, after a long silence, he broke into a wide grin and said ‘You are right to say nothing until we know each other better. Now, we will drink!’

The granddaughter produced a flagon of the purple/black wine favoured by the peasantry, and filled glasses for all four of them. The old man watched with interest as Dodd and Angelo both took a gulp: he’d been expecting them to cough and splutter at the roughness, but they’d both been long accustomed to the throat-clenchingly coarse local wine. The padrone nodded with satisfaction, and tossed his drink back in one, gesturing for a refill.

‘Drink, my new friend, drink! We have many things to discuss.’

‘Yes, Padrone, gladly. But first, I am concerned about your animals. Will you allow the soldiers to guide your vehicles to a place where your people can look after them?’

‘Of course.’ He sent the woman to get his second in command, and, when he arrived, gave instructions. Within a few minutes, the sound of shouted instructions and roaring engines permeated the caravan walls, indicating that the circus convoy, minus the *padrone*’s vehicle, was on the move, and the army’s

business of shifting equipment had restarted, leaving the single circus truck alone, an island in a sea of movement.

Inside, the glasses had been refilled, and the conversation began again, this time as between two respected men, rather than warily. After a time, the old man asked Dodd 'How is it that you are called *Colonello*, though you were only a lieutenant? Is it not a bad thing in your army to pretend to be senior?'

'Do you know of the railway bridge near Casagrigio that we saved from being blown up by the Germans?'

'Yes.'

'Well, after we'd captured it, a British armoured car approached. My sergeant went to meet it and he didn't like the look of the officer in charge of the patrol. He seemed not to respect what we'd done, you understand.'

The balloon of silver hair nodded. The old man knew about respect.

Dodd continued, 'Well, my sergeant saw that the officer was a captain, and might start throwing his weight around and making a nuisance of himself, so my sergeant told him that I was a colonel. So when I went out to join them, the captain thought I was senior to him, and didn't make a fuss.'

'But surely, *Colonello*, he could see you were a lieutenant?'

'Ah, *Padrone*, that is where my sergeant was clever. You see, I was dressed in the uniform of a German major at the time.'

There was what is known as a breakdown in communication at that point. The *padrone* expressed confusion, and the story had to be gone through again, and then again, while he digested the unlikeliness of it - a British lieutenant posing as a German major while a sergeant lied to a captain that the major was in fact a British colonel.

Dodd saw the light of understanding come on in the ancient eyes, did his open handed wave gesture, and nodded. 'It is true, *Padrone*.'

The old man barked a laugh, smacked the table and gestured for more wine. He leant forward, conspiratorially. ‘And it was you who destroyed the old castle and blocked the road, eh? Tell me about that.’

Dodd retold that story, telling first of the drama of the race to get round the headland, at night, intermingled with a German convoy. He could see the old chap was entranced by the adventure, and described in detail the Germans reactions, the speed of their repairs to the road and the drama as they brought in flamethrowers, heavy machine guns, searchlights and bulldozers to clear the forest alongside the road.

At last, the story was finished, and the old man sat back, thrilled. Dodd could see he was about to ask about Naples, and got in first.

‘And now, Padrone, it is your turn. Firstly, I noticed that there are no horse drawn vehicles in your convoy. Do you not find it hard to get petrol?’

‘These days, it is impossible to find enough forage for horses. Do you know how much they eat? We can barely get enough for the performing animals.’ The circus boss put one finger to the side of his nose. ‘But there is always petrol, if you know where to look.’

‘I see. Now, you must tell me how it is that your circus arrived in Anzio, which is completely surrounded by very strong German lines, which face equally strong Allied lines. I can’t think your vehicles suddenly fell from the sky. Or perhaps you simply drove right through the fighting?’

‘But, *Colonello*, that is exactly what we did – what we always do when we come upon the stupid soldiers playing out their stupid war, no matter what colour their uniform! We have done it many times as we travel round Italy, and, as you see, here we are!’

It was Dodd’s turn to be amazed.

‘With respect, *Padrone*, I find it hard to believe.’

‘Yet as you see, we are here,’ the old man repeated. ‘How else would we be able to move about? How else would we make our living?’

His tone was matter-of-fact, as though the matter was beyond dispute. But Dodd still struggled. ‘You mean to tell me that your entire convoy just went driving down the road, through the middle of the war?’

‘Pahe! It’s your war, not mine! I know nothing of your war, and care less! I wish you would all go away, and leave us poor people to get on with our lives in peace.’

Hmmm, thought Dodd, he knows enough about the war to recognise the difference between a British major and a lieutenant, but in the absence of a better explanation, Dodd had to accept that the circus had indeed driven through the lines.

‘And Padrone, will you repeat this same magic tomorrow, on the way out of Anzio?’

‘Of course! What else would we do?’ The great mane of hair jiggled a question mark. ‘It seems there is nothing for us here, so tomorrow, we must go on.’

‘And you expect the Germans to let you through?’

‘Of course! What else would *they* do? Fire on a defenceless circus? All soldiers are stupid, naturally,’ a shrug to show he meant no harm by saying that, it was just an indisputable fact of life. ‘But why would the Germans shoot at us? Would you?’

Dodd thought about that for a minute and realised the *padrone* had a point: it would be public relations suicide, almost like firing on a Red Cross convoy. On the other hand, as far as Dodd could see, the circus master was relying on a lot of tired and jumpy soldiers, who had been accustomed to fire at anything that moved along the road, to recognise the reality of the situation, preposterous as it was, and to hold their fire. It really didn’t seem likely to Dodd, but here was the living proof. Not only had the circus passed through the double cordon round

Anzio, but it must also have come up through the fiercely contested pass near Cassino.

A sudden thought struck him. 'Er, *Padrone*, what do you think would happen if my two trucks were to come with you?'

It was the old man's turn to ponder. 'These trucks of yours, they would be army vehicles? So would they not be obvious even to the stupid soldiers?'

'Actually, no. One of them belongs to Angelo here, and the other, well, it looks much the same as his.'

What a blessing, thought Dodd, that they'd swapped the British three tonner for the heavily disguised Chevrolet.

Another long pause before the old man spoke again. 'Well, I suppose it is a road for anybody to use. If you were to be on the road at the same time as us, I could not stop you, could I?'

Dodd sat back. Maybe, just maybe, this was the way out of Anzio. '*Padrone*, I must ask my people if they wish to make the attempt.'

The Sicilian nodded understanding. Another thought occurred to Dodd. 'And I must obtain permission from my superiors. They might not approve of us just wandering off. That sort of thing is frowned on in the military, you understand.'

This time, the reaction was different. 'Pahe!' He smacked the little table with the flat of his hand. 'Soldiers! Well, if you have to, you have to. We will be leaving at first light. I will alert my comrades. If you are to come with us, we will allow you to join us, and if not, well, I wish you well anyway, *Colonello*.'

Dodd proposed that they simply wait until the circus vehicles were all past, then join on at the end, but the *padrone* refused that idea, saying it would be too obvious. The Germans were very likely to wait while the circus vehicles passed, then stop the two odd ones out. No, the old man said, much less chance of being found out if they were mixed in. Dodd protested that in that case, if they were found, the circus people would be implicated, but the *padrone* would have none of it: it was his way or nothing. He stood then, a sign that the meeting was over.

## Chapter 6

Back in the alley among his team, Dodd had trouble at first, getting the men to accept that he was seriously suggesting they simply drive through both the allied and the German lines, but he pointed out that the circus had done the trick several times with not even a sentry demanding papers (which was probably just as well, because they had none – Sicilians didn't really believe in papers.)

Some were immediately for having a go, some needed some convincing, but all surreptitiously watched Brownlow, knowing that if he was adamantly against it, that would be the end of it. But Brownlow was saying nothing just yet, but grimaced and gently turned his head from side to side, like a man with a neck injury testing the progress of recovery.

As the men talked it over, fate stepped in. A donation from Anzio Annie landed quite close, sending clouds of antique dust up, and a cascade of aged pebbles down.

Brownlow stood. 'T'be quite honest, Skipper, I reckon it's a barmy plan, just chugging along, clean through the jerry lines. Barmy. But on the other hand, I'm just about sick o' sitting about here waiting to be blown up. What with hanging about in Naples for best part o' three months, and another two here, I'm about ready to try anything. So, barmy or not, I say let's give it a try. Anybody disagree, you'd better say now.'

Everybody looked at everybody else, while Dodd quietly translated for Angelo and Dino. After a minute, Kelly smiled a sheepish smile and said 'Count me in, Boss' at which point all the soldiers were suddenly on their feet, shaking hands and telling each other they'd been just about to put their hand up when Ted spoke. Dodd patted the air to quieten them down, and a hush fell as it occurred to the men that Angelo and Dino's agreement was vital. It was important they came – without Angelo's truck, they'd have a struggle to carry themselves and all their kit in the Chevrolet.

The two Italians moved away and had what passes for reasoned discussion in Italy, that is, gesticulating, surly looks, shoving and the rest of the customary pantomime. The soldiers looked to Dodd and Watson for a clue as to what was going on, but Dodd whispered that they were talking in *dialetto*, and even Dodd couldn't understand more than an odd word. But luckily, before it got to the hat kicking stage, the two Italians grinned, shook hands, and then started shaking hands with the others. They didn't need to say anything – they were obviously game to go. It turned out later that their argument had only been about who had decided to join the adventure first.

'Lovely! Excellent, excellent' said Dodd. 'I'm delighted. Now, all I have to do is get Colonel Bullivant to agree. I really think we should ask, don't you? I imagine he might have a job or two for us once we're out and about.'

The interview with Colonel Bullivant didn't really go as well as Dodd had hoped. In fact, Bullivant was dead against it, saying he couldn't possibly sanction such a stupid and reckless action. He made it abundantly clear that Dodd had strict orders not, repeat not, to even move his vehicles out of their little alley. Dodd tried to bargain with him, suggesting that they join the circus column but withdraw if things looked too dangerous, but Bullivant held up a hand to stop him. No discussion, no options, no nothing. No. Got me, Dodd? No!

Strange, then, that early the next morning, before first light, Brownlow was wakened by a quiet scuffling noise beside the vehicles, and when he got up to investigate, he found a brand new two way radio of the type Burgess had been trained on, a pack of spare batteries, and a haversack full of goodies, including chocolate and cigarettes. The haversack also contained a satchel marked 'Personal and Confidential – Major Dodd.' and an envelope addressed to Burgess.

Brownlow quietly woke the others and pointed out their gifts, which said, more clearly than words 'OK, I know I said

you guys weren't to try your stupid idea, but that was just to cover my arse. Good luck!

Dodd moved to one side and opened his satchel. It contained a sheet of paper and several envelopes. He studied the paper carefully, under the interested gaze of the men, then said 'Chaps, Colonel Bullivant has a number of jobs for us. He's instructed me not to mention anything but the first job for the moment – need to know, and all that silly business – but the first objective, as you can well imagine, is to find that damned gun and radio back the map co-ordinates, so the air force can have a crack at it. So, one last time, are we all in?'

He received a muted roar in reply and did his single clap. 'Well, all right, let's get on with it. Everything ready to go, Sar' Major?'

'O'course, Boss. Has been for weeks.'

'Lovely. Excellent. Let's get going, then. But Burgess, I see you had the honour of an envelope, too. Can you tell us what it says, or is that a secret, too?'

'No, Skipper, it don't say anything about secret. It just gives me radio frequencies and call schedule, an' that. See, if we've anythin' to report, I'm to make contact at eighteen hundred – they'll be listenin' then, an' I'm to listen out at eighteen thirty to get any instructions. Simple: even Gilbert (who was backup radio operator) could prob'ly manage that.'

As the darkness faded, the two trucks stood at the appointed place, awaiting the passage of the circus. It wasn't long before they heard the sound of the convoy approaching and watched as the leading vehicle, piloted by the padrone, ground past. He nodded solemnly to Dodd, and the woman, in a strangely girlish gesture, gave a shy wave. Brownlow waited as the first three vehicles passed, then the next hung back, obviously waiting for one of Dodd's trucks to move in. Brownlow, wearing Dino's black suit jacket and disreputable hat, obliged with a quick wave of thanks, and after a couple more circus vehicles had passed,



there was again a gap and the driver gestured to Angelo to move in.

‘Bit like when we came round the mountain, eh, Boss?’ Brownlow remarked.

It was different for the men huddled in the back of Brownlow’s truck, though. In the mountain escapade, they were out and about, playing their own roles in getting the vehicles round the arm of the mountain. Here, in the gloom among the gear, with the canvas covers tightly laced, they had nothing to do but try to keep calm while they waited to start what just now seemed nothing more than a ridiculous way of giving yourself up. And the sudden revving of the engine and lurch forward caused several hearts to race. If one of them had panicked just then and tried to get out, others might well have followed.

The convoy sped up for a few minutes, but soon struck the poorer road surface at the edge of the town and had to slow again. But they’d have had to go slow anyway. It was important not to race at either the Allied or the German lines: soldiers on the front line don’t take kindly to a streamer of trucks speeding at them – they’re liable to shoot first and ask questions later. No, what was needed was a steady pace, no more than about eight miles an hour, which would allow the troops on both sides plenty of time to study the scarcely believable sight of a stream of gaily painted vehicles just chugging through their lines, and have time to relax.

Colonel Bullivant had sent a warning ahead that the circus was coming through, without, of course, mentioning the extraneous vehicles, so the Allied soldiers were prepared for their passage and even managed a small cheer amid a barrage of expletives and cigarettes, all of which the circus people completely ignored but Dodd, in his civilian suit, and Brownlow, in his borrowed civilian jacket and hat, and trying to keep in

character as circus people, found it hard not to at least wave as they passed. Angelo and Dino, in their vehicle, also stared ahead.

As soon as they were through, Dodd turned and yelled the news to the men in the closed up back of the truck.

Tension mounted then, as they passed into the contested territory between the lines. Suddenly, the circus vehicle in front of Dodd lurched to a stop and for a second, Dodd's heart seemed to follow suit. Shouting could be heard from up ahead, though Dodd couldn't make out the words. He couldn't see what was going on either, his vision blocked by the gaudily painted truck in front of him, but imagined a barricade of German soldiers, weapons trained on the *padrone's* cabin, while an officer demanded papers preparatory to searching the entire convoy.

In the darkness in the back, the tension was palpable: all the men knew was that they were stopped, but they could hear nothing except the rumble of the engine, so they were left alone with their imaginations, occasionally catching each other's eye and grimacing.

Afterwards, Burgess couldn't explain why he did it: it was the tension, most probably, but he suddenly sniffed deeply, pulled a dreadful face and whispered to Green, "Ere, was that you, Gil, or was it that fuckin' ol' elephant?"

That set Green off. It started with a suppressed snigger, and he had to whisper an explanation as to why he was laughing to Watson, who joined in, and so on, and soon they were all at it, doing exaggerated sniffs and pulling disgusted faces, all the while trying to keep quiet, and shushing each other, which only made it worse.

Dodd opened his window and was elated to hear it was the Sicilian who was doing the yelling. After a tense few moments, he heard shouted commands in German and translated for a relieved Brownlow that the roadway was being cleared.

The engines of the vehicles ahead roared as the crocodile began to move. Brownlow, stony faced but secretly delighted, threw his truck into gear and followed, uncomfortably aware of

the curious stares of the German soldiers and that, but for the American army, he'd have been driving a British army right hand drive three tonner and not his ancient looking Chevrolet. But of course, if they'd still had the Bedford, they couldn't even have attempted this escapade.

Then suddenly, they were through the first German cordon, and the expressions on the German troop's faces showed no animosity, only surprised but amiable interest. Some of them even waved and cheered, exactly as the Americans had. As the seconds passed, the tension washed away, and they knew they'd done it: they'd simply driven through the lines of two mighty armies.

The convoy continued its steady pace until Anzio had been left well behind and they were back in rural Italy. After a while, the leading vehicle drew to a halt and tension in the Chevrolet rose again, but in a moment, the smiling face of the *padrone* appeared at Dodd's window. Dodd clambered down and saw that they'd stopped alongside a junction in the road. The gesture from the old man was obvious: it was time to part company. Dodd was about to shake his hand but found himself engulfed in a mighty hug. No words were necessary.

As the Sicilian moved back to his cab, Dodd undid the canvas at the back to tell the men they could at last relax. He was more than a little surprised to be greeted with gales of merriment from the men, who were rolling around, helpless with laughter.

As the vehicles started moving once more, Brownlow turned onto the side track, and Angelo followed.

When Dodd was sure they were well off what passed for the main road and not being followed, he suggested to Brownlow that they'd more than earned a stop somewhere out of sight for a brew up. As soon as the vehicles had pulled up, the men spilled out, dancing and prancing, cackling with relieved laughter and each pointing out how the others had all been shitting

themselves. Dodd let them carry on for a few minutes while Kelly was doing his usual performance with the stove, then called for attention.

‘Now chaps, I imagine you wouldn’t mind knowing what we’re here to do. I have to say it’s a bit different from our last adventures, where we just sort of wandered about, getting up to mischief as we saw the opportunity. Now we’re official, as it were, we have some specific jobs to do.’

He noticed the grimaces and rolling eyeballs, and pointed out that it was the price they had to pay for being officially “TD”, then quickly added ‘Then after that, we can get on with whatever comes our way, all right? Now, I’m sorry I can’t tell you everything just now, but I don’t really know any more than you, and in any case, I was sworn to secrecy: need to know, and all that military intelligence rubbish. All I do know is our first objective.’

At that, the men all leaned forward, much more interested. Angelo and Dino, of course, didn’t understand what was being said, but it was obvious something important was about to happen, so they joined in with the leaning inward gesture.

‘You know well enough that the Germans are using a monster gun to bombard Anzio and the shipping in the harbour. Anzio Annie, the Americans have called it, as I’m sure you’re aware. It’s just as well the thing can only manage a slow rate of fire, but even so, as our forces build up, it’s causing a lot of damage. Bad for morale as well. It seems the problem is, well, nobody can find it to put it out of business. According to the experts, a gun capable of delivering the sort of projectile, I think the word is, that’s being fired most likely has a range of twenty or thirty miles. Imagine that! Maybe more! They could fire it right across the English Channel. Amazing, eh! At any rate, the blessed thing could be anywhere in a radius of thirty miles from Anzio, and try as they might, the RAF and the USAAF have been unable to locate it, and the intelligence people can’t even give an

approximate area. The theory is, it's well camouflaged, and the camouflage only comes off for a minute while they're preparing to fire, so all they have to do is make sure there's no Allied aircraft about for that short time, and they're safe. The upshot is, until the thing can be located, it can't be got rid of. So our job is to find it and radio back its exact position so the bomber boys can have a go at it.'

Dodd did his spread the hands gesture, and added 'Easy, eh?'

Watson was first to respond. 'Hang on, Boss, that's going to be an enormous area to cover. It'll take months!'

Dodd nodded. 'Yes, that's what I thought at first. But we can narrow it down quite a bit, just by looking at the map. I'll show you.'

And after the customary Englishman's slapstick tussle with any map, he finally managed to spread out a map of the area from Rome down to Cassino and inland to the mountain heights.

'Now look, chaps, see this road?' He pointed to the bold red line which touched the coast well south of Anzio then headed for Rome. 'This is called the *Via Appia*, the Appian Way. It's never more than, what, maybe seven miles from the coast, well within range of our naval guns. So I don't think the Germans would put their big gun on the coastal side of the road, eh? Agreed? And this one,' he pointed out another red line, further inland, 'well, on the other side of that, they'd most likely be out of range of Anzio, you see?'

He looked round and got nods of understanding.

'Right, so we're looking in this band, about here, from, say, Aprilia to Albano, down to Velletri then Sermoneta, to Latina.' He pointed out the area. 'Getting a bit more manageable now, I think.'

They all stared gloomily at the map, realising it was still going to be a matter of luck, or perseverance, to find the thing.

Brownlow chewed his lip for a while. 'Do we know anything much about this gun, Skipper?'

‘Good question, but the answer is, not much, I’m afraid. All we know, and that’s just an educated guess, apparently, judged on the estimated size of the projectile, is that it’s very big indeed. But even that helps us a little bit. My impression is, what we’re looking for is not going to be in the really high country, right up in the Alban Hills, say, so that cuts it down further. So what I suggest is, we get ourselves over to somewhere around here,’ pointing at a dot labelled Cisterna di Latina, ‘and start a systematic search from there. That’d be your area of expertise these days, Sar’ Major, after your navigation course?’

‘Spot on, Skipper.’ Brownlow whipped out a strip of white plastic that looked like a ruler, except that it had numerous scales. He edged his way nearer the map, and studied it for a second. ‘Not much of a map,’ he sniffed, in a gesture of contempt he’d unconsciously picked up from Green, ‘no contour lines, y’see. But it’ll have to do us.’

He wafted his scale ruler over the area Dodd had outlined, and announced ‘Let’s say about twenty miles by fifteen.’

He chewed his lip for a bit, and added, ‘Yes, pretty big area. Pretty big. But there’s nine of us, and we’ve got vehicles, plus, this gun’s not going to be exactly silent is it? So if we’re anywhere near it when they fire it, that’ll get us closer. And that Cisterna place, it’s got, what, five, six, no, seven roads going into it, so it’d be a good place to start.’

Dodd smiled agreement and Brownlow continued. ‘So, Boss, do we make ourselves known to the locals? I’m thinking they might be able to direct us.’

‘Yes, I wondered that too. But I’m told the area is regularly patrolled by the Germans and there could easily be fascist sympathisers about, especially in a reasonable sized town like Cisterna, so I’m wary about making contact, for now at least. Maybe Angelo and Dino could go in and find out how things stand, but just now, let’s assume we’re on our own. Any suggestions, Sar’ Major?’

‘I reckon you’re on the right track, Boss, going out somewhere near this Cisterna place. We’ll find somewhere for a base, then fan out from there. I’ll put a grid down on the map, so we can see where we’ve been, and we’ll just have to put the legwork in from there, eh?’

And that was pretty much how it turned out, except that on the first day, they covered the area around their first base, and quickly realised they’d have to move on each day, which was tiresome. It was hard work, plodding through this rough country all day, searching for a needle in a haystack. It would have been nice to return each evening to somewhere they could assemble the odd bit of comfort, but moving on every day, they couldn’t get settled.

Brownlow, with Doss’s nodded agreement, had arranged a rotating roster of three groups of two to go out each morning, leaving three to guard the vehicles and equipment, and do the housekeeping and prepare the evening meal. Either Burgess or Green were always at the camp, in case an emergency required using the radio. But already, after only a few days, Dodd’s Army was getting seriously tired of this business. As usual, the three pairs had gone off in different directions, as directed by Brownlow and his map, and had all returned with the news that they’d constantly been stopped by broad open meadows, some of them seemingly a mile or more across, which they daren’t attempt to cross in case they were spotted by a German aircraft on patrol, or even a left over fascist forest ranger. As Kelly said, they’d have stood out like dogs balls out there. It seemed the entire country was made up of these open plains, separated by forested slopes. It didn’t make the search for the gun easy, but nobody could come up with a plan other than to keep plodding on, skirting round the grasslands as they searched their areas as allotted by Brownlow.

Next day, they moved to yet another new vicinity, where Brownlow studied his map, then allocated pairs and search areas. Dodd happened to be paired with Tullett that day, a fact for which he was profoundly grateful, when he came to think about it later, because he wouldn't have coped on his own, and if he'd been offered the chance to re-run the episode with anybody else as his companion, he'd still have chosen Tullett.

Tullett, on the other hand, wasn't that thrilled at the pairing: he knew he'd have to try not to swear too much, it being just him and the boss, but he knew he'd fuck it up – just couldn't fuckin' help himself.

All morning, they'd been plodding along heavily forested hillsides at their fruitless mission, aware now that it was just about time to stop for something to eat, then go across country for a bit so as to cover a different sector on the way back. But it was hard, searching this country. If the damned gun was in the trees, they could go right past it without noticing – their only chance would be to stumble across the path that would have had to be cut to get the gun in there, or, more likely, to be near enough when the gun was fired to at least get the general direction.

The pair of them had been climbing, not too steep, but a testing pull nevertheless, through close packed trees, when they emerged onto the rim of yet another small plateau, perhaps a couple of hundred yards across, rocky outcrops and one or two stunted trees showing through the remains of last summer's grass. As they stopped, they both almost instinctively put their knuckles on their waists, puffing a bit while they took in their surroundings.

Beyond the plateau, to left, right and straight ahead, the wooded hills continued relentlessly and depressingly upward, while near at hand, a handful of creatures, perhaps twenty, camouflaged dun and sludge against the dirty yellow/grey of the grass, stood heads up and motionless as they gazed suspiciously at the new arrivals.



Tullett pointed, quite unnecessarily. ‘Blimey, Boss, what’s them bastards, d’yer reckon?’

‘I imagine they’re sheep, Stan.’

Tullett stared hard at Dodd, then back to the sheep, then back to Dodd again. ‘Oh, bollocks, Skipper, due respect’. Sheepses is sort o’ white, ain’t they? *An’* they got short legs. *Them* things,’ he flicked his head towards the beasts as though Dodd might have been thinking about a different group of animals, ‘they’re more like fuckin’ goats or summing.’

The pair of them stared back at the animals.

‘Well, you may be right, Stan. If they’re sheep, I have to admit they’re not much like the version we see around Oxford.’

Happy with the chance to stop climbing for a bit, Dodd proposed ‘How about we have a bit of a rest and get something to eat while you tell what you know about goats?’

Tullett was pleased to get a break – his foot still wasn’t quite right, though if asked, he’d have declared it *a ‘undredperfuckincent* – but he still wasn’t sure whether Dodd was taking the piss, asking about goats. He decided to take the plunge and regale Dodd with his philosophy on the sheep/goat conundrum.

‘Well, Boss, what I reckon is, sheepses is sort o’ white an’ friendly lookin’, an’ goats, well, they’re taller, an’ grey, but skinny, like, an’ some of ‘em ‘ave ‘orns an’ that. An’ beards. Goats ‘ave beards. Nasty bastards too, be all accounts.’

Tullett was pleased with himself: not only had he cleared up any confusion about the sheep/goat issue, but he’d done it without swearing. Well, almost.

Dodd nodded thoughtfully. ‘Stan, I’m impressed. You’re obviously well informed. How did you come by all this farmyard knowledge, may I ask?’

Once again, Tullett wondered for a second if Dodd was taking the grin, but Dodd wasn’t known for it, so Tullett gave him the benefit of the doubt. Even so, he responded cautiously. ‘I

seen ‘em in books.’ And, realising that sounded a bit lame, shored up his position. ‘Yeah, loads ‘o books.’

He didn’t mention there were only the two, both children’s nursery rhyme books. ‘An’ in the butcher’s – they ‘ad a bloody great picture o’ a sheep.’

His eyes went vacant as he visualised it. He nodded – he could picture the image clearly. ‘Yeah, definitely, sheepses is white, an’ friendly lookin’, not like them bastards.’

Dodd was almost persuaded. ‘You’re probably right, Stan. If these are sheep, well, they’re not like ordinary English sheep. This lot,’ and here he copied Tullett’s jerk of the head, ‘well, my goodness, they do look a *lot* different, don’t they?’

They both studied the animals again, who by this time had decided that the newcomers presented no immediate threat that should cause them to leave off their main occupation, eating the yellow/grey grass.

The two soldiers continued to study the creatures, until Tullett, in a scene eerily reminiscent of that time back in Naples, announced ‘I got an idea.’

Back then, it had taken encouragement from Dodd before Tullett had continued, but this time, he was more confident, and spoke up: Dodd was happy to listen.

‘Well, Boss, yer know them *goats*?’ He emphasised the word, as if to confirm that it was he that had positively identified their species, when Dodd had been doubtful. Dodd nodded and Tullett continued ‘Well, if we ‘ad a few o’ them, we could pretend we was shepherds, like, couldn’ we? Then we could just go strollin’ across them medders, couldn’ we? Save a lot o’ time, eh? So d’you reckon we could round a few of ‘em up, like?’

Dodd was shocked. ‘What? We can’t do that! They’re somebody’s private property!’ He shook his head in disbelief that anyone would even think of such a thing.

Tullett put on his cunning look, which, it must be said, he did very well. ‘Well, I jus’ thought it’d be good cover if we

‘ad a ‘erd ‘o fuckin’ goats, eh? Nobody’d suspect a fuckin’ shepherd, would they?’

He caught his breath, realising his language was getting a bit ripe. ‘An’ if Ted got ‘old o’ one, I reckon ‘e could invite it to a nice roast dinner, eh, Boss? Know what I mean, Boss?’

‘Really, Stan, I don’t know what gets into you sometimes, I really don’t. You can’t just go stealing people’s animals, you know. That’d be, er,’ he did his rubbing the forehead thinking gesture, ‘well, rustling, would it be? No, that’s more cattle, I think. But stealing, anyway.’

Tullett was disappointed: he could have just fancied a nice bit of roast dinner, even if the tasting qualities of goat was a gap in his knowledge of the species. But he pressed on. ‘Look, Skip, ‘ow about we jus’ give it a try? ‘Ow about I get round be’ind ‘em an’ sort o’ nudge ‘em over ‘ere, then we can both try movin’ em over the other side so’s we can ‘ave a poke about over there?’

In spite of his better judgement, Dodd was intrigued: if they could confirm a means to get across these open plateaux, they could cover a much wider area. For just a split second, he thought it might be quite a feather in his cap among the chaps if he could take credit for the idea, but he immediately discarded that – everybody would know it was Tullett who’d thought of it. In any case, Dodd realised that nowadays, the men accepted him for what he was: he didn’t have to pretend to be useful any more. But he recognised that Tullett’s plan did have a flaw. ‘Er, Stan, we’re still in uniform, remember. You don’t think that might be a giveaway?’

Tullett considered that for a second. ‘Nah, Boss, nah. ‘Cept our ‘ats, eh? But our greatcoats, look at ‘em: they’ve got pretty grubby the last few days. Could be anythink, really, eh? I reckon we’d be all right, ‘less they got up close, like, an’ then we’re in the shite anyway.’

He stopped for another instant, annoyed with himself. He’d made almost an entire speech without swearing, then

ballsed it up at the last minute. He shrugged minutely: *shite* wasn't a real swear word anyway, was it?

'So, long as we don't wear our 'ats, we'll prob'ly be all right, eh?'

Dodd accepted that, and kept his worry about the industrial overmanning aspect to himself - two shepherds to look after a couple of dozen goats probably wouldn't look right to anybody who knew about these things.

Everything went swimmingly at first: the two men emerged from the edge of the trees and, separating a little, made towards the goats. Dodd moved cautiously, a little, well, sheepishly, the only indication that he was herding anything being that he held his arms out sideways, like a boy pretending he was an aeroplane. Tullett, on the other hand, was getting right into it, waving his arms and calling instructions to the goats, who moved cautiously away.

Dodd was just beginning to relax a little, when a voice from off to their right yelled, in a broad Scottish accent Billy Connolly would have been proud of, 'Hey, youse!'

Both men froze and stared at the apparition that had emerged from nowhere and was marching towards them. 'Aye, youse, I'm talkin' tae! Feck off! Git yer ain feckin' sheep!'

Dodd, quite rightly, was stunned. Not only had two Englishmen been caught in the Italian hill country making off with somebody's animals, but they were being shouted at by what seemed to be a Scotsman dressed in a scarecrow's castoffs! His face, what could be seen of it under an extravagant growth of unkempt beard, was gaunt and fitted well with his clothes: if he'd been miraculously transported to a desert island, he'd have fitted in really well. Tullett, however, was utterly unfazed, and took charge immediately.

'Fuck off yerself, Dermott!' he yelled back. 'We're only borrerin' 'em. Any case, they're fuckin' goats.'

The newcomer stopped dead: Tullett's response had taken him completely by surprise.

As they watched, Dodd congratulated Tullett. ‘Oh, well done, Stan. Well done indeed. But actually, I think you’ll find Dermott is an Irish name.’

Tullett smirked. ‘Course it is Boss. But there’s nothing stirs a Scotty up more’n bein’ mistook for a Paddy.’

He then turned his attention back to the Scotsman, who had started moving towards them again, but warily now, half sideways, as though preparing to scarper. Tullett maintained his position on the high moral ground. ‘C’mon Patrick, come an’ ‘ave a smoke or sunning, an’ we’ll all ‘ave a nice friendly chat, all right?’

The shepherd recovered himself sufficiently to calm down, and kept coming until he was right up to them.

‘Ma name’s not fuckin’ Dermott, or Patrick or any other Irish fuckin’ name, arright? Ah’m Scottish, an’ proud o’ it, arright?’

His body language had gone back to aggressive: Dodd thought the man would have preferred to be leaning forward, poking Tullett in the chest with a finger, if Tullett hadn’t got him so much off balance. But now that Tullett had established superiority, he was happy to be friendly. ‘All right, Jock, settle down,’ he said, patting the air in a calming gesture. ‘Come an’ ‘ave a smoke an’ a brew up, eh?’

The Scottish shoulders dropped, relaxed. ‘Aye, right, go on then. I could do wi’ a smoke – been oot o’ snout fe’ feckin’ weeks.’

Tullett was magnanimous in victory and passed the scot a well worn tobacco tin that contained tobacco and cigarette papers, what he called “the makin’s.”

‘Righto, mate, ‘ere yer go. Yer better keep that if yer out – I got plenty back at the truck. An’ we’re just goin’ to get a bit o’ grub, eh, Boss? Want some? We’ll jus’ pop back in the trees a bit, keep out o’ the way, like. Your goats be all right, will they?’

The scot was stunned all over again. ‘Goats, d’ye say? D’ye tell me that?’

Tullett nodded firmly, convinced of his position now. ‘Fuckin’ goats, Jock. Definitely.’ And with that, he led his audience back into the trees.

Dodd and Tullett were well practiced in getting a meal together, and came equipped with Dodd’s little portable stove, which the men had all agreed was *the* big benefit of being paired with the major.

Tullett acted as master of ceremonies, introducing himself as ‘*Corporal* Tullett, but you can call me Stan’, and Dodd simply as Mr Dodd. The Scotsman nodded acknowledgement and said his name was Donaldson, but, for reasons he never explained, he answered to “Jacko.”

They ate in companionable silence for a while, except for occasional grunts of approval from Jacko, who, after scoffing everything he was offered, including half of Dodd’s meal, explained he’d been living off what his employer sent him, a rudimentary and inadequate diet of bread and pasta with tomato sauce. At least that explained his gaunt and bedraggled appearance.

Finally, Jacko licked his lips, belched prodigiously, rolled himself another cigarette, which he called a “querly”, and with a magnanimous little flourish, offered the tin to Tullett. He then reached for his third mug of tea, as supplied by Colonel Bullivant, black, of course, no sugar, as the men had become used to, and gave a contented sigh.

## Chapter 7

Dodd, ever the intelligence officer, could restrain himself no longer. ‘I hope you don’t mind me asking, er, Jacko, but how does a scotsman come to be a shep ... er, goatherd, miles from home out here in the Italian countryside?’

‘Aye, fair question, right enough. Wee bit o’ an adventure, that it was. Bit of a long story, you know?’

He gave his hosts a crafty look. ‘Wid there be any more o’ yez, creepin’ aboot back there?’

And when that was acknowledged, he nodded. ‘Aye, so Ah thought’ and nodded again. ‘Ah must say, Ah’ve got the taste fer proper food again, right enough, so, if you’ll invite me to tea, mister, Ah’ll pay fer ma supper by tellin’ ma tale. Arright?’

Dodd and Tullett “helped” Jacko round up his goats and herd them into a rickety pen: as Jacko explained, they didn’t need anything robust, they were quite content with the feeling of safety the pen gave them – they had no interest in trying to break out. Dodd asked ‘Wouldn’t it be a bit early to round them up for the night, Jacko? It’s only the middle of the afternoon.’

Jacko looked at the goats, then at Dodd, and back to the goats again. ‘Aye, mister, mebbe you’re right, but Ah don’t see any of ‘em checkin’ their watches, do you? Long as Ah’m back some time tonight, they’ll be just fine.’

So the trio set off, Dodd insisting they take the route Brownlow had planned for them, so as to cover an extra bit of country as they returned.

Jacko was quite the centre of attention when they got back to the trucks: he found it a little overwhelming at first, all these people talking to him all at once, after more than a year pretty much alone, but for the visits of the family who’d adopted him, and only the daughter could manage a few words of English. But he very soon got over it, and sat back smoking and swigging tea as he watched the others preparing the evening meal.

When dinner was done, Jacko found himself the centre of a circle of interested faces, so, after a disgustingly ostentatious clearing of the throat, he began his story.

‘Did ye no hear o’ the Pedestal convoy?’ he asked, and got blank looks in return. ‘Aye, well, I’m no’ surprised. Back in forty two, August, it was. Ye’d prob’ly ken Malta was in big trouble, though?’ At this, he got nods. ‘So they decided to send this mighty convoy, wi’ heaps o’ stuff, petrol, food, everything. Apparently, they even had Spitfires on a carrier they were goin’ to fly off to land on Malta. An’ the protection, ye’d no believe it! There was carriers, battleships, cruisers, subs, the feckin’ lot.’

Dodd, against all his training, jumped to a conclusion. ‘So you were a sailor then?’

‘Och, no’ me, mister, no’ me. Ah never liked the water much, an’ Ah like it less now. Y’see, the brass knew the convoy’d attract a lot o’ attention, but they reckoned they could deal with the Italian navy. The big worry was feckin’ bombers flying out o’ Sicily, so they thought it’d be handy if their airfields could be sorted out before the convoy went through, d’ye know? So they thought the best thing’d be to put troops ashore to attack the airfields at the last minute, an’ that’s where Ah came in. They had whole crowds o’ commandos an’ that, wi’ their wee canoes an’ stuff, but they wanted more, so they called for volunteers from us infantry jocks, to make up raiding parties. Sounded exciting, Ah thought, so Ah put ma feckin’ ‘and up, did Ah not?’

Tullett started a scoff, driven by the standard squaddies philosophy of “Never volunteer for anything” but it dawned on him that he’d been volunteering ever since he landed in Italy, so he turned it into a cough, and nodded interestedly.

But Jacko had caught the meaning. ‘Aye, feckin’ stupit, right enough. Us jocks, we’d no trainin’ fe’ that sort o’ silly bastards game, just mobs o’ chaps wi’ rifles an’ a coupla Brens, and a few chaps wi’ ten minutes trainin’ on explosives. My lot, a destroyer or somethin’ took us, along wi’ three or four other groups, an’ we each got dropped onto the beach in a boat. From



then on, it was just a gigantic feck-up. Middle o' the feckin' night, o' course, an' we 'ad no idea where we were. All we knew was, we wez supposed to get inland, find an airfield, an' blow stuff up. Easy, eh? But soon as we got off the beach, we was straight intae the feckin' wire, we're makin' a right feckin' racket, tryin' tae get each other oot, just gettin' oursen more tied up, you know?'

The scotsman's eyes had glazed and his shoulders twitched involuntarily as he remembered.

'Then, away tae the left, there was explosions, then suddenly, there was shootin' from everywhere – Ah imagine that was the real commandos doin' their stuff, an' jerry shootin' back – but my lot, we was stuck way away from the action. Then the searchlights come on, an' we was lit up like Sauchiehall Street at Hogmanay. We was caught right off, feckin' miles frae the airfield. Feckin' useless, eh? Ah've thought since, we as just there as decoys, ye know? We'd nae feckin' chance at all 'o gettin' anywhere near the planes, mister, no' frae the minute we got on the beach.'

Jacko, eyes closed now, shook his head in continued disbelief at the memory. 'I cannae decide who wez the most stupid: the brass fer puttin' us in there, or me fer stickin' ma hand up in the first place.'

He slumped, head down, and his audience let him have his moment of contemplation. Then he shook his head and continued his story.

'Aye, well, ancient history now, eh? So, a bunch o' German soldiers come an' collected us poor wee bassarts oot o' the feckin' wire and took us off to some sort o' guard room. We went round the edge o' the airfield on the way, an' that was the nearest we ever got to the planes. More'n more squaddies was bein' brung in, all tellin' much the same story, gettin' rounded up before they got close tae anything, but there wez a fair few explosions goin' on, so somebody was blowin' somethin' up right enough, eh?'

Jacko nodded to himself, looking for confirmation that this waste must have achieved *something*. His audience returned the nod, and he sighed and continued.

‘Aye, well, that was that. So they didn’t even bother interrogatin’ us, we was just put in trucks that took us to ships, an’ frae there, we was taken to Italy. We didnae know then, an’ I still dinnae know where it was we landed, but the Eye-ties took us over, an’ after a while, we wez put on a train. Just an ordinary train, you know, wi’ them wee little compartments an’ a corridor goin’ along. They told us we was goin’ up north, somewhere about Rome, where there wez POW camps, but they wez that sloppy wi’ their security, ye couldnae credit it. The train kept stoppin’ an’ startin’, stoppin’ an’ startin’ an’ pretty soon, chaps started to realise they could just open the door an’ jump off. After a while, the Eyeties got wind o’ it an’ started puttin’ guards oot whenever we stopped. So that was an end to that wee game. But then it got dark, an’ it struck me that when we’re stopped, the driver signalled we’re goin’ tae start again wi’ a wee toot, an’ the guards all jumped back on. So I thought, the guards’re all back on, it’s dark, the train’s still goin’ slow, pretty good odds, eh, Jacko, so I got ma stuff together, such as it was, an’ next time we stopped, soon as we started again, I just opened the door an’ jumped off.’

He chuckled. ‘As Ah jumped, Ah thought “what a feckin’ eejit! The feckin’ train could be on a feckin’ great bridge or somethin’ an’ Ah’m jumpin’ intae trouble, right enough”, but nae mind, Ah just hit the ground an’ laid still in case a guard wez lookin’ oot, but the train just went on. I could see I wez in a bit o’ a forest, so I jest sorted oot a place to doss down fer the night. Then come daylight, I started walkin’, didn’t know where, o’course, just away frae the railway, really.’

He smiled and shrugged. ‘Aye, an’ that’s the story o’ Jacko’s great escape! Pretty feckin’ heroic, eh, mister? But more stupit than heroic, d’ye know? ‘Coz what was I to do now? I had nae food nor water, an’ Ah didn’ know where Ah wez, or what

way to go. So Ah jus' kept goin' an' found meself comin' up intae the hills. Most o' the day, Ah kept on, hopin' somethin'd turn up. But by an' by, Ahm startin' to realise Ah couldnae get along on ma ain – Ah wez thinkin' Ah'd mebbe 'ave to ask fe' help, an' if they turned me in, well, at least Ah wouldnae starve.

'Ah'd just skirted past a wee village – Ah wez gettin' pretty stuffed be now, an' it started tae rain, so that decided me – Ah'd jest go back and knock on the first door Ah came to. An' that's what Ah did – knock, knock, then I jus' stood there. Well, Ah must hae looked a right sauny sight, 'cos soon as the door opened, the old chap that opened it, looked me up an' doon, then right off, pulled me inside an' slammed the door. Ah thought, 'Aye, right, there'll be a reward fer the likes o' me, an' this chap'll be claiming one, but right off, there was a bowl o' soup an' a big lump o' bread! Then 'e calls out somethin' an' a lad, oh, aboot ten, Ah'd say, comes in. The old chap tells the lad somethin' and off he goes, oot the door. Ah, well, Ah thought, at least they gimme a feed afore they put me in, so Ah gie the ol' chap a smoke. Well, ye'd think Ah'd given 'im the keys to Edinburgh Castle, the way 'e carried on. So we both sat there an' smoked fer a bit, then the door opened, an' a young woman come in wi' the lad. She looks me up an' doon jus' like the old chap did, an' I saw right off she wez 'is bairn. An' she says she's Bianca an' she speaks a bit o' English, she'd spent a bit o' time workin' fer an English family in Rome afore the war. She says I wez lucky to choose this hoose: most o' the rest o' the village wez Mussolini supporters, but 'er family wez agin' 'im. She told me later the Italian soldiers'd kept comin' up to the village an' takin' anythin' worth 'avin' and she an' 'er family couldn' understand why the rest o' the village put up wi' it. But she says it's too dangerous ter keep me with 'em. If Ah wez caught in their place, well, she jus' rolled 'er eyes an' went ...' Jacko drew a finger across his throat.

'Any rate, the lad opened the door an' made sure Ah seen 'im lookin up an' down the road, then e' signalled me ter follow

‘im, and ‘e led me to a sort o’ shed, wi’ hay an’ that, an’ Ah knew Ah wez ter doss down there.

‘Nex’ mornin,’ just on daybreak, the girl, Bianca, comes in an’ tells me it’s too dangerous tae stay here, an’ Ah’m tae move further up intae the hills. The wee laddy appears, wi’ a knapsack sort o’ thing, an’ Bianca says ‘e’ll tack me. She says ‘e’s got food fer a few days, an’ they’ll bring more by an’ by. So off we go, up an’ up, ‘til we get up this way. The laddy shows me a wee hut, made o’ rock wi’ a wooden door an’ nothin’ else but a chair, a wee table an’ a bed o’ sorts, jus’ leaves an’ rags mainly. An’ ‘e shows me a wee stream away a bit, an’ then ‘e points oot the *beasts*.’

He smiled at Tullett, acknowledging the uncertainty of their provenance. ‘‘E looks me in the eyes an’ raises ‘is eyebrows, so ...’ Jacko demonstrated for the group ‘... and Ah knew right off, the deal wez Ah look after the beasts an’ the people’d look after me. An’ that’s how it’s been frae that day tae this. They showed me how tae move the beasts frae one meadow tae another, up the mountain in spring, back down in winter, how tae pen ‘em up at night, and so on, an’ every few days, the laddy or the lassie’d come up wi’ a basket o’ stuff, mebbe pasta, or a stew, an’ bread, an’ sometimes, even a wee flask o’ wine. Its shocking bad drink, so it is, but I’m grateful fer it anyway.’

Jacko glanced round, as if he thought his adopted family might hear and be upset at his ingratitude.

He paused and nodded, to make it clear that his story was finished, and to emphasise that, he looked at Dodd and said ‘So, tha’s how Ah come to be here, mister.’

There was a pause then, while the audience absorbed the story and, to be frank, considered the likelihood of it being true. After a bit, Green broke the silence.

‘That’s quite an adventure you had, Jacko. But listening to you as you told it, you took me back to my school days. We had a teacher - masters, we called ‘em - who spoke in a broad Scottish accent, just like you. The thing is, he was our *English*

teacher. Funny, eh? And he was keen on poetry, especially some Scottish chap, er, Burnley was it?’

‘Burns, man,’ Jacko interposed grumpily, as though he was amazed that anybody might not be sure of the name of certainly the greatest Scottish, and possibly greatest ever poet.

‘Robert Burns. Some people call him Robbie, though they shouldnae – he never called himself anything but Robert.’

Green smiled an apology and continued ‘Anyway, Mr Figgis, that was his name, he made us memorise great chunks of poems by this Burns chap, and we were supposed to recite it with a Scottish accent! He said it only sounded right in the proper accent. We had to take it in turns to recite verses, and if we got it wrong, or he didn’t think we’d put enough of an accent on it, he used to go beserk! He’d shout “Stand on your desk!” and make you say it again with a thicker accent. Of course, it became a bit of a joke among us boys: we used to see how many of us we could get standing on our desks, and how incomprehensible we could make it. But nobody ever got shouted at for using too much of an accent. And you know, I’ve often wondered, thinking back on it, if Mr Figgis was playing the game as well. But then, just sometimes, he’d get extra cross and yell at someone who’d fumbled his lines or hadn’t made his accent unintelligible enough, “Fetch the detention book!” You know, when you had to stay back after school. Now, detention wasn’t too bad, but the detention book was kept in the headmasters study, so you had to go and ask for it, and the head would want to know why you needed it, and when you’d explained, often as not, he’d say, all friendly, “Oh, I don’t think we’ll be needing the detention book” and just as you were thinking you were all right, he’d say “Let’s get this sorted out straight away” and before you knew it, you were getting six of the best!’

Green squirmed at the memory before continuing, ‘I still remember the odd piece of that poetry, you know. There was one in particular Mr Figgis was especially fond of called “Ode to a Haggis.” I’ll give you a bit, if you like.’

Without waiting for a sign one way or the other, he stood and, in a passably guttural Scottish accent, launched into the poem.

“Fair fa' your honest, sonsie face,  
Great chieftain o the puddin'-race!  
Aboon them a' ye tak your place,  
Painch, tripe, or thairm:  
Weel are ye worthy o' a grace  
As lang's my arm.”

Green saw that his mates were eyeing each other, as though wondering if they'd somehow strayed into a parallel universe where they didn't understand the language. He smiled and said 'Yeah, bit of an acquired taste, eh? Look, there's loads more of it, but that'll do for now, eh?'

But Jacko was impressed.

'Aye, pally, tha's no too bad. No too bad at all. Will ye tak a smoke?'

This, coming from Jacko, was just about the highest form of praise, and he backed up by proffering the tobacco tin that he'd recently acquired from Tullett.

Green recognised the sincerity of the gesture, especially knowing that Jacko had been short of the makings for a long time, and accepted the tin with a grin and a nod.

Jacko sat, eyes closed, head nodding faintly, apparently recounting to himself the next verse, but then, recovering himself, mentioned 'Aye, great stuff, eh? An' a great man too. O'course, the poetry comes natural to us scots, does it not?'

He left the suggestion hanging, until Watson took the bait.

'Have you written any poetry yourself, Jacko?'

The Scotsman gazed at Watson, as though wondering if he was being set up, but finally agreed 'Aye, matter o' fact, I have. Wid ye like to hear it?'

Watson said he would, and Jacko clambered to his feet.

‘Ma favourite’ he explained, ‘well, I didnae write the whole o’ it, d’ye ken? But I added a wee bit extra. D’ye ken that one that goes “Nae cast a cloot ‘til May be oot?”

He got a mixed reaction to that, but enough of the audience admitted they’d heard it, or at least, said they did, that encouraged Jacko to continue. ‘Aye well, ma own version goes

“Nae cast a cloot, ‘til May be oot.

Nor walk about” and here he leant forward and raised his voice in emphasis, “wi’yer willie hangin’ oot!”

Jacko misinterpreted the baffled silence and, satisfied that he’d made a seriously good impression, said ‘Aye, it’s no’ so bad eh? No’ so bad at all’ and, by using much the same expression he’d used to describe Watson’s rendition of Ode to a Haggis, indicated that he considered the two pieces to be on the same intellectual plane.

He nodded to himself in agreement and turned to Dodd.

‘Now, it’s your turn mister. Ah suppose it’s the gun you’ve come for, is it not?’

Everybody looked at Dodd, who took off his officer’s hat and scrubbed his head while he wondered whether to trust this strange apparition. He realised Jacko’s story was extremely improbable but it was told with such sincerity that Dodd believed every word. There was a collective sigh of relief as Dodd replied ‘Yes, you’re right. It’s been causing a lot of problems down in Anzio: we’re here to locate it and radio back its exact position so the bomber lads can have a go at it.’

Dodd suddenly joined the dots. ‘But if you know about the gun, I imagine you know where it is. You’d save us a lot of time, and a lot of lives in Anzio, most likely, if you could give us directions to it.’

‘Aye, I ken that, right enough. One o’ ma meadows is right close tae it. I wez goin’ tae keep ma beasts back here fer another couplae weeks yet, but Ah’ll mebbe move uz across tomorrow, eh? Y’see, mister, they roam about a bit when we’re up the mountain, but doon here, over the winter, Ah’ve two or three

meadows', he added, with a hint of pride, 'an' we move on now an' again, tae where the feed's best, you know? Ah cannae just stop at any ol' field, ye ken. Ma beasts, they're happy tae wander about a bit in the daytime, wi'out me bein' there even, but they get a bit nervy a' night, ye know? They like tae be all close together in the dark, an' know Ah'm nearby. So Ah hev tae put 'em in a pen a' night, an' then we 'ave a wee song or two to settle 'em down. They partic'ly like "Mairi's Weddin" an', I'm pleased tae say, "A Scottish Soldier." Ma meadows, well, there's a wee hut at each one, wi' a bit' o' fencing, just tae keep 'em calm, like.'

The men were thrilled to learn that this miserable exercise might be near an end, all except Brownlow who, as usual, wanted details. 'Hold up, Jock, how far is it?'

Jacko had thought his offer generous, and hadn't expected scepticism, but nodded to the sergeant major. 'Aye, tha's why ye've got the stripes, eh, Sar' Major? Well, It takes ma wee beasts a good half day frae here – they're no' race horses, ye ken. So, a coupla mile, mebbe, or a bit more. Your lads'll do it in an hour or two, even frae here. But I'm thinkin' ye'll be wantin' tae get yer lorries a bit closer, so yez'll hev tae gae back doon a way then follow the wee track yez'll find aboot a mile since. Then we'll meet up an' yez can use ma beasts tae get a bit closer, if ye 'ave a mind.'

Brownlow was satisfied with that, and went off to study his map again, but Dodd still wasn't happy with the legal side of things.

'I still feel it's not quite right, you know, using these, er, animals like this. It still seems like rustling to me.'

Kelly tried to smooth things out. 'Yairs, duffing, we call it back home, nicking some cove's stock. But Skipper, we'd only be borrowing 'em, wouldn't we? Once we found the gun, we could bring 'em back to Jacko, eh?'

Tullett corrected him: 'Most o' em, any rate, eh, Ted, eh?'



Brownlow intervened. ‘Never mind about that, but I reckon Tullett’s on to something, Boss, usin’ ‘em for cover. If Jacko can get us in the right area, we’ll still have to get up fairly close so we can report back, but if we can *borrow* the sheep, er, goats,’ (he winked at Tullett as he said that) ‘we’d at least be able to get somebody across any open bits. So, the more I think of it, the more I like the idea, Skipper.’

Dodd was still sceptical, but after further discussion, agreed to give the scheme a try, on the clear understanding that the goats were only on loan. The rest of the men smirked, nudged each other and rolled their eyes: they might just as well have rubbed their stomachs and made goat strangling gestures, their intentions were so obvious. It was getting seriously cold again now, now the sun was down, which only made the thought of a roast diner all the more enticing.

Finally, after accepting gifts of tobacco and the leftovers from dinner, Jacko gave Brownlow instructions as to where to move the trucks to in the morning, and said he expected to be there by midday, beasts permitting. As he disappeared into the trees, the strains of Jacko’s rendition of “Roaming in the Gloaming” slowly faded.

By late morning the next day, Dodd’s miniature convoy had been in place for an hour, and had made themselves as comfortable as they could while they waited. Winter was back good and proper – the chill struck as soon as they stopped moving. Jacko’s imminent arrival was indicated by tuneless whistling, accompanied by the mournful hollow thunking of the goats bells, and soon they began to appear, long legged and tall with bedraggled sludge and tan colouring, beautifully camouflaged against the undergrowth.

Jacko greeted his hosts with ‘Wid that be the kettle boiling, mister? An’ did yez hear the gun a wee while back?’

He was surprised to learn that they hadn't heard it, until he learnt they'd been in the trucks most of the morning, having got a little lost and then had to deal with a puncture.

'Aye, well, yez'll hear it next time, right enough. We're only a mile or so from it, an' it makes a hell of a noise, Ah can tell yez that. Ah'll walk yez a wee bit closer if yez like, an' yez can see fer yersen. After a bite o' dinner, eh?' he added hopefully.

After a light lunch for the men, and a gargantuan one for Jacko, they set off, Jacko in the lead, and the goats followed dutifully along, jostling the soldiers to the rear, as though anxious not to be left out. Almost immediately, the trees ahead were lit up and an echoing explosion followed. Jacko turned and grinned. 'Aye, yez'll have heard that one, would ye not? There'll be another in a minute.'

And he was right.

Within twenty minutes, Jacko called a halt and explained they were about to arrive at one of those meadows that had caused them so much trouble, and on the other side of it lay the site of the enormous gun, so they'd best be careful. With that, he moved forward again, but slowly, and soon the men found themselves crouched among the trees at the edge of yet another grassy plateau, intently scanning for the gun, but the landscape was a disappointment. They'd been expecting to see a gigantic gun barrel protruding from enormous earthworks, with anti-aircraft guns, vehicles and tents, or at least, large camouflaged lumps concealing everything, but there was nothing like that at all. The meadow was roughly oblong, maybe four hundred yards long and about half that wide. The party was at the bottom right hand corner. At the opposite edge of the grassland, the hills recommenced their steep and wooded upward march, but otherwise, there was little to see, except the mouth of a tunnel way off to the north, which was their left. The slightly raised line of a railway track emerged from the tunnel and passed along the edge of the meadow, following the approximate line of the base

of the hills. And that was all, it seemed. It took Jacko to point out the two or three dilapidated railway trucks, tucked away in a siding cut into the hillside and apparently abandoned.

Dodd's men gave each other baffled glances until Jacko gave them a clue. 'Aye, it's well disguised, right enough. Yez'll need to see it in action before ye believe it. We'll just have to wait. They might go again in ten minutes, or they might not go again today. But Ah'll tell yez, when it happens, it's worth the wait right enough.'

The men spread out along the edge of the trees and settled down to watch and wait. An hour went by and they were getting a bit fed up. They were just quietly discussing whether to post a lookout so the others could move back and relax, when an amazing transformation took place. A group of maybe ten German soldiers slithered down from the scrub above the siding and trotted to the derelict trucks.

In a practiced move, they started dragging at the trucks, which revealed that they were actually cleverly painted canvas concealing a massive gun mounted on railway bogies. The canvas was clear within seconds and the watchers heard the sound of a diesel motor starting. The monster gun slowly moved forward, away from the cut away hillside, and began to swing, following the bending line of the siding, as though about to enter the main railway line, but stopped, and the soldiers immediately swarmed all over it. Slowly, responding to the energetic spinning of control wheels, the colossal gun barrel swung towards the hidden soldiers and for a fraction of a second, Dodd thought the gun was being aimed at them, but then the barrel began to ponderously rise way above their heads. The breeze brought a waft of shouted instructions matching the now measured turning of the control wheels as the German officer settled on the fine aiming of the gun.

Then suddenly, the German artillerymen were gone, scuttling for the cover of the railway tunnel, and immediately, with an enormous roar and a blast that shattered the trees around

them and set their ears ringing, Dodd's crew witnessed for themselves the firing of the gun.

Immediately, the artillerymen returned and intense but disciplined activity at the rear of the gun began as the monster was reloaded and fine tuning of the aim was carried out. Within seconds, the men scampered away once more and as soon as they were well clear, the gun roared again. Then the crew scurried back and was winding the barrel back into its resting position, even as the mammoth vehicle moved gracefully back to its place close against the cutting wall. As it moved, two soldiers with buckets followed along, strewing dirt over the rails to cover any glint of freshly shined steel. The canvas cover was quickly redeployed, and the soldiers scrambled back up the steep incline, so that a passer by arriving now would be left wondering what on earth the explosions had been about.

The witnesses shook their heads and looked at each other, feeling a mixture of awe and respect for the Germans. All except Jacko, whose goats had quite sensibly made a run for it, and he'd already gone off to coax them back.

The men carefully moved back further so they could have a brew up and discuss what they'd witnessed.

As Kelly fussed over his self-appointed duty as stove wallah, Dodd asked for opinions, and looked at Brownlow, who, by way of variation from chewing a lip, sucked in both cheeks for a moment.

'Yeah, bloody impressive eh, Boss? The whole thing took, what, five minutes, start to finish? Not that, prob'ly. No wonder our lot can't locate the gun – a search plane could come over any time, pretty much, and see nothing. Yeah, I reckon they've thought of everything – did you see 'em covering up any shiny marks on the rails? Pretty smart, I reckon.'

He got nods of agreement, and carried on. 'And all they have to do is make sure there's no Allied planes about just for

that few minutes and the chances of getting seen are pretty small.'

'Excellent,' smiled Dodd, 'quite excellent! Just as well we came, eh? And all thanks to Jacko: without him, we might have been wandering about up here for days or weeks, and even then, if we'd gone right across that meadow, we probably wouldn't have bothered checking a couple of broken down old wagons. So, there's just the one thing the Germans didn't allow for, eh?'

Watson clapped like a child who'd somehow accidentally grown into a man's body, and finished the thought. 'Yes! Us! And Jacko, of course. All we have to do is radio back the exact position, and leave it to the bomber chaps to finish the job. We don't even have to borrow Jacko's goats!'

The men began to congratulate each other until Brownlow spoke over them. 'Yeah, well maybe, but I was about to say, parking the gun right up against the side of the hill like that, well, it'd be pretty well protected from bombing, wouldn't it?'

His audience nodded morosely, and Dodd spoke the group's thoughts. 'Well, all we can do is radio back the position on the map and the powers that be will have to work it out from there. What time is your radio contact due, Burgess?'

'Eighteen hundred, Skip.' Burgess shot back. 'No point tryin' to send early, they won't be listenin' before.'

'All right, there's nothing to be done before then. Once we've sent the co-ordinates, I suppose we should hang about here for a day or two so we could report back on whether the bombing has put the gun out of action. What do you think, Sar' Major?'

Brownlow winced. 'I imagine they'll work that out for themselves, Boss, due respect, if the shells keep arriving in Anzio. Any rate, I think we'll set a lookout – we might get another look at the jerries in action.'

And so it was: eventually, just as the colours were draining out of the day, the Germans swarmed down the hillside again and repeated their "ballet with monster" as efficiently as before,

though this time, the onlookers noticed that before the full crew arrived, three or four early arrivals slipped under the canvas at the back of the gun and busied themselves there. Brownlow correctly surmised that they were loading the gun, and must have a cradle to carry the second round aboard the gun carriage, and some sort of lifting gear to raise the enormous projectiles. This was all but confirmed when the monster chugged forward onto the curve in the rails, under its own diesel power, revealing a dark blot on the face of the cutting, obviously the ammunition store, which disappeared as it's door was closed.

When the performance was over, and the scene of bucolic innocence returned, by this time it was almost dark and the men trooped back to the trucks in their hidden place, where they could safely prepare a meal and discuss what they'd witnessed.

As Kelly did his usual routine with the little stove, Brownlow began the conversation. 'Anybody notice anything this time that we didn't spot before?'

The yellow light from the stove lit the faces of the men and turned their surroundings into a cave of darkness. The tang of burning petrol filled the air. Brownlow gazed from one face to another, but got blank looks in return, and tried a bit of encouragement.

'Come on lads. Watson, you're supposed to smart. What did you see?'

Watson was flummoxed and Brownlow gave him a hint.

'All right, I'll help you out. What did you not see?'

The men all thought furiously, trying to recapture the image, hoping that Brownlow kept his attention on Watson.

Brownlow sighed. 'Billy, Billy, Billy, I thought you were better than this. OK, I'll give you another clue. Were any of them armed?'

The audience erupted and Watson finally caught on. 'No! Of course! They didn't even have sentries out!'

Brownlow smiled. 'Finally! So what do you make of that? Anybody? Boss?'

Dodd responded. 'Well, I suppose they're not expecting to be attacked, at least, not on the ground. And why would they? They've been there for weeks without any sign of Allied troops nearby, so they've probably got a little slack, eh? So is that important, Sar' Major?'

'Well, Boss, we could just do our job, and report back like we're supposed to, but I was thinking we might be able to do something a bit more wassname, positive.'

An electric silence fell and the men leaned forward. Dodd asked the question they were all thinking. 'Really! What did you have in mind?'

'Well, I reckon we might be able to disable the gun somehow. I mean, what if we could get up close and blow it up?'

Deferring to the newly minted expert, he turned to Kelly. 'What do you think, Ted? Could you do it?'

Kelly scratched the back of his head, pushing his hat down over his eyes as he considered the possibilities. 'Bugger me, Sarge, that's a monstrous big thing. I reckon it'd take a lot of stuff to do it serious damage. My bloody word it would. More'n we've got, quite likely.'

He thought for a second before adding 'But you don't need to actually blow it up, do you? If we blew the track so it couldn't move into position, that'd be the same, wouldn't it?'

The men were thoughtful, but Dodd was dubious. 'But couldn't they just fire it from where it is?' That thought provoked a few groans among the soldiers, who'd started getting excited at the thought of action, especially action involving blowing things up. But then Dodd thought again. 'But hold on, if they could do that, why would they bother taking the risk of moving the blessed thing out of cover. No, on reflection, I think the gun must have limited, er,' he held an arm out straight and slowly waved it from side to side, 'what's it called, Sar' Major?'

‘Traverse, the word you’re looking for, Skip. Traverse. And come to think of it, a whacking great gun like that, it’d have a hell of a recoil, wouldn’t it? If you could turn it far off the line of the track, the recoil’d probably knock the bastard clean off the rails. No, I reckon you’re right: they have to move it onto the curve in the siding to aim it roughly towards Anzio, and then do the fine adjustment from there.’

Without really recognising it, the whole group had accepted that they should put the gun out of action – and with that, the concept of passively tapping out the map co-ordinates on the radio for somebody else to deal with became a most unattractive proposition. After all, being behind the lines and seriously irritating the Germans, well, that was what they were all about, wasn’t it? And again, with that acceptance, the only thing left to discuss was exactly how to do the job.

When they came to think about it, there seemed to be many options, including blowing up the track of the siding, (discarded after deciding the efficient Germans could probably repair it in a few hours) to shooting the guns crew as they prepared it for firing (but nobody fancied the idea of spraying unarmed men) to capturing the crew, then driving the gun into the railway tunnel, then blowing it off the track, which would have blocked the line as well as disabling the gun (but, while the reward was great, the plan was discarded as being too complicated.)

As might have been guessed, Watson came up with the idea that was finally accepted: he and Kelly would approach the siding under cover of night and apply large explosive charges to the ammunition stored behind the gun. That would, at the very minimum, leave the crew unable to fire until they could be resupplied, which would give the Allied bombers time to do their job, and with any luck, the explosion would be sufficient to knock the gun off the track, or better still, off its bogies.

Neither Dodd nor Brownlow had found any fault with the scheme, Brownlow’s only caveat being that since Kelly and



Watson would be heavily loaded, they would be unable to carry weapons in addition, so he should lead a protective screen which would precede them, using their newly learned fieldcraft skills, to check the way was clear and guard against attack. Unhappy at the thought of being left out, Burgess, Green and Tullett enthusiastically accepted the task.

Finally, it was agreed that they would all move up through the trees, along the edge of the grassland, to bring themselves to a starting point as close as they could to the railway track, which would leave them only about eighty yards from the gun. They would take the explosives and detonating gear, as well as four Bren light machine guns with ammunition, and two similar Italian weapons, Berettas. Angelo and Dino would be using these, as they stood what Brownlow called “rear cover” which was really a polite way of involving them, whilst in fact keeping them out of the way. Not that he doubted their courage or ability, but he worried about communicating with them in an emergency, and he didn’t want Dodd wandering about in the middle of an exchange of fire, trying to translate.

Their first thought was that they should get a good night’s sleep, then spend tomorrow in checking all the kit – the men had long since learned that Brownlow was a great one for checking stuff - going over the plan in detail, then getting themselves into position, so as to be completely ready for the attack at first light the following day. But as it turned out, the wind - which had been no more than a chill and irritating breeze all day – got colder and stronger. Before, they’d been protected to a degree by their position, but by midnight, icy stabs of wind found its way among the trees, making sleep all but impossible. The men, huddled in the trucks, tossed and curled into childlike shapes but even a constant stream of invective didn’t comfort anybody. Even the goats were fractious – they didn’t know where to stand - so, by mutual consent, the plan was set in motion.

## Chapter 8

As soon as all the kit had been distributed and hefted, the whole group, led by Jacko, began the careful plod towards the jumping off point. As they went, Dodd mentioned to Kelly, who happened to be walking alongside him ‘Notice anything odd about our goatherd, Ted?’

Kelly squinted through the darkness and suddenly stopped dead. ‘Well, bugger me dead, Boss! He’s not herding ‘em, he’s leading ‘em!’

Sure enough, Jacko was out front and the men followed, but between them, the goats jostled each other and the soldiers to get close to Jacko, just as they had before.

Kelly was amazed. ‘Well, I don’t know much about goats, Skipper, but I never saw sheep do that, or cattle neither. But hold on, that’s not quite right, I *have* seen dairy cattle following along, like, when the blokes come to collect ‘em for milking. They do it every day, and just know what to do. Same with this mob, I suppose. Funny though, ain’t it?’

When they arrived at the spot designated by Jacko, he had immediately gone about constructing a makeshift pen for his goats – it was nothing much, more a loose circle of odds and ends of sticks and dead branches than anything – a half witted goat could easily have found a way through, but they didn’t want to get away, they just wanted to be sure they were in the right place.

They went through the plan one final time. Kelly, now properly trained in the task, with his offsider Watson, who had done the basic training in handling explosives, (and had been very thoughtful when he’d learned how dangerous it was, if you didn’t know what you were doing) had prepared two large packs of explosives and wires, along with an emergency pack, which Kelly referred to as his bugger-up bag, which each contained odds and ends of fuse, an assortment of time pencils, (which

were thin tubes, about the size of an ordinary pencil, made of brass and copper. The user crushed the copper part, which in turn crushed a glass vial of acid that burned through, at a controlled rate, a wire holding back the striker) and a small block of his new favourite toy, plastic explosive. Everything was prepared as much as possible, so that all they needed to do on site was to set the packs in a suitable place, insert the detonators, connect the wires, which they'd have laid on the way in, and move back into cover, where the wires would be connected to the detonator box.

Kelly reckoned that they could cover the eighty yards or so from their start line at the edge of the trees to the gun, past the forward screen men about half way to the gun, in just a cautious five minutes, an even more careful five minutes to set the packs, the same time to get back, make the connection and as soon as they were sure the screen men were back, blow the charges, so, say twenty minutes tops, start to finish.

Finally, they were ready and, wrapping themselves in their blankets as best they could, tried to catch a little sleep.

The unmistakeable smell of red dusty soil, wood smoke and cowshit made young Ted Kelly's nose twitch. His senses were extra sensitive tonight: it was his turn to ride the boundary of the herd – his first turn on his own, if truth be told, and he'd been nervous about it. Ironical really, since it was the night man's job to keep the mob calm. But as he rode, he began to feel more confident, listening to the tiny rustle of the gum leaves mingled with that undefinable hushed clomping and muttering of the herd at rest.

He was glad he was on old Billy, who had immediately eased into the relaxed plod of the night horse, one of only a handful chosen for their quiet and unflappable nature. Some horse were hopeless for this job, ready to shy at a moon beam, but Billy here, he wouldn't break his rhythm for a thunder storm, never mind a snake. Kelly gave the old horse a friendly slap on the neck, by way of appreciation.

Kelly had ridden the herd at night several times as one of a pair, getting used to it and, you had to admit, it took a bit of getting used to. It was a lot different to daytime, when the herd was moving and your main task was to push strays back into the mob. Keeping them moving was easier, somehow, even among the heat and the flies and the dust, than keeping them steady and serene at night.

The saddle creaked its familiar tiny tune as accompaniment to Kelly, who settled into his own rhythm and sang quietly, just to let the beasts know he was there and all was well.

The hours passed uneventfully and Kelly was unsurprised to find he was sorry when his shift was finished. He dismounted and whispered a few words to old Billy, preparing to get the tack off him and give him a bit of a feed, when, at the edge of hearing, there was a distant, almost inaudible rumble, felt more than heard, but it quickly got louder, and was suddenly thunderous, right on top of him. Kelly knew what he had to do. He tried to leap back into the saddle, ready to race to the front of the herd, try to turn the leaders, but he was caught in something that held him back, and the harder he tried, the harder ....

Kelly awoke, tangled in his blanket, and relaxed, suddenly aware of the passing of a train.

The first hint of light was just seeping into the sky when the men stirred, though in fact, most of them had been awake for a while, chilled and stiff, half excited, half fearful, at the action to come, even though it seemed it was going to be a pretty one-sided affair. And the goats were awake and fretting too – their main task each day was to eat, and yesterday hadn't been good in that regard, what with the trek from the old meadow to the new, and there wasn't much to be had in among the trees, on the march or where they were now camped in the dubious protection of their fence – so they were keen to get started on the grass. They watched Jacko keenly for a sign that it was time.

Brownlow, ever careful, rechecked each mans weapon while Kelly checked and rechecked his kit. Dodd made his usual contribution to preparations - that is, he fretted. It was his job to look after the detonating box, to make sure the handle stayed down so that the explosives were not fired accidentally. Kelly or Watson would raise the handle when they got back, then, only when they were sure everybody was back and under cover, would they plunge the handle down, generating the current that would fire the explosives.

Although the sun was still on the other side of the mountains, and there was low cloud pushing at the mountains like some mad, slow motion upside down tide, damply blanketing the hills above, there was enough light to make out the mass of the canvas covered gun against the looming hill above it.

Brownlow led off the screen team, Burgess, Tullett, Green and himself going onto all fours as they entered the dank knee high grass and began to fan out. Tullett grinned to himself as he crawled along, his Bren cradled across his forearms: he'd taken the piss something chronic about the yanks and their field craft training, and now, here he was, making full use of it.

Kelly watched them go. At last, he winked to Watson, dropped to his knees, and began his crawl.

It might have looked a bit over-cautious, somehow, to a casual observer, bearing in mind how careless the German troops had been, especially when Angelo and Dino took up their places as reserve cover at the edge of the trees, but Dodd was grateful for it as he watched Kelly sidle into the grass with Watson close behind.

The screen was about fifty yards in, that is, about thirty yards away from the gun, when Dodd heard a brief whistle, Brownlow's pre-arranged signal for the screen to stop. Kelly heard it too, and soon passed within a yard or two of the now motionless Brownlow, who, his Bren now at the ready, muttered 'Good luck, boys. See you shortly.'

So far, so good, but within another five seconds, everything went horribly wrong, as Kelly crawled into a tripwire. Immediately, the whole area for twenty yards round the gun was bathed in light, and, from up the hill, a siren began to wail.

Instinct took control then: Kelly jumped to his feet whispering ‘Come on Billy, we’re on!’ and ran, crouching, to the shelter of the gun, trailing the detonating wire behind him. Just out of the pool of light, Brownlow remained motionless as first one, then more, heavily armed Germans half ran, half slithered, down the hill. The men in Brownlow’s screen did as they’d been instructed to do, and waited, stock-still, for a lead from the sergeant major.

Afterwards, Jacko would not be able to explain rationally what he did – it just happened. Calling to his flock, he stepped out onto the grassland, calmly leading them in among the prone soldiers. At the same moment, Angelo half consciously comprehended what Jacko was going to try to do - to suggest to the Germans that the alarm had been triggered by the goats - and, realising the flaw in Jacko’s plan, put down his Beretta and followed the goats out.

The Germans stopped in a line, uncertain what to do. They’d been trained and ready for a determined defence of their gun against serious opposition, paratroops, probably: the training hadn’t mentioned a straggle of goats and a couple of scruffy yokels. The soldiers stood their ground and waited for orders from their officer, who spruced up his uniform and his bearing as he examined the newcomers, having slid the last few yards down the hill.

The oberleutnant, having gathered his composure, began shouting at Jacko in Italian. Of course, Jacko had no idea what was being yelled at him – the flaw in his plan - but Angelo yelled back in his turn.

‘It’s no good shouting at him, he’s half witted, thanks to your bombers. Looking after my goats is all he’s fit for. Now, what’s the matter, soldier?’

That took the wind out of the lieutenant’s sails for a second. He wasn’t having the best of mornings, first slithering helter skelter, most un-officerlike, down the hill, now being accused of bullying an imbecile. Lucky his men didn’t understand what was going on, he thought - they’d be taking the piss for weeks. So, to keep the initiative, he turned on Angelo and marched towards him, shouting ‘What the hell are you doing, wandering through a restricted area? And bringing these,’ he studied the animals briefly, ‘creatures, whatever they are, into a military zone? Can’t you read the sign? Access to this area is forbidden! You’re bloody lucky my men didn’t shoot the whole stupid lot of you!’

Angelo stood his ground, but held up his hands in a gesture of conciliation. ‘Look, officer, I just want to get my goats to the market at Savelli,’ guessing that the German wouldn’t recognise the name of a small village he knew down south. ‘We’ve been walking through the forest all night, and we saw no sign. And it wouldn’t have mattered if we did: neither of us can read. Now, if you’ve finished trying to intimidate a poor goatherd and his poor simple brother, we’ll be on our way.’

Angelo waved his arms as a signal to Jacko to move on, but the German wasn’t having that and signalled his men to block the way across the grass. The soldiers stood in a line with weapons raised. After that, nobody moved: the tension mounted as the tableau continued, until Jacko decided it was time to break the spell. He walked towards the line of troops, bestowing on them a storm of Scottish abuse, his goats shadowing his every move. The soldiers looked uncertain: what do you do when a madman comes at you, yelling stuff you don’t understand, even when you’ve got a rifle pointed at him? Jacko abruptly spun and turned his attention to the oberleutnant, delivering a savage spray of broad Glaswegian verbal violence that was enough to have the

officer take a backward step and hold up his hands as though to ward off a blow. He turned to Angelo, almost pleading. 'What is he saying? I don't understand a word.'

Angelo, on top of his game now, replied 'You should know – it was your bombs that made him this way.'

The officer was wishing these idiots and their horrible animals would just go away. 'Look, this is a restricted military area. You can't come across this way. You must go back and go round.' He pointed back to the trees.

Jacko seemed ready to stand his ground, but the officer gave an order and the line of troops began to move forward, so Angelo trotted to Jacko and put an arm round his shoulder, talking to him quietly, as though coaxing him back, and began to move him back towards the trees. Jacko, after making sure Kelly and Watson were safely hidden under the gun, gave the officer a final blast of gaelic unpleasantness and allowed himself to be led back into cover. The goats, oblivious to the showdown going on around them, and having taken the opportunity to grab a bit of a feed, happily followed along.

The Germans watched through the gathering daylight as the whole mob disappeared into the forest, then, at a signal from the officer, they fell out of line to begin to clamber back up the hill. After a minute or two, the lights from up the hill went out.

All this time, Kelly and Watson had remained motionless under the canvas, not even daring to move enough to take a peep at what was going on. They heard the shouted exchange between Angelo and the German officer, and Watson caught enough to be able to whisper the gist of it to Kelly, but then Jacko began his tirade, which nobody understood. Then finally, Watson heard the German telling the interlopers to go back, and peace descended again.

Brownlow let a few minutes pass before moving forward until he was ten yards from the canvas, then in an urgent whisper, called 'Ted! Billy! They've cleared off. Are you OK?'



Kelly's head appeared from under the canvas. 'Yeah, Sarge, we're right.'

'OK. What do you think?' Are you game to carry on?'

'Sure thing, Sarge' Kelly replied. 'Don't see why not. We'll only be a minute. All right?'

'Right. Off you go then, but soon as, eh? It's getting light out here: from up there, we'll be pretty bloody obvious in a minute.'

Under the gun carriage, Kelly moved to the other edge of the canvas, near the cutting wall, and eased himself out, dragging his bundles with him. Watson followed, or rather, tried to: Kelly had stopped half way out. After what seemed to Watson a long time, he shuffled back, and Watson moved back to give him room.

'Bit of a problem, Bill. The ammo store's got a bloody great steel door on it, with a whacking great lock too.'

Watson eased past Kelly to see for himself, then jiggled himself backwards into the darkness under the canvas and looked at Kelly.

'Any thoughts, Sergeant?'

Kelly had already been thinking. 'Well, Bill, we could blow a bit of track right here, and that'd more than likely set 'em back a bit, but I reckon they could repair that in a day or so. Or we could set our stuff against a couple of these wheels,' he whacked one with a hand, 'and I reckon there'd be a fair chance they'd take a while to fix that, but you never know, this thing might move OK even with a couple of wheels missing. Doesn't have to go far, or fast, does it? But I did have one other idea, if you're game. We could blow the lock with a bit of plastic, easy enough, then before they could get back down here, we could nip in, whack the stuff against the first shell we see, and scarper quick smart. Bit o' luck, it'd set the whole store off. The blast might even knock the gun off the rails. What do you think, Bill? If you reckon it's too dodgy, ...'

He didn't have time to finish before Watson replied. 'Oh, no, Sergeant, it's smashing! Let's do it.'

When he thought about it afterwards, Watson wondered if he'd seen Kelly's plan as an opportunity for, well, atonement, after freezing back at the ruined castle and nearly stuffing the whole plan up, and leaving Kelly to the Germans too, but, being a young man and very keen on blowing things to smithereens, he concluded he just wanted to do it.

'OK, Billy, good lad. Now I'll set the plastic and you slither out and tell the sar' major.'

Brownlow had been waiting anxiously, knowing it was only a question of time before they were spotted, but when the canvas jiggled again, his hopes that things were on the move were dashed. Watson's head appeared from under the canvas.

Watson, always very correct about addressing his seniors by their rank, for once took the easy route. 'Sarge! Sarge! You there?'

'Yep, Watson, we're ready. You right to go?'

'Not really, Sarge. We'll be a minute or two.' Watson explained the issue and what they proposed to do.

Brownlow sighed. 'You sure about this? Is Ted?'

'Yes, Sarge, we're fine. But we'll need you chaps to keep the jerries amused while we set the charges and scarper.' Watson scanned round. 'We'll be coming along the edge of the cliff, then into the trees from there. OK? So ... oh, I'm getting a nudge. It seems we're set to go if you are.'

Brownlow crawled back and whispered to his three fellow screeners, who had all heard about the revised plan, and weren't very happy about it, but they each whispered readiness.

Watson's head disappeared, and Brownlow reminded the others to make sure their safety catches were off.

In the gloom under the gun, Kelly held up a grey green doughnut shaped lump, about four inches across. 'I reckon this'll do the

job, Bill. I'm going to use a ten second time pencil, so we won't be hanging about. What I reckon is, we'll get out from here, taking our bundles with us, I've put the primers in and wired 'em up. All right? Yeah, I know, not supposed to be done that way, but we're going to be in a bit of a hurry, aren't we? So, I set the plastic, and we move along the cliff a couple of yards. That should be enough: the door's set in a bit, so we'll be out of the direct blast. Then, soon as the door blows, we go in. Yes?'

Watson hadn't had a chance to think about it until now, but now he imagined the job, to his amazement, he felt calm and confident it would work. He nodded to Kelly, who immediately said 'Right, let's get on with it. Take my pack while I set the plastic.' And immediately, he was on his way under the canvas. Watson followed and dragged the packs of explosives behind him, making sure the wires were still attached.

By the time Watson was upright and flattened against the wall of the cutting and had both the bundles safely out of the way, Kelly had carefully, even lovingly, massaged the doughnut of explosive onto the door, surrounding the lock. He glanced at Watson, who nodded, and pressed himself further against the rock face. Kelly then broke the end off the time pencil, jammed it in the plastic explosive, and unhurriedly trotted a few paces away from the door.

There was a surprisingly muffled report as the plastic blew, but it set the siren up the hill whining again as the door swung outwards. Kelly went in first and was stopped for a second by the sheer size and organisation of the place. The dim red glow of the emergency lighting glimmered off several rows of enormous shells on both sides of the cavern, disappearing into the darkness. He also took in the miniature railway track set into the concrete floor, obviously used to shift the ammunition to the gun. Watson charged into the store, jolting Kelly. They both took a bundle of explosives and set them between shells, Kelly to the left side, Watson to the right. They each spent a second or two

checking the connections then turned to look at each other and grinned.

‘Righto, mate, let’s go’ muttered Kelly and turned for the doorway. But even before he got there, there was a multiple clanging as German bullets whanged into the steel slab of the door.

Kelly whistled through his teeth. ‘Shit, mate, they were bloody quick, eh?’ He thought for a second. ‘OK, Billy, this is what I reckon. The door swings outwards, to our right, yes?’

Watson, strangely calm, nodded.

‘Right, and we want to go left, so the door’ll give us a bit of protection, as long as we stay in the lee of it. I reckon the sar’ major and the boys’ll stop the jerries from moving out too far, so if we just stay close to the wall, we can get back a fair way, maybe even to the trees. What do you think?’

‘I agree. But we have to keep to the wall, so we can’t get back to the detonator box from here.’

Kelly acknowledged that but didn’t have an answer. They were interrupted by a shout from Brownlow, above the din from the non-stop volleys outside.

‘Ted! There’s more of ‘em coming down the hill this side now. You’d best come now, or you’ll be cut off.’

Kelly yelled back. ‘Righto, mate. We’re coming now. Plenty of covering fire, eh, on three.’

Without waiting for acknowledgement, he shouted ‘One! Two!’ and on ‘Three!’ swung the door wide and the pair plunged through the doorway. They ran into a wall of noise as their mates put up a surge of covering fire to answer the German fusillade. Unarmed as he was, Kelly felt oddly naked as the two began to edge along the cliff face, keeping in the lee of the steel door, realising they were now entirely dependent on their mates keeping the Germans heads down. The noise seemed to be coming from all around them now, the German MP40’s mixing with the British Brens, and then Angelo and Dino started up with their Berettas.

A grenade, one of those famously deadly stick bombs, came tumbling down the slope and landed at Kelly's feet. He calmly picked it up and threw it back over Watson's head, past the doorway, where it exploded noisily between the rock and the gun. Kelly kept going, Watson following, each of them holding the detonator wire and letting it run through their fingers as they moved, to make sure they didn't snag it as they edged along. In a few seconds, they got into a niche in the rock face well on the way to the edge of the trees, out of the direct line of the German gunfire and stopped to catch their breath. After a moment, Watson remarked 'Well, so far, so good, eh, Sarge?'

Back in the forest, Dodd peeped around a tree, while Angelo and Dino kept up an erratic but useful spray of bullets to augment the covering fire being put out by Brownlow and his screen.

But Brownlow was getting worried – really worried. The Germans were now fully aware that the screen was there, and while one group of Germans stayed in cover on and under the gun, another group, crawling and using the long grass to try to stay out of sight, were slowly spreading out, obviously to get outside the line of fire so as to outflank the English from the side. Brownlow understood what was happening: he could see the long grass moving from time to time and realised there was only one thing to do. If he allowed the Germans to keep coming out wide, his group be outflanked, then Kelly and Watson would come into the defenders view and under fire.

Brownlow shouted to his screen: 'Got to move back, boys, yeah?' And without waiting for a response, yelled 'Go! And keep down! Go!'

He scrambled to his knees and loosed a spray from his Bren in the general direction of the line of Germans, then dived flat again and began the long crawl back towards the trees.

Dodd, like Brownlow, realised the whole group was in serious trouble. Standing where he was, he could see the line of Germans was fanning out further. It would only be a matter of seconds before they were past Green, who was on the far left of the screen, then all they'd need to do was to have their mates at the gun lay down a hail of fire while they moved in and rolled up the line. As he watched Brownlow fire and drop back out of sight, a heavy machine gun opened fire from up the hill, its bass thud thudding easily discernible amid the higher pitched racket from the light machine guns from both sides on the ground. The trees hiding Angelo, Dino and Dodd began to explode in a storm of leaves, twigs and bark as the German gunners tried to crush the counter fire. Instinctively, Dodd dived between the trees to the detonating mechanism, pulled up the plunger, and bellowed 'Come back, chaps, I'm firing!'

Amazingly, above all the racket, Brownlow heard him, and yelled 'Run, boys! Go!' He stood then, and emptied his Bren at the hidden line of Germans then turned and raced for the cover of the trees.

Dodd knew he could wait no longer, and screamed 'Firing on three! One! Two!' The racing soldiers, like some orchestrated display, dropped out of sight and on 'Three!' Dodd pushed the plunger back down.

Nothing!

For a millisecond, he was frozen, then realised the final connection of the wires had not been made – this was never done, he remembered, until the last minute, to avoid accidents. He quickly wrapped the wires round their terminals and tightened the threaded nuts, surprised that his fingers did what he wanted them to do, then raised the plunger again.

As the firing from outside intensified. Dodd took a deep breath, yelled 'Firing!' again, and this time the result was astounding. He just had time to see the great gun appear to lunge sideways before the blast from the enormous explosion tore at him, Angelo and Dino. Even partially protected from the full

blast by the immense bulk of the gun, Dodd staggered backwards several paces before regaining his balance, then crouched motionless, ears ringing, as the trees were shredded once more, this time by bits and pieces of falling metal and rock.

Stumbling back to “his” tree, Dodd looked at the scene in astonishment. Five seconds ago, his world was a torrent of noise but now, he wasn’t sure whether it was really quiet or if he’d been deafened by the explosion. There were no visual clues because the eerie silence hung amid a great billowing wave of thick black smoke that raced over the meadow like molten lava.

But suddenly, the spell was broken by the familiar voice of Tullett yelling ‘Fuuuuuuck!’ as he came tottering through the smoke, followed by his mates. The goats plainly agreed completely with Tullett, since they had disappeared into the trees.

After an anxious wait during which there was no sign of Brownlow, it was Green’s turn to act instinctively. ‘Come on, Stan, and bring your first aid kit. We’ve got to get the sar’ major, then sort out the jerries ‘fore they get organised.’

And pausing only to replace the magazine in his Bren, he plunged back into the acrid cloud of smoke

As the air began to clear a little, they bumped into Brownlow, who, having been knocked over by the blast, had got himself disoriented and had to wait while the smoke, and his head, cleared enough for him to guess his way back. Brownlow nudged aside Tullett’s attempt to administer first aid and shouted ‘What the hell d’you reckon you two are doing?’

When Green replied ‘We’re going to get the Germans before they start shooting again,

’ Brownlow nodded and said ‘Good boy, Gilbert. You’re a good boy.’

And for a second, Green was reminded of the time, way back at the abandoned hut, when he, with a torn ankle, and Brownlow, blinded in the aircraft crash, had tied themselves

together, like competitors in a three legged race, to put the hut back to rights after the great rain.

‘You’ll have to go without me, lads,’ added Brownlow, ‘I’m a bit wassname, I think.’ He saw Tullett brighten and start to move forward, ready to put down his Bren as he clutched his first aid haversack, but Brownlow held up his hand.

‘No, I’m all right, son. You boys need to tidy them jerries up before they get sorted. They’re bound to be cross, ain’t they? I’ll send the others over, so don’t go shooting ‘em, all right? Now, off you go.’

As the smoke wafted away, the enormity of what they’d done began to be revealed. The great gun had been tossed aside like a toy, and there was an enormous jagged tear in the hillside, the thick smoke still pouring from it the only movement. But as they watched, carefully looking for any sign of movement, there was a dull rending sound, no more than a rumbling sigh, and a huge sheet of rock eased away from the cliff and settled at the base, half covering the remnant of the gun.

Green and Tullett turned towards where the line of Germans soldiers trying to outflank them had been. The yellowed grass had been flattened by the blast and the line of slumped bodies was now visible. The first two men they found were beyond help, but, as they moved further away from the cliff, they found two more, injured but breathing then, further out still, another three who were just beginning to stir. These five were the only survivors. While Green collected their weapons and signalled the three to stay still, Tullett began to work on his first two patients.

By the time Kelly got there, having got back to where Dodd was, and collected Dino and Angelo, first aid was well under way for the injured men, while the others, in the time honoured way, smoked cigarettes provided by their erstwhile enemies.



## Chapter 9

By the time they were all back in the trees and had begun to calm down after that euphoric few moments when they realised they'd survived a daring and successful attack, a hasty conference was convened.

The principal order of business, after a unanimous vote of thanks to Jacko and the gods of war, was what to do next. Brownlow pointed out that it was likely that an enormous explosion such as they'd just confected would be noticed by the Germans, who might well be more than cross at the loss of their gigantic toy, and who would very likely want to have a serious word with the culprits.

The motion to scarper was passed without dissent and the men quickly made ready to march back to their trucks. As they worked, they discussed the dilemma about what to do with the Germans. The men who'd been wounded by the blast had been moved into the lee of the railway cutting: they weren't going anywhere in a hurry, but that left the three uninjured soldiers. They couldn't be brought along, and they couldn't be shot, so the only option was to leave them there. They'd be harmless enough, and when the Germans came to investigate, they could at least confirm that the damage had been done by soldiers and not partisans, so Dodd didn't need to worry about the Germans taking reprisals.

They were about ready to move back to the hidden trucks when Dodd called Brownlow to one side and whispered an enquiry. Brownlow stroked his chin for a second before nodding, and Dodd then turned and spoke to their new Scottish friend.

'So, er, Jacko, what now for you? We're going to be staying behind the lines for a while, trying for a bit more fun and games.' He wafted an arm back towards the devastation behind them. 'We'd be happy for you to come with us, you know.'

An awkward silence arose while Jacko became the centre of attention. He, in turn, rubbed his chin.

‘Aye, well, that’s a verra tempting offer, mister, that it is. But there’s ma beasts tae think aboot, ye ken? Ah cannae jes’ go wanderin’ off an’ leave ‘em, can Ah? It’d no be fair tae the people that looked after me back yon, an’ fed me since. No, mister, if ye’ll no be upset, Ah’ll jes’ dwell here, see tae the beasts, if Ah ken find the wee bassarts after that explosion, an’ gie ‘em back tae the people when our lot come past, all right?’

That settled, there was a small and slightly awkward ceremony as Jacko was farewelled, each man in turn surreptitiously slipping him a bit of food and the smokers donated some tobacco too. In the end, they had to empty a haversack to give him something to carry it all in. Jacko then made a short speech, hefted his pack, turned downhill to search for his beasts.

A scatter of wind driven snow brought the curtain down on Jacko: the last the men heard of him was his rendition of Mairi’s Wedding fading into the trees.

They let Jacko get well clear – they didn’t want him complaining that they were spooking his goats - as if they might need any more frightening than they’d just had with the blast from the gigantic explosion - then set off back to where they’d hidden the trucks. In any case, Dodd didn’t want Jacko to know that they would be heading north instead of the more sensible direction for a successful raiding party, south, towards the Allied armies, or west, towards the coast. Not that he didn’t trust the Scotsman, but the Germans would quite likely put out search parties, and if they found Jacko, it would be best if he had no idea where they’d gone. Of course, with his all but incomprehensible accent, the Germans would be hard pressed to understand him even if he tried to tell them.

While Burgess set about putting up his ariel wire, the deflated mood of the group reflected the gloomy winter dusk after all the excitement of the attack.

The men half interestedly watched Burgess scramble onto the cab roof of the Chevrolet, which had a little ladder and platform for the purpose, then dangle the wire from the branch of a tree. He then clambered down and set up the radio on its own little table in the back of the Chevrolet, connected the battery and fiddled with various knobs before, conscious of a fascinated audience, he threw the power switch with a small flourish. A couple of dials began to glow and the radio emitted a low hum. Burgess switched on a small light set into the carcass of the radio, studied the dials, nodded to himself, and positioned his notepad and pencil, then ostentatiously checked the good quality wristwatch he'd been presented with on concluding his radio training. He checked the settings once more and turned to Dodd. 'Coupla minutes, Boss. Just right, eh?'

The tension grew as those who had watches moved their wrists so the watch faces were illuminated by the dim light from the radio, and gave each other increasingly concerned glances. Burgess sat, his small movements showing his nervousness at this, his first operational communication, as he moved the notepad a fraction, checked his watch again, then minutely moved the morse key, and finally satisfied, at six precisely, he grasped the morse key handle with one hand and reached for the "transmit" switch with the other.

'Right, Skipper. Ready when you are.'

There was a long silence when Dodd, aware of the attention on him, suddenly realised he wasn't prepared, didn't have the first idea. He took a half pace back, a bit off balance, as though someone had unexpectedly shoved him gently in the chest. At the same time, it occurred to Burgess that he should have asked Dodd for the text to send earlier. 'Sorry, Boss' he said, pulling a grimace, 'I should've got you to say what you wanted to send.'

Still bewildered, Dodd muttered 'Not your fault, Burgess. Not your fault. What happens now?'

‘Well, nothing, really Boss. They’ll be listenin’, but they won’t shut down if we’re not dead on. An’ we’ve not started sendin’ yet. They’ll prob’ly give it five or ten minutes before they lose interest. So, if you’ll think what to say, I’ll send when you’re ready, eh?’

Dodd was staggered. He’d expected to be handed a telephone handset – he’d even had his hand half held out waiting to be given it - so as to simply speak to the operator back in Anzio: he’d thought he might even be able to talk to Colonel Bullivant. He certainly wasn’t ready to dictate something formal for Burgess to pass on. Half panicking, he began to spout a rambling story of their days behind the lines when Burgess stopped him. ‘Er, Boss, we can’t send all that. I gotta send morse, yer know. We’ll be ‘ere all night, which is a very bad thing to do. For a start, it’d use a lot o’ battery, an’ we need to be a bit sparin’ with that, and second, o’course, the longer we’re transmittin’ the better chance jerry ‘as o’ gettin’ a fix on us, yeah? So, summing nice an’ short, eh?’

The other men looked away, embarrassed for Dodd, though this unexpected stringency hadn’t occurred to them either, except Green, who had received some training as the backup radio man.

Dodd did his rubbing the forehead gesture then patted the air, to signal “give me a minute.” After a moment, he made another familiar movement, the single clap, as though to say he was back in charge of himself, and began ‘Right, Burgess, are you ready?’ A nod from Burgess, who had his back to Dodd, poised over his notepad. ‘All right. Send this. We have located the gun at map reference, er ... Sar’ Major?’ Brownlow was ready and passed Burgess a slip of paper. Dodd nodded thanks and continued ‘The gun was sheltered at the base of a cliff and disguised as railway trucks. We have destroyed the gun and brought the cliff down on top of it. That completes the first part of our mission. We await your orders. Signed, Major Dodd. There, how’s that, Burgess? All right?’

Burgess thought briefly about sending his own version, but decided that Dodd would have to learn about brevity, and he might as well start now.

‘Sorry, Skipper, still much too long. That’d take me plenty long enough for jerry to get a fair ol’ fix on us, if ‘e’s listenin’. I’m not that quick, y’see. What we need is summing like “Target ref 696097 destroyed. Await further orders. Dodd” Are you with me, Boss?’

Relieved, Dodd put a relieved hand on Burgess’s shoulder and said ‘Thanks, John, I’m grateful. Send that, please.’

It was Burgess’ turn to be nervous: a shiny film appeared on his forehead as he tapped out his call sign, “Doddforce”, repeated it, then keyed the message. He stumbled a bit, but got through it all right and sat back, puffing out his cheeks and wiping his brow as he received congratulations from his mates.

‘Excellent, John, well done. Er, what happens now?’

‘Well, they know we’ll be listenin’ out at eighteen thirty, so we wait ‘til then, eh?’ Burgess flicked the power switch to “off”, nodded to the world in general, then reached for his tobacco and asked ‘Right, then, any chance of a cuppa for the workers?’

The minutes ticked by and tension built up again as the men crowded round the radio, huddled round the glow from the radio’s little lamp like witches round a cauldron. At a couple of minutes to the half hour Burgess reached forward and turned the radio set back on to give it time to warm up, then ostentatiously moved his note pad half an inch until it was just as he liked it.

The faint hum was joined by a quiet crackle of static as Burgess switched to “receive,” then suddenly enough that several of the listeners started, an American voice came clearly: ‘Home to Doddforce. Home to Doddforce. Acknowledge. Over.’

Burgess switched to “send” tapped out a reply, then switched back to “receive.”

‘All right’ came the voice. ‘Your eighteen hundred received. Well done. You are cleared for Objective Two. Repeat, Objective Two. Maintain contact schedule. Home, out.’

The voice was replaced by static, and then by silence as Burgess turned the radio off.

Kelly now had a kerosene lamp ready and lit it, turning the cloud of steamy breath in the truck into a sickly yellow miasma. There was a communal sense of relaxation, even from the Italians, who had no idea what had been said. Except from Dodd, who was still peeved and complained, ‘Tell me, Burgess, why is it that they can speak to us, but I can’t speak to them?’

Burgess noted that only a minute ago, he’d been John but now he was quickly back to being Burgess. How the mighty are fallen. ‘See, Boss, it’s all a question of power. It takes a lot less power to send morse than it does to send voice. Yer can get problems with atmospherics if yer sendin’ voice, but morse, that’ll get through a lot more reliable. And’ he added, getting into his stride, ‘Morse is less liable to bein’ mis’eard. So, Morse code’s not really a code at all – it’s just a way o’ changin’ letters into ...’ He saw from Dodd’s expression this was not a good time for a lecture, and got back to the point. ‘Any rate, it’s to do with the signal strength as well. They’ve got plenty o’ power, an’ we ‘aven’t, so we ‘ave to send morse. Simple’s that, really.’

Burgess realised that Dodd was still smarting over his earlier embarrassment and tried to change the subject. ‘So, Boss, what’s this about Objective Two?’

Everybody turned their attention to Dodd again, and again, he looked confused for a second. The men could see him thinking “Now, Objective Two. I wonder what that is?” until suddenly, his face cleared, happy to put the whole experience behind him.

‘Ah, yes, Objective Two. I’m pretty sure that’s, er, I’ll just check the orders.’ He climbed into the cabin of the truck and came back waving his satchel.

‘Now, let’s see.’ He tipped the contents into his hand, to find several smaller envelopes, each clearly numbered. He found the one with a large “2” and replaced the others before opening it and studied the single page of typing. ‘Yes, here we are. Objective Two. All right, we’re to find somewhere overlooking the main road from Rome to the south, and report on traffic.’

This was received in a glum silence.

“Hmm. Not really our preferred activity, eh, chaps?”

There were plenty of mumbles of agreement with that: the men felt the thing they were best at, as they’d shown several times, was destroying stuff.

Watson spoke for everybody. ‘What, nothing about a bit of demolition, sir?’

Dodd sympathised, but replied ‘There it is, Watson – we do what we’re asked to do.’ He turned to Brownlow. ‘Well, no real surprise, I imagine, Sar’ Major, after your story about the Long Range Desert Group patrol?’

‘No, Boss, it’s much as we might expect. Like I said before, the LRDG was originally formed to do exactly that – report on enemy traffic – that and checking the terrain for possible routes through the desert for armour. Wouldn’t be surprised if we get told to do that as well, only through the hills.’

This was met with groans, but Brownlow was having none of that.

‘Come on now lads, you know this stuff’s important. We’ve been given a job: it’s up to us to get on with, all right?’

Reluctant nods, and Brownlow continued ‘And remember the LRDG patrols: if we find something that needs blowing up while we’re at it, well, that’ll be a bonus, eh?’

The mood of euphoria had well and truly dissipated by now, and as the men went about their evening tasks, they muttered to each other about the utter stupidity of their orders. Fancy setting a crew of pirates, no, experts, such as themselves, to counting trucks and not even letting them blow a few up from

time to time! It was ridiculous. They were so upset that nobody noticed the odd flake of snow finding its way through the pines.

Brownlow let them get on with it: he knew that moaning and squaddies went hand in hand, even if they weren't really squaddies any more - not since they'd got their promotions - and sat in the cab of his truck, studying his map by the light of a torch. Interested, Dodd clambered up beside him. Brownlow grunted acknowledgement but continued to study the map. Dodd let him continue for a bit before breaking the companionable silence.

'Any thoughts, Sar' Major?'

'Yeah, well, my first thought, Skipper, is this maps a right fuckin' shambles, beg pardon. Like I said before, no contour lines, see?'

He offered the map to Dodd, who waved it away. He was still a little out of sorts about getting caught out over the radio business, and he agreed with everybody else that they were not being put to their best use if they were to simply report on traffic. His ill temper came out in his response.

'Yes, well, that's as may be, but it's the only one we've got, isn't it. So you must do the best you can.'

But as he said it, Dodd realised he sounded like a petulant child and sighed. He rubbed his face with his hands and tried again.

'Sorry, Sar' major. I'm just a bit, er, well ...you know.' He left the sentence unfinished, and continued 'So, what do you think?'

Brownlow understood how Dodd felt and studied the skinny face for a second as he pondered yet again about how amazing it was that here was this back room intelligence wallah, never got his knees brown before the last few weeks, well, months now, and here he was, disappointed not to have been given orders to lead his team of odds and sods on more demolition work. He smiled at Dodd, acknowledging the



apology, and replied “Yeah, well, it’s a rubbish map all right, but like you say, it’ll have to do, eh?”

He spread the map out between them, and shone the torch.

‘Close as I can reckon, we’re about here,’ pointing towards the town of Velletri, and this is the main road, right?’ Dodd nodded and Brownlow continued, “I reckon we need to get across towards this area here.” He prodded the map. ‘See this junction where these two main roads join? What’s that say? Morati, is it? Well, if we can find ourselves a nice snug spot up near there, that’d be good, eh?’

Dodd studied the map. ‘Hmm. That sounds excellent. How far would you say that would be?’

‘I reckon maybe thirty kilometres, according to the scale.’ Then, unable to resist showing off his newly learned skills, ‘Say, oh, twenty miles or thereabouts.’

‘Oh, good, good. But I see we’re on the south of the road and you’re suggesting we need to be north of it, so we’ll need to cross it, I suppose?’

‘Well, Boss, like I said, there’s no contour lines on the map, so I can’t be sure, but the sea’s here,’ he prodded the map, ‘and the mountains are here,’ the finger swept over the road, ‘so the other side’s higher than this side. That make sense to you?’

‘Yes, absolutely. I’m just a bit worried about getting the trucks across a main road full of Germans.’

Brownlow winced. ‘Yeah, well, can’t be helped, can it? Any rate, we’ve crossed a road before, haven’t we? We’ve even joined in a German convoy, so how hard can this one be? Still, best we put on a positive wassname eh? We don’t want the boys getting nervous, do we?’

When Dodd and Brownlow returned, they found the men dejected. There was the natural let down after the excitement of the attack, then the news that they were to shift to a passive role as observers. Nevertheless, everybody perked up a bit when told they were to cross the main road used by the German convoys.

Who knew? Maybe there'd be something to shoot at, or better still, blow up as they went?

They got their evening meal sorted and Tullett and Green trudged back to the remnants of the gun to check on the injured men and give them all some food and blankets on the basis they didn't know how long it would be before the Germans came to investigate.

By the time they got back and reported that snow was falling harder now, and they'd helped the relatively fit Germans to move the injured into shelter, everything was organised for an early start the next day. The plan was to get as close to the crossing point as they could during daylight, and have time to study the landscape and traffic before they lost the light, then make the crossing in darkness.

It was just as well they'd made the move in daylight. Working with Brownlow's inadequate map, and in difficult terrain, they made several false moves, often into dead end gullies, then they had a hell of a job getting back out. Often as not, the map just had no connection with the reality on the ground, sometimes showing tracks where there were none, or so badly overgrown as to be impassable, and sometimes not showing a track at all, so Brownlow became increasingly frustrated, finding it all but impossible to understand where they were. Eventually, they took to sending out an advance party so they at least avoided lurching the vehicles up blind gullies. Many times, Brownlow thanked the gods and the Americans for giving him the wonderful four wheel drive Chevrolet – the British army Bedford was a great workhorse, but it certainly wouldn't have coped with the rugged conditions they were struggling through. This country was far worse than what they'd encountered before, when they at least could clearly see the track in front of them. In fact, more than once, they had to use the Chevy to tow Angelo's truck over particularly rough ground.

But in the end, with much cursing, sweating, even in the freezing conditions, and a frustrated hat stamping performance from Angelo, Brownlow saw Watson, who was doing a stint as half an advance party, standing across the ghost of a track, giving a calm but emphatic stop signal.

Watson walked back to Brownlow's window. 'Brilliant job, Sarge.' Watson had finally managed to stop addressing the sergeant major by his full title.

'The road is about a hundred, hundred and fifty yards in front of us. Johnnie's up there having a scout around. He's trying to find something to place us a bit more precisely. I imagine you'd like to have a bit of a prowls yourself before it gets dark?'

'Yeah, certainly would, young Watson. Anything to get out and have a stretch, eh?' He turned to Dodd. 'You coming, Boss? No, come to think of it, maybe it's best if just me and Watson ... ?'

Dodd nodded gratefully. He'd be happy to stretch his legs, but he thought he'd be more likely to get in the way than be able to add anything.

'I'll get the boys organised, eh, Sar' Major? Get a camp sorted out, and so forth.'

Brownlow, equally happy that he didn't have to be worrying about keeping the major out of trouble, gave Dodd a nod and turned to Watson.

'All right, lad, let's see what you've got for me.'

Brownlow clambered down from the cab and recoiled as the wind threw a flurry of snow in his face. Watson led him carefully upwards, slipping and scrambling through scrubby trees, to where Burgess was waiting, huddled behind a tree.

'Ello, Sarge, fuckin' cold eh?'

'You're not wrong, son. I thought you were having a sniff about? So, what've you got for me?'

‘Well, the road’s another thirty yards or so further up. Proper road it is, too. But I seen nothin’ that’d tell us where we are though. Come an’ ‘ave a dekkio.’

The three of them carefully moved through the timber, once again grateful for their fieldcraft training, stopping a few yards in from the edge of the road. From there, Brownlow could see that Burgess was correct: while the surface was mostly hidden under a thickening skim of snow, there were parts still shielded by overhanging trees that revealed that it *was* a proper road, properly sealed and wide enough for two large vehicles to pass, at a squeeze. Burgess nudged Brownlow. ‘See what I mean, Sarge? Better’n that bloody cart track we was on comin’ round the mountain, eh, an’ miles better’n that bastard thing down from Angelo’s ‘ideout, eh? That was right fuckin’ rubbish, that one, eh?’

‘All right, all right, don’t keep on. Seen any traffic?’

‘Nah, Sarge, but we only been ‘ere a couple o’ minutes ain’t we? I reckon we should ‘ang about a bit, yeah?’

‘Yep. Watson, just nip back down and tell Mr Dodd what we’re doing, there’s a good lad, and bring Ted back, if he’s interested.’

By the time Watson came back, with Kelly in tow, snow was being swirled this way and that in the gusty wind. Brownlow glanced skywards and addressed Kelly. ‘What do you think, Ted?’

The gangling Australian pulled his slouch hat down hard and replied ‘Mate, I’m not the best person to talk to about snow. Ain’t hardly seen it before, have I? Is it good for us, or bad, d’you reckon?’

‘Well, depends if it keeps up, I suppose. If it’s only light, or stops soon, I don’t suppose it’ll matter much, but I dunno,’ he pulled the collar of his greatcoat closer, ‘my feeling is this is set in for a bit, then it depends if it settles, and it’s well cold enough. So, my guess is, we’re in for a ..... Wait! What’s that?’

All three heads came up, ears pricked, eyes scrunched against the wind.

‘Yeah,’ Kelly acknowledged, ‘traffic.’

Nobody needed to be told to ease back further down into the trees as the rumble of an oncoming southbound convoy ground closer, though there was little chance of being spotted: it was full dark now and the snow was getting heavier by the second: the German drivers would be having enough trouble staying on the road without scanning the surroundings for spectators.

The convoy rumbled closer, and sounded as though it was right on top of them before the lights of the leading truck gave the falling snow in front of them a golden glow. The vehicle emerged through the swirling flakes like some half blind monster gingerly picking its way between the trees. They could clearly see the face of the driver, pushed forwards, almost touching the glass as he peered through the small triangle swept by the windscreen wipers, which were not coping well with the sudden heavy onslaught. The vehicles loomed above the men as they crouched below the level of the road, their noise emphasised by their elevation above the watchers. Somehow, the sprinkle of snow on them made the trucks seem more aggressive, more menacing: the soldiers involuntarily shied back.

More and more vehicles chugged past until it seemed there was an endless, remorseless stream, which included fuel tankers and monster after monster carrying tanks, seemingly even more enormous when seen from this viewpoint. Kelly began to wonder how the Allies ever thought they could possibly withstand such force, never mind defeat it, while Brownlow, more practical, realised that the Germans must have been bringing reinforcements into Italy from all over Europe, so were taking the business of holding on to Italy very seriously. If nothing else, Brownlow thought, the Allied invasion of Italy must be having an important strategic influence in France and eastern Europe too.

Eventually, after what seemed to be an entire armoured army passing, the last truck ground past.

The four of them stayed rooted to the spot for a while after the clatter and oily miasma of the trucks had died away, leaving their surroundings with that eerie muffled silence that only snow brings. The stillness was broken by a whispered ‘Compliments o’ Mr Dodd, Sarge, an’ can we get a brew on now? We’re gettin’ well fuckin’ cold back there.’

Brownlow and Kelly exchanged tight grins and Brownlow replied ‘Oh, sorry about that, Tullett, we forgot. It’s nice and warm up here. We were thinking of having a bit of a wassname, weren’t we, Ted? Sunbathe.’

Tullett mumbled something under his breath that sounded like ‘Bollocks’ before Brownlow took pity. ‘Yeah, OK, son, go and get a brew on. We’ll be there directly. We just need to try to find if this track carries on over the other side. We won’t be long.’ He turned to Kelly and, with eyebrows raised, flicked his head first one way then the other. His meaning was clear. Kelly said ‘Righto Sarge, I’ll go that way. You coming, Johnny?’

Burgess was surprised. He’d assumed that if Kelly chose a companion, he’d pick Watson, his demolition offsider, but was happy enough to be selected himself. Brownlow began to kick a small pile of snow and dirt together. The others watched, sharing nervous glances. For just a second, they all shared the same thought: had the Sar’ Major gone a bit potty and started making a snowman? But then they realised he was raising a marker before trudging off the other way with Watson in tow.

Relieved, Kelly grinned at Burgess and off they went, leaning into the wind and swirling snow.

Soon, all nine men were huddled round Dodd’s little stove, grateful for any extra warmth, however miniscule.

Kelly had nothing to report: struggling into the wind, they’d been flat out keeping on the road, never mind looking for a side track. The snow was falling fast enough that already, the

roadway was well covered and the tracks of the German vehicles had all but disappeared, and as the wind spun and eddied, visibility was sometimes down to a matter of yards. It was easier coming back, with the wind: at least they could clearly see the edges of the roadway because it cut a path through the foliage and the very edge was denoted by a dip in the snow that indicated a shallow channel on each side.

Brownlow had been luckier: only fifty yards along, he'd seen the side track he was looking for, or rather, the negative of it, as it were. Its presence was denoted only a narrow avenue without trees, although the branches of the surrounding trees met overhead, making the track tunnel-like and gloomy as it snaked away and upwards.

He recounted his story to the group.

'So there it is, Boss. I dunno if it's *the* track we want, but it's *a* track, and its going where we want it to, north-ish and upwards. So, I reckon all we have to do is get the vehicles up as close to the road as we can, wait for a convoy going north, then when they've gone we turn left onto the road and follow 'em along 'til we get to the turn, then off we go. Simple, eh?'

He studied the faces that were peering at him from the cave of their greatcoats, and waited while the plan was related to the Italians, and the others thought about it.

'Well, it certainly sounds easy enough,' mused Dodd. 'Are you sure you'll be able to find the track again if this lot keeps up?' He raised his eyes skywards.

'Yeah, Boss, We're confident about that, aren't we Bill?'

Watson, as usual, glowed at being called by his first name. 'We built a little pile of snow and sticks. Any rate, the snow's pretty light in among the trees, same as round here. Can't miss it, can you, Billy?' Watson simpered. 'So I reckon, first thing is to get the trucks moved right up close as we can, soon as we can, and make sure we're ready for the first opportunity, eh? I'd imagine there'll be plenty of traffic: this weather works both ways for the jerries. Keeping moving in these conditions'll be

murder for the drivers, o’course, but they’ll be safe from air attack, so they’ll be wanting to move as much as they can while it lasts.’

During a lull in the traffic, they carefully brought the vehicles up as near the road as they dared: their main concern was that, while the trucks might be invisible when the snow was falling heavily, it would be a bit embarrassing if there was a break in the fall just as a convoy was passing, so they played safe. There seemed to be many convoys going south, but only a few northbound – only a couple, so far, and they’d come and gone before Dodd’s miniature column was ready to move.

The darkness didn’t seem to matter much if the snow kept on, and it kept coming, heavier if anything, to the extent that Brownlow went out to make sure his little mound was still visible. Just as well: his tiny mountain was almost submerged, so he built it up a bit more. And just as well he’d done the same for the first marker on the way out, too. In the snow, and the dark, it wouldn’t have been hard to trudge straight past it.

The waiting was getting harder. There was nothing to do but hang about – they didn’t want to be unprepared when the next northbound column came, so couldn’t get a hot meal or even a mug of tea. Only Brownlow and Angelo had anything to do, and that was to start and run the engines for a few minutes every so often: they certainly didn’t need an engine to refuse to start when the moment came.

Infuriatingly, the muffled silence returned, except for the occasional quiet *ooosh* as a pile of snow slithered from a branch. But finally, the moment came. A column of vehicles was approaching from the south.

Green was crouched as close as he dared to the road, waiting for the last German vehicle to pass, and Burgess stood further back, watching him intently. Everybody else was in their assigned places in the trucks: Dodd and Brownlow in the Chevy with all



the kit, and Angelo and Dino in the cab of his faithful truck, with the other three in the back, all wishing they could see what was going on.

A minute passed, then two, then three. The tension was getting to everybody, but there was nothing to be done, except wait for Green's approaching vehicle.

The last truck disappeared into the gloom. Green's face was pinched by the cold, and from the strain of listening, but he was finally satisfied and waved to Burgess, who passed on the wave. Instantly, Brownlow started his engine and moved carefully upwards, checking in his mirror that Angelo was moving too. The Chevy surpassed itself, making light of getting across the little cutting at the roadside and within seconds, lurched onto the roadway. Brownlow moved his vehicle cautiously, watching as Angelo brought his truck up to the road. The front wheels moved over the gutter easily. Brownlow held his breath as the back wheels dipped into the drain. The wheels began to spin and the old truck lurched sideways, throwing a rooster tail of snow and ice behind it. Green and Burgess, who were due to jump aboard, came up and put their shoulders to the tailboard. That was enough: after a second or two the tyres found enough grip to push the truck onto the road and the two helpers were dragged aboard by their mates.

Brownlow whooped: that was the first bit done.

The windscreen wipers struggled to keep a clear area, and Brownlow had a sudden pang of sympathy for the German drivers who'd been struggling through these conditions for hours, and had nothing to look forward to except many more. Still, sniffed Brownlow, better than getting strafed or bombed. He turned his attention back to the job at hand, sharing his gaze between the road ahead and his mirror, to check on Angelo's progress. And soon, he had another concern – to look out for his little roadside marker that indicated the side track. It'd be hard

enough in daylight, trying to peer through this blizzard, but, now, at night, well ...

He'd hardly had time to get settled, then there it was! Brilliant! He pointed it out to Dodd, checked one final time that Angelo was visible behind him, then turned off the road. Immediately, Brownlow knew there was trouble: the Chevy staggered as the front wheels hit the gully, lurched far more than when they'd crossed the other one onto the road. Brownlow cursed himself: why hadn't he thought to check the depth? Oh, well, too late now, and in any case, the four wheel drive truck handled it easily. Brownlow gave it a gentle bit of extra throttle, the front wheels spinning a little as they pulled themselves out, then another stagger when the rears reached the gully, but they found grip too and the truck bounded forward, as if to say, "Easy! Piece of piss, mate."

But Brownlow wasn't concerned about the Chevy – he'd seen what these things could cope with back in the Western Desert. He was more worried about Angelo, and rightly so. Watching in his mirror, he held his breath as Angelo's front wheels thudded into the drop, and realised just how deep the gully was – more of a shallow ditch, really – but, to his delight, the front wheels came up onto the level again. But that was it: the truck shuddered sideways as the rear wheels sunk and spun, unable to find traction, digging themselves ever deeper into the ground.

The men who'd been riding in the back of the truck understood what had happened and spilled out to help push, but by this time, the back wheels were pretty much up to the axle in half frozen mud. Kelly signalled to Angelo to stop the wheels spinning – that was only making things worse. He thought of putting out a lookout, but what would be the point? If the Germans came, they came. He got the men, including Dino, pushing rhythmically in an attempt to rock the truck out, but it was just too heavily loaded, and too deeply stuck.

In the meantime, Brownlow had seen what was going on and realised that without help, the ancient Italian vehicle was going nowhere. Luckily, the tow rope was handy, having been used several times already to assist Angelo, and Brownlow jumped down, calling for Green, who'd already acted as his assistant in connecting the rope.

Dodd, too anxious to sit still, clambered down as well and stood between the two trucks, wondering what to do. He watched as Brownlow took one end of the rope and quickly slipped the eye of the rope onto the tow hook, but Green, his hands all but frozen, struggled to control his end of the thick rope. Brownlow was on his way to help when finally Green stood and signalled that his end was also connected, so Brownlow turned back and scrambled back into his cab.

'When you're ready, Sir!' yelled Brownlow and Dodd immediately grasped what Brownlow meant – should have thought of it himself, he muttered tetchily as he moved a few paces towards the Italian vehicle and shouted to the men to push on his signal, then yelled the same in Italian. He raised an arm, took one quick glance – everyone seemed set – and dropped the arm, like the starter of a race. Immediately, both engines roared, the tow rope sprung taut, the men behind the truck pushed hard against the tailboard, getting sprayed with snow and mud. Nothing seemed to happen for a second, but suddenly, with a great heave like a camel raising itself to stand, Angelo's truck lurched out of the gulley and into the shelter of the trees.

Delighted at not having to unload the vehicle to extricate it, the men on foot all punched and hugged each other, and ran to the vehicles, which had stopped a little further up. They trudged up to rejoin the trucks and when they got there the congratulatory hugs and handshakes started all over again. Until, that is, first one of them then the others, turned to look back down the slope.

Up here, in among the pines, little snow had penetrated as far as the ground, but down at the roadway, everything was pristine white, the grooves in the snow worn by the German

trucks having been coated anew by snow. Everything, that is, except where Angelo's truck had left a wide gouge, starkly black against the snow where the wheels had spun along the line of the gully. It couldn't have been clearer if they'd put up a sign "Clandestine trucks went this way."

Dodd muttered 'Oh dear,' and Tullett added 'Yeah. 'Kin' 'ell.' Both comments were appropriate. Everybody did what they thought was best: Brownlow and Angelo stayed with their vehicles, in case a quick getaway was needed: Kelly collected two Brens and, handing one to Burgess, they went to stand watch, while the others, including Dodd, clumped back down to the gaping wound in the snow and began to patch it as best they could with more snow.

After a few minutes, they'd at least managed to make things look a little less obvious, but Kelly came trotting back, said 'Convoy coming' and called to Burgess to come back.

They all scampered back up to the vehicles and swarmed in, but Brownlow was now reluctant to start moving the trucks, reckoning they'd be safer way back here as long as they didn't draw attention to themselves. So they waited, peering downwards as another column ground its way past.

The men waited anxiously as the convoy approached and as they watched, their makeshift repair to the snowscape began to seem ever more obvious. It began to seem to the culprits that the scar would be impossible to miss.

But for the German drivers, they were just grateful to stay on the road, and of course, if one of them had noticed the bedraggled patch of snow at the roadside, what would they have cared, or done about it?

And Brownlow had been right: it was true what they had been taught in fieldcraft training. Often as not, the best thing to do was simply to stay still: the eye was much better at spotting movement than it was at seeing something unexpected.

As usual, the convoy seemed to take ages to grind it's way past, but eventually, the sight and sound ebbed away and the men relaxed, clambering out of the vehicles for a further round of congratulations.

Tullett mentioned to his boyhood friend, Burgess, 'Kin' 'ell, Johnnie, that was well fuckin' scary, down at the ditch, eh? I was pissin' meself in case a fuckin' jerry convoy come along right then, eh?'

'That right? I didn' really think about it' Burgess lied. 'Any rate, just as well yer didn' piss yerself – yer'd ha' turned the road into a bloody ice rink, eh?'

The two men stared at each other for a long moment, then turned to Kelly. 'Hey, Ted, we got plenty o' water?'

A few minutes later, Tullett and Burgess found themselves slithering down the slope, each staggering under the weight of a five gallon water can.

They skirted round the damaged area as best they could, though it was already healing below the fall of snow, and began to pour the water over the road. Ten gallons of water doesn't sound very much, but it began to freeze as soon as it hit the ground, and soon spread into a quite satisfactory patch of ice.

Chortling like mischievous schoolboys, they tottered back up to the others, and were bitterly disappointed that Brownlow wouldn't let them stay to see the results.

They were well clear when the next convoy came past. They'd have been frustrated to see the first truck do a minor slither as it hit the ice, but the driver caught it in time, and it straightened and carried on. But the driver of the second vehicle, an enormous mobile crane, saw the front vehicle slide, hit the brakes a little too hard and his machine performed a lazy sideways glide as the wheels locked and lost traction. The left wheels dropped into the ditch, exactly where Angelo's wheels had scooped it out. Desperate now, the driver put his foot down to try to force the monster wheels out of the gully, but he was too

late, and only turned a poor situation into a disaster. The tyres spun and bit, but the momentum of the vehicle forced it further left: the left wheels climbed out to the forest side of the drain but this forced the top heavy vehicle to lean to the right, then more, before, graceful as a ballerina's dying swan, slumping onto its side, back onto the road, completely blocking it.

Ironically enough, if it had been any other vehicle, the mobile crane itself would have been on hand to make short work of shifting almost anything else out of the way. As it was, all attempts to right it failed, and even the desperate move of shifting it off the roadway proved hopeless – it was just too big. A series of increasingly frantic radio calls eventually resulted in the discovery that the nearest mobile crane heavy enough to move the wreckage was in France, and would take days to get there. In the end, a team of engineers took to the blockage with welding torches, cutting it into bits capable of being dragged out of the way. The road was blocked for a full day.

## Chapter 10

Things were not all that much better for Dodd's vehicles. They found that as they ground their way upwards, the trees thinned out and as a result, the snow on the ground was thicker. The Chevy could cope all right, but Angelo had difficulty keeping up: the tow rope was in use as often as not. But if they left the ancient track and stayed among the more heavily forested terrain, trying to avoid the deeper snow, finding their way through the trees was slow and difficult.

In the end, Brownlow called a halt. After a short conference, it was decided that they should camp for the night where they were, in among a stand of pines where only a sprinkle of snow had got through, and they'd be invisible from the air, if ever the heavens cleared.

They felt confident enough that they wouldn't be seen that they lit a large fire between the two trucks and huddled round it, swigging an endless supply of tea while they waited for their supper to heat up.

The firelight skipped and skittered round them, making familiar faces grotesque and throwing dancing shadows against the sides of the vehicles.

'So, Sar' Major,' said Dodd, when they'd finished their meal, 'could you estimate how far we have to go?'

Brownlow grimaced. 'Boss, I wouldn't even like to guess where we are now, and since we're not really sure exactly where we want to be, the answer is, I have no idea. First thing is, I reckon, we need to try to estimate where we are, but even that's impossible while this shit keeps up, beg pardon, Mr Dodd, Sir. So all I can suggest is we sit it out 'til we can find, er, well, something that'll give us a clue.'

Dodd nodded, and the others followed suit. 'Yes, I see that.' He grinned a tight grin. 'What will we be looking for, exactly?'

Brownlow shrugged that universal shrug he'd picked up from the Italians. 'Dunno, Boss, 'til we find it. Something marked on the map: roads, railways, rivers, stuff like that. Best of all, a combination'd be good: railway crossing a road, or a road crossing a river. But looking at the map, I reckon we must be well above the road and the railway's even further away. And up here, there's no real rivers, just hundreds of little streams.'

He shrugged again. 'There is one thing that'd be ideal, though.' Dodd picked up the tone he'd used, and studied Brownlow's face.

'I get the impression I'm not going to like what you're about to suggest, Sar' Major.'

'Well, Skipper, there's one thing that'd show us exactly where we are, and maybe tell us exactly where we need to be so as to do our job and get a good look at the traffic on the road.' He paused, waiting for someone else to work it out, but just got curious looks, so had to carry on.

'A village, o' course! If we can find a village that's on this map, that'll do us just right, won't it? And we could likely get 'em to show us where to camp so we can overlook the road. Eh, Boss? Eh?'

The way Brownlow said it, it all seemed so obvious and uncomplicated, but Dodd wasn't convinced.

'What, we all just go driving down the street and ask a policeman?'

Brownlow was surprised: Dodd was usually so straightforward, and here he was being sarcastic. Brownlow sniffed a slightly disdainful sniff, a trick he'd unwittingly picked up from Green, and responded as though speaking to a child: 'Well, no. For a start off, we don't want to bring attention to ourselves, do we, so we'll walk in. And we won't all go, will we? That'd be daft. No, just you, Boss, and maybe Dino. You could just go in the pub and have a drink, bound to be a pub, eh, and get chatting to the locals, like. All you got to do is find out the name of the place and the direction to the main road. Pretty easy,



I'd think. Or maybe just Dino and Angelo, though I'm not too happy about leaving Angelo's truck without a driver, just in case.'

He left the question as to in case of what unsaid.

Dodd wasn't convinced, though. 'Look, maybe it'll come to that, but just now, it's ridiculous to try to go anywhere in this blizzard, let alone strolling into a village. Let's just get settled down for the night, and think again in the morning, eh?'

He did his "pay attention" clap before Brownlow could continue the discussion, and said 'Right, chaps, it's late and we're stuck here for the night, so let's get settled down. All right?'

No-one had a better suggestion so, with their customary mindless grumbling about nothing in particular, the men sorted themselves out for sleep.

But after a couple of hours, they did have something to grumble about. The wind was bitterly cold, and seemed to be crafty with it, gusting through the trees and sneaking through the tiniest gap in the canvas covers of the trucks load areas. And as soon as someone got frozen enough to get up and try to block the gap, another slit appeared elsewhere, to drive somebody else barmy. By the time a dim light began to creep in, they were all wearing everything they owned, wrapped in anything else that might help, and huddled together like puppies.

Green, who happened to be nearest the flap at the back, eased a gap and put his eye to it for a second. That was all it took. 'Still fuckin' snowing' he groaned. This was greeted with desolate shakes of the head, even by the Italians, who didn't need fluent English to understand the tone.

That set the tone for the day. Every so often, someone had to get out for a call of nature, and clambered back to report that he thought that maybe it was easing off a bit, but nobody cared much.

Then Brownlow made everybody jump by suddenly scrambling to his feet and shouting ‘Right, I’m fucking jack o’ this.’ He nudged people out of his way, sometimes none too gently, until he found what he was looking for, a spare canvas. He dragged it out of the truck and managed to create a makeshift shelter between the two vehicles, then trudged off into the trees. Kelly, realising that Brownlow was going to hunt for firewood, said ‘All right, boys. Let’s give a hand, eh? We’ll get the snow shifted from under the canvas so’s we can have somewhere dry to sit and a nice little bonfire ready for when the sarge gets back.’

Too dispirited even to bother complaining, the men followed him out while Dodd, in a scene reminiscent of the time back in the abandoned hut when they were all drenching in the rain, stirred himself to find a few tins of soup, and he and Kelly set it warming over the little stove.

Afterwards, sitting round the fire with a mug of hot soup inside them, and another canvas rigged to give them at least some respite from the biting wind, the men were grateful for the improvement, but the day still dragged on endlessly, and they were still there when the light began to fade once more.

Dodd made one or two attempts at getting conversation started, as much to take their minds of their discomfort as anything, but it was pretty much a losing battle until Brownlow, understanding what Dodd was trying to do, made his own contribution.

‘So, Skipper, what was it you did before the war that got you mixed up in this lot?’

That got the men’s attention – they’d often speculated about it but hadn’t felt it right to ask – and they pretended disinterest but exchanged furtive glances.

‘Well, Sar’ Major, I’d like to tell you about the top secret work I was doing, and so on, that’s simply not true, and really, it’s not much of a tale. You already know I’m fluent in Italian, having spent a good deal of time here as a young chap, and pretty

good in German too, so that was all it was, really. My work just didn't have anything to do with it.'

Silence descended again, then Brownlow pressed on, determined to keep conversation going. 'So what *was* your work, Boss? We know you were at university, but to be honest, that don't mean much to me.'

Dodd grimaced. 'Nothing very glamorous, you know. I'm sure some of you chaps had much more interesting work.' He looked round but then thought, no, probably not. 'I'm a lecturer, you know, or rather, was.'

But the men weren't going to let Dodd off the hook that easily. After all, Watson was the only one who had more than the most general idea of what happened at university, and they pressed for more information.

'What, was you one o' them professor chaps?' asked Brownlow. 'What did you actually *do*?'

'Well, no, I'm not a professor – they're senior to the likes of me. I'm with the Department of History -my area of expertise is the Medieval and Renaissance periods, let's say 1066 to about 1600. And if I'm honest, I'm particularly interested in Italian art of the Renaissance period.' He saw he wasn't making himself clear. 'Look: there are different opinions about what universities are for. Most people, the public and students, and so on, they think that universities are there to teach, a sort of senior school, as it were, while the people who work there, the academics, they're there for the research, mainly. Nobody goes to work at a university to teach, and many of them believe the actual teaching part of their duties is a mere annoying interruption to their own studies. Personally, I'm quite happy doing lectures and things like that, and I enjoy my research as well.'

For a moment, he was back in Oxford, his voice echoing round a crammed lecture room. He'd been a popular lecturer, in part because he had collected a mass of interesting yarns that brought the past back to life, and it had often struck him, as he scanned the bright, young and expectant faces of his students,

that there was nowhere else he'd rather be. But, with a frisson of shock, he now wondered if, after this adventure, he'd ever be able to regain his enthusiasm for teaching. Even the thought of the endless hours he'd happily devoted to his research seemed from here, a bit, well, pathetic really.

Shaking himself back to the present, he could already see bodies slumping in indifference as the men recalled their seemingly endless school history lessons, and tried to rekindle some interest. 'I know it sounds pretty boring now, but I find it fascinating. I liked to include stories of princes and kings, wars and disasters, and so on. I'll tell you one, if you like, just to pass the time?'

He didn't get a reaction, so hastily continued. 'Now, I'm going to tell you a crime story, a mystery story. I always tell my first year students this tale, though it's not strictly on the curriculum – I find it helps to bring history to life – and the whole story, with all the details, takes a couple of hours or more, but it gets a little bit technical for, er, popular consumption, so I'll try to give you the shortened version.'

He waited until Watson had finished translating for the Italians, then did his famous single hand clap and asked, 'Right, who knows about the Mona Lisa?'

Brownlow nibbled his lip: that name rang a faint bell with him, as it did with Green, but everybody else looked glum – all except Watson, who sat up straight and, childlike, thrust up his hand.

'Yes! I know! I've seen it! I was in Paris on a school excursion in '37, and we spent a day at the Louvre!'

Tullett coughed, but it sounded suspiciously like "Tosser!" and Watson mouthed 'Sorry, chum' to him. Tullett smiled acknowledgement.

But Dodd was pleased. It always helped to get at least one student involved – it encouraged the others. 'Excellent, Bill! Lovely! But I'm surprised Angelo and Dino haven't reacted. I

imagine they don't know her by that name. Try mentioning "La Gioconda."

The two Italians recognised that all right and suddenly took a greater interest in proceedings.

'Right, good. The painting we know as the Mona Lisa is properly called La Gioconda in Italian, or in French, La Joconde. She was painted by Leonardo da Vinci in about ...' Dodd realised he was already risking losing his audience, and corrected himself.

'All right, too much detail. Now, Bill, tell us what you thought of the most famous female portrait in the world.'

Watson's eyes half closed as he tried to recollect what he'd seen. By the time the outing had trudged to the right room, even the keenest students were getting a little bored and Watson's memory was clouded, to say the least. 'Er, it wasn't very big, I seem to remember,' he said, uncertainly.

'That's right, she's only about thirty inches by twenty. Nothing else you recall? No? All right, what about the museum itself? What do you remember about that?'

Watson was on more confident ground with that one. 'Now that, I *can* tell you. Apparently, the Louvre is the largest museum in the world – and I can believe that – it's absolutely enormous! Our guide said it was longer than two Eiffel towers, but that didn't mean much to us, so we worked out it's over seven hundred yards long – that's thirty two cricket pitches end to end. And the chap told us there are vast underground storage vaults as well, that were originally the caves that gave the building its name, *loup* and *vivre*, where wolves live, you see.'

He grimaced, waiting for another "cough" from Tullett, but it didn't come.

Dodd was delighted that Watson had helped him to paint the picture, and took up the narrative again. 'And there was almost no security: there were at least eight exit doors, no alarm system, a hundred pass keys that opened every door were floating around the building, and the staff was poorly trained.

Hard to imagine isn't it? It seems incredible now, but even the most valuable works were not secured in any way. Amazing, eh? Never mind there being no alarms, the pictures were just hooked onto the walls and the statues were free standing! Apparently, the building was not fire proof and the directors were more worried about fire than theft.

'But Mona Lisa was protected a bit: she was in a glass case, but that was not for security – it was there simply to stop people kissing her!

'At any rate, the museum closed as usual on the Sunday afternoon and on Monday 21 August, 1911, was closed, also as usual on a Monday, for cleaning and maintenance. On the Tuesday, when it reopened, nobody even noticed Mona Lisa was gone at first. It was only when an artist who'd been painting a copy - a perfectly common and accepted thing to do: the museum encouraged it and even had a special room where the copyists could store their materials - came to continue his work and found the painting missing, so he asked the attendant where it was. The attendant assumed that the photographers had taken it. You see, the gallery photographers would simply take the picture they wanted to photograph to their studio without having to get permission or even tell anyone they'd taken it. Not only that, but they might keep it for days or weeks. Unbelievable, really. It was only when the artist went to ask the photographers how long they would be needing it, and they replied that they didn't have it, that bells began to ring, or rather, didn't, because there was no alarm system.'

Dodd always liked that little joke: it invariably got a laugh, and today was no exception.

'The Louvre was closed immediately, of course. The immediate theory was that Mona Lisa must have been hidden in the Louvre to hold the government to ransom, and a thorough search of the entire building was set in train.'

Burgess broke in. 'Yeah, fat chance, eh? Whackin' big place like that, lookin' for a rolled up little tube o' canvas!'

‘Well, it wasn’t quite as bad as that, John. The picture was painted on a wooden panel, you see, so it did have a bit of bulk to it. Even so, after every little nook and cranny had been searched, all that was found was the glass case that had protected Mona Lisa, along with the picture’s antique frame, both tucked away in a stairwell. A single fingerprint was found on the glass frame. All employees were interrogated and fingerprinted, but nothing useful was learned. And mysteriously, a door knob from an interior door was also found in a garden outside the building. That was all.

‘Some authorities, including the mayor, now considered that the painting had been stolen by a gang of professional art thieves, and it was already on its way out of France, almost certainly to the USA. That was understandable. You see, at the turn of the century, the USA was paradise for fortune hunters: self made millionaires were everywhere, especially as there was no income tax to hold them back, looking for artworks to show off their newfound enormous wealth.

‘You know, only fifty years or so before the theft, Mona Lisa was valued at much less than many other pictures in the collection but around the eighteen fifties, her popularity took off. In 1850 she was merely another picture, but by 1878 she was described as the most celebrated work of Leonardo, and by 1910, she was the most renowned female portrait in the world. Having said that, until the theft, most ordinary people would not have recognised her, but afterwards, she became famous all round the world. She wasn’t in the Louvre, but she was everywhere else – in advertisements, in magazines, everywhere.’

Another pause for gentle laughter.

‘Now, when, after a week, the museum was reopened, there was an empty space on the wall where the painting had been. Before, there had never been a wait to enter but amazingly, now the queues stretched into the distance, simply to file past, contemplating the empty space where Mona Lisa had been!

‘And here’s another surprise! A few days later, a man went to the offices of the Paris-Journal, one of several papers that had offered rewards, but the only one that also offered anonymity, and sold them a small bust of a woman he said he’d stolen from the Louvre. He said he’d given the bust to a painter friend, a young chap called Pablo Picasso, and had since stolen another bust. He, of course, immediately became the prime suspect for the theft of the painting. Suspicion then fell on Picasso and his friend, a chap called Apollinaire and in fact, they did have two statuettes that had been stolen from the Louvre. When the news of the theft of the painting broke, they decided to get rid of the statuettes by throwing them in the Seine. Late one night, they started out but came back two hours later, still with the statuettes! They hadn’t plucked up the courage to do the deed. A couple of days later, they handed them in to the newspaper on condition of anonymity and it was never really sorted out whether the thief had stolen the pieces for a prank, or with a mind to sell them, or even, as was suggested by some, the theft was actually commissioned by Picasso.

‘Another mystery, and while we’re on the matter of mysteries, I’ll just quickly mention that over the years, the painting had been the subject of many mysteries. For example, for centuries, there had been a good deal of controversy over who Mona Lisa actually was. My official lecture goes into this in detail, but it’s a little bit ...’ He was about to say “advanced” but stopped himself in time and said ‘boring.’ He continued, ‘To me, the answer was obvious - though many authorities dispute this - that she was Lisa del Giocondo, the wife of a wealthy silk merchant. We do know she was painted in about 1503, though we’re not exactly sure when: Leonardo was notorious for fiddling with his paintings for years. One of the many odd things about the picture is that, well, let’s see if our local expert can help. Now, Bill, think hard and imagine the picture. Can you recall what she was wearing?’



Watson screwed up his face to give an impression of one who is concentrating really hard, but nothing came to him. ‘Sorry, Boss, I just can’t remember at all.’

‘Yes, well, sorry to put you through that, but your response is exactly what I expected. Hardly anybody remembers, and that’s the point. She is depicted wearing a very plain, dowdy dress with almost no decoration – just a border of knots, or *vinci*. You see, her wealthy husband had showered her with jewellery and silks – so surely, a young woman would want to be pictured in her finest clothes, especially as she had not grown up amid luxury? But no, just a simple dress. Does that sound right to you? Another puzzle, eh?

‘Now, back to the theft. By the end of 1911, the trail was cold, and public interest had waned: the newspapers were full of the sinking of the Titanic and Scott’s race to the South Pole. It seemed the theft was the perfect crime – no clues, and not even a sensible motive, because it was recognised that Mona Lisa was so well known in artistic circles that to sell the painting would be impossible.

‘Occasionally, the press reported sightings and from time to time copies of varying quality emerged here and there. Then one day in 1913, the Italian art dealer Alfredo Geri received a letter signed “Leonardo” offering the painting for sale. Geri was sure it was just another prank but agreed to meet Leonardo to examine the picture, and cabled the director of an important gallery, a man called Poggi, to come to Florence to join him. Leonardo took them to a cheap hotel, only a short distance from where the painting had been made four hundred years previously.

‘In Leonardo’s hotel room, he emptied a wooden case to reveal a false bottom from which he withdrew a package wrapped in red silk. He unwrapped it to reveal the painting: the two experts examined it and were shaken to realise it was the original. Poggi said he’d have to take the picture to his gallery for verification. Leonardo agreed and the painting was re-wrapped in its red silk. Funnily enough, as they were leaving the

hotel, the concierge stopped them and demanded to see what was in the parcel! He thought they might be trying to steal something from the hotel. If the people at the Louvre had been that careful, they wouldn't be in this position now.

'Once clear of the hotel, Poggi called the carabinieri and Leonardo was arrested. He went without complaint – he was convinced that he'd soon be released with the thanks of Italy and a handsome reward for returning the picture. His real identity was Vincenzo Peruggia, an ordinary chap who'd worked at the Louvre for two years prior to the theft. Peruggia considered himself a patriot who had taken Mona Lisa to return it to Italy after, he believed, Napoleon had stolen it. He said that he was ashamed that no Italian had previously thought of returning the picture to its native land.

'In France, the mood was sceptical: in fact, the French officials didn't believe Peruggia's story of how he'd done the deed. But in Italy, of course, the national mood was euphoric and Peruggia's jail cell filled with gifts and admiring letters: poems were published about him and his patriotic exploit.

'Peruggia's story of the theft was that he had gone to work as usual on the Tuesday morning, wearing his workman's smock, the standard dress for a Louvre employee, and he'd simply taken down the picture from the wall, including its glass frame, then took it to a quiet stairwell where he'd removed the picture from its frames before walking out of the museum, down the main front stairs with the picture under his smock. It was, he said, as simple as that. He stuck to his story under intense questioning from the Italian police, who were convinced his tale was a work of fiction, and he always maintained that his motive was to return Mona Lisa to her rightful home in Italy.

'Now, more mystery. In fact, he should already have been a prime suspect. He was one of the glaziers who had constructed and put in place the glass frame to protect the Mona Lisa. And when he was questioned by the police after the theft, he'd said he was at work on the morning the theft was discovered, but if the

police had bothered to check, they'd have found he'd arrived several hours late and said he'd overslept. How did he get away with that?

'And every employee of the Louvre was fingerprinted, except Peruggia. Why? Moreover, he had a police record: he'd been arrested twice in France for minor offences and had spent a day or two in jail. The police had a full profile, including fingerprints, but never made the connection. It turned out that the police fingerprint records were catalogued by right fingerprints, and the print found on the frame was from a left hand, so it was never matched.

'At any rate, after doing a triumphal tour round Italy, Mona Lisa was returned to Paris. She'd set off a craze – the "Mona Lisa" look was all the rage, shops sold out of the makeup of the colour of her skin and ladies practiced their attempts to smile as she had. On her return to the Louvre, a hundred thousand people queued to see her.

'On the other hand, the fate of Peruggia was less wonderful. He wasn't brought to trial until June 1914, by which time the world had moved on. Italy was reluctant to deal with him too harshly – after all, he had brought Mona Lisa home, however briefly. At the trial, his story that he'd been driven by patriotism to bring the painting home – he'd stuck to that from the beginning, remember – began to look less likely when it came out not only that he'd told his family that he'd made his fortune, but that he'd attempted to sell the picture in London as well as to the Italian art dealer, Geri. Geri had testified that Leonardo had wanted payment, but Leonardo continued to maintain that his motive was patriotic and his demeanour suggested that he truly believed that he would be vindicated and awarded honours and a large reward. A psychiatrist gave evidence that Peruggia was mentally deficient so only partly responsible for his actions and in the end he was sentenced to one year in prison, after which he sank into obscurity. So, with Mona Lisa restored to her honoured place, but with much improved

security, and the thief faded from view, that's the end of the story.'

Dodd smiled and looked at his audience, who were shifting uncomfortably, their faces aglow in the firelight.

'Yes, a bit of an unsatisfactory ending though, wouldn't you say? Lots of questions left hanging, eh? Let's think about them, and I'll start with the historical ones. Who, exactly was Mona Lisa, and if she was the wife of a wealthy silk merchant, why wasn't she painted wearing fine silks and jewels? Well, we just don't know the answers to those questions, so how about the more recent stuff? Over to you chaps, I think. What strikes you as odd about the theft?'

He waited. 'Nothing? Bill, you look as if you've got a question or two.'

Watson wasn't happy about mentioning again that he'd actually been to the Louvre, but the silence was worse.

'Well, I'm finding it hard to believe that this chap, Peruggia was it, was working alone. He's asking us to believe he just walked in, took the painting down and carried it away to a quiet place where he calmly removed the picture and walked out. It's an enormous place, there's attendants strolling about and in any case, the picture, in its frame and its glass case, would be pretty heavy, not to mention bulky. No, I reckon he must have had at least one lookout, probably more.'

Watson glared round at the others defiantly, but found no argument.

Dodd agreed and thanked Watson. 'All right, anything else, anybody?'

Watson looked as if he had more to say, but Dodd caught his eye and shook his head minutely. Watson clammed up and Green took up the running.

'That Peruggia, he was a strange one, eh? I can't decide if he really was a patriot who just wanted to get the picture back to Italy, or if he was just a thief intending to sell it.'

Discussion broke out, but in the end, it was just another question without a solid answer and Dodd brought the argument to an end with his single hand clap. He was pleased: at least, as he'd hoped, the men's thoughts were elsewhere than their present freezing environment.

'Right, another riddle, then. But there's one more yet that still has the experts baffled. Any ideas? Stan?'

Tullett squirmed but plucked up courage. 'Yeah, well, there's the business o' the door knob – I dunno what that's all about, but what's really funny is the time, ain't it?'

The men looked confused and Dodd pressed him for more information. 'Well, it was two years afore that whatsisname bloke come up with the picture, weren't it? What was that about?'

Dodd was delighted, and the others set about explaining to each other that they were just about to mention it themselves.

'Excellent, Stan, excellent. It seems to me it doesn't matter whether you believe Peruggia was a patriot or a thief, the delay is just inexplicable. And nobody seems to have pressed Peruggia to explain why he kept Mona Lisa hidden for two years at the time. So, the story sort of fizzles out, doesn't it, with so many questions unanswered.'

There was an awkward silence while the men thought about the anticlimactic end to the story, and Dodd let it hang for a time gauged by long experience, before he continued.

'Or at least, there it was, until 1932, when a journalist called Karl Decker broke an extraordinary story. In 1914, so he said, he'd had a meeting with a man who called himself the Marques Eduardo de Valfierno who told him the true story of the theft, but had made Decker promise that he would not make the story public until after Valfierno's death. He said Mona Lisa was not stolen to be sold but was just part of his greatest con, of which, it seems, there had been many.

'Decker said that Valfierno told him that in the course of his activities as an art dealer, he'd met an art restorer called Yves

Chaudron, who had drifted into the more financially rewarding field of art forgery. He turned out to be absolutely brilliant at it. Together, they made a great team, Valfiero the front man and Chaudron the forger. They did a lot of deals in Argentina, where Chaudron churned out many excellent copies of Murillo Madonnas while Valfiero sold them to besotted widows.

‘Eventually, the pair returned to France, where the fleecing of American millionaires had become a major industry, but Valfierno was ambitious for the great con, the one people would talk about for a century.

‘So to start, Chaudron went to the Louvre and quite openly – it was a common sight to see, as you know – painted an exquisite copy of Mona Lisa. All quite legal, though the authorities had decreed that copies must not be the same size as the original. He painted a slightly smaller copy, which became his template for full size forgeries. Meanwhile, Valfierno found a piece of furniture of the appropriate age and timber, and after cutting six panels out of it, carefully prepared them just as Leonardo would have. By the time they’d both finished work on the panels, they had six perfect copies, right down to a crack in the wood, insect damage and so on.

‘As Chaudron finished each picture, Valfierno took them, one at a time and quite openly, to the United States. At customs, he quite correctly declared them as copies. While he was there, he also completed his research on likely victims and soon had half a dozen wealthy but immoral sheep ready for fleecing.

‘Only one piece of the puzzle remained. Valfierno had begun wooing the Louvre glazier Peruggia some time previously, and they had rehearsed the heist several times on site in the Louvre. On the Sunday afternoon, as the museum closed, Valfierno, Peruggia and an accomplice hid in a store room and waited. On the Monday morning, when only employees would be about, they dressed in the standard white smocks, and after waiting until the guard was elsewhere, they simply took the painting, complete with its glass frame, down from the wall.

Retreating to a pre-planned landing, they removed the picture and started their planned exit. But at one door, the key Peruggia had wouldn't open it. On the edge of panic, Peruggia removed the door knob and was trying to dismantle the lock when another employee came along and kindly opened the door for them, and they walked out.

'All they had to do then was wait for the fantastic news to break. But nothing happened! Nobody had noticed! But when the newspapers did get hold of it, the news raced around the world, and the final part of the sting was ready. Valfierno quickly sold the forgeries to the six unlucky customers, each of them sure they'd got the original, made a fantastic fortune, and the conspirators went their separate ways. And that's the end of the story ... if you choose to believe it.

'You see, the journalist, Decker, had been a great reporter in his time, but his career had been fading for some years. He never offered any proof of the identity of Valfierno, or even that he actually existed, or that the story was true. He was at the end of his career – perhaps he simply made it all up to give himself one last scoop.

'The only thing that is reasonably certain is that Peruggia stole the painting, and it was the genuine picture that was returned. Other than that, everything else is just another set of many mysteries surrounding La Gioconda!'

## Chapter 11

It was Green who discovered the transformation. He'd stumbled out for a slash and found the conditions utterly changed. Not only was it morning, but the snow had stopped and the snow on the treetops glittered golden. He knew immediately – it was sunshine! Seemed impossible after the last two days, but there it was: sunshine in a beautiful clear sky!

He scrabbled and stumbled his way up the slope to the edge of the trees as fast as he could, and when he got there, he stopped, dumbfounded. Beyond, as far as the eye could see in this crystal clear air, lay a scene from a Christmas card: snow lay thickly draped over everything, the trees on the higher ground sparkling in the sunlight, mostly firs up here, each bedecked in their own coating of snow.

Green was stood on a crest with the country in front of him sloping away steeply to his left, forming a valley, while remaining flattish to his right before continuing it's rise to the mountains beyond. Only the skeletons of the few deciduous trees dotted about the otherwise open country stood out black against the snow, and the whole vista lay sharp against the mountains, which were, in their turn, highlighted by the brilliant blue of the sky.

At once, Green was transported back to his childhood, back to Norfolk. Ridiculous really - the country there was quite different, of course, much flatter, but in his mind's eye, the neatly laid out English fields, marked by snow covered hedgerows, rolled whitely away into the low mist-hazed distance under a brilliant sky just like this one.

In his memory, a distant stand of trees half hid a house with a dribble of smoke above it while everything nearby gleamed sparkling and new. And quiet too, just like this. Not a sound, in fact, just like this. But there was something missing here – something right at the edge of Green's senses – something he couldn't quite name.



After a long moment trying and failing to fathom what was absent, he turned and slithered back to the trucks, yelling ‘Chaps! Chaps! You must come and see this. It’s fairyland!’

At first, the men instinctively tried to ignore the hubbub, but there was something in Green’s tone that caught their attention, and one by one, grumbling and shivering, they clambered out and up after Green, who’d gone back up.

Kelly was first up to the edge of the trees, in time to catch Green chuckling as he pissed his name into the snow. Green saw him watching, and laughed, ‘Here you are, Ted! Your first lesson about winter. Never eat yellow snow!’

The others all came up and were each struck speechless by the magnificent panorama, especially after the last two days. It was the sort of setting that made grown men suck in the crispness of the air, glory in the sensation of the coldness biting into their noses and throats, and thank heavens that they were there.

But the grown man soon gave way to the schoolboy, and a snowball fight erupted. Dodd shared a tut and a grin with Brownlow, as if to say “damned kids”, and they drew back a little to avoid an “accidental” snowball coming their way.

After a while, Brownlow put his hands to his face in an unmistakeable “binoculars” gesture, and started back to the vehicles. Dodd went too, and soon they were back, Dodd with his field glasses and Brownlow with a proper pair of good binoculars, courtesy of Uncle Sam. The two scanned the panorama unhurriedly, pointing out particularly attractive scenes to each other, although to be fair, it was mostly Brownlow doing the pointing, and Dodd trying to see what was being shown to him through his vastly inferior glasses. It was Dodd, though, who first noticed the tiny black blob in the distance on the other side of the valley. He couldn’t make out what it was, but drew Brownlow’s attention to it and waited for his opinion.

Brownlow silently studied it long and hard, so long that Dodd lost patience in the end and asked ‘Well, Sar’ Major? I think it must be a farmhouse. What do you make of it?’

‘You might be right, Boss, I don’t know what a farmhouse round here might look like. But I’m not seeing any smoke, are you? Matter o’ fact, I’m not seeing a wassname either. Chimney. *And* I can’t make out any windows. Here, Boss, have ago of these,’ he added, offering Dodd his binoculars, ‘they might give you a bit better detail.’

Dodd took them gratefully, and immediately realised how hopeless his field glasses were. Before, he’d not been able to make out a great deal more through his glasses than he could see with the naked eye, but now, the building, and it was now obviously a building, rather than an approximately oblong blur, leapt out crisp and clear against the whiteness.

‘Oh, yes. That’s much better. Brilliant, in fact. And I agree, it doesn’t seem to be a farmhouse. I think it must be a barn, or some sort of store, don’t you?’

Dodd handed the binoculars back and stared at the building, now returned to black blob status.

‘Hmmm. I wonder if we could get inside and get some shelter from the weather? Possibly get our wet things dried, and so on?’

‘Sounds good to me, Boss. The inside o’ them trucks is a right fuckin’ shambles, beg pardon, after the last few days.’

They both stared at the distant rectangle, and Dodd asked the question on both their minds. ‘How far, would you guess?’

‘Yeah, hard to say, eh? Not much to judge by, is there?’ Brownlow chewed his lip and guessed ‘Maybe a mile? Maybe two?’

The younger men had by now begun to recall that larking about in the snow is all very well until the cold and wetness gets to you, and their skylarking was becoming half hearted, then stopped altogether. Blowing hard into their cupped hands, trying to get some warmth back, they began to take an interest in what the major and sergeant major were up to, squinting against the glare in the direction of the distant black rectangle.

Tullett was first. ‘‘Ere, what’s that then, Skipper?’

‘See for yourself’ replied Dodd, proffering his field glasses.’ Tullett took them and studied the blob for a long time before announcing ‘No disrespect, Boss, but these things’re just about fuck all use, beg pardon Sir.’

He gazed pointedly at Brownlow’s binoculars. ‘Sarge?’

Brownlow ignored him and called to Kelly, who was now feeling melted snow trickling down his back, becoming uncomfortably aware of the downside of fooling about in snow. ‘Hey, Ted, you’ve got the best eyes of all of us, I reckon. See what you think.’

Kelly took a turn with the binoculars and agreed with Brownlow. ‘Yeah, I don’t reckon it’s a house. Got to be a barn, eh?’

Finally, Brownlow relented and gave everybody a go of the binoculars, then announced, ‘Mr Dodd and I reckon it’d be good to get inside there and lay up for a day or two, get ourselves sorted and so on, and maybe we can use the place as a base to try to check our position, isn’t that right, Boss?’

Dodd nodded.

‘So, we’re going to skirt along the edge of the forest as far as we can,’ he swung his arm off to the right, along the line of the trees, ‘you can see the snow’s not so deep there – then we’ll just have to chance it the last bit. All right? Let’s get moving then.’

As it turned out, the journey was uneventful. They stayed on the flattish land to the right of the valley, and the ancient Lancia managed the light cover of snow among the trees quite well, but struggled immediately as soon as they moved onto the open. On the other hand, the Chevrolet cruised through and forced a path for the Italians. They kept the tow rope attached to give Angelo a bit of a tug from time to time, and by midday, they found themselves a couple of hundred yards from their objective.

The building sat in the lee of a hill, the virgin whiteness all round it interrupted here and there by the skeletons of one or two

wind tortured trees and the odd outcrop of rock thrusting through the snow.

They could now see that it was indeed a barn – at least, there seemed to be no windows interrupting the lines of the mottled grey stone walls. The building gave off an air of permanence, as though it had always been there and the landscape had somehow been constructed around it. The fact that the wall had subsided a little at one corner, and had been buttressed by a massive tree trunk, only served to heighten the impression of antiquity.

Cautiously, they examined it for signs of life, though, realistically, if there had been anybody there, the sight of two black trucks noisily approaching would surely have been more than enough to bring the occupants out.

Even so, Brownlow insisted on going forward on foot, with Kelly in support, both of them armed with Brens. Dodd trudged between them, in case, as Brownlow pointed out, there was somebody there after all.

But, no need: the place was deserted. They took a hasty tour round the outside and found, on one side, an ancient and decrepit pair of double doors with a smaller, man sized door at the other end.

Brownlow gave the double doors a tentative nudge, but there was no lock or even a handle, and was about to kick his way in, but Dodd stopped him. ‘I say, wait, Sar’ Major. You can’t do that! That’s private property, you know.’

Brownlow sighed and rolled his eyes at Kelly, who grinned and said ‘No worries Boss. I’ll check the other door.’

Off he went to the other end, and a minute later, there was a scrabbling noise from inside, and Kelly pulled the doors open with exaggerated cautiousness, which caused both Dodd and Brownlow to smile. ‘Yes, all right, very funny, Ted,’ said Dodd ‘but how would you like it if someone smashed their way into your property?’

Kelly smiled back, to show there was no ill feeling and responded ‘Yeah, it’s not that, Boss. Fair dinkum, this bloody door’s about to fall off of its own accord, my bloody word, it is.’

Brownlow signalled to the others to come on and, delighted at the chance to practice his driving skills, Green leapt into the cab of the Chevy. He was seriously tempted to have a bit of a charge about – he was pretty sure he could get it sliding sideways in these conditions – but common sense prevailed. Nothing about getting under cover without leaving too much of a trace, of course: it was just that he knew he’d never be given another go if he misbehaved now, so, with what he hoped was an expression of calm professional competence, he manouvred the truck carefully through the doorway.

In a minute, both vehicles were inside and everybody peered about silently, like tourists in a badly lit cathedral.. The main difference, of course, was the strong agricultural smell, redolent of dust, straw and Jacko’s goats. But even with the doors wide open, and the daylight from the open doorway aided by occasional diamonds of light twinkling through gaps in the wall, there wasn’t much to see. There was just what they’d wanted, an enormous stack of firewood, but apart from that and a tumbled pile of turnip-like vegetables, that was about it, apart from a broken wagon wheel and the inevitable jumble of rotting harness.

Green remembered where the light switch for the Chevrolet was, and suddenly the whole interior was illuminated. A handful of pigeons, who’d been trying to ignore the newcomers, found the light too much to overlook, and began a demented sprint through the rafters, sending down a rain of ancient dust and brand new shit.

In the far corner, there was a large mound of straw that seemed to have been used for some sort of childish game, but on examination, the men realised that people had been sleeping here, and, on closer inspection of the interior, they also came upon a fireplace made of rocks, complete with an amateur

attempt at a sort of grille made of heavy wire, which rested unsteadily on the rocks.

The men stood round the fireplace, contemplating its significance. Suddenly, they knew how Robinson Crusoe would have felt when he came upon the footprint in the sand: they were not alone.

Everybody looked at Brownlow, as though, taking all their circumstances into account, he'd be bound to know what to do, but the sergeant major just stood gazing at the unmistakeable signs of habitation and chewing his lip ruminatively.

After a bit, he sucked in a breath, shrugged a shrug that Angelo would have been proud of, and followed it up with 'Well, there's a turn up, eh? But I don't see it's a problem for us. It's obviously not military, is it? Not tidy enough, for a start. And look at that grille: just made out o' rubbish. If it was army, they'd have the proper kit, wouldn't they? No, I reckon it's just the locals using this place from time to time, eh? Prob'ly been no-one here since the summer, eh?'

He looked around for support, which Dodd supplied. 'Yes, of course, you're right, Sar' Major. What would anybody be doing up here at this time of year?' He received several wary but hopeful nods. 'Yes, I'm sure we won't be disturbed for a day or so while we get ourselves sorted out.'

He'd convinced himself by now and did his single clap. 'Yes, right. Let's get something to eat, then we'll pull all the damp stuff out and start getting it all dry. All right, Sar' Major?'

Brownlow agreed. The pigeons began to settle, but kept a beady eye on proceedings. By way of commentary on the intrusion, one of them shat on Angelo's windscreen.

It was amazing how much of their kit had been affected by the snow. The young English soldiers were remembering about larking about in the snow, but the last time they'd been in snowball fights, they'd been able to go home and their mums

gave them dry clothes and hot soup. This time, it seemed almost everything they possessed was damp, especially their socks and boots. By the middle of the afternoon, the barn was looking, as Brownlow said, 'like a Chinese laundry' with lines strung out all over the place, festooned with clothes and blankets, while a major fire roared in the fireplace, and another fire, more modest, burned at the other end to encourage the drying process, and incidentally, to enable the occupants to be warm for the first time in days. It triggered Greens memory of the vista he'd imagined back in Norfolk, and what was missing: the unmistakeable tang of woodsmoke. Except that in here, it wasn't so much a tang, more an overpowering, throat clenching fog. Not quite as attractive, somehow.

The atmosphere grew ever thicker with smoke and, as the afternoon wore on, with steam from an extravagant meal of pasta and stew being masterminded by the two Italians, who were taking advantage of the opportunity, it being their turn to produce dinner, to put on a bit of a show.

The valleys below them already lay in darkness, but up here, well up in the foothills, the sun still sent feeble pink orange rays through the half closed double doors, like a stone structure that had been precisely sited to honour some archaic midsummers dawn.

An interested observer could easily have watched the sunlight losing its daily battle with the darkness and the cold, as the shadows washed up the hillsides like a tide. But inside the barn, all was warmth and light, although the fug of smoke and steam was creeping ever downwards, causing thoughtful glances towards the roof as the men wondered if they should knock a hole in a high part of a wall to let the vapours out.

There were also the beginnings of guilty thoughts about the rapidly reducing stock of firewood and Brownlow began to growl about the fires being too big.

Every so often, one of the pigeons would emit a squawk at some imagined threat, and that would start the others off, flying a

demented circuit or two before settling and doing that ridiculous sideways bouncing walk birds do along the rafters, and sending down an occasional volley of shit, as though to remind the newcomers who was in charge.

Suddenly, there was a change in the light from the doorway – a shadow partially blocking the brightness. Green was first to notice and instinctively turned to see what was going on. He was shocked to see a giant of a man, clutching an enormous gun of some kind, standing motionless in the doorway. One by one, the others noticed too and soon everybody was standing, gawping at the new arrival, who was still immobile, staring back at them.

Dodd, more than a little surprised at his own bravado, broke the spell. ‘Good evening, Sir.’ He said, in Italian. ‘Won’t you come in? Our supper will be ready soon, if you’d like to join us?’

As he spoke, Dodd’s conscious mind caught up with his subconscious. The man, or what could be seen of him, silhouetted as he was, did not seem to be a German soldier, and his stance did not seem threatening – the gun was held across his body, not pointing at them. He continued to examine the soldiers, as though checking for threats, then took a couple of tentative paces into the barn. Suddenly, no longer backlit by the dying rays of the sun, he shrank back to human size – in fact, more like the shortish stature of Dino and Angelo.

The newcomer stood examining the men, obviously uncertain, while they, in turn, studied him. He would have passed unremarked in any poor upland village in Italy (and that was pretty much all of them, at that time), the standard many days growth of black stubble over nut brown leathery skin, and the standard dilapidated black suit, topped off, in his case, though, by what looked like a terminally decrepit soldier’s greatcoat, left over from some Neanderthal war. The whole ensemble should, by rights, have been topped off by a down at heel fedora, but he



made do without any headwear at all. Across his chest lay the strap of a satchel.

Still wary, though his gun stayed unthreatening, he concentrated on Dodd.

‘You are partisans, I suppose?’ He barked it out, but with a querulous note, and something in his tone suggested that partisans were not popular with him.

‘No, Sir. We are soldiers.’

‘I have seen many soldiers. You do not look like the soldiers I have seen.’

‘We are British soldiers.’ Dodd indicated the crowns at his shoulders, as though that should settle the matter.

The man nodded minutely and studied them all again. He flicked a glance towards Angelo and Dino. ‘These two, they do not look like English. They look like partisans.’

Again, that hint about the status of partisans. It was as though he’d said “those bastard partisans” without actually using the words. Dodd turned to Angelo and asked, ‘Well, Angelo? Do you say you are a partisan?’

This was a new concept to Angelo: he and Dino moved to one side and had a quiet but animated debate. Dodd was afraid it would turn into one of those typical Italian gesticulating, shoving, hat stamping dialogues, but the issue was quickly settled.

‘No, *Colonello*, we are not partisans. We are just Italians who want to help get things back to the way they used to be.’

Whether Angelo had also picked up on the tone of the newcomer’s enquiry about partisans was impossible to say. Nevertheless, the answer seemed to satisfy the man, who took a few steps closer and returned his attention to Dodd. ‘What are you doing here?’

Dodd looked at him steadily and replied ‘I cannot tell you that. It is secret information.’

The man exploded. 'What? I am not to be told why a crowd of soldiers is in my barn? And using all my firewood, by the look of it!'

'Oh. Yes, I see. I *can* tell you that. We were caught in the blizzard and found our way in here for shelter, to get dry. And I'm sorry we've used so much of your firewood: we needed the warmth. We'll be very happy to collect more for you tomorrow.'

This response seemed to surprise and mollify the newcomer, who jutted his chin for a moment while he thought about the situation. Obviously, he wasn't used to strangers using his stuff then offering to replace it. Then he visibly relaxed, shrugged and replied 'All right, maybe you're not partisans. If you were partisans, you'd have burnt *all* the wood, or stolen it. And you're not Germans either, so I suppose you *must* be British.'

He glanced at the two Italians again. 'Except those two. I'm not so sure about them.'

Dino beckoned him over to where the meal was simmering. 'Spaghetti putanesca, amico. Is that Italian enough for you? Plenty for all.'

The man allowed himself to be satisfied, though whether by the evidence or the aroma it was difficult to say. He carefully leant his gun, now seen clearly as an aged shotgun, against a wall, and announced 'I am Umberto – this is my barn.'

He then immediately took charge, as befitted the *proprietario* of the establishment.

'The doors must be closed immediately – the light will be visible for many kilometres and in any case, it will be very cold soon. We must keep what warmth we can.'

Dodd translated and Brownlow and Kelly, having seen the fragile state of the doors when they were opened, carefully complied. Umberto watched and nodded approval, then continued 'You two', he indicated Green and Tullett, 'right in the corner, deep under the straw, there are two oil lamps and a cask of oil. Get them and bring them to me.'

The two soldiers looked confused until Dodd translated for them and nodded for them to comply.

After a few minutes, the original nine, plus Umberto, were all sitting around the one remaining fire, lit by two smoky oil lamps and getting stuck in to the pasta. Umberto, in particular, was thrilled with his meal - he hadn't seen such a feast for a long time and the canned anchovies and olives Dino had used in the sauce were an extravagance Umberto had almost forgotten about. Umberto's sense of luxury was completed when Angelo produced a flagon of his famous wine, which glinted blackly in the dimness. Everybody watched out of the corner of their eyes as Umberto took a manful swig, but he disappointed his audience by smacking his lips appreciatively and staring pointedly at the flagon. He was immediately offered a refill, though it later came to light that, whilst he thoroughly enjoyed the wine, he was particularly interested in the flagon itself. Such things were pretty rare up here, and valuable.

The evening drew on and the cold crept in, the flagon emptied as the circle of men drew closer round the fire. Umberto explained that for most of the year, the barn was in regular use for storage and as occasional protection for his sheep, but during the winter, the flock was taken down to the village, so he only occasionally came up to the barn during the winter, just to check. He didn't specify what he was checking against, but when Brownlow heard the translation, he nodded approvingly. Umberto liked to be sure there was oil for the lanterns and straw to sleep on. Sometimes, the Germans came to the village, searching for "volunteer" labour and soldiers on the run, so the young men had to come up here out of the way. The girls too, not that the Germans had ever caused trouble in that regard, but, best to be safe, eh? Brownlow nodded again.

Umberto meandered into an explanation that he liked to time his arrival in the afternoon, so he could check the barn and make himself comfortable overnight, so as to give himself time

in the morning to do a little hunting before going back down. You never knew your luck, he pointed out, even in these conditions. A bird or two, maybe even a rabbit, would be a welcome addition to the family table.

Umberto sighed, and brought himself back to his narrative. The road up to the village, such as it was, was steep and winding, and the Germans always came in motorised transport. It didn't seem to occur to them that their arrival could always be anticipated by the sheer noise they made. At any rate, the young people always had time to grab something to eat and drink, and be well out of the way by the time the Germans finally ground into the village. And even then, they seemed half hearted in their searches: the villagers had learnt to leave a cask or two of poor quality wine and maybe a little ancient dried pork or goat for the Germans to "find" and they invariably went away satisfied. Umberto shrugged: perhaps their conditions were even worse than the villager's. Or perhaps they just couldn't be bothered to hunt out the young people any more.

And then, Umberto went on, there were the bands of partisans. He made it plain that he considered the *bande* barely better than the Germans. They were mostly men keeping out of the way of the Germans, either villagers or Italian soldiers on the run, with the odd Allied fugitive, and scraped an existence scrounging from or, more realistically, stealing from, the inhabitants of the villages. They had virtually no weapons or equipment, so did little harm to the Germans. And if they did manage to attack a lone German truck or despatch rider, the Germans came down hard. So far, they hadn't taken any hostages, but they rampaged through the nearest village, smashing and burning, and driving off any livestock they hadn't already "requisitioned." In Umberto's opinion, it would be best if the *bande* just kept out of the way, closer to some other village for preference.

Umberto looked as though he was just hitting his stride on this subject, so Dodd deflected him by asking the name of his

village. Umberto replied “Protasi” at which Dodd and Brownlow immediately began to scrutinise the map, but, after several frustrating minutes, had to give up. Dodd asked Umberto to point out on the map where the village was, and the Italian gladly moved round to Brownlow and studied the map minutely.

After what seemed a long time, Umberto nodded to himself and said ‘Ah, so this is a map, is it? It’s very pretty. Now tell me, *Sergente*, what are all these lines? And can you show me where Protasi is?’

Watson was translating from the Italian, and Umberto’s reply drew a few startled faces until Dodd mentioned that he’d been hoping that Umberto would be able to do that. Umberto smiled and replied ‘*Padrone*, we don’t have much use for maps up here. This is the first map I’ve ever seen – I understand what they’re for, of course, but ...’

He let the sentence drift away, before adding ‘And in any case, I cannot read, so these writings mean nothing to me.’

Watson translated, causing a wry chew of the lip from Brownlow, who wasn’t about to give up easily.

‘All right, Mr Dodd, Sir, ask him the names of towns around here, and where they are from wassname, Protasi. Anything that might help, really.’

Dodd began to question the Italian about the surrounding area: it was a little difficult, because Umberto knew next to nothing about anything much more than thirty kilometres away, that being the furthest he’d ever been. Except Rome: he’d never been there, but at least he knew of it. He mentioned that if you wanted to go there from Protasi, you went down through Palestrina, which was the biggest town in the whole area, to the *via grande*, the big road. This was a vital clue. Brownlow excitedly gave Dodd a thumbs up, and with a little more probing, in which Brownlow named places shown on the map, and Umberto explained where they were relative to Protasi, they were able to establish, at least approximately, the position of Umberto’s village. It was all a bit rough and ready, since

Umberto spoke of distances in terms of hours or days travel, and he didn't seem sure about some of them, but they reckoned that they'd got pretty close. And with that information, and understanding from Umberto that they were about two hours east of Protasi (according to where the sun went down, though Burgess ostentatiously checked that with his famous Boy Scout compass, as though the sun might have been trying to trick them), they had a fair idea of where they were on the map. And from that, they could see that if they went down through Protasi and about the same distance beyond, they should be close enough to the *via grande* to be able to find a spot from which to view the traffic.

Dodd and Brownlow were delighted with the outcome and, as the saying goes, they all turned in for the night tired but happy.

## Chapter 12

The next morning dawned bright and sunny again, and the temperature had risen a little. Dodd wanted to get down past the village to start on their surveillance job, but Umberto had pointed out that getting the vehicles down through the snow would not only be difficult, but would leave obvious tracks, should the Germans stage a sweep through the village. This posed a problem because the radio, that essential part of the surveillance task, was too heavy for a man to carry, especially when the batteries were added. Umberto explained that this snow was abnormal at this time of year: usually, he'd be getting ready to move his sheep up to their summer pasture by now. He predicted that the snow would be gone in two days, but accompanied that announcement with that universal hand wobbling gesture that means "Maybe it will, or maybe it won't. Two days, or thereabouts." In the meantime, he said, the men were welcome to remain in his barn.

Dodd was grateful for that offer, but was anxious to get on. He proposed that he and Brownlow should accompany Umberto down to the village then carry on to locate a suitable place overlooking the main road. That seemed sensible, except that Brownlow realised that the trek would be strenuous, and was wondering how to suggest that Dodd might have difficulty when the answer came to him.

'Well Skipper, what I reckon is, we got up here in the trucks in pretty bloody difficult conditions, so surely, we could get 'em back down again, you know, creeping along the edge of the trees, like we did before.'

Dodd put the suggestion to Umberto, who this time shrugged and grimaced, but the gestures meant the same as the hand wobbling - Well, maybe you can, and maybe you can't. Have a try, but if it ends in disaster, don't blame me.

The rest of the morning was spent repacking the vehicles and cutting, to Umberto's surprise, a new and gargantuan stack of firewood.

Umberto sat sandwiched between Dodd and Brownlow in the cab of the Chevy. It must have been dreadfully uncomfortable for him, perched in the gap between the seats, while the vehicle lurched and staggered, with the handbrake and four wheel drive levers doing impertinent things to his behind, but he seemed to regard this as the position of honour, and grinned from ear to ear. Umberto was amazed at the ability of the Chevrolet to traverse the steep terrain, which was, in fairness, all but impossible for an ordinary truck. The Lancia would certainly not have made it if not for the Chevy doing the pathfinding. Even then, there were several hair-raising slides, a couple of them sideways, followed, often as not, by the trucks staggering up steep inclines. Once, even the Chevy couldn't help the Lancia up, even with all the manpower included, and they had to backtrack and find another route.

Umberto had pointed out that the so-called road from the lower valley ended at Protasi, and from there up to the barn and beyond, the only transport was by horse drawn cart or by pack donkey. Even the Germans, with their enormous armoured cars and half tracked vehicles, hadn't tried to drive up, and it seemed they were reluctant to walk where their transport couldn't go. They'd almost never come up to the barn, and as far as Umberto knew, they'd certainly never ventured up further. Perhaps they worried about meeting partisans up there, Umberto snorted.

At any rate, by doing their trick of staying close to the edge of the trees, thus avoiding getting deep into the forest, but also staying out of the deeper snow, both the Chevy and the Lancia half drove, half slid down to the spot Umberto had selected.

Eventually, Umberto directed the vehicles onto a track that led into thick forest and called a halt. The men clambered



out, eager to be finished with the dreary journey, and began the customary prowling round for a slash and a suitable spot to set the little stove going for a brew up.

Umberto gave a “come with me” wave to Dodd, and plodded into the trees. Brownlow noticed and followed. Within twenty yards of easing through thick undergrowth, they found themselves in the perfect position: they were well hidden just back from the top of a steep incline, a cliff, almost, which fell away sharply so that they could see the country beyond for a long way. Dodd even fancied he could see the ocean, but told himself that couldn’t be – they must be thirty miles or more away from the coast. They could, though, see a smudge of smoke well away to their south west: Dodd mouthed “Anzio?” and Brownlow nodded. No point in asking Umberto – he’d never been that far. As they took in their surroundings, they realised that the weather had changed again: the clear blue skies had, while they were struggling downwards, been replaced with thick grey cloud. Somehow, the snow scene didn’t look so enticing now – just dull and wintry and miserable.

Umberto pointed to a clutch of terra cotta rooftops a mile or so to their right, and named it “Labico” and another, maybe three miles to the left, which he called “Valmontone.” Brownlow was happy – that would give him a new and more accurate fix on their position – but most importantly, as the land fell away, they had a clear and unrestricted view of the thin ribbon of road, black against the whiteness where traffic had cleared the snow, wending between the two towns. Even now, a line of miniature trucks could easily be seen dribbling their way south.

*‘Il via grande’* pronounced Umberto, proudly, and Dodd nodded.

*‘Esselente, Umberto, esselente. Perfetto.’*

He had no need to translate for Brownlow, who smiled, shook Umberto’s hand and even attempted a “*Perfetto*, chum” of his own before going back to his truck to get his binoculars.

He was just in time – the lads were just about to light a fire and he had to order that there'd be no fires in daylight - the Germans just might come to find out who was lighting fires less than a mile from their main supply route. No, when they wanted to cook a meal, they'd have to rely on the little stove or go well back, so the smoke and flame wouldn't be visible from the road or the villages. In fact, he mused, there'd be no point in everybody being down here all the time. He told Kelly to get a roster organised, two men on watch at any time, two hour shift. Kelly nodded 'Yairs, Sarge, righto, no worries.'

The rest of them could take the trucks back up a mile or so, and make a more comfortable camp there. In the nick of time, Brownlow thought to add 'If that's all right with you, Mr Dodd, Sir?' Dodd gave a wry smile and agreed.

When the plan was announced to the Italians, Umberto scuttled to take "his" place in the cab of the Chevy, ready to direct traffic.

Dodd (who Kelly had tried to exempt, but who had insisted on taking his turn) and Burgess had the first two hours. It was just on noon when they were given their greatcoats, a couple of groundsheets, a bit of food, a notepad and pencil and the all important binoculars, and left to it, while the others began the return journey. Umberto said he knew exactly the right spot for the main camp, but then hummed and harred until it was clear that Brownlow was getting cross. But finally, he made a decision and the trek began.

It turned out much harder than before: the snow was softer and slippier, which meant that even the Chevy was having to work harder to get itself upwards, and had to tow the Lancia half the time. But finally, after more dithering from Umberto, he guided them to the perfect spot, a small clearing in a shallow basin shaped area, which left them invisible from the road or the track up to the village – they'd even be able to have a fire to cook on once it was dark, with little chance of being spotted.

Then it was time for Umberto to leave for the trudge up to his village. Kelly and Dino had rummaged around in the back of the Chevrolet and presented Umberto with his haversack, jam packed with tins of goodies. They'd even remembered to include a tin opener. Umberto accepted the gift with solemn grace and made a short speech, but it was mainly in *dialetto*, so nobody understood the actual words, though the sense of it came through strongly. It was pretty clear that he regarded his new friends as a different class of outlaw to the bastard partisans.

In the way of soldiers everywhere, a routine was immediately established. When Watson and Green plodded down to take their turn, they found that Dodd had headed the first two pages of the notebook "northbound" and "southbound" then drew columns on each, headed "armour", "gun", "truck", "tanker" and "other" and scratched lines in the appropriate columns as Burgess, on the binoculars, called out what he saw.

As he handed over to Watson, he drew a line across the page and wrote the time, two pm. Watson studied the page for a moment, and commented 'Fair amount of traffic then, Sir, er, Boss.'

'Yes, as I'd have expected. With all this low cloud, our lot won't be able to put in air attacks, or even do any reconnaissance, so it turns out we will be doing something useful after all.'

Watson nodded reluctant agreement. 'Goes against the grain, though, doesn't it, Skipper? All those lovely targets down there, and we're not allowed to go after 'em.'

He attempted an Australian accent. 'Fair dinkum, mate, it's a fair cow, eh?'

'I know exactly what you mean, Bill. I imagine you and the sergeant could make a nasty hole in that road.' He sighed. 'Oh, well, maybe before we go. Now, back to the job in hand. You see what you have to do with the notes? John and I found

it's best to change places every fifteen minutes or so. You tend to lose concentration if you leave it much longer. So, if there's nothing .... ?'

Watson shook his head. Green took the binoculars from Burgess and the new duo settled down to their two hours, leaving the first pair to follow their tracks up to the camp.

By the time Burgess and Dodd got up there, following the track made by their footprints, Brownlow had the camp nicely set up. There were still several hours until the scheduled radio contact, but Burgess immediately began to prepare his equipment. He was a bit worried about reception, since they were camped in a depression, but, with a boost from Kelly, he shinned up a tree and got his ariel wire high enough to satisfy himself, and received a barrage of abuse for his trouble, since he brought down a cascade of snow as he climbed. After that, there was nothing to do but wait.

Angelo and Dino were the next pair out and they took over at four. Watson passed on the instructions and the changeover was done with no problems. But by five it was getting hard to see through the lengthening shadows exactly what was going on down on the road, and by five thirty, the encroaching darkness forced them back to the camp.

Dodd took the notebook and made a summary then fiddled about with the text of the message to headquarters.

Burgess carefully did his preparation and studied the message, grimacing at the length but realised it was as short as it could get and finally, after yet another glance at his watch, threw the power switch. He held his breath as he did so, knowing that the radio had had a serious bouncing about over the last couple of days, but immediately, dials began to glow and the quiet humming told him everything seemed all right.

At six precisely, Burgess began tapping out the call sign then switched to "receive." After an anxious static swamped moment, the spoken acknowledgement came back "Receiving strength four – ready to proceed."

Burgess then tapped out his message, which seemed to him to take an age, but in reality, only a couple of minutes. He then signed off and blew out a breath. He patted the radio like a loyal pet and muttered ‘Right, then. Now we wait.’

By six thirty, everyone was crowded round the radio again, as Burgess once more sent his call sign and switched to “receive.” Again, the eerie scratch of static filled the air, and was broken by a voice acknowledging the previous message. The voice then said ‘Very well. Out.’

Burgess switched off the radio, while the men all stood and looked at him as though it was his fault the person at the other end hadn’t been a bit more grateful, or at least, wished them goodnight. Burgess felt their stares, but had nothing to say. Surely they understood this wasn’t a nice cosy chat – as far as he was concerned, the less time the Germans had to realise that there was someone out there, listen for Burgess’ transmissions and get a fix on their position, the better.

The small illumination from the radio faded, leaving the sickly yellow light from the two kerosene lamps seeming dimmer, somehow, and now the small excitement of the radio contact was gone, it seemed colder too. Realisation began to dawn that this was going to be their routine for the foreseeable future – taking turns to plod down to the lookout then count miniature trucks creeping along their miniature road, far below.

Next morning, their drooping spirits were lifted when a young woman appeared at the edge of their little arena. She stood waiting quietly until someone noticed her, when she quickly became the centre of attention. Dodd was down at the lookout, so Watson stepped forward to do the talking. She was typical of the young women of rural Italy, upright, graceful, dark skinned and raven haired – she immediately put Watson in mind of Sofia, back in Naples, though Sofia was taller. Watson went up to the rim of their little crater to escort her down, but when she smiled

at him, he became tongue tied and bashful. Laughing, she took his arm and the pair walked into the clearing like a couple at a wedding.

The young woman, no more than a girl, really, announced that she was Maria, the daughter of Umberto, and had brought them bread by way of thanks for the bounty her father had brought home. Someone, she said, looking directly at Watson, would probably come again this evening, perhaps with milk, or maybe wine.

By the time Watson had recovered himself, she was on her way back, and did Watson undone again by bestowing him a brilliant smile.

That day, and the next several, passed uneventfully, although the lookouts reported that the snow lower down, the other side of the road, seemed to be disappearing.

As darkness fell one evening, and Burgess began his preparation for the evening transmission, there was the sound of somebody pushing through the undergrowth above them. Watson stood eagerly and began to walk towards where Maria had appeared earlier, but he was disappointed when Umberto came into sight.

Everybody but Burgess gathered round Umberto, to Burgess' displeasure, but the show had to go on, and he tapped out his call sign, waited for the acknowledgement, and then sent the text Dodd had already prepared, summarising the day's traffic.

By the time he was finished and closed the radio down, Umberto was standing in the centre of an interested crowd. Tomorrow, he'd announced, was the villagers biggest day of the year, when they celebrated the feast of *Saint Giacobbe the Lame*, the patron saint of the village and the villagers had invited, well, insisted, that the men come up to share the *festa religiosa*, the saints day festivities. Of course, he noted, there was little celebrate with this year – what the Germans had left, the

partisans (that inflection again) had taken – but they were welcome anyway. He would send somebody down to guide them up, and reminded them not to bring the vehicles: tracks would set the Germans and the partisans on the alert.

He stayed to share dinner and, of course, when he left he found it hard to get up out of the secret basin, laden down with provisions as he was.

The next day was as peaceful as those preceding it: the snow was still receding up the slopes and they reckoned it would be gone, or near enough, from their camp area in a day or so. They took the opportunity to collect snow and turn it into water to top up their supply, and spent the rest of the time off watch making themselves as presentable as they could for their appearance at Protasi.

Watson was getting visibly agitated as the time for the transmission approached – they couldn't go, of course, until that rigmarole was finished, and he was anxious to be on his way.

While they waited, Dodd reminded them that this wasn't going to be like a Christmas feast they might have remembered. The mountain villagers lived a precarious existence, barely surviving from one year to the next, where the sudden and unexpected need to buy even something as ordinary as a new coat could be calamitous for a family. Moreover, he reminded them, Italy had been at war for years with first Mussolini, then the Germans, taking whatever they needed. So, this evening wasn't going to be all that exciting. Having said that, it would be considered very rude for them to refuse something they were offered, and they must realise it was a great honour to be invited, so he expected everyone to be on their best behaviour.

Burgess had decided to let his reserve radio man, Green, have a go, for the practice, and the transmission went off stumblingly, but without a hitch, then to Watson's obvious pleasure, Maria arrived to guide them. She seemed glad to see them too, and everyone was getting a bit excited as the time

leaked away to six thirty. As soon as the usual process had been completed, Green gave a loud sigh of satisfaction, shut down the radio, and the men excitedly prepared to join the *festa religiosa*.

It was just as well Maria had come to guide them: the heavy cloud shut out any starlight, and as far as the men were concerned, it was just about impossible to see where the mountains finished and the sky began even, never mind their direction, and they didn't expect to see the village ablaze with lights. But after half an hour of trudging in her wake, they were surprised when Maria stopped suddenly and announced that they were nearly there.

The little crocodile of men concertina'd together as though they were in some slapstick comedy routine before sorting themselves out and began to study their surroundings. At first, they saw nothing but the unrelenting snow, but it slowly dawned on them that there were black shapes up ahead, big black shapes festooned with white. And then, all became clear, when a door was opened, creating a sudden golden rectangle of light, revealing that the shapes were the walls of a close packed huddle of buildings, standing out against the snow.

Now, when they picture a rural village, readers might picture a scatter of ancient homes dotted round a village green with a pond and ducks. A couple of old men sit dawdling over their beer outside the pub, illuminated by the light streaming from the windows of the village shop and post office next door, while on the other side of the green sits the ancient church, its steeple sharp against the purple sky of the evening. Villagers, out for a stroll, saunter down the quiet street and a character straight from a Miss Marple story calls a greeting as she cycles home from evensong.

Well, readers could not be more wrong. Protasi, like hundreds of villages high in the Appenine foothills, was a cluster of ancient stone walled, slate or tiled roofed buildings, some two storeys, some three, all jumbled together as though thrown down,



roughly pushed together atop a hill then abandoned by some monstrous child. The road, such as it was, simply petered out as it entered the village, leaving nothing but a series of steep and twisted alleys and stairways between the buildings, much like the slum areas of Naples, but, if anything, even more tightly packed. And of course, there were no street lights, or welcoming beams from the shop window or the pub either. Because there was no shop, and no pub. Nothing but the glow from the open door.

A body slipped into the light. 'Maria! Is that you?' The men recognised the voice of Umberto, and Maria responded 'Yes father, we are here.'

'Well, come on then, hurry up.' He called, unnecessarily, as the whole group scurried forward, pleased to be able to move towards something they could see.

In a couple of minutes, they were all inside a large room, rich with the aroma of wine and garlic with that strong underlying tang from the barn that reminded the men of Jacko's goats. The lighting was provided by three or four oil lamps that threw an odd light – they appeared bright, but seemed not to cast much light on anything more than a few feet away, and they added their own pungent oily smoke to the atmosphere.

There was an awkward silence as the two groups, the villagers and their guests, regarded each other interestedly, then the villagers began to look towards Umberto, obviously expecting some sort of speech, while Umberto, equally obviously, attempted to ignore the attention. Eventually, a middle aged woman standing next to Umberto, short and sturdy but attractive for all that, hissed a few words at him, and he responded by taking a small step forward and made a short speech. It was spoken in dialetto, but the meaning was clear enough: Dodd's troop was being thanked for the supplies they'd given the village, and were welcomed to the *festa religiosa* in honour of *Saint Giacobbe*.

As Umberto spoke, the guests were being given goblets of wine, so that as his speech stumbled to a finish, he was able to raise his own glass in a toast to the health of the visitors, and the whole company joined in.

An expectant silence fell again for a moment, but Dodd was ready with a small speech of his own, delivered in Italian, and quietly translated by Watson, in which he thanked the villagers for their hospitality and recognised the honour of being invited to join in such an important celebration. No mention of the war was made by either speechmaker. Dodd finished his words with a toast to the prosperity of the village. This was taken as a sign that the formalities were over, and, with an accordion playing a lively tune in the background and a recharge of drinks all round, the mood of the gathering became easier, hosts and visitors intermingling and ignoring the language difficulty.

It wasn't long before the dancing started, and it was at that point that Dodd's men began to realise that there were several groupings among their hosts: the handful of wizened old men sat in a huddle, almost invisible in their ancient black suits against the smoky darkness in a far corner: the *nonnas*, the grandmothers, sat in a clutch against the walls, wrapped in their black shawls and disapproval, chattering as an aside to sniffing criticism of the middle aged couples who were dancing an odd kind of cross between a quickstep and a polka, while children scampered and shrieked, in the way of children everywhere who were up beyond their bedtime, quite unable to comprehend that it'd be better for them if they maintained a lower profile.

But to the dismay of the soldiers, especially Watson, there were no young women, especially Maria. Somehow, though he'd have sworn he hadn't taken his eyes off her for a second, she'd disappeared. It was easy enough to understand that there'd be a shortage of young men – they'd either been carted off by the Germans (or Mussolini's lot, before that) or were making themselves scarce higher up the mountains. But the girls, well, they'd simply vanished.

While Watson was getting upset, Dodd found himself in conversation with the woman who'd nudged Umberto into his speech. It turned out that she was his wife, also called Maria, and as soon as she admitted that, Dodd realised how like young Maria she was. Her glowing smile, especially, made her unmistakably Maria's mother. She explained that it was expected that Umberto should make the speech, he being the *sindaco*, the mayor, of Protasi and Dodd, before he could stop himself, grinned at the idea of someone like Umberto being the mayor. Catching Dodd's expression, Maria smiled again.

'Yes, Mr Dodd, some people say he's a strange choice as mayor. Sometimes I call him Umberto Incerto, the uncertain one,' but there was something in the way she smiled towards Umberto as she said it, that let Dodd know there was love and pride there too.

'Some people say he's got no ambition for Protasi,' she continued, 'but I say, that's exactly what we want: we may be poor, but until the last few years, and even I can't blame Umberto for the war, we got along happily enough. So why would we want a mayor who wants to keep changing things? No, as far as we're concerned, our mayor is a good one, because he has no ideas for changes, so we keep electing him every year.'

While this conversation was going on, Dodd's men were making the best of things, enjoying the food and drink, and even making the odd clumsy but enthusiastic attempt to join in the dancing. The atmosphere, even so, was somehow uncomfortable, the participants not quite at ease.

Watson's attention was suddenly caught by a young girl of perhaps ten years, who grabbed his arm and began tugging and smiling. At first, he thought she was inviting him to dance, but then he realised she was trying to pull him towards a door at the darkened edge of the room. Baffled but interested, he allowed himself to be eased out into the darkness. With a final smile, the girl moved past him and went to stand a few yards away in the shadows at the corner of the building.

Nothing happened for a few seconds, then there was movement in the corner and, to Watson's delight, Maria emerged from the darkness.

Watson moved towards her, arms outstretched. Afterwards, he realised he didn't know whether he'd intended to gather her in his arms, or simply reach out to hold her hands – it was just an instinctive gesture. Whatever, Maria's reaction was to step back quickly and say 'No, Billy! No! What are you doing? We can't.'

She glanced meaningfully at the shadow of the young girl, who, it now became clear, was her chaperone. Watson was mortified. He'd had no amorous experience with girls at all, and was utterly bewildered by the scene, had no idea what was going on. His outstretched hands turned palm uppermost in an unconscious gesture of bewilderment.

It was Maria's turn to be mortified. She saw his confusion in his face and tried to explain.

'I just wanted to see you, Billy, talk to you, be with you. But if we were seen to be out here, even holding hands, I couldn't ... Oh dear, it's all gone wrong. This isn't what ....'

The pair stood facing each other, bereft, each uncertain what to do, until Maria had a brainwave.

'Go back inside, Billy. I won't be too long' and now she grabbed Watson's arm and pushed him back towards the building.

Back inside, the warmth, rich aroma and sound was momentarily stunning to Watson, who was still befuddled as to what had just taken place.

It must have been fifteen minutes he stood there at the edge of the room, struck motionless with confusion and hurt and at first, he didn't notice the movement at the top of the stairs that led to the hayloft. But other people did notice and the dancers began to stumble into each other as first one couple, then others, stopped and stared.

Maria, attired now in a beautifully simple white silk dress, was descending the stairs, graceful as a swan, stately as a princess, as though the simple rustic set of steps was a grand and curving marble staircase. Dodd was surprised to realise that he'd seen that style of dress before, as a young man back in Rome in 1920 and guessed, correctly, that this was Maria senior's wedding gown.

Maria had searched out Watson among the crowd and was smiling as she gazed at him. Watson was transfixed: his entire body seemed to be trembling under a mild electric shock. Nothing else existed for him at that moment while he watched Maria reach the floor and walk towards him. Suddenly, he knew what to do: he stepped forward a few paces and held out his arms, right lower, left higher. The accordionist began a waltz as Maria, still smiling, still meeting his gaze, walked into his arms and they began to dance.

Watson, in a daze of joy, knew nothing of his surroundings, of the interested dancers who'd moved to the sides of the room, nothing but the miraculous sensation of holding the young woman in his arms, and somehow, whether she led him, or whether he'd somehow absorbed the dance steps, or maybe, it was just the natural thing to do, the young pair began to dance as though born to it.

The attention of the villagers now turned to Maria's mother as they wondered what she would make of this breach of the strict instructions to the young women not to show themselves – the people knew how soldiers behaved when girls were about, either from actual knowledge, or from wildly exaggerated stories.

The *nonnas*, especially, craned and shifted forward to study Maria senior's reaction. There was a long moment when the only movements in the room were from the oblivious young dancers and from the accordion player. Then Maria senior turned to Umberto and whispered 'She's so beautiful' and Umberto

replied, 'She looks exactly as you did.' Then, assertive for once, he continued 'Come, we will dance.'

His wife smiled at him lovingly: sometimes, he knew just what to do, and they swept onto the dance floor. At once, there was a roar of approval that drowned the hissing and tutting of the *nonnas*, and soon, the floor was crowded with dancers.

The spell of uncertainty was finally broken completely when half a dozen girls, from maybe thirteen to twenty came clattering and giggling down the stairs. They had obviously been watching from the hayloft and, having seen the acceptance of young Maria's shocking behaviour, took that as their cue to join in.

Shortly, the whole room was asway with revellers.

Later, there was a short break in the dancing when an old fellow detached himself from the group in the corner and, quite independent of the music, stood in the middle of the room and began to sing a local folk song. Immediately, the accordionist stopped and the dancers stood still while in a moment, the old man was joined by a couple of others, obviously the worse for wear, as they bawled the chorus.

The other villagers were clearly quite used to this, and waited good humouredly as the old chaps, purple faced, eyes popping and gnarled veins bulging on their foreheads, bellowed their way to a conclusion.

Dodd happened to be talking to Umberto when he noticed him scowling over his shoulder, and turned to see what was upsetting his host. Maria, Umberto's wife, was in an emotional embrace with a young man, the only young man (other than Dodd's people) in the place. Dodd turned back to Umberto, eyebrows raised in enquiry.

'Partisan!' spat Umberto, disgustedly. 'Pahe! Knows it's our feast day. Come to scrounge food and drink, you see.'

As they watched, Maria senior put her arm into the young man's and steered him towards Dodd and Umberto. She then

introduced him as her son, Cesare, and he hastily added, 'Among the partisans, my *nome di battaglia*, my battle name is *Volpe*, the fox.'

'Pahe' spat Umberto again. 'Battle name! Fox!' Ridiculous!'

He glared hard at his son, then remembered himself and apologised to Dodd for his rudeness.

'You see,' he explained, 'before all this fighting business, he was a good lad, hard worker, all that. But these days, we see nothing of him until he comes sneaking down to cadge food and get his clothes washed. And I'm left to do all the work myself! Kids, eh? You have children, Mr Dodd?'

Dodd agreed that he did, but didn't want to have to admit he was proud of how his daughters had turned out.

Cesare continued as though his father had not spoken. 'You are the one they call *Colonello*?'

'That's true, though as you see, I am in fact a mere major.'

Cesare nodded, as though the whole thing was clear. 'Well, *Colonello*, on behalf of the partisans, I offer our company for your assistance. You have only to ask. Any of the boys from the village will be able to find us; we can be with you in a matter of a few hours.'

And with that, he stood at what he imagined was attention, gave Dodd a tiny bow, and did the same for his father. The respectful effect was spoiled a little though, when he rummaged in his knapsack (which was bulging with food from the table) and put on his lucky hat, an orange fur monstrosity that Robinson Crusoe would have been ashamed of, bowed the minute bow again, and moved away. In a few moments, he was gone.

As the evening wore on, the effects of the wine began to tell, especially on the visitors, and eventually it became clear that most of them would be incapable of getting back down to the vehicles that night, so they were parcelled out in twos and threes to villagers who could give them a bed.

## Chapter 13

It was late the next morning when Angelo and Dino, the two least affected by the coarse local wine, stepped gingerly into the daylight to begin a stint down at the lookout.

The whole group had been treated as honoured guests and it was soon decided that the sensible thing would be for them to base themselves at the village while they took turns in sending pairs down to count the traffic. And to avoid the effort of all that traipsing up and down every couple of hours, it made sense to have one pair do the whole morning, boring though that might be, and to be relieved by another pair, who would stand watch for the whole afternoon.

Of course, this meant that the others spent a lot of time in the village. It quickly became uncomfortable for the soldiers though: after doing their washing and getting their kit in order, they had nothing to do, except to take their turn at the lookout, while the villagers, men, women and children, all had farm work to do.

They soon began to realise that although they'd been welcomed with traditional hospitality, they were a serious drain on the already scanty resources of the village, so in return, the soldiers began to help out on the land, and the men returning from the lookout spot always brought something in the way of supplies from the trucks.

The work in the fields was sometimes physically hard and always monotonous, but oddly enough, was much preferred to doing lookout duty, most likely because the young women of the village shared the hoeing, weeding, and clearing of the everlasting stones that plagued the fields. Each year, an important task was to remove the bigger stones from the fields, where they were either stacked up as ever heightening walls, or, often as not, simply thrown over the edge of the plateau on which the field lay. But the next year, there was a new crop of stones, as though the others had never been removed at all. There was a



legend among the villagers that when God finished making the world, this was where he dumped all the stones he had left over.

While the work was not particularly pleasant, the company was: the weather was warming up and the men usually worked in just a shirt and shorts, while the women and girls wore a loose blouse and skirt. They shared a communal midday meal and wine, and the days were usually punctuated by the giggling of the young women as they called flirtatiously to the men, who, after having had the calls translated for them, responded in kind. Maria and Watson were the exceptions to this banter, it being understood that they were, well, not engaged or anything, but close.

It's one of the many odd things about people, especially squaddies, that when a period of routine is thrust upon them, they'll whinge about it to anybody who'll listen, but often enough, after a while and without realising, they become accustomed to it and even begin to be contented in the sameness. And so it was that when, on 22 May, the daily procession of the last month was suddenly broken, some of the men took a while to shake off their comfortable state.

That evening, Green had examined his watch one more time, as usual, and switched on the radio, flicking the switch to make sure it was set to "receive" and the whisper of static trickled out. He still enjoyed being the centre of attention for a little while each day, surrounded by the other soldiers, plus Angelo and Dino, and, as usually happened these days, Maria had come down to where the trucks were hidden too. Of course, she wasn't needed as a guide any more, but she enjoyed the evening stroll down to wait while the others listened in to the radio and always made sure she was alongside Watson in the circle of spectators.

At six thirty precisely, the static was replaced by the usual voice, which confirmed receipt of the information they'd sent earlier, and Green was just about in the act of shutting down,

when the disembodied voice stunned everybody by continuing 'From tomorrow at zero six hundred hours, maintain listening watch every hour, on the hour. I repeat, ...' and the message was repeated. The voice concluded 'Message ends. Out.'

The message, startling in its simplicity, had the men all standing, studying each other's faces, wondering what it all meant. Maria, Angelo and Dino, of course, didn't understand the detail, but felt the sudden tension as they awaited the translation.

Dodd was first to react.

'Well, chaps, perhaps we're on the move again, eh?' He did his single hand clap gesture. 'Excellent! Lovely! Personally, I've had about enough of this counting vehicles job. Let's hope they've got something a little more, er, active for us, eh?'

Watson was translating: Angelo and Dino were pleased, and joined in the bout of grinning and shoulder punching among the men, but Maria jutted her chin and looked away.

The men sat up late discussing what it all might mean, but, since all they had was speculation, even Dodd, with his supernatural powers of interpretation of the smallest snippet of information, was unable to so much as guess. The men tried to get him to reveal what there might be in his secret orders, but all he could do was to explain that there were several envelopes, each one separately sealed, and he was as much in the dark as everybody else until he had instructions as to which one to open.

So by six, with the watery sun yet to breast the mountain heights, the men were all back down at the trucks, surrounding Burgess and his radio. Maria had come down with them, feeling she had a serious interest in their immediate future. Cesare, who had, by mysterious means, come to hear of the break in routine, had appeared too, bringing his lucky hat and his crossbow, hoping to be included, even though he wasn't sure what that might entail.

Like a coven of witches round a brew of spells, the men waited but Burgess fussed over his knobs and dials before shaking his head.

‘Nope. Nothin’ Boss’ and everybody went back to making their preparations to move, or rather, pretending to – in fact, they’d all been ready before getting to bed.

Maria and Watson sat together, looking glum.

Seven came, with the same result, and Kelly broke out the tea making kit, explaining ‘Fair dinkum, boys, I need a brew, this is driving me potty. Any case, we’ll be finished and packed up again by eight.’

They gathered round the radio again an hour later, and this time, the static was broken by a distant voice.

‘Breakout from Anzio has begun. Execute Objective five. Expect six packages at map reference one one seven one zero eight and deliver to map reference zero eight six one six one. This task is highest priority. Commence immediately. I repeat, ...’ And after doing exactly that, the disembodied voice said ‘Confirm, over.’

There was a short silence as the men stared at the radio, digesting the news that the war was suddenly on the move again. Burgess broke the silence. ‘Skipper?’

Dodd started. ‘Oh, yes, send “Objective five, immediate, confirmed.”’

Burgess flicked a switch and began tapping out the reply. Everybody watched as he finished then switched back to “receive” but nothing more broke the static and he switched off.

Attention then turned back to Dodd, who muttered ‘Right, five it is’ and reached into the satchel, which he’d unconsciously been clutching almost since waking up. He found envelope five and silently read the contents before doing his “listen to me” single hand clap, which, of course, was completely unnecessary – he already had his audience’s undivided attention.

‘Yes, righto, chaps, this is more our line of work, I think. And, oh, I now realise Colonel Bullivant gave me a quiet briefing about this job, though at the time, I thought he was just chatting. I should have realised, when he swore me to secrecy, but of

course, I ...' Dodd realised he was waffling, and brought himself back to the point.

'How long to pack up the radio, John?'

'Only a few minutes, Boss, once I get the ariel down.'

'All right then chaps, I'll give you the background while John gets ready to go. You see, the Germans have obviously taken many, many prisoners, including a fair sprinkling of senior officers, but since the war's started going against them, they've also grabbed a lot of important non-military people too. They've collected leading churchmen, politicians and so on, even some royalty from the countries they've beaten, anybody really, who might be a leader or what you might call a rallying point for resistance, d'you see? And they've kept them apart from the general run of prisoners, looked after them better, better food, better digs, and so on. They call them the *prominenten*, the prominent ones. And now, of course, it seems the Germans think these *prominenten* might have some value as possible hostages against the time they have to negotiate to, well, I'm not sure, really, maybe to allow senior Germans to get away, something like that?'

'At any rate, there it is. Now, our lot have intelligence that says a group of these *prominenten* are being held somewhere south of Rome, and our objective five is to go and seize them back before the Germans can spirit them away somewhere. They're bound to do that soon, now that our lot have broken out from Anzio. The first map reference we received was the place they're being held, and the second was the place where we're to deliver them. And of course, "six packages" means there are six of them.'

Dodd gave the men a short silence to absorb all this, then summarised: 'So, we go to wherever they're being held, grab them and deliver them to the second map reference. Easy, eh?'

'Strike me lucky, Boss!' exploded the normally even tempered Kelly, 'I dunno 'bout easy! They want us, just seven of us soldiers, plus the Italians, to break *into* a prison? Then break

out again with their most important prisoners? Jeez, Skipper, it that's easy, I'd like to see your idea of a stiff job.'

'Hmm, I expect you're right, on the face of it. But look, this is not going to be an ordinary prison, or even an ordinary prisoner of war camp. Remember, there's only the six of them, and I expect they're getting on a bit, you know, senior officers or senior civilians, so I doubt they'll be in any danger of trying to climb a ten foot wall or dig a tunnel. No, I'd guess we can expect them to be kept in a country hotel, or something like that, with guards on the doors and so on. But I don't think the Germans will be wasting many good quality troops on guard duties. How many would you need to contain half a dozen older chaps? A dozen? Now, do you have the map handy, Sar' Major?'

Brownlow was already prepared for that, and had already begun to plot the references on the map while the others, after exchanging raised eyebrows and wagged heads to indicate uncertainty, looked on interestedly. Brownlow looked up.

'Well, Boss, if we're right about our present position, and I think we are, this first map reference isn't that far from here – we could probably get there today, depending on the terrain. O'course, if we could just pop down to the main road and motor along from there, we'd be there in a couple of hours, but there we are. And the second place, where we're to take 'em, that looks like a spot on the coast, so I reckon we'll be putting 'em on a boat. Bit tricky, that, though. We'll be going across jerry's main line of communications, and what with the break out, it'll be like an ants nest down there. So we'll maybe have a bit of excitement along the way, eh? Maybe a bit of demolition, eh, Watson? Would you like that?'

But for Watson, who'd been clutching Maria's hand while he translated for her, even the thought of blowing things up couldn't compensate for the idea of having to leave Maria, who snatched her hand away.

Brownlow continued 'Here, Boss, I'm checking the first map reference again, and I see it's right on top of a place called

*Castello Fiorelli*, if that's how you say it. He glanced at Watson, daring him to correct his pronunciation.

'Oh really?' replied Dodd. 'Let me see' and Brownlow pointed it out.

Dodd thought for a second and said 'Right, that must be it.' He saw Green's hand begin to rise and forestalled the question.

'Yes, *Castello Fiorelli*, that sounds right for a prison for important people. *Fiorelli* will be the family name, and *castello*, well, that means castle, so we've got ...'

Tullett interjected. 'What?' and, forgetting himself, added 'Fuckin' what? We're supposed just go walkin' in ter a fuckin' *castle*? Just us? 'Kin' 'ell!'

'Well, it's probably not an actual castle, as such. More like a manor house, most likely. Quite likely, it was an actual castle at one time, but maybe it's been rebuilt?'

Dodd tailed off, realising that his uncertainty wasn't making anyone feel better. But he pulled himself together and continued 'But look, I don't think they'd order us to do something impossible, do you, Stan?'

Tullett subsided, grumbling, and Dodd turned to Cesare. 'Do you know of this place, *Volpe*?'

Cesare beamed - he loved it when somebody used his *nome di battaglia*.

'Yes, *Colonello*, I know it: it's a huge place, gigantic! Are we going to blow it up?'

Cesare held his breath, hoping his use of "we" wasn't going to bring a bucketful of derision.

'Well, not necessarily,' Dodd replied, 'we need to go there and see what we can do. Can you take us there?'

'Of course.' He beamed again. The *Colonello* was going to include him in the adventure! But why not? Was he not a partisan? And was he not *il Volpe*?

'We need to take our vehicles.'

'Of course.'

‘And we need to keep out of sight, to be like the fox, you understand.’ Dodd smiled a small smile and Cesare simpered back.

‘Nothing could be easier, *Colonello*.’

‘How long will we take?’

Cesare stroked his chin, delighting in his sudden importance. He closed his eyes and one hand came out and began to weave about, wafting left, then right as he pictured the favoured route. Once, he tutted irritation and fluttered his hand, obviously realising that the path he was imagining wasn’t suitable, but after a minute, he was satisfied.

‘Hmm. It would take me half a day to walk there. Your trucks can go faster but we must take a longer way. If we start soon, we can be there by noon.’

Watson had quietly been translating into English and Burgess announced he’d finished stowing his kit so Dodd proclaimed ‘Excellent. Are we ready to go, Sar’ Major? Good, good. Let’s get on with it then.’

Everybody found something to be doing, leaving Watson alone to say goodbye to Maria.

Cesare insisted on riding with Angelo, who was happy to be promoted to lead driver. It had to be acknowledged that Cesare really knew his way around the whole area. Mostly, he led them along the sort of half concealed tracks through the forested and hilly terrain they had become used to travelling on. In only two places it was necessary to traverse open country, but only for one grassy gap of a hundred yards or so, and another of perhaps twice that, but made more intimidating because it was down and across a steep and stony incline which should sensibly have been taken at a slow crawl, but which Angelo negotiated in a hair raising slalom. Brownlow, not to be outdone for bravado, did the same.

Otherwise, the journey was uneventful, and a bit before midday, Cesare told Angelo to stop. He climbed down, explaining that he wanted to go forward on foot to check their

position. After a couple of minutes, he was back, his wide grin confirming that they were where he wanted them to be.

He waved an arm and called ‘*Colonello*, come and see.’

Taking their cue from Cesare’s confident manner, everybody followed.

They slowed as they saw the edge of the trees nearing, and were beginning to take up their customary half crouch, but Cesare took no such precautions, except to stop just inside the trees.

The brilliant vista that awaited them was somewhat reminiscent of the scene when they’d first sighted the barn. The land sloped down a little from right to left and the forest framed the right hand side of the view. But instead of the ancient stone barn, standing black against the snow, here, perhaps half a mile away, a cluster of buildings nestled, some light grey, others more buff, and whereas the barn had seemed to stand in spite of the surroundings, here, the buildings seemed much more comfortably part of the landscape, gleaming in the sunlight.

The men stood taking in the panorama, studying the buildings, especially the imposing two storey sandstone edifice, the colour of a biscuit, that stood apart from the others, higher, on a small ridge. On each side of the main structure, a lower wing ran out, which seemed to make the central part more imposing. The architecture was simple, the only adornment an elegant portico covering the main entrance, and low battlements, a token nod towards the “Castello” of its name, surrounding the grey slate roof. An American might well have commented on the similarity to the White House, but none of the onlookers knew anything about that. The simplicity, unusual in Italian architecture of the past, spoke volumes about the owners: they knew their position in society - no need for showy flourishes here.

In front of the house, on the other hand, lay one of those extensive ornamental gardens, full of elaborate flower beds and shrubs tortured into ornate shapes, sloping gently down towards



the other buildings. It would probably once have been the owner's pride and joy, but now, all the able bodied men having been vacuumed up by the war, the lines of the once lovingly trimmed shrubs had blurred and overgrown, the rose garden ran amok and the central gravelled driveway was tufted with outbreaks of weeds. But outside the garden, defined by walls of stone about four feet high, small fields extended out for perhaps a hundred yards on each side, showing the turned soil and neatly planted stripes of young greenery that indicated diligent working by someone.

Brownlow, predictably, said they ought to take a bit of time to study the place and watch for people moving about, so they could begin to think about where the prisoners might be and how they could be extracted. Dodd agreed, and sighed with pleasure at the familiarity of the vista.

'Oh yes, I'm quite happy to just sit here and soak it all in for a bit. This all looks very familiar to me, you know. I've seen similar layouts many times as a youngster, mostly north of Rome, of course, but I bet I can tell you pretty much what each of these buildings are. First, the big house on that little hump: that'll be the *castello* of course, and ...'

He was interrupted by an explosion from Tullett.

'What? You call that a castle? That ain't a fuckin' *castle*!' The derision in his voice almost, but not quite, concealed his relief that they weren't going to have to attack his image of a castle.

'It ain't even got one o' them pond things' he continued, making a circling motion with a finger.

'A moat, you mean?' added Green, helpfully.

Tullett ignored the interruption, and went on. 'An' where's the fuckin' pointy bits at the corners, eh? All castles 'ave them pointy bits, don' they?'

He stared defiantly about him, daring anyone to argue.

Dodd recognised that Tullett had a very clear picture in his mind of what a real castle should look like, complete with a moat

and turrets. He recalled the same certainty Tullett had displayed back when they were discussing the difference between sheep and goats. Intuitively, Dodd thought that Tullett's knowledge of castles was as theoretical as that of sheep, quite possibly gleaned from the same book of fairy stories, but he wasn't inclined to argue.

'Yes, Stan, you're quite right. But you might recall that I did say before it was only *called* a *castello*, which translates as castle, but a better translation would be a manor house. Remember that? Or the original castle might have been rebuilt?'

Tullett nodded reluctantly and subsided, still feeling that he'd somehow been tricked, and if the true situation had been properly explained to him earlier, he wouldn't have had to worry so much.

'Right,' Dodd continued, 'let's just call it the big house, all right, Stan?'

Tullett grinned sheepishly and nodded for Dodd to continue. Attention had wandered from the buildings to Dodd and what he was saying. Realising that, Dodd reminded the men that they were supposed to be looking out for movement, and they turned back, but nothing seemed to be happening and Dodd was about to continue when Green broke in.

'Does this view remind anybody of England? You know, little fields, rolling hills, everything's a lot greener than back up there, lots of grass, stuff growing in the fields, even the trees're more English, aren't they? Not so many fir trees, lots more ordinary trees with new shoots, eh?'

The men all looked again, taking in Green's thoughts, though Kelly had never seen any English countryside, and Tullett and Burgess rolled their eyes at each other, having seen little more than Kelly, but accepted that the country *was* different.

Dodd brought them back to the matter in hand.

'So, the big house. That will be the home of the owners of the estate. I imagine they own all the land you can see, and quite likely a lot more. There'll be several little farms dotted around

the estate, worked by tenants who pay an annual rent to the owners for the right to farm their plot. In return, the owners maintain the buildings and fences, and quite likely supply seed, fertiliser, and so on. Right then, down the slope a bit, we see another building, not as large as the big house, but two storeys and still a good size, eh?’

Grunts of acknowledgement.

‘That, I’m almost certain, will be the *fattoria*.’ Dodd was aware, as was everybody else, that Watson had been miserable and silent since leaving Maria, and decided to bring him into the conversation.

‘Come across that word, Bill?’

Watson shrugged. ‘Er, don’t think so. Factory, is it?’

‘Good guess, but no, it means the factor’s house, the factor being the estate manager. He’ll be the chap who actually runs the place, looks after the little farms, and so on. Important chap, you know. Quite likely, the actual landowners don’t get involved with the estate at all. They may not even live there most of the time.’

Burgess was horrified. ‘What! They just sit there raking in the cash while the others do all the work? That ain’t right, is it? Bastards!’

Attention was distracted for a moment, while the men glanced from Burgess to Dodd, but the officer didn’t seem fussed by the outburst, so they turned back, just in time to see a group of four men emerge from the *fattoria* and begin to make their way towards the *castello*, perhaps a hundred and fifty yards away up the gentle slope and across the ornamental garden. Almost simultaneously, a similar group came from the *castello* and strolled towards the *fattoria*.

Brownlow studied them all through his binoculars until each group had disappeared. After a moment, another small group came from the big house and began to fan out among the garden and small fields surrounding the buildings.

‘Well, Sar’ Major, what do you make of that?’ asked Dodd.

‘Well, Boss, that’s very interesting. The two lots that changed buildings are jerry soldiers, but they’re obviously not expecting any trouble – two or three of ‘em coming from the big house had rifles, which they handed over to the new chaps, but they weren’t on the alert. The other lot, the ones going to the fields, well, I reckon they’re maybe some of our targets. But as you can see from here, nobody’s guarding ‘em, and they’re not working hard, so I my guess is they’re just out for a bit of exercise, and a bit of an interest.

‘But thinking about the guards, we can also reckon there’s not too many of ‘em. I’m pretty sure we’ve just seen a change of shift, so, four to a shift, no more than three shifts, that makes twelve guards all told, plus probably an officer, maybe two, more than likely have their dinner in the big house. If we can take ‘em by surprise, this job might turn out not too hard. And there’s another interesting thing as well. Any thoughts, Boss?’ he added, turning Dodd’s trick of suddenly questioning his audience on himself.

But Dodd wasn’t going to be caught by his own trap. ‘Well, I see a couple of points of interest, but let’s see what anybody else had to say. What do you think chaps?’ he said, deftly batting the question on to the corporals.

Kelly chuckled and broke in. ‘Those other chaps, they have to be English, don’t you reckon, Sarge? Prisoners of war, pretty senior too, and they’re doing a bit of pottering about in the garden! Yeah, Poms, definitely.’

Brownlow nibbled his lower lip ruminatively. ‘Yeah, you’re probably right, Ted. What else, lads?’

Burgess was ready. ‘Well, what strikes me is it don’t look like a prison at all. Them chaps in the fields, they could just walk away: there’s no barbed wire, nothing at all really, just the walls between the fields. You could climb over them easy as easy, couldn’ you?’

Watson tried to shake off his depression and make a contribution. 'I'm looking at the roads. There's these little tracks going off in several directions, look.'

Dodd agreed. 'Yes, they'll be the tracks going out to the little farms spread around the estate.'

Watson nodded testily, and continued 'And then there's the big one, looks like a proper road, going down the hill. Look, it goes from the big house, down through the garden into a sort of farmyard, I suppose you'd call it, surrounded by the other buildings, then off it goes, down and out of sight. That must be the way down to the main road, and that'll be where the jerries'll come from.'

The others all felt relieved – Watson's despondent mood had been getting on their nerves. Immediately, everybody knew what was coming next. 'So I think we should get down there and blow a hole in it, eh? Stop 'em coming after us, eh?'

He received grins and the odd gentle punch on the shoulder, the closest these young men could get to a public demonstration of sympathy, but Brownlow threw cold water on the idea.

'Er, maybe, Billy, but we might be needing the road to get our people out. Just for now, perhaps we'd better just put a couple of chaps down there to stop any new arrivals, eh? Now, what about you, Tullett?'

Attention turned to Tullett, but he was still sulking a bit over the castle misunderstanding, and he pouted for a second before saying, 'Well, these whatyercallems, important people, they'll be stayin' in the big 'ouse, wint they? That's what we got to go for, ain't we Gilbert?'

Green felt a little put upon, having already pointed out how different the country was, but made an effort.

'Yeah, it'll be a bit hard to attack the big house from here, won't it? Maybe half a mile, maybe more, then over those fields and walls. I don't fancy that much, even if we go at night. I

reckon we'd be best off going right round up into the trees and coming down at it from there.'

This caused an outbreak of discussion about the best way to attack the big house. As the men batted ideas back and forth, Dodd and Brownlow exchanged smiles as they thought the same thing - a few months back, these young men were accustomed to being told what to do without the reason even being explained to them and now, here they all were, discussing tactics as though born to the job. Even Angelo and Dino offered suggestions, via Watson's translation, though Cesare wisely kept quiet. It was all a bit beyond him why they didn't all just get in a line and march down there like hunters, shooting at everything that moved. That's the way he'd have done it, which perhaps explained why he was pretty low down in his band of partisans chain of command.

In the end, the plan was quite simple. Kelly would be in charge of stopping any traffic coming up the road while the attack was in progress, and would, if need be, blow a gap in the road. He'd be accompanied by Burgess, who would provide covering fire as required.

Green, Dino and Cesare would approach the *fattoria* under cover of the field walls and be ready to stop the occupants from reinforcing the big house.

These two actions would, it was hoped, isolate the *castello*. Meanwhile, Watson would circle round and wend his way into the trees behind the big house and set an explosive charge on a time pencil, so as to cause a distraction and confusion among the Germans. He would have Tullett with him as covering fire, and, having set the charge, they would scarper, but stay as close to the house as they could, so as to support Dodd's group, which was Dodd himself, Brownlow and Angelo, who both had to be there to brazenly drive both trucks to the front entrance, of the *castello*. Dodd would then do his usual trick, marching into the *castello*, backed by Brownlow and

Angelo, brandishing their weapons, to demand the surrender of the Germans and the handing over of the six *prominenten*.

Everybody would have a light machine gun, except Dodd, who was frightened of them, and Cesare, ditto, and in any case, he preferred his crossbow.

A sudden silence fell then: nobody had anything to add, and they looked at each other, but mainly at Brownlow, as he chewed his lip, going over it in his mind, visualising movements, looking for faults.

Eventually, he broke the silence. ‘Yeah, well, that’s all very well and good, but what I’m not clear on is you and me, Boss, we just go walking into the big house, do we? What happens then?’

Dodd nodded. ‘Yes, well, that bit could do with some work, couldn’t it? But let’s think about that. Angelo will be with us, looking fierce of course, and you’ll both be waving machine guns about. And Bill and Stan will soon be right behind us, with any luck. I’m hoping we’ll come up against the officer straight away, catch him off guard, and then it’ll simply be a question of rounding up any other guards in the *castello*, er, big house. Or not even that, really. We’re not there to take prisoners – we only need to keep the Germans subdued long enough to collect the six *prominenten*, don’t we? It won’t take a minute, we’ll be away before they even know what’s happening. Then we’ll drive down to the *fattoria* and pick up the chaps from there, then down the road, collect Ted and, who was it, oh yes, John, and we’re away. Once Bill’s explosion goes off, the whole thing’ll be over in five minutes. All we have to do then is wait at the main road for a chance to get across, and we’re off.’

Brownlow scrunched up the right side of his face. ‘I can’t believe I’m saying this, but it’s just potty enough to work, so I’m happy to give it a go. Only question is, when? I’m thinking first light, eh? Give ourselves the best chance, eh?’

He saw Dodd was about to object and added ‘Yeah, I know there’s a bit of urgency, but we’re relying on surprise and

the best time for that's first light. It'd be ridiculous to try it in broad daylight. And Ted'll have the road covered, so if the jerries show up to collect 'em, we'll have some warning. So, somebody get a bite organised and I'll check the weapons over. Ted, will you and Billy get your explosives sorted?'

Within half an hour, they were fed, packed, equipped and ready to go, with nothing to do until it was time to get into position before dawn.

Soon, though, the waiting was getting on everybody's nerves. Kelly spoke for everybody when he said 'Fair dinkum, boys, I'm jack o' this hanging about. How about we go now?'

Dodd was pleased – it was worrying him that he'd been told the job was urgent and here they were lounging about – and Brownlow, to everyone's surprise, replied 'Yeah, let's get on with it.'

Within a few minutes, the trucks were all packed, the men had checked their kit for the hundredth time, and were ready to go.



## Chapter 14

Watson and Tullett were the first to leave – they had furthest to go, because they had to move back then up into the protection of the trees above the *castello*, before creeping down so as to set their charge as close as they could to the back of the mansion.

Kelly and Burgess went next, moving down the hillside among the trees before scuttling across the open ground to the road, where they would select a suitable spot to ambush an oncoming vehicle or, if need be, demolish the road.

Last to go went Green, Dino and Cesare, whose job was to stop reinforcements from the *fattoria* getting up to the *castello*. They had what might turn out to be the most vital job, really, and maybe the trickiest, because they didn't know exactly how many troops there were in the building. Brownlow wished there were more proper soldiers to beef up the group, but he was needed to drive his truck and escort Dodd, Kelly had to be at the road, and the others were required where they were, so that was that. Green's group was to move through the little fields and get themselves as close as possible to the door of the building, so that when Watson's explosion brought the occupants out, they could be, well, neutralised. Exactly what that entailed hadn't been discussed. It might mean anything from simply rounding them up into an orderly line, to firing bursts from the light machine guns across the doorway to keep them inside, depending on their level of belligerence, or even, in the worst case, to shooting them down as they charged for the *castello*.

For the moment, Dodd, Brownlow and Angelo had the hardest task of all: after moving the vehicles into position for a quick move, they had nothing to do but sit in the trucks and wait for the blast from behind the big house, imagining all the terrible things that could go wrong.

Dodd pulled at the collar of the German major's greatcoat. There had been a bit of discussion about whether to wear it or keep to his British battledress. In the end, it was decided that the

sight of the German uniform might just be enough to carry the surprise long enough to take control, so they'd compromised – he wore the German greatcoat over his own uniform, along with the German officer's hat.

Everything went so well for Watson and Tullett that they were in position at the edge of the trees maybe fifty yards from the back of the manor house, with their small bundle of explosives in place, in only twenty minutes. Watson had selected a five minute time pencil and had nothing to do now but watch the hand of his watch creep along for another ten minutes, until the agreed moment.

Kelly and Burgess were also ready, having come upon the ideal spot to stop a single vehicle, and laid a charge ready to blow a hole in the road if a convoy approached.

Gilbert Green had to admit he felt pretty special. After all, he'd been entrusted, he and his squad (as he thought of Dino and Cesare) with the important task of blocking German reinforcements from reaching the big house. He'd have been less happy if he'd known that Brownlow had thought long and hard about how he, Brownlow, might take charge of this part of the job, or how Kelly might be freed up to do it, but they both had even more vital tasks. His first choice among the corporals might have been Watson, but he too was needed elsewhere. Which only left Green, Burgess and Tullett. Much of a muchness, sniffed Brownlow, and pretty much tossed a metaphorical coin.

The first part of the journey was easy enough: just a question of keeping low and following Brownlow's parting advice: 'Off you go, boys, and remember, like the donkey, eh?'

Dodd had translated that for the two Italians, except that he'd used "like a fox" and Cesare had swelled with pride. But soon, they arrived in the shadow of the first drystone wall, maybe four feet high and right across their line of travel. After shaking hands with each of his comrades, Green half scrambled, half

flopped over the wall in the approved manner and brought his Bren up to the ready, as taught in the US army fieldcraft class. Dino, as instructed previously, waited a few seconds, listening for any indication that Green had been spotted, then followed and they were soon joined by Cesare. They'd expected him to be a bit clumsy, carrying his cumbersome crossbow, and were amazed at how he managed it. It was as though he'd somehow simply teleported himself through the wall. Green grinned and the Italians joined in. They just had one more wall across their path to get over before the last one, which took the line they had to take, so they only had to follow it along and then they'd be right where they were needed.

Aware that they were getting close to the buildings, Green crouched low, ran at the second wall, and slithered over. Hearing the others right behind him, he kept going, diagonally across the next small field and took shelter against the final wall, Bren up, ready to protect the others, but the silence told him there was no need: they still hadn't been spotted.

Well, that wasn't quite true. Taking a deep breath, Green slipped over the wall, making a small "ooof" sound as he dropped onto one shoulder then rolled and took up the ready position while waiting for the others. Looking round, he noticed one of the gardeners who'd stood upright and turned at the small sound of Green's appearance. The man studied Green, as though not quite sure what to make of the new arrival, and managed a surprised 'I say!'

Green stared back: the man didn't look much like what Green was expecting of a prisoner of war. Too well fed, for a start. True, he was wearing what appeared to be the top half of the remains of an officer's uniform, but his outfit also included scruffy grey trousers and a most unmilitary pair of boots. He was unshaven and his stance and grey stubble showed him to be at least late middle aged. On the other hand, Green also noticed the red tabs on his collar, so he was a staff officer. *If* that was his

jacket, of course. He could just as easily have been a local labourer with a cast off military jacket.

The two regarded each other silently, until Dino took the man's attention as he took his turn at slumping over the wall. The gardener looked at what appeared to him to be a bandit, and had managed another 'I say!' when Cesare arrived, clutching his crossbow and his lucky hat, which he now placed firmly on his head.

The gardener turned a long and interested gaze onto Cesare, then addressed Green. 'You'll be British, I imagine?'

Well, that settled it for Green: the scruffy outfit, the gardening, and the accent. He had that upper class accent that until a while back, Green would have called lah di bleeding dah, but having worked with Dodd, he'd softened his point of view.

The gardener spoke to Green, but kept his eyes on Cesare, as though he'd be bound to try something underhand if not carefully watched. 'You'll be here to rescue us, I suppose?'

'Yeah, that's the idea, chum. You and your mates. It's all sorted, so we'll have you out of here in no time.'

'Super!' He turned away and called 'Gerald! I say, Gerald! Young chap here's come to rescue us! Look!'

Green could only shake his head in horror as the man pointed down at Green. The other man called back 'Oh, splendid!' But an element of doubt crept in as he shouted back 'Er, on his own, is he, Hughie?'

'No, he's got a couple of, er, chums with him.' He turned back to Green. 'Gerald wants to know if there's any more of you.'

Green did a downward patting motion with his hand and hissed 'Look, mate, can we keep the shouting down? We're trying not to be noticed just now.'

'Oh, yes, of course. Sorry. Anything I can be doing? No? No, probably best if we leave you to it for now, eh? Gerald! We might see how the cabbages are coming on, eh?' And with a wink at Green and a final long stare at Cesare, he strolled off.

Green turned to his team and rolled his eyes.

After what seemed an eternity, a loud explosion echoed through the trees behind the *castello*, and with a grunted ‘Good. Right,’ Brownlow started the short drive, checking that Angelo was behind him. They watched anxiously as they approached, but there was no sign from the big house that they were even being watched, never mind challenged or about to be shot at. It seemed the decoy tactic had worked brilliantly and this was soon confirmed. Brownlow, Bren at the ready, raced for the front door, with Dodd close behind, followed by Angelo, who’d been slowed down a bit, having somehow got his Beretta caught up in his steering wheel.

Brownlow clattered into the imposing marble floored entrance hall, two storeys high and with one of those wide curving staircases so beloved of Hollywood, lit by an enormous window at the upper floor level.

He charged into a large side room, a one-time library, judging by the shelf lined walls, now obviously used as an office, but again, there was nobody there. With a small shrug for Dodd, Brownlow pressed on, quietly now, until he came to a large and ornate room with many windows and a pair of French doors leading out to a terrace at the rear of the building. The doors were wide open and a crowd of people could be seen outside, standing with their backs to the newcomers, chattering and pointing, studying the trees, from which a thick cloud of smoke was wafting.

Dodd and Brownlow exchanged glances: pretty much the one thing they hadn’t expected was the complete success of the explosion ruse. There was a sound behind them, and as Brownlow turned back, Watson whispered ‘OK, Sarge, it’s only Stan and I.’

Watson and Tullett fanned out either side of Brownlow, and Dodd stepped forward into the doorway.

‘German soldiers!’ he said, getting a flashback to the scene at the railway bridge when they had surprised the guards. The people on the terrace turned at the sound of Dodd’s voice, including a German captain and four privates. They’d been taken completely by surprise: the captain, catching on, began to scramble for the pistol at his belt, but Watson stepped towards him and waved his Bren in a way that made the message abundantly clear. Two of the privates found themselves in the same predicament: their rifles were slung on their shoulders – they would have had no chance to use them, the third had no rifle and the fourth, embarrassingly, had put his down somewhere in the rush out to see what was going on.

Dodd was just about to begin his little speech about not wanting anybody to get hurt, when he felt, rather than heard, somebody behind him. He turned to see a large German sergeant pointing a light machine gun at him and his group, whose weapons were all, of course, pointing exactly the wrong way.

Meanwhile, Green’s group was perfectly placed behind a stone wall only fifteen yards from the *fattoria*. Green’s main concern was that the two gardeners would come wandering over for a chat or to ask what the delay was all about – they really didn’t seem all that clear about the situation – but they dutifully stayed away.

It wasn’t long before Watson’s explosion reverberated around the area, and Green stuck his head up, Bren at the ready. Dino and Cesare followed suit, and, as though choreographed, five or six German soldiers, half dressed, some of them, but with their rifles, came tumbling out of the front door to see what was going on. Green stood then, and yelled ‘Halt. Hands up!’ Dodd had told him how to say it in German but he thought he might get it wrong and the Germans wouldn’t understand, or worse, laugh, but as it turned out, they understood all right, and didn’t even manage a grin as they raised their hands.

By shouting and pantomime, Green had them discard their weapons and sit at the base of the wall of the building, then left Dino and Cesare to guard them while he set about the task he was least looking forward to - going inside to check for hidden soldiers. He'd imagined all sorts of unfortunate outcomes, mostly involving somebody, quite likely himself, getting shot or strangled, and sidled round the interior with comically exaggerated stealth, but, to his great relief, the place was empty.

Green emerged, grinning widely, and Cesare took off on his special task – to go to Dodd and confirm that the off duty soldiers had been captured. The Germans were relieved to see Cesare trot away towards the *castello*: they were quite reasonably nervous about having a crossbow pointed at them by a man wearing a crazy hat.

As he jogged along the central path among the gardens, Cesare noticed a large man in German field grey sidling along the front of the house towards the great entrance door, followed by another soldier. A third soldier approached the entrance from the other side. The first man carried a light machine gun, and the others each had a rifle. Cesare knew that wasn't supposed to be happening, and, like his namesake the fox, made himself invisible among the shrubs as he sidled nearer.

The German sergeant stood in the doorway, taking a second to size up the situation but in an instant, he understood intuitively that Dodd was a fraud.

Dodd and Brownlow exchanged glum glances – there was nothing they could do, and suddenly, Dodd's wearing the German uniform turned into a very bad idea. If he wasn't shot right now by the sergeant, he certainly would be later on: soldiers out of their own uniform could be shot as spies.

The sergeant smiled, realising he had wrested the initiative, and was about to tell his troops to disarm the attackers, when his expression turned surprised, then baffled. The machine gun began to waver, and he fell forward onto the floor and lay

motionless. It was only then that the crossbow bolt buried deep in his back became visible.

Outside, the two German soldiers froze, uncomprehending. Their sergeant was there in the doorway, then they'd heard a faint whirring sound and a thud, then he'd fallen. Instinctively, they both spun to search the gardens for the attacker, but the foxlike Cesare had disappeared. The pair did the only reasonable thing in the circumstances: they threw down their weapons and put their hands up.

Inside, it was hard for the residents to keep up. It was like a tennis match – first everything was normal, then the newcomers arrived and took over, then the German sergeant grasped the initiative, but finally, the game went to the challengers.

Dodd recovered himself enough to do his single hand clap. 'I am Major Dodd,' he announced in German. 'My troops are blocking the road and the soldiers at the *fattoria* have been captured. As you see, we are in complete command. Do I make myself clear, Captain?'

The German officer nodded.

'Right then, Captain,' he continued in German, 'we won't disturb you for long. We'll simply be wanting your prisoners, right now if you please.'

The captain, also back in charge of himself, nodded. 'Your timing is excellent, Major, if you are a major. My orders are that we're all to be moved tomorrow.'

Dodd smiled and removed the greatcoat.

The German said 'Ah, so, a real major, after all' and began an odd conversation. 'So, is it *all* my prisoners you want?'

That rattled Dodd a little. Was there some sort of hierarchy of prisoners? Some more prominent than others? 'I'm here to collect the *prominenten*.'



‘Of course, of course. You’ll have quite a convoy: are you hoping to simply go driving back to your lines? You’ll find the roads a little busy, I think.’

‘No, Major, both my vehicles are quite competent off the road, and ...’

‘*Both* vehicles?’

‘Just so.’

The captain had a sudden thought. ‘How many do you expect to take?’

Dodd was becoming a little uneasy, as it began to sink in that there was quite a crowd in the room now. In fact, some couldn’t even get in, and were craning round the french doors and passing on the conversation to others further back. ‘My information is that there are six *prominenten*,’ he said firmly. ‘I can only take them.’

‘Then, Major, I have to tell you, your information is a little out of date. We have somewhat more than that, as you see.’ He wafted an arm at the crowd.

‘Twenty eight, to be exact.’

## Chapter 15

That shook Dodd badly: it was quite impossible to transport that many people, prominent or not. Even if they abandoned most of their gear, Dodd's group would only be able to take a dozen or so.

So he did what any sensible officer would do and turned to Brownlow.

'Bit of a problem, Sar' Major. We need to have a chat.' He quickly explained the issue and added 'Can you get something organised about securing the German soldiers – I imagine there'll be a cellar that'll do the job, then we'll review our options.'

Quietly pleased with himself – sometimes this officer business seemed to come quite naturally – he continued.

'Corporal Tullett, pop down to the *fattoria* and get Green to bring the others up and put them with the rest, and Corporal Watson, I want you to nip down to Sergeant Kelly to let him know what's going on. He'll have to stay down there for the time being, I'm afraid – we can't have any more surprises – but we'll organise relief as soon as we can. All right?'

Turning to the crowd, he called 'Now, I need to talk to the senior British officer here. Who would that be, please?'

A young man in the uniform of a private said 'That would be General Howes, Sir, or General Barrington, but I expect they're in the garden – they're usually there. I'll fetch them if you like, Major' and, carefully stepping round the body of the German sergeant, trotted out of the front door.

In ten minutes, the Germans, including the two from outside the front door who'd been rounded up by Green after he found them still standing outside with their hands in the air and a bewildered look, were all safely tucked away in a substantial cellar. It had originally been even bigger, but the owner's best wines had been hidden away, bricked up behind a false wall when he realised the Germans were coming, and the racks of wine now on show were

merely the ordinary plonk left there to decoy the Germans away from the good stuff.

Dodd assembled his team and a few others in a corner of the enormous sitting room. More trickled in from time to time.

‘Well, chaps, this is a bit of a pickle, eh? We need to think about how to proceed from here. But first, let me introduce General Howes and General Barrington.’

The two men, peas in a pod, like an elderly version of Tweedledum and Tweedledee, sat and smiled benignly, completely unfazed by the sudden change in their fortunes. But General Howes stared at General Barrington and twitched his face at Dodd. Barrington caught on.

‘Oh, yes, thank you for reminding me Gerald.’

He stood and beamed at Dodd’s army, reserving a special smile for Cesare.

‘May I, on behalf of all the *prominenten*, thank you chaps most sincerely for your efforts. Most impressive, I must say, if a little, well, informal.’

Green astounded his mates by saying, ‘Oh, that’s all right, Hughie: all part of the service.’

Everybody waited for an explosion from General Barrington at Green’s effrontery in addressing such a senior officer in such a way, but Barrington simply smiled even wider and spoke to Dodd.

‘What a wonderful tribe you have here, Major. Quite remarkable. I’m particularly impressed with the *banditti* you’ve brought with you, especially this chap here.’

Having been briefed about the earlier action, he moved to Cesare and shook his hand, then everybody else’s, insisting on being properly introduced as he went. General Howes followed suit and when that little formality was over, Barrington made a short speech in which he stated that he would do his best to make sure that everybody, especially the Italians, should be awarded a medal, but in the meantime, it was his opinion that Cesare should henceforth be officially known as *Volpe*. Meanwhile, he’d

appreciate it if firstly, he and Howes should be known as Gerald and Hughie, and that in the same spirit, they both accepted that Major Dodd was in charge. Acknowledging a smatter of applause, he then sat, and looked expectantly at Dodd.

‘Oh, right, thankyou General, er, Hughie – that will make things so much easier. Now, on to the main business. The problem as I see it is this. We have two vehicles, capable of carrying, at most, twenty people, or, if we ditch most of our equipment and supplies, let’s stretch it to twenty four people. Would you agree with that, Sar’ Major?’

‘I would, Skipper, I would, ‘cept that would be really stretching it, even if we ditched a lot of kit, which I’d be very wary about, bearing in mind we’ve got to get past the main German supply route, so we’ll probably be needing all the stuff we can get.’

‘I’m sure you’re right. And there are already ten in our party, so, the most we could take, at the outside, would be a dozen or so. That’s not very attractive, is it, leaving sixteen people behind?’

Dodd let that sink in for a minute. ‘The alternative is that we take everybody and walk out. Obviously, we couldn’t go down among the Germans, so we’d have to stay up and make our way among the forests, keeping out of the way until our forces push past. How does that sound to you, chaps?’

Nobody seemed keen to speak until Watson voiced what they were all thinking. ‘Well, Boss, I don’t think that’s much of an option.’

‘Maybe you’re right, but tell us your thinking.’

‘Well, Boss, we know it’s pretty rugged country up here, and the *prominenten* are mostly getting on a bit ...’

Barrington expostulated ‘I say, steady on! Getting on a bit! Really!’

But Howes said quietly ‘He’s quite right, of course, Hughie. And not in the best condition, some of us, are we? How do you think you would manage on a long trudge through the

mountains? And the weather won't be kind, most likely. Gets pretty cold overnight, eh? You saw what happened to your lettuces just the other night when the frost got 'em. I don't fancy it myself, and I'm not the oldest or the least active chap here, I think.'

Barrington mulled that over and agreed. 'Hmm, the lettuces *were* a mess, weren't they, Gerald?'

He turned back to Watson. 'Yes, you're quite right to point that out, young man. So, we're not all going to ride out and we're not all going to march out.' He pulled a grim face. 'Doesn't leave very many options, does it? So I suppose you fellows will have to leave us to it.'

Dodd was astonished. 'Oh no, General, er, Hughie, I don't think that's an option either, do you, chaps?'

Before anyone could offer an opinion, Brownlow broke in. 'Call me wassname, Skip, but I reckon you've already got something in mind.'

Dodd smiled. 'Well, as it happens, Sar' Major, I do have one alternative.'

The whole meeting leant forward.

'Well, we know that our troops are coming north, and will soon force the Germans away from this area. We just don't know how long that will take. So, what if we stayed put and defended the *castello*? We'd only need to keep the Germans off for a few days, quite likely, and I'd imagine they'll have plenty of other things on their minds than tying up forces just to recapture a few prisoners. What do you think, Sar' Major? Could we do it?'

Everybody watched as Brownlow gave his lip a serious chewing before replying 'Well, it's not like we're attacking, for a start: we're defending, which is a lot easier. And we're not going to be trying to secure territory, not as such. All we'd be wanting to do is buy time, just hold 'em off for what, a couple of days, or maybe a bit more? But what worries me is there's not many of us, is there? Only ten, or nine, really – I can't see Cesare, er, Volpe's crossbow's going to be much use, defending this place.'

General Howes broke in. 'Well, that's not quite right, not if we include some of our chaps.'

Brownlow was sceptical, and said so.

'Oh yes,' Howes went on, 'of course, there are quite a few of us who'd be absolutely useless in a fight, wouldn't we, Hughie, but on the other hand, there's some I imagine would be willing and able. You see, there's all kinds here, anybody who the Germans thought might be useful as hostages, really, and they weren't too fussy either. Now, as you see, there's a lot of old fogies like Hughie and me – we weren't even fighting soldiers. Hughie was a quartermaster general in Greece and I was in charge of transport: we both got left behind, somehow, and the jerries got us. And there's a couple of Greek generals, too, and an Italian admiral.

'Funny thing, the Greeks insisted in bringing their servants with them, you know, batmen, we'd call them, and the Germans allowed it! Extraordinary, eh! Then there's a Polish prince, but he's pretty old, and a couple of Italian ones who'd made their opinions of the Germans a bit too public, but they're both getting on a bit too. And there's a lot of other odds and sods as well. But the people I'm thinking of are here by mistake, really. You see, as I said, the Germans've collected anybody who they thought might have some sort of bargaining value, and we have two British private soldiers and a second lieutenant. Now why would they be of interest? Well, the privates are both called Churchill, and the other one is a Lieutenant Montgomery! None of them are any relation to their namesakes, of course, but the Germans don't seem to believe them, so, into the bag they go with the other *prominenten*!'

Howes snorted. 'Honestly, they've no idea, really. Shouldn't wonder if they're collecting anybody called King, eh, Hughie, in case they're related to royalty!'

He snorted again, and Barrington responded with a laugh, but Dodd got the distinct impression that that line had been used a good few times before.

‘Point is, though, that they were proper fighting soldiers, so they’d be useful, and there’s also a couple of US Air Force colonels – not a day over twenty one, by the look of ‘em, but that’s the Yanks for you.’

He sniffed a disdainful sniff that Green would have been proud of. ‘But I’m sure they’d be game to help out on the firing line.’

A young man in an olive uniform stood and said ‘Sir, may I introduce myself? I’m Colonel Paul Tyson, USAF, and my pal here is Colonel Jim Cassidy. We’re airmen, but we’d be keen to help. Ain’t that right, Hoppy?’

And Colonel Cassidy stood and replied ‘Sure we would, Major!’

‘So, Sar’ Major,’ said Howes, recognising that Brownlow was more the military expert than Dodd, ‘there’s a couple more. And privates Churchill? Are you there, chaps?’

Two more young men stood, and Dodd’s men studied them interestedly: a more unlikely pair of Churchill lookalikes would be hard to find. One was tall and thin with a shock of blond, almost white hair, and the other was also tall but strongly built and dark skinned. Dodd had trouble biting back a laugh, but the swarthy one grinned and said ‘Yes, Sir, we know. Ridic’lous, ain’t it? We told ‘em an’ told ‘em we wasn’t related to Winnie, but they wouldn’t ‘ave it. Any rate, we soon cottoned on it was better for us to play along, like. I’m Dave, by the way, an’ ‘e’s Kev. An’ speakin’ personal, fer meself, like, I’m ‘appy to join in. We’re both PBI –poor bloody infantry, that is, an’ we’ve seen a bit o’ action an’ that, so we know what we’re about, like. You in, Kev?’

The blond replied ‘Not ‘arf, mate. Try’n bloody stop me!’  
Barrington smiled.

‘Well, there you are, Sar’ Major. Your army just grew by four, and I’m sure Lieutenant Montgomery will put his hand up too, soon as he finds out. So, would that help at all? And some of

the rest of us could help with odd jobs, carrying ammunition and so on.'

Brownlow gave his lip another savaging, and this time, added a gentle rub of the chin. 'Well, put it like that, I reckon there's maybe a chance, always provided they don't bring up tanks or artillery. We'd be helpless against that.'

The lip chewing continued. 'But maybe we could stop 'em getting armour up here. I need to get down to have a look at the road, and talk to Ted about whether he can make it impassable to heavy stuff. If he can, I'd say we've got a fair chance of holding for a day or two at least. So, best I get down there now and talk to Ted, eh, Boss? And while I'm doing that, could you get hold of any more of them prommie chaps who might be useful and make sure they're willing?'

The meeting adjourned, and Brownlow left the room to go down to the roadblock, but was back a few seconds later. 'Er, Skipper, you'd better come and have a look at this.'

Intrigued, Dodd followed him out and the others trailed behind. There, in the entrance hall, stood perhaps a dozen men, some with suitcases of all sizes, some just with bundles. As Dodd watched, the two Greek generals began a stately descent of the grand staircase, followed by their servants, lugging enormous chests. Expressionless, Dodd turned to General Barrington and whispered 'I'll leave this with you, shall I, Hughie?'

It was getting dusky and cooling down quickly when Brownlow found Kelly and Burgess, hunkered down and grumpy with boredom and lack of news, but after having the situation explained to them, they quickly cheered up at the prospect of action.

Brownlow studied the landscape, chewing a ruminative lip. The countryside here was what they'd become used to, partly wooded, partly agricultural, divided into tiny fields, and hilly. The road wandered its way down among the hills towards the



main road, odd stretches of which could be seen distantly below them. Kelly pointed out where he'd placed his explosives: a stream had cut a deep gouge through the hillside, where it bludgeoned its way like a mob outside the January sales under a little stone bridge that carried the road across, before gushing away into a minor waterfall, and from there, disappeared into the trees. In summer, you could walk across the creek, probably, or even get a good vehicle across in places, but just now it was a torrent, swollen by meltwater from the mountains, that bustled and tumbled its way downwards. It was an obvious place to defend: to the left, seen from where they stood, the ground fell away steeply enough that it would take a brave, or stupid, tank commander to try it. To the right was not so steep but heavily forested and in any case, the road was cut into the hillside, leaving a step about four feet high. Too high, at any rate, for any vehicle, even a tank, to climb.

Brownlow grinned approvingly. 'Yeah, nice: ideal, eh Ted? Maybe we can't stop infantry, but you bring that bridge down, you'll stop everything else.'

'That's what we thought, didn't we, John? And your infantry won't be getting across that bastard either.'

Kelly hooked his face at the rivulet, and Burgess nodded, as though the decision might have been something to do with him.

'Lovely,' said Brownlow, doing a single hand clap in unconscious imitation of Dodd, 'but look, I've got to leave you chaps here for the moment ...'

'Yeah, I know, just in case' grumbled Kelly.

As the evening closed in, back at the big house a conversation had broken out about what to actually do about defending the place, and more particularly, what to do about destroying the little bridge.

There were several schools of thought on this: the main options were to blow the bridge now or at least, before the

Germans arrived to evacuate their *prominenten*, or, with Watson as the strongest advocate, to blow it as the Germans crossed, and finally, to blow it after they'd crossed, to block reinforcements.

Argument ranged back and forth, with individuals first supporting one option, then another, without any real progress being made.

In a quiet side talk with Brownlow, Dodd said how pleased he was that the whole group was joining in – it wasn't long ago that most of them would simply have waited for someone else to make the decision, to which Brownlow replied with a grin that at least in the old days, a decision *would* be made. But they both agreed that the Germans wouldn't be coming tonight now, so the lonely pair at the bridge could be brought back to add their two bobs worth.

But, of course, when Kelly and Burgess got back, the whole thing broke out again as first one possibility then another was explained to them.

As they listened, Kelly and Burgess exchanged glances and rolled eyes but finally, the consensus was that the two newcomers should make the decision since each sides considered they had made the strongest argument and the answer was obvious. Dodd, who had been of the "blow it now" school, but had then swung to the "blow it after" mob, did his one clap thing, then invited Kelly to state his preference.

Kelly grinned at Burgess and asked 'Heard enough, Johnny?'

'Yeah, Corp.' (An outsider might have been surprised to hear a corporal address a sergeant as "Corp" but the internal appellations of the group were still fluid. Kelly accepted "Corp" with the same equanimity as "Ted" and "mate" and even, in company, responded to "Sergeant.") 'Yeah, well, I don't reckon we've heard anything new, do you? So will you tell 'em, or shall I?'

'Righto, mate, you go.'

Burgess was pleased. ‘Right, well, we weren’t just sitting down there scratching our arses, were we? We thought ‘xac’ly the same as you chaps at first. But you ‘ave to remember what we want, eh?’

And with a technique he’d picked up from Dodd, he went on ‘An’ what’s that, Bill?’

Dodd smiled approval, and thought again how far these lads had come.

Watson was flummoxed for a second, before smiling in his turn while pretending to be caught out. ‘Oh, yes, er, well, to keep the *prominenten* safe, I suppose?’

Burgess nodded encouragement. ‘Yes, an’ ‘ow’re we goin’ to do that?’

He’d thought of addressing this question to Tullett, but at the last millisecond, he worried about embarrassing his mate, so continued looking at Watson. But Watson was in gear now.

‘Well, just keep ‘em well away, I suppose, for as long as possible.’

Burgess smiled condescendingly. ‘Yes, well, you’re on the right track, at any rate.’

Dodd looked at Brownlow and half suppressed a grin.

‘Y’see’ explained Burgess, ‘It’s the “as long as possible” bit that’s important, ain’t it? They can get right up into the garden if they want, long as it takes ‘em enough time so our lot arrives in time to kick ‘em back out again, eh?’

He gazed round at his audience, nodding sagely. ‘Ain’t that right, Corp?’

‘Spot on, John’ responded Kelly. ‘So the question is, is it better to blow the bridge before they come tomorrow, or when they’re actually on the bridge?’

Watson raised his hand immediately, of course, but Kelly patted the air to stop him and continued. ‘Right, so if we do the bizzo now, the jerries’ll come along tomorrow and what’ll they do when they see the bridge is gone, Sarge?’

‘Well, what we reckon’ Brownlow replied, ‘is they’ll have a radio and they’ll call for somebody to come and put a bridge across. They might radio the castle to tell ‘em what’s happened, but we don’t think they’ll tell ‘em to come down, ‘cause the stream’s too fast and too wide to wade across. So we’ll have bought the time it takes to get engineers up and fix up a crossing. My guess is that’d be at least twelve hours, maybe double that.’

Several of the audience nodded agreement.

Kelly agreed as well. ‘Righto. So, what if we blow the bridge when there’s traffic on it? Bill?’

Watson had been squirming with impatience. ‘Well, the big difference is, if we, er, disable the vehicle with the radio – be obvious with the ariel, won’t it? – they won’t be able to call for assistance, so the vehicle at the back’ll have to go back to their HQ, and that’ll take a lot longer.’ He nodded triumphantly and added ‘A *lot* longer.’

Kelly and Burgess also nodded, and Burgess responded. ‘Except they’ll then know it was enemy action that bust the bridge, so when they come back, they’ll be mob handed, won’t they? Call me a cissy, but I’m not real sure that’s what we really want. But if we blow it before they get here, they’ll quite likely think the force of the water smashed the bridge and just send the engineers. So there’s plusses and minuses to both, eh?’

Miffed, Watson jutted his chin, and asked Kelly what *he* thought, in a tone that added, without actually saying so, “If you’re so fucking smart?”

But Kelly flicked a look to Burgess, who took the hint and said ‘So, like the Corp said, plusses and minuses. So what we thought was, what if we didn’t blow it at all? The convoy just comes up here, all unsuspectin,’ we’re waitin’ for ‘em and soon as they stop, we do the Naples patrol trick – you know, twenty odd chaps suddenly appear waving weapons at ‘em, maybe even a burst or two, just to make it clear. Shouldn’t be no trouble, eh, Skipper? You just shout out like you did before, we knock out the radio, collect ‘em up an’ put ‘em with the others, job done.’

Burgess sat back, watching Dodd's and Brownlow's faces as they pictured the scene. After a moment, they both began to grin.

'You know what?' asked Dodd. 'That'll work, don't you think, Sar' Major?'

'Yep, it's just the job. What with our wassname, experience, I'm amazed we didn't think of it before, eh Skipper?'

'I agree. It's *exactly* what we're best at. Suppose the convoy is due here at, say, ten tomorrow morning. I imagine they'll be thinking it'll take a while to load everything – they're all expecting to leave, remember, guards and all, so the Germans'll be planning to take all their equipment too – so we might expect they plan to get something to eat before they go. Yes, they'll probably be aiming to leave early afternoon, to get back to wherever they're aiming for by, oh, say six in the evening. Nobody will start to get concerned before, what, eight? Then they'll get on the radio to see if there's a problem, and they'll get no answer. But it'll be dark by then, so what can they do? Hmm: what would you do, Sar' Major?'

'I reckon you're about right, Boss, and even if they got worried sooner, it'd still be too dark to do anything. And you asked what would I do? Well, I'd have to wait 'til daylight, then I'd try to get a spotter plane to come and have a look. And what would it see? Nothing! We could put the vehicles in one o' the barns, no-one about – complete mystery! Yeah, just like Naples, eh! Brilliant! Because when the plane saw nothing, what would I do then? What would *you* do then Boss?'

Dodd considered batting the question on, but thought it was time he did something a bit officer like. 'Well, that's a very interesting question, isn't it? But I think the real question is, what do we *want* them to do? And the answer is, whatever takes them the most time. So if we do what we're thinking, that is, let the convoy come up, then capture the people and hide the vehicles, I think that will cost them the most time. Does anybody disagree?'

He waited a second, but nobody spoke, so he carried on. 'You know, I'm beginning to feel this is rather like a game of chess, isn't it?'

He was greeted by silence again. 'Er, does anybody play chess?'

Watson, reluctantly, raised a hand and Tullett and Burgess rolled eyes at each other before Tullett added, 'Yeah, me too.'

Burgess was amazed. 'Oh bollocks, chum, you can't play chess!'

'I fuckin' can. Them 'orsey ones, them's me favourites.' But then he added, 'Well, draughts, anyway. Much the fuckin' same, ain't it?'

Tullett glared round, inviting disagreement, but nobody was game to take him on, so Dodd quickly continued.

'Yes, well, what I mean is, good players, which I'm not, try to create a situation where their opponent *has* to make a certain move in response to the players move, so the player can then gain an advantage. This is a bit like that, isn't it?'

Nobody had anything to say in reply, so the major played the classic Dodd Defence, and did nothing, except to construct a message for Burgess to radio to HQ to advise of the changed situation and ask for an estimate of when the Allied forces would reach them. After all, he explained, the Americans might even beat the Germans here, so all the worries might be unnecessary.

When he tapped out the message, Burgess was acutely conscious of the large and interested audience, but managed it without fluffing, and with a relieved sign, flicked the switch to "receive".

Tension built in the long silence from the other end, broken by a whisper of static, as the men imagined the officer at HQ absorbing the changed conditions, until eventually, the disjointed voice with the soft American accent simply replied 'Your position understood. We agree your proposed action, but our forces will not be with you for several days, at least. A week, maybe.'

A pause, then, 'Maybe more. Report daily as usual.'  
And then, almost reflectively, 'Good luck.'

That reply generated a good deal of thoughtful lip sucking and many sideways glance until Dodd brought the meeting to order in his usual way. 'Right, well, at least we know. We're on our own, for "several days", whatever that means. So, we need to plan out in detail what happens when the convoy arrives. Any thoughts, gentlemen?'

Kelly was a bit surprised, and responded immediately. 'Oh well, Skipper, I was just assuming we'd be doing the usual, eh? It's done us well so far – my bloody oath it has.'

Several of the ex-prisoners began to ask what "the usual" meant, and Kelly explained, 'Oh, it's a bloody ripper mate. We just ask 'em to surrender, and they do. It's our speciality, and it never fails: you'll see.'

Dodd summed up. 'So let's get on with setting the scene for the spotter pilot.'

And, as though asking him to pour the tea, he turned to Brownlow, and asked 'Will you do the honours, Sar' Major?'

But Sergeant Kelly broke in. 'Just before you go, Sarge, I've been thinking about that, and I reckon maybe there's an even better idea than making the transport disappear.'

And after listening, the audience applauded.

## Chapter 16

Colonel Malzer had known the letter from Kesselring was a poisoned chalice as soon as he received it. Whatever the job was, it was bound to be seriously tricky – why else would he need the letter? But on the other hand, his first reaction on being given the order to move the *prominenten* was that this ought to be easy, though that was before the Allies had broken through at Anzio and the mission had taken on a serious element of urgency. Had Kesselring, the crafty old bastard, realised the breakout was imminent?

Even so, the mission should have been straightforward, seeing how long it had taken the Allies to finally break out and begin their plod northwards. Realistically, there was plenty of time to rustle up some decent transport, get it up to the *castello* by midday tomorrow, say, and back here by dark, or thereabouts. Malzer realised that his vehicles would make slow progress along the single main road south from where he was in Rome, to the area of the castle, so he was allowing plenty of time.

With the benefit of long experience, Malzer called for his most trusted subordinate, a captain with the unfortunate name of Kurchehill, which roughly translated as Churchill, and passed on the orders to requisition (by which he meant, steal) appropriate transport and drivers and collect and bring back the *prominenten*, no later than tomorrow evening. With a slight feeling of guilt, as though passing on the “Old Maid” card, he then handed over Kesselring’s letter.

Kurchehill was so grateful at the honour of being selected to hold, and if necessary, brandish, the document that Malzer almost sniggered.

Kurchehill set about his mission immediately, but, amid the chaos of Rome’s choked streets, he had some difficulty locating suitable vehicles. Armed with such a powerful talisman as the letter, he wasn’t about to take a handful of German army trucks for his august charges and he took most of the afternoon



searching. At last, he came upon the perfect answer – a beautiful pair of motor coaches, decked out in brilliant red, green and blue paint, with chocolate leather upholstery, obviously used, pre-war, for the transport of the better class of tourists. Doctor Danielli would have drooled. All Kurchehill had to do then was to find German drivers competent to handle the coaches, have the vehicles carefully checked over, and to complete his entourage, he added one of those ubiquitous three ton trucks beloved of all armies, and his caravan was ready to go early the next morning. He added a radio and operator, and that was it: he was ready.

As he lay in bed, excitedly waiting for the time to go, Kurchehill felt a bit disappointed: he'd been hoping to have to wave The Letter (it had taken on capital letters in his mind) at some senior officer, but so far, the chance had not come. He sighed. Maybe tomorrow.

At the *castello*, everything was set by first light on the second day, even though nobody expected the German transport to arrive by then. The estimate was that, assuming they were coming from Rome, they might try to negotiate the main road in darkness, to avoid being shot up from the air, and then they'd need daylight to come up along the secondary road through the forest, so, mid-morning, at least, but while Brownlow had anything to do with it, there was no chance they would be caught off guard.

Dodd had given his *prominenten* an outline of what Kelly had called "the usual", that was, presenting the opposition with an overwhelming show of force which gave them no options, and Brownlow had allocated positions and weapons, of which there was now a plentiful supply, including the British Brens, the Italian Berettas and a couple of German MG34s, as well as many rifles. But Brownlow, ever cautious, gave strict instructions to everybody he didn't know that they were not to be fired, and made an ostentatious display of ensuring that only his people had any ammunition.

Brownlow had organised a roster of lookouts down by the bridge, to give early warning of the convoys approach, so at least the men didn't have to stay crouched behind a wall all morning, but even so, the time dragged on uncomfortably, especially for the newcomers to Dodd's army's unique tactics.

And so it was that at about noon, the signal, a relay of frantically waved handkerchiefs, was given and the men took their positions. Soon, they heard the sound of engines from below and almost immediately, the first motor coach came into sight: it was labouring a bit, as though offended at being taken away from its happier duties, but came plodding up gamely. As it turned for the final stretch, the sunlight making the bright colours come alive and gleam, the second coach appeared, and was followed in turn by the truck, which looked, in its dowdy camouflage colours, as though it was there by mistake. And that was it: no armoured car, no Kubelwagen, even. At first Brownlow was surprised, but then he nodded and asked himself why would they be needed? They were well behind the front line, on a humdrum job, just coming to collect a bunch of prisoners and their guards.

The little convoy chugged up past the *fattoria* and outbuildings, through the ornamental garden, and the leading coach drew up right outside the imposing front door of the big house. The other vehicles stopped in formation and engines rattled to silence.

For a moment, nothing happened. Dodd guessed, correctly, that the captain in charge of the vehicles had expected to be greeted enthusiastically by the guards, who, he thought, would be glad to see the back of this place. But nobody came from the building – in fact, there was no sign of movement at all – so Captain Kurchehill (who had passed the journey in splendid isolation as the only passenger in the leading coach) clambered down and began looking about him. Dodd, peering cautiously from a gap in the barely opened front door, could sense the

captain's irritation – this wasn't how he'd imagined his arrival at all – he was supposed to be the cavalry coming to the rescue.

The drivers of the other vehicles were on the ground now, glad of the break and glad also that their up-himself officer wasn't getting a hero's welcome, but the mood changed instantly when Dodd shouted "German soldiers!" and a swarm of troops in British battledress appeared, some from behind the stone wall, others brandishing weapons from the windows of the house, and yet others from the garden.

The German situation was immediately and obviously hopeless. The only German who even had a weapon was Kurchehill, and any attempt to get his pistol from its holster would clearly be suicidal. Dodd's customary ploy of demonstrating overwhelming force had worked yet again.

Burgess was asked to locate and disable the convoy's radio while Kelly ambled through the vehicles "just sniffing around," as he explained later, for anything of interest. His effort was richly rewarded when he came upon a black leather document case embossed in silver with the eagle and swastika emblem of the German general staff.

By the time the Germans had been guided to the basement to join the guards, Dodd's men, who were feigning nonchalance at their success, plus the bunch of erstwhile prisoners who'd been given weapons to wave about, were beginning to settle down and think about something to eat.

The Greek generals, in addition to their personal servants, had brought their own chef with them, a very capable man who had been providing excellent meals for all the prisoners, and who was completely unperturbed by the addition of Dodd's ten as well as the extra German mouths to feed.

After lunch, taken in an ornate dining room, there was a certain shuffling about among the erstwhile prisoners, until Dodd and his crew were guided into the sitting room next door.

They were ushered to places of honour while everybody else grabbed what seats were left after the British and Greek generals and the Admiral had taken their places, but a crowd was left standing.

General Howes stood and called for order, then suggested to Dodd that everybody was extremely interested to hear what he had planned for the immediate future. If he hadn't been a lecturer, Dodd might have been thrown off balance at this unexpected attention, but as it was, he delivered a review of their current position while his mind prepared the next stage.

'So, gentlemen,' he said, 'that's where we are now. As to the future,' and here, there was a noticeable shifting forward by his audience, 'the real question is, what will the Germans do? So far, we've placed them in a position where they just don't know what's happened to their transport, although, of course, they don't even realise that as yet. I think we'll find the camp radio will be getting more and more frantic queries by this evening, wanting to know why the convoy hasn't come back. There's also a radio in one of their vehicles, but obviously we won't be responding to their queries.

'So, we think they'll be forced to respond in a way we can predict. Possibly, they'll simply scrap their plan to retrieve you gentlemen – that would be ideal, wouldn't it? On the other hand, we think they'll most likely send an aircraft to find out what has happened, but they won't even realise they have a problem until this evening, and then it'll be too dark, so the aircraft will come tomorrow, early. All agreed?'

His audience nodded.

'All right. The question is, then, what do we want to happen next? In our opinion,' and here he waved a languid hand to indicate that his soldiers agreed, 'the scout aircraft will see a scene that explains at least part of what the problem is.'

Dodd outlined the tableau he envisioned, and concluded 'So, what will they do then?'

One of the American colonels spoke up. ‘My guess, Major, is that they’ll just forget all about us. They’ve got enough problems with our army pushing them back without worrying about a handful of POWs.’

There was a half hearted rumble of agreement until Dodd did his single hand clap gesture. ‘Well, Colonel, you might be right. In fact, I mightn’t disagree at all, but for this.’

Here, he held up the leather wallet that Kelly had found, and took out a letter. ‘This, gentlemen, was found in one of the coaches, left there, I imagine, by the captain in charge of the convoy. Allow me to read it to you.’

With a small flourish, he read:

“The bearer of this letter is charged with a mission of the very highest importance to the Reich.

He is to be given all and any assistance he requires in the discharge of his mission and it is the duty of every German soldier, of whatever rank, to immediately fulfil any order given by the bearer.”

‘That’s all, except to mention that it’s signed by Kesselring himself. Kesselring! So, gentlemen, perhaps you’re a little more valuable than you thought, eh?’

He gave them a minute to absorb that before continuing. ‘Right, well, having cleared that up, I think we can assume that when the scout aircraft reports back, the Germans will do *something*, even if it’s just to keep Kesselring off their backs. I think you’ll agree, gentlemen, that in their position, you’d probably do quite a bit to stop the wrath of Alexander or Eisenhower falling on you, eh?’

‘Now, let’s assume they will send an aircraft. It will probably be here at first light, and will report back to Rome, I imagine. Let’s say a patrol sets out by mid-day. It’ll arrive at the bridge no earlier than about three – I’m anticipating they’ll make slow progress, heading south when everybody else is going north.

‘So, we wait until after the scout plane has been and gone, then blow the bridge, which will stop the rescue patrol when it gets there. Now, I’m convinced they won’t just give up, but the water is running far too fast even to get a man over, so they’ll have to radio for engineers to build a bridge.’

‘But I can’t see they’ll get here before evening, and it’ll take a good while to build a new bridge strong enough to take a heavy vehicle, so I don’t see them arriving up here before early the next day. We’ll be ready for them and between us, we think there’s a good chance we can hold them off for a while – we don’t think they’ll have heavy weapons with them. So, if they’re still serious about recapturing you chaps, they’ll then have to call for reinforcements, which, with any luck, will buy us another day.’

Dodd paused before adding, ‘And that, gentlemen, is as far ahead as we can plan. We can hope that by then, we’ll have cost them so much time that our troops will have come to our rescue, but if not, we’ll have to react as best we can.’

He was about to call for any questions, but a barrage of suggestions, queries, demands and complaints overtook that. It was obvious that there was at least one alternative plan for every ex-prisoner in the room, so Dodd, the experienced lecturer, feeling a wave of what he privately called officerliness, did his celebrated single clap then held up both hands, palms towards the audience and waited for silence.

‘Now, gentlemen, I see I need to speak plainly. My men and I have been behind the lines, getting up to all sorts of mischief, since last August.’

Well, that was true to an extent. August was when they’d been in the crashed aircraft and found themselves in Italy, and the period of hanging about in Naples, then Anzio, well, that counted, didn’t it?

‘We are trained and experienced in exactly this kind of work.’

Hmm: not quite so true, that one.

‘We are here solely to keep you out of the German’s hands, and that is exactly what we plan to do. We have made our decision as to how to do that, and it’s not open to discussion. If anybody is not happy with our plan, they are free to take whatever action they want, provided it does not compromise us. Is that clear?’

And, recognising the value of a well timed exit, Dodd strode from the room, his entourage following, amid an increasing swell of argument.

Later, a crowd gathered round Burgess as he made radio contact and confirmed that they had captured the German transport before tapping out a request for an update on the Allies progress towards them. The now familiar disjointed voice congratulated them on their action and said that while good progress was being made, it was impossible to say when they might reach the *castello*.

‘A few days, maybe a week’ was all he could offer.

At exactly the same time, in Rome, Colonel Malzer was getting edgy – Kurchehill should have been back by now, and wasn’t responding to the constant radio calls. Finally, he had to accept that something wasn’t right, though he couldn’t imagine what it was. If one of the vehicles had broken down, the others would have continued, surely? They couldn’t all have broken down, could they? And if they did, why hadn’t they got on the radio and demanded assistance? It was beyond belief that both the radio at the *castello* and the one Kurchehill had taken had failed as well. And if it had, surely Kurchehill would have come back – he only had to get back to the main road and wave his letter at the first vehicle that came along. So, a mystery.

Unwittingly responding to Dodd’s move, Malzer considered the only thing to do was to get a plane up there to find out what was going on. It was, after all, the only sensible thing to do. But he was getting a little concerned now: the Allies were pushing forward.

Dodd's stock rose considerably when, soon after dawn on the third day, as predicted, a German aircraft appeared overhead and began circling the area. It was immediately obvious what the problem was: the still smouldering remains told the story clearly enough. One of the coaches must have somehow crashed headlong into the side of the other one and then caught fire, setting the other one alight in turn. Suitcases and bundles were strewn about, some of them burst open and their contents scattered, suggesting the passengers had made a hurried exit from the coaches. As the pilot circled, a German officer and several privates came rushing from the *castello*, waving frantically, though there was no need, he was only a couple of hundred feet up.

After another circuit, the aircraft wobbled its wings and flew off.

As soon as he was sure the aircraft had gone, Dodd took off his trusty German major's uniform hat and greatcoat and instructed Kelly and Watson to take off the bits and pieces of German uniform they'd scavenged and get on with destroying the bridge. They knew what to do: if they could, they were to make it look as though it was the force of the torrent that had caused the damage.

As the two trudged down towards the bridge, Kelly plucked up courage and put a hand on Watson's shoulder.

'Er, Billy, about Maria.'

'Yeah?'

'Well, remember Sofia? Back in Naples?'

Watson nodded. 'Of course.'

'Well, just so's you know, I reckon I know how you feel, OK?'

Watson squirmed. 'Yeah, thanks Ted.'

They plodded fifteen yards before Kelly added 'D'you want to talk about it, mate?'



Watson was horrified. ‘Good lord, no!’

Another few paces, then Kelly closed the conversation with ‘Thank God for that.’

On his return, all the pilot could report to Colonel Malzer was to describe the tableau he’d seen at the *castello*.

After interrogating the pilot and demanding he describe the scene several times, Malzer gave him a non-specific and completely undeserved bollocking and then repeated the dose for his clerk. That helped Malzer calm himself down enough so he was able to review what he knew, which wasn’t much. Of course, the colonel was at a serious disadvantage, even with all the resources available to him after he’d let everybody know about the missive from Kesselring. His difficulty was that he didn’t even realise as yet that he had a serious problem, and was simply responding to Dodd’s moves.

Malzer reviewed the evidence yet again, but could find no other explanation: clearly, one of the coaches had gone out of control and collided with the other, destroying them both. Unlikely as it was, there was no other possibility. No, there was only one thing to be done now, especially bearing in mind the spectre of an unpleasant interview with the field marshal, and that was to send replacement transport up there. Malzer was half tempted to lead the column himself, and was only stopped by the thought that if it all went pear shaped, his arse would certainly be the one getting kicked.

Thus, Colonel Malzer did exactly what Dodd had predicted: he sent for Major Hummels, who, when he heard the news, was in two minds. He was still smarting from being overlooked for leading the first convoy in favour of Captain Kurchehill, especially in light of the Kesselring missive. Hummels regarded Kurchehill as a dick who should certainly not be trusted with anything of importance. (That was no particular reflection on Kurchehill: Hummels regarded everybody as a dick, himself and Kesselring excepted – and he wasn’t entirely

convinced about Kesselring.) on the other hand, something strange had clearly gone on up in the hills, and he was glad not only that he hadn't been in charge but he now had the opportunity to rescue, ie put in his place, the officer who'd obviously cocked up a perfectly simple mission.

Major Hummels didn't trouble with finding motor coaches, but rounded up six trucks, which he considered more than sufficient for the transport of prisoners, *prominenten* or not, and by midday, he clambered into his Kubelwagen and signalled his driver to lead off.

By the middle of the afternoon, the lookouts at the stream had raced back to the big house with the news that a line of German vehicles had arrived and been stopped by the blown bridge. Dodd was congratulated again for his foresight. The *prominenten* would have been even more impressed had they known that Major Hummels did as Dodd said he would (since he couldn't do anything else) and radioed back to Malzer to report the problem.

Malzer, beyond rage, and ever more conscious of time passing, told Hummels to have men force their way through the stream, but Hummels described the torrent and said a crossing would not only be impossible, but suicidal. Malzer sighed and thought of suggesting that would be a good idea if Hummels would only lead the attempt, but settled for telling Hummels to send men out to try to find a place where they could get across and in the meantime, Malzer would rustle up some engineers and send them up to build a temporary bridge.

It took a mighty effort, and much yelling, but Colonel Malzer did eventually find an engineer unit that wasn't actively engaged, and got them moving.

That evening, in the big house, the usual crowd gathered round the radio, eager for news of the Allied progress. But there was nothing new – just the same message that good progress was

being made, and they should be relieved in that infuriating “few days.”

A detailed discussion followed, as to whether the expression “a few days” was more encouraging than “a few days, maybe a week.”

Burgess was on lookout and spotted the column of vehicles soon after daybreak on the fourth day. When the news reached the castle, Dodd’s reputation grew to new heights. He was, his charges explained to each other, a military genius. The only wonder was, why he was still only a major: several theories emerged about that, ranging from having been caught with his hand in the mess till, to having been caught with his hand in the colonel’s wife’s underwear. However, their surreptitious, and sometimes not so surreptitious questions of Dodd’s men produced nothing but blank looks or laughter. Whatever, nobody was prepared to question his words now, since he was plainly able to manipulate the Germans at will.

Breakfast was put to one side as the *prominenten* crowded round Dodd, anxious to know what he had in mind now. He tried to get his listeners to put themselves in the mind of the German commander, and asked them to consider what they would do in his place, but it seemed nobody was keen to make what might turn out to be a silly suggestion, so Dodd had to continue to play the strategist.

‘Well, it seems they’re still interested in coming to get you gentlemen. The stream is definitely blocking their way, so the engineers must build a new bridge, mustn’t they? How long would you say, Sar’ Major?’

Brownlow, well experienced in Dodd’s methods by now, was on the ball. ‘Well, Boss, it’s not that wide and they’ve got solid support on both banks. I’m no expert, o’course, but I’d say they could probably put something together and anchor it in a couple of hours, or maybe three. So, they’ll be moving across before dinner time, I’d reckon.’

‘All right’, responded Dodd, ‘and what do you think they’ll do then?’

That one caught Brownlow out a little bit, and Burgess put his hand up. Dodd nodded for him to proceed. ‘Well, Skipper, I reckon we’ve still got the advantage, ‘cause they still don’t know we’re here, do they?’

Dodd nodded approvingly, while the *prominenten* wondered what sort of outfit this was, where the man in charge, himself a brilliant strategist, invited suggestions from corporals, and the corporals addressed him as “skipper.”

‘So what I reckon is,’ Burgess continued, ‘they’ll just cross their new bridge and come driving up to here. I bet they won’t ‘ave tanks or anything – least, I never saw any when they got to the stream - why would they? They don’t know they’ve got a problem do they, ‘cept their transport’s gone bung. Ain’t that right?’

Tullett agreed. ‘Tha’s right, chum. Like draughts, innit?’ He glared round, then subsided, and muttered, ‘Or chess. Same fuckin’ thing, really.’

Dodd turned back to Brownlow and raised an eyebrow. Brownlow only needed a perfunctory nibble of his lip before agreeing.

Then Dodd continued. ‘Of course, when they get close, we’ll have to force them back. Now, we all agree they’re not expecting any trouble, and it’ll be a complete surprise to them, so, if you agree, Sar’ Major, I don’t think that will be too hard, will it?’

‘No, Boss, I reckon just a burst or two from a Bren’ll send ‘em on their way. We could push ‘em right back beyond the bridge, most likely, but it doesn’t matter, does it? Better to let ‘em get away than risk losing any of our chaps, eh? O’course, either way, it’ll all be changed then, won’t it?’

Dodd nodded and explained for the benefit of the others. ‘Yes, it means that for the first time, the Germans will know we’re here, and we’ll have lost the advantage we’ve had up until

now. But there's no alternative, is there? Either we hold them off and reveal our presence, or, well ...'

He let the sentence drift before getting all officerly again. 'So, Sar' Major, if you'll organise the chaps? Positions, and so on?'

'Righto, Boss, I've been thinking about that.' And he immediately began calling names and telling them where he wanted them. He called for Volpe, but there was no reply. Dodd asked Angelo where Volpe was, but Angelo, embarrassed that his countryman seemed to have scarpered, shook his head.

'Never mind,' said Brownlow, understanding, 'I only wanted to tell him to keep out of the way. A chap with a crossbow's more liable to be a nuisance than anything else, eh?'

Finally, he called for the two American air force colonels. 'Now, gentlemen, Mr Tyson and Mr Cassidy is it?'

Tyson corrected Brownlow. 'Hey, Sergeant Major, call me Paul and he's Jim, but he answers to Hoppy. You know, like in Hopalong Cassidy?'

Brownlow was flummoxed – Hopalong Cassidy wouldn't reach British shores for nearly ten years – but smiled as though understanding and went on, 'Yes, well, I imagine you've fired machine guns?'

Cassidy answered. 'Yeah, I've done a bit, mostly on the range, though.'

'Yep, me too.' apologised Tyson. 'We're both pilots, see, so, only on the range. Would that be OK, Sergeant Major?' He added, deferentially.

'Gentlemen, they only call me Sergeant Major formally. Usually, it's Sar' Major, all right? Now, I might have a special job for you, if you're willing. It'll likely get a bit dicey, but I don't think we'll be needing what I've got in mind until tomorrow or even later. Now, if you'll come with me.'

He turned and led the pair outside to an outbuilding where the two black trucks were hidden. He clambered into the back of the Chevrolet, fished about in his pocket for a key, and opened

the steel cabinet. Both the Americans peered inside, then, as though choreographed, each raised a pumped fist and said 'Oh, yeah.'

The German engineers luxuriated in the unusual experience of doing their work without being shot at, so were in no hurry, and made sure their construction of seemingly hundreds of beams and spars was solid and strong before sending the first truck across. So it was midday before they were satisfied, and with a warning to Major Hummels not to put more than one vehicle on the bridge at a time, they began packing their kit.

Hummels' little snake of vehicles then began its final approach to the *castello*, leaving the usual military spread between vehicles. That meant there was the best part of two hundred yards between first and last, but Brownlow had anticipated that, and positioned his men accordingly.

When Brownlow fired and his shooters followed suit, the result would have been comical if it hadn't been so serious - as soon as the first shots were fired, Hummels' driver spun the Kubelwagen round without waiting for an order, and the drivers of the six trucks reacted almost as fast. Even so, one truck immediately stopped dead as its crew bailed out and another crew simply jumped from their moving vehicle and ran for shelter in the trees. Another one caught fire and one limped back towards the bridge, but stopped, both rear tyres flapping and shredded. Only two trucks managed to escape, along with the Kubelwagen.

The defenders could easily have followed up and would quite likely have stopped the two moving trucks, but Brownlow had issued strict instructions against a chase. The real damage would already have been done in that the Germans would now realise the true situation, and risking his men in a chase would do nothing to change that.

Colonel Malzer was getting seriously pissed off with the whole episode. He'd been trying to get his stash of "liberated" wine and cigars properly packed ready for shipping back, but what with his wife's detailed demands for gloves and hats, plus a suggestion that he should drop in to Milan on the way back to pick up some nice fashion items, and the constant enquiries from Kesselring's office as to when the *prominenten* would be arriving, he wasn't making progress. And when he got the message from Hummels that his column had been shot up, so he'd be needing plenty of backup and more vehicles to transport the *prominenten*, Malzer had just about had enough.

He sighed heavily: the Allies were closer every hour, and if it had been left up to him, he'd have had an artillery barrage laid on to the castle, or better still, a bombing raid. Yes, a bombing raid – that would do it. He smiled a small smile as he savoured the image. Oh well, maybe not. He sighed again: at the very least, he'd have just left them where they were: they were just a bunch of geriatrics, more trouble than they were worth, but Kesselring thought otherwise, so Malzer had to show willing. And it wasn't getting any easier to rustle up transport or the troops to man them.

The Germans had declared Rome an open city, which was supposed to mean there should be no military presence there at all, but, luckily for the Colonel, the roads were still thronged with troops, albeit just passing through, so he'd been able to wave his copy of the Kesselring missive. By late afternoon he'd amassed ten trucks with drivers, and, joy of joys, an elderly Daimler Mark 1 light scout car, that looked like a Dalek driving a Kubelwagen, or perhaps the (very) little brother of the armoured vehicle Dodd's army had pissed on in Naples. It could easily cope with rough terrain but was poorly armoured, especially at the rear, and armed only with a light machine gun: even that was limited in its arc of fire by the narrow gap in the armour plate of its miniature turret. Moreover, it had a poor turning circle, which made it ponderous to manouvre. On the other hand, it came with a driver

and a young captain who'd already seen action and was anxious for more – he could see the way the war was going and was ambitious to make a name for himself before everything went pear shaped. Captain Mendelssohn was suitably impressed by Kesselring's signature on Malzer's copy of the letter and between him and the colonel, they'd soon rounded up forty seasoned infantrymen who'd been trudging through Rome and who, like dislocated soldiers everywhere, would have been happy to join any mob if they had the chance of a feed, a smoke and a sit down for a bit.

Malzer's order to Mendelssohn was clear – report to Major Hummels and, between the two of them, get the *prominenten* out by tomorrow.



## Chapter 17

*The Allied plan of action following the simultaneous breakout from Anzio and Cassino was that one force, mainly British, would strike north from Anzio along the coast road, while another force, mostly American, would race east from Anzio towards the main north south road. On arrival, General Clark's forces were to stand astride the road, thus cutting off the Germans streaming back from Cassino, who needed the road to escape from the Allies chasing them north.*

*General Clark, though, had other plans. He'd made no secret of his ambition to be the first into Rome, and suspected that his British boss, General Alexander, wanted the British troops going up the coast to beat Clark to it. So, when his forces reached the crucial road, instead of entrapping the retreating Germans, he turned left and raced for Rome. In doing so, without having the first idea that they even existed, he'd given Dodd's group a sliver of hope.*

Captain Mendelssohn and the reinforcements arrived in the early afternoon the next day, after a dead slow journey, battling against a tide of traffic going north. In the end, Captain Mendelssohn had waved a copy of the Kesselring missive at a squad of military police and ordered them to force a passage for his miniature tank and straggle of trucks.

Major Hummels wasn't exactly overjoyed. True, his party of ten drivers and their mates, (now reduced to fifteen able bodied soldiers after the convoy was shot up) had been greatly expanded – he'd now got sixty odd soldiers, plus Captain Mendelssohn and his scout car, but he'd have been a lot happier with something heavier, an anti-tank gun, for example – anything, really, to put the serious frighteners on the people in the castle.

But, as he often philosophised, things are as they are, and even without heavy weapons, he'd now got plenty of men to go

up against a bunch of geriatrics who'd somehow managed to snatch control from their guards.

Of course, Hummels was unaware that Dodd's group was on the scene. If he had been, he might well have made a different decision, but as it was, he'd decided that if the *prominenten* couldn't be persuaded to be sensible, a frontal attack in force, a demonstration, he called it, should be enough to change their minds.

At six that evening, as usual, Burgess made contact with headquarters and tapped out a report on the day's action before making the inevitable request about progress. To everybody's surprise, after the usual platitude about satisfactory progress, the voice from the radio said that all being well, they might expect contact with Allied troops within two days. That sent an electrified silence through the room - two days!

Two opinions then emerged in the discussion that followed. The optimistic one was that, today's convoy having been sent packing, the Germans would more than likely give up their attempt to extract the prisoners. In any case, even if the Germans continued their attempt, the defenders only had to hold them back through tomorrow, and they'd then be pushed away by the Allies.

The opposing view, of course, was that the Germans had already shown that they valued the *prominenten*, they were not likely to simply go away now, and, having had it revealed to them that the *castello* was defended, a serious force would be arriving tomorrow to brush any resistance aside. The only sensible thing to do, therefore, was to scarper while they had the chance, take some supplies and hide out in the forest while they waited for the Germans to retreat.

That started a secondary argument about whether the Germans would chase them into the trees, and if so, would their position then be better or worse than staying put.

This discussion interrupted by a call from the lookout at the front of the house. A strange little vehicle was approaching with a hand sticking out of the top, vigorously waving a white handkerchief.

Dodd's men took aim but Brownlow reminded them not to fire unless he said so, and they all watched interestedly as the diminutive machine pattered closer, chasing its own long shadow from the lowering sun. Soon, it clattered to a stop, the owner of the handkerchief dismounted, still waving his flag, and walked to the foot of the steps at the entrance to the building.

Dodd went to the top of the stairs and waited: the two men studied each other in silence.

'Can I help you Captain?' enquired Dodd. 'Did you wish to surrender? We have no more room for prisoners, I'm afraid.'

Captain Mendelssohn was taken aback for a second but soon recovered himself. 'Good evening Major' he replied, in impeccable English. 'No, quite the reverse, I'm afraid. But let me introduce myself. I am Captain Mendelssohn. Major Hummels is in command, but as it happens, my English is a little more, well, experienced, than his, and he wishes to be sure there is no misunderstanding between us. I must say, your chaps have put up a splendid show, good straight bat and all that, but you see, this foolishness has to stop. Urgently. In fact, my orders are to emphasise that if you don't see sense, we will have to get you out by tomorrow, er, one way or another, if you get my meaning.'

'Well, I'm sorry to be a nuisance,' Dodd replied, 'but you see, *my* orders are to keep my people safe until the Allies arrive, so it seems we're going to have to do this the hard way, eh?'

'Major, I'm disappointed to hear that, truly I am. You and your chaps have done a splendid job, disarming the guards and so on, but surely, you've done enough to satisfy honour and so on. It's time to be sensible, don't you agree?'

'Well no, Captain, I don't agree. We're well placed to hold you off for a few days – that's all we need, isn't it, or if we

choose, we could simply disappear out the back and hide out in the woods until the Allies arrive. So ...'

At that point, a spray of bullets from the rear of the building shattered the glass in the upstairs windows and Mendelssohn smiled, pleased with the timing.

'So, Major, we've posted men in the trees – that little burst was just to let you know you won't be getting out that way. No, the only way out of this is through the front door, waving a white flag. The alternative is that we have to come in and get the *prominenten*, as I said, one way or another. And that would be,' he sought the right word, 'unpleasant. Now, what do you say?'

'We seem to be unable to agree, Captain. I'll discuss it with the chaps overnight, but I'm not hopeful for a peaceful ending, are you?'

Mendelssohn nodded, and said 'Goodnight, Major. I do hope you'll think carefully.'

Standing to attention, he saluted and turned away.

Meanwhile, inside the castle, after a half panicked rush to put shooters at the back windows, there was no further fire from the trees.

Brownlow thought about that for a bit and called out 'All right, lads, settle down. I reckon they're just letting us know we can't escape. So that settles sneaking out into the trees argument, OK? Now, we're going to have to keep a lookout front and rear for movement. My guess is they don't have heavy weapons, or we'd have seen 'em already, so as long as we can keep 'em more than forty yards or so away, I reckon we've got a sporting chance.'

He saw several questioning looks and explained 'We want to keep 'em out o' range for slinging them stick grenades through a window don't we? Could be nasty, that. Right, Ted, get a watch roster together, will you, and I'll have a scout round to sort out the best places, all right?'

Major Hummels was surprised and disappointed with Captain Mendelssohn's news that there was not going to be a quick resolution, but he had his plan ready. He would have most of the men filter up into the farm buildings before dawn, and from there, spread out under cover of the stone walls of the fields, so as to emerge at first light on a broad front. They would then move forward, under cover of their own weapons, until they took up positions against the walls only fifty yards from the front of the building. Captain Mendelssohn, with his toy armoured car, would move up the central driveway, keeping station as the infantrymen pressed forward. While all this was going on, the troops in the trees would play harassing fire across the back of the house. They'd been given one of the only two light machine guns in Hummels' armoury, the other one, of course, being in the scout car.

If the defenders were stupid enough to resist, on Mendelssohn's order, a dozen troops at the front would press forward under concentrated covering fire and, as Brownlow feared, lob grenades through the windows. Game over. It was a good plan – at least, bearing in mind Hummels' lack of heavy firepower, and if, as Hummels thought, the defenders were a handful of geriatrics with a dozen rifles between them, it would very likely have brought about the response he wanted – a quick and easy surrender.

Well before dawn, Private Alf Churchill shook Brownlow awake. 'Sarge, Sarge, they're movin' about down there. I seen 'em.'

Brownlow was instantly fully alert, and replied 'All right, son, show me.' The private led Brownlow to a front window and pointed at the *fattoria* building, maybe two hundred yards away, that showed dimly through the starlight. Brownlow saw no movement for a bit, but then several vague shadows flitted into the building.

'Blimey, you did well to spot that, son' said Brownlow. 'Now, just keep watching while I rouse the others, all right?'

Within moments, all the defenders were awake and running for their assigned positions, but, having thought about it, Brownlow relaxed. He was pretty sure that when the attack came, it would involve the scout car and its machine gun, so they'd get a bit of warning. But he was concerned about the German troops massing in the *fattoria*. From there, they'd be able to use the stone field walls as cover to get themselves within maybe fifty yards from the front of the house – not close enough to get a grenade through a window, but certainly close enough to put up strong covering fire while some brave fellows rushed the building, and then, well, it'd all be over, more or less. No, they had to be kept further off.

'Hey, Ted' he called. Kelly turned away from his vantage point at a window and approached.

'I guess you're thinking what I'm thinking, Sarge.'

'Oh yes? What's that then?'

'We need to disperse that mob in the house, and we need to knock a hole in the wall to stop 'em getting a free ride up close, that's what I'm thinking. And we need to do it soon – it'll be light any time. And I reckon it's up to Bill and me, eh?'

'Ted, you're exactly right. Can you do it?'

'I reckon we've got a good sporting chance. I'll tell Bill and we'll get our stuff ready straight away. If we leave it 'til it gets light, we'll have no chance. OK?'

'Yeah, that's right. Just one thing though: don't tell Bill, ask him. I reckon it's a job for volunteers, eh? I'll clear it with Mr Dodd and I'll get some chaps ready to give you covering fire, just in case ....'

Dodd was torn when Brownlow told him what he intended – he didn't like the idea of exposing two of his men, but accepted that Brownlow was correct: they should deny the enemy a safe place to prepare their attack if they could.

Kelly and Watson, the demolition team, slipped out of the side door of the house and slithered the fifty yards to the first wall.

After that, all they had to do was to keep in the deep shadow of the wall as they covered the hundred and fifty yards to the end of the wall, only a few yards from their target, the side wall of the *fattoria* facing the main house. The bundles of explosives had already been prepared, so all they had to do was to set the five minute pencil and retreat to the section of wall they intended to blow to deny the Germans an easy approach. There they each set a charge, again, on five minute time pencils, where they reckoned they should blow a gap at least ten yards wide.

Everything went exactly according to plan and they were on their way back when they were spotted in the growing light by a German sentry. First there was a shout and a single shot, then another shot and another as more Germans joined in.

Kelly shouted ‘Come on Billy! Time to go!’ and started to run, crouching. Watson followed, but almost instantly, Kelly was down, hit. Instinctively, Watson threw himself on top of Kelly and waited for his own bullet, but by this time, a cascade of fire from the castle forced the Germans to keep their heads down, giving Watson a chance to take stock. He saw that Kelly was still breathing, but unconscious, with blood pulsing from a chest wound. Abandoning the satchel of explosives, he half carried, half dragged Kelly towards where a slight kink in the line of the wall gave them some protection. He almost got there – almost. But a lucky shot hit him in the shoulder and threw him against the wall. Shocked and winded, he lay half stunned for a few moments, then, realising that Kelly was still exposed, was about to lunge out to grab him and pull him into cover, when there was an explosion and the wall of the *fattoria* collapsed in a cloud of debris and dust.

Watson didn’t need another invitation and lurched out to grab Kelly, realised that his right arm wasn’t working, took Kelly’s collar in his left hand and, falling backwards, dragged him into the shelter of the wall.

Watson was still struggling for breath and trying to work out how badly he was injured when the other charges blew amid another pall of smoke and vicious stone splinters.

All that quietened the German fusillade for a while, but Watson realised that it wouldn't be long before they gathered their wits and wanted some retribution. On the other hand, any attempt by him to get back to the castle, with or without Kelly, would obviously be suicidal, and, since he had no weapon, not even the remaining explosives, that he'd abandoned in the open, there was nothing to be done but to await events.

It was getting lighter by the second now – the men in the big house could clearly see Watson waving and beckoning for help, but they could also see the Germans, having regrouped, beginning to make their stealthy way forwards again. Any minute now, they'd be darting past the gap in the wall and coming abreast of the helpless Watson and his unconscious mate.

It was beginning to dawn on Dodd, quite rightly, that attacking the *fattoria* and the wall was possibly correct tactically, in that it denied the Germans a safe place to launch their offensive, but it was a major blunder strategically. Not only had the true strength of the defence had been revealed to the enemy, but two of his handful of experienced troops were now either dead or injured and in serious danger.

In all credit to Major Hummels, he realised immediately that his supposition that the *prominenten* had somehow managed to overcome their guards was false. Clearly, outsiders, most likely parachutists, had come to grab the prisoners, so Hummels had a quite different issue to deal with.

He ordered covering fire while a file of troops slunk closer to where Watson and Kelly lay. His plan was still to push forward and display enough force that another white flag offer would be enough to make the defenders see sense, and he hoped that if his troops could capture the two wounded men, they might



be used as bargaining chips. Failing a quick surrender, his intention was still to get men close enough so they could rush the defence under heavy covering fire, when a few grenades would surely be enough to change some minds.

Right then, Brownlow wasn't thinking about strategy: he was just interested in getting the two injured men back. He turned to call for the American airmen, but they were right there with him.

'Time for us to go, Sar' Major?' asked Cassidy. 'The Chevy's ready.'

Brownlow turned to Dodd, eyebrows raised. He nodded.

'Right' said Brownlow, to the Americans. 'Soon as you move, I'll get you covering fire. Off you go, boys.'

The two ran for the corridor leading to the side of the castle, and Tullett, already grasping his first aid satchel, yelled 'Wait, I'm coming too' and scampered after them.

Dodd winced – this was getting out of hand, but he let Tullett go – he was the first aider and might be able to do something useful. Green started to follow.

'No, Gil, not you. We can't risk any more losses.'

Green was torn between fear for his mate and the realisation that Brownlow was right. He turned back and took up position with his Bren, ready to take savage retribution on anything that moved out there.

The airmen rushed into the kitchen store room where the vehicles had been hidden and, by the time they'd clambered into their practised positions, Tyson driving and Cassidy in the back, two soldiers had swung back the double doors and the increasing light illuminated the Chevrolet. The canvas cover had been taken off the load area and, as Tyson gunned the vehicle forward, Cassidy had to cling to what Brownlow had called "the equaliser," two Browning machine guns, mounted as a pair, taken from a USAAF B17 bomber and now sitting on a mounting welded to the roof of the truck.

Tullett just barely managed to hang on after throwing himself into the load area and lay there, amazed by the guns and their long belts of ammunition.

As Tyson dragged the vehicle round towards Kelly and Watson, and floored the accelerator, he saw the flash of several rifle shots being aimed at him before the Germans were forced to cover by a fusillade of fire from the castle. Cassidy joined in with his Brownings, though it was almost impossible to aim his guns as the Chevy bounced and lurched, but he forced the Germans to scatter for better cover as the truck raced along their flank.

Within a few seconds, they were nearing the kink in the wall and Tyson turned the vehicle side on. In an instant, Tullett was out and racing to his mates: he immediately saw that Kelly was in a bad way, still unconscious, with a large red blotch on his shirt advertising the site of his wound. 'Come on, mate,' yelled Tullett, 'elp me get 'im in the fuckin' truck' but Watson yelled back 'Sorry, chum, only got one arm. Can you manage?'

Tullett glanced and saw Watson had a red patch of his own. 'Fuck! Fuckin' fuck! All right, mate, can yer walk?' Watson nodded. 'Right. Can yer just grab 'is legs, take a bit o' weight if yer can.'

And between them they managed to bundle Kelly into the truck, Tullett wincing as he recalled his first aid instructor's firm instructions *never* to move a patient until he'd been examined and stabilised.

Immediately, Cassidy yelled to Tyson to get moving and as they lurched forward, Tullett scrambled aboard, dragging Watson with him.

Captain Mendelssohn had seen what was happening, and was on his way to interfere. He'd got his scout car onto the open ground between the field walls and the forest, yelling at his driver to floor it. He was still well over a hundred yards off when the Chevy began to roll, and he fired a spray from his MG34, but,

what with the vehicle bouncing around on the rough ground, he'd have been lucky to get a useful shot away.

Even so, he posed a serious threat, because the shortcoming of the placing of Cassidy's machine guns became apparent – the mounting on the cab roof meant he couldn't fire backwards.

Cassidy yelled at Tyson to swerve, which he did, allowing Cassidy, by leaning far out, to get a few shots approximately at the scout car.

Mendelssohn was fully aware that his armour wasn't up to a sustained burst from the twin half inch Brownings, especially from the side or rear, while the Americans knew that if they gave the German any sort of shot, that'd be the end. So the two vehicles began a bizarre sort of ballet as they both tried to get in position for a burst without giving the enemy a similar chance.

Eventually, Tyson managed to get closer and closer to the house, so the defenders could more effectively join in and finally, a last lunge took the Chevy back through the side doors.

It wasn't until then that Dodd realised the cost of the sortie: Kelly and Watson both wounded, Kelly seriously, and now, he discovered, Cassidy had also been shot, a nasty leg wound, and he'd collapsed even as the truck slewed into safety.

So the whole expedition had been a terrible blunder: not only had three important men been put out of action, but strategically, Dodd had lost the initiative. He'd revealed to the Germans that they were dealing with a much stronger force than they'd reckoned with, and, with the Chevy, they faced a powerful mobile threat to their flank.

Moreover, Private Arthur Churchill, who'd been firing on the Germans to give the Americans covering fire had been shot and killed, and Lieutenant Montgomery had copped a facefull of glass shards from a window that had exploded from a bullet, leaving him blinded and helpless.

Tullett had commandeered the grand entrance hall as his infirmary, it being the only room without ground floor windows, being lit by large windows on the upper level. Having done the best he could for Kelly, who was still unconscious – he'd managed to stop the blood, though his patient now looked terrible, his chest a mass of sodden bandages and the remains of his shirt, also crimson – he turned to Watson, whose injury was less threatening, but now the shock had worn off, the pain was making him whimper, so Tullett had given him a shot of morphine. He'd then moved on to Cassidy and bandaged his leg with, like Kelly, success in staunching the blood, but again, like Kelly, the wound was advertised by sodden bandages and a missing trouser leg.

Tullett was now crouched in front of Montgomery, who was sitting on the floor, back against the wall, while Tullett extracted slivers of glass from his face.

## Chapter 18

Major Hummels was shocked at first when the Chevy appeared – he was expecting that it was his men who'd be doing the attacking, not to be attacked - and he called a halt to the assault while he reviewed his position.

Obviously, the defenders were much better armed and organised than he had thought. But how well armed, exactly? Did they have automatic weapons other than the machine guns on the truck? If not, maybe a frontal charge while a small force kept the truck occupied still would do it? He decided to test the water.

A handful of men would skirt round to the side of the castle where the truck had disappeared, and a few more would reinforce the three at the back, while the main force, including the scout car, would make as though to push towards the front of the place. At the given moment, the Germans would begin firing from three sides (the fourth, right hand side, being protected by a wide open grassy area, was impossible for infantry).

Observers would establish, from the return fire, whether the defenders had anything more than rifles, and this knowledge would allow Hummels to decide on his next assault, his final assault, he acknowledged to himself, aware that time was slipping away. It could only be an hour or two before the Allies, bulling their way up the main road, got past the point where the side road joined it, and Hummels' escape would be cut off.

And so it happened, that at eleven in the morning precisely, the defenders were assailed on three sides.

The onslaught only lasted a few seconds, and didn't help Major Hummels establish the strength of the defence – the intensity of the firing caused the defenders to keep their heads well down – but it was Dino's turn, like Montgomery, to be caught by a blast of shattered glass. He joined the queue of patients for Tullett.

Dodd and Brownlow stood watching Tullett as he finished wrapping Montgomery's head in bandages and made a start on Dino's injuries.

In the sudden silence, the air in the entrance hall was full of ancient dust, set free by the torrent of bullets and made eerily beautiful by the sunlight that streamed in from the upper windows.

Dodd did his face washing gesture and spoke quietly, as one does when among suffering.

'I didn't imagine it would be like this, I really didn't. Perhaps we should have surrendered while we had the chance, eh?'

Brownlow said nothing.

'I suppose we still could. Surrender, I mean. What do you think, Sar' Major?'

Brownlow winced and called softly to Tullett. 'How're you doing, Stan? Coping all right, are you?'

Tullett was quietly proud of how he was coping, but of course, he couldn't say so. 'Yeah, all right, Sarge. I'm gettin' well fuckin' low on bandages an' that, though. Can yer get someone to find me summing, sheets or towels or that? An' I'm low on everything else an' all, but there we go – can't do fuck all 'bout that, eh?'

Dodd joined the conversation. 'Er, Stan, some of your patients look pretty bad. What would you think about us giving up so as to get treatment for the wounded?'

Watson heard that and chipped in. 'What? Surrender? Not on my account you don't! And I think I can speak for Ted, too.'

Tullett smiled grimly. 'There's yer answer, Boss. Fuckin' surrender?! Do what? We come this far, ain't we, so let's just 'ang on a bit more, see what 'appens, eh?'

Brownlow turned to Dodd. 'Look, Skip, why don't I have little look round, see how the rest of the lads are doing, check the ammunition, and so on. Then we'll see if we can go a bit longer, all right?'

Brownlow then toured the interior, checking his resources. He still had Green, Tullett, Burgess, Colonel Tyson and one Private Churchill, all of whom were stood at their own windows, so that was six fighting soldiers including himself. The two British generals were sitting on the floor on one side of the main room among a pile of ammunition boxes, engrossed in reloading magazines for the Brens and in another corner, other *prominenten* were doing the same for the Berettas, though they were almost out of supplies now.

When he returned, he summed up for Dodd.

‘Well, Boss, we can put out a fair old rate of fire if they come from the front – enough to keep ‘em well back, I reckon, far enough, at any rate, and still put up a bit of covering fire at the back just to stop them chaps in the trees from getting too confident. And on the sides, well, I don’t reckon they’ll try from the left – too open – one man with a Bren’d do too much damage. The other side’s a different story though. If they’ve got enough men, they might try to infiltrate through the trees and put pressure on from the side and back, and that’d spread us pretty thin. We’ve got a fair bit of ammunition for the Brens, but the Berettas’re almost done, and as you know, medical supplies’re very low too. But Tullett reckons he can manage for now. So, there’s the story. Give up? It’s up to you.’

Dodd stood among the injured, looking about him, then did his face-washing-I’m-thinking-hard motion before saying ‘I don’t know if this makes any sense to you, Sar’ Major, but frankly, I’m not inclined to wave the white flag. Maybe we should do, sensibly, but if we give up now, what’s the point of all this?’

He waved both arms around him. ‘We might as well have admitted defeat in the first place, mightn’t we? Don’t you agree?’

Brownlow, in turn, did his own half-the-face-screwed-up-I’m-thinking-hard-too gesture for a long time before replying.

‘You know what, Boss? This reminds me of way back when we first landed off the plane – remember? I was thinking we’d best give up, and you said no. D’you remember that?’

‘Yes, well, that *was* a bit different, wasn’t it?’

‘Oh well, never mind that. But I’ll tell you what – this time, I’m just not inclined to go walking out with my hands up. I know it’s ridiculous, there’s only a handful of us left, fit enough to fight, that is, but if you ask me, I’m thinking stuff it – if they want me, they’ll bloody well have to come in here and get me.’

Dodd looked hard at Brownlow and smiled. ‘I know exactly how you feel. I’m the same. So let’s give ‘em something to remember, eh?’

Tullett, who’d sidled up into hearing range, added ‘Fuckin’ right’ which seemed to say it all really.

Major Hummels was reviewing his situation too, and coming to much the same conclusion: reasonably, he should be withdrawing his troops while he still had time. He thought about discussing it with Mendelssohn, but worried that the captain might have wanted to leave. He needn’t have concerned himself about that though – Mendelssohn had a very clear picture in his mind of being presented with a medal and thanks by Kesselring after collecting the *prominenten* and dashing out onto the main road with seconds to go before the Allies cut them off, so Mendelssohn was right behind Hummels’ decision to make one last hundred percent effort.

In the end, Hummels found he was in much the same “stuff it, let’s go for it” frame of mind as Brownlow.

He ordered the trucks to be brought up to where he was, in the remains of the *fattoria*, somewhat sheltered but visible to the defenders, so as to give them the impression that *Hummels* had a larger force than he did, and to remind them that he was coming for the prisoners, and soon.

The remainder of his plan was simply the application of his entire force. Half his remaining men would continue



harassing fire into the front of the big house, supported by Mendelssohn and his Dalek, and be ready to charge forward if the opportunity arose, while the other half would infiltrate through the forest to the left, where some would stay and shoot at the side to threaten a charge, while the others, maybe twenty odd, would continue round to reinforce the shooting into the rear of the building.

Thus, Hummels reasoned, the defenders would be so spread out that a rush by his troops from one side or another had a very realistic chance of success. Like Brownlow, he considered that if only a grenade or two could be flung into the building, the devastation inside would be such that the conclusion was going to be inevitable.

Dodd and Brownlow were still in Tullett's makeshift hospital when there was a shout from Colonel Tyson, who was guarding the left flank of the *castello* from an upstairs window.

‘Sar’ Major! You’d better come and see this!’

Brownlow shared a grimace with Dodd, muttered ‘Now what?’ and made for the stairs. Dodd followed.

Tyson was at the top of the grand staircase, standing back a bit from the remains of a window frame at the left side of the house, and explained ‘There’s something going on out there: I keep seeing movement in among the trees – I’m pretty sure the Germans are slipping men up ready to put pressure on the back. Look! There! Did you see that?’

Brownlow gazed out and after a moment, said ‘Yes! Oh shit, there’s something going on all right. There! D’you see, Boss? See? You’re right, Colonel, they’re moving troops up to increase the pressure on the back, see? And they’ll leave some there to shoot from the side too.’

Brownlow gave his bottom lip a nasty chewing, then said ‘This is bad news, Boss. Very bad. I dunno if we’ve got the manpower to hold off a serious attack from all over.’ He savaged his lip again, as though it was somehow to blame.

Dodd looked hard and admitted that he couldn't see anything unusual, but even he couldn't miss the sudden volley of gunfire from the trees to their right, towards the back of the house, and the ragged reply from in front of their window.

Suddenly, the gunfire was intense.

'What's going on, Sar' Major?' asked Dodd, but Brownlow shook his head. 'I don't get it, Boss. That shooting from up there, it don't sound right, does it? Sounds more like shotguns or something, or small bore stuff.'

Dodd shook his head and raised an eyebrow so Brownlow explained 'Well, small bore, you know, hunting guns, for birds, or rabbits or that.'

Without thinking, Dodd moved forward, looking hard, and there, yes, that's what he was looking for – a glimpse, just a glimpse, but unmistakable, of orange fur tortured into the approximation of a hat!

'Volpe! Yes, it's Volpe and his partisans! Look!

Tyson and Brownlow both moved closer to the window. The orange monstrosity was gone now, but there was no doubt that the skirmish was going against the Germans. Even though they had modern military weapons, they were no match among the trees for the locals who'd made an art form of slipping invisibly through the forest after game. They were definitely being forced back.

Excited and slightly hopeful, Brownlow and Tyson both edged forward. Some soldier in among the trees must have seen the movement and snapped off an instinctive shot. Tyson jerked backward, shot clean in the chest and slumped into Brownlow who, pushed off balance, himself staggered backwards, slipping on the shattered glass strewn about the floor. He spun round and fell, smacking his face full on into the handrail of the staircase before collapsing onto the stairs.

Aghast, and feeling it was somehow his fault, Dodd turned to go to Brownlow's aid, but the very last German bullet from the trees smashed the very last sliver of glass in the frame, which

sliced down Dodd's own face, from just above the left eye right down to the chin.

Dodd didn't even realise he'd been injured at first, not until he knelt over Brownlow and his blood started flowing onto the back of Brownlow's head. Even then, he didn't really take it in – he was far more worried about the sergeant major.

He was still wondering what to do when Brownlow stirred and tried to sit up, then put his hands to his face, which was rapidly swelling and changing colour.

'Oh, shit, not again,' he moaned. 'I can't fucking see. Are you there Boss?'

'Yes Sar' Major, I'm here. We'd better get you down to see, er, sorry, to get looked at by Tullett, eh? Do you think you could stand?'

'Well, I'll give it a go, if you'll give me a hand. And the colonel, can we manage him as well?'

'Young Tyson's dead, I'm afraid. Now, give me your hand ...'

And between them, Brownlow blinded and Dodd now realising there was blood pulsing from his own wound, they managed to stagger down amid a blizzard of splinters of glass, wood and stone created by the torrent of shooting from the front and join the scene of carnage in the lobby.

Dodd guided Brownlow, like an ancient but loved relative, to a place at the side of the lobby, and the pair of them sat on the floor, with their backs to the wall, waiting for Tullett to spare a minute to see to them.

It was only then that they became fully aware of the crescendo of shooting coming from the front of the building. They could hear what remained of the glass in the front windows shattering under the onslaught, occasional fragments from the great windows on the higher floor that lit the entrance hall cascading among the injured and from time to time, a volley thudded through the enormous front door, sending jagged splinters to join the glass.

Obviously, the Germans were making their final push, aiming to so overwhelm the defence that they could get close enough to administer the coup de grace.

Dodd and Brownlow sat against their wall, heads down, shoulders slumped, aware that their battle was over.

When Tullett spared them both a minute to examine their injuries, he swathed Dodd's head in a vertical strip of bedsheet, leaving him looking like a cartoon of a man with toothache, to stop the blood, he explained, but after studying Brownlow's already closed and purple eyes, said all he could offer was morphine, but he'd only got the one ampoule left and Brownlow told him, as he'd expected, to save it for somebody else.

In a lull in the deluge of fire, another set of footsteps clumped down the stairs and into the lobby. Brownlow's head came up and he muttered 'Who's that?'

Burgess stood immobile for a moment as he took in the scene.

'It's me Sarge, John. I see yer've been playing silly buggers again, an' this time, yer didn' 'ave me to look after yer.'

'Never mind that' replied Brownlow, 'what're you doing here? You're supposed to be guarding the back, aren't you?'

'Yeah, well, there's nuthink 'appnin' back there is there, so I thought I'd come an' 'elp this side, eh?'

Brownlow thought about that for a second, while Burgess wondered if he might be in for a bollocking, but Brownlow just sighed and said 'You're a good boy John. But listen, son. What're you hearing?'

Burgess agreed that it had gone a bit quiet and Brownlow continued. 'Yeah, the firing's died right back all of a sudden, and you can hear their trucks coming up to get us, so just put your weapon down and come and sit quiet and wait with the Boss and me, eh? Like the donkey, eh? No point getting yourself shot now, is there?'

Burgess looked as though he was going to argue for a moment, and waved a hand to indicate the scene around him as though to say “what, was this all for nothing then?” But then his whole body drooped, his Bren clattered onto the marble floor, and he said ‘Yeah, all right Sarge, like the donkey.’

He sighed, and added, by way of explanation, ‘Didn’ ‘ave ‘ardly any bullets left, anyway.’

He picked his way between the injured and slid his back down the wall beside Brownlow: the three sat and watched Tullett scurrying among his charges, oblivious now to everything except his work.

There was no shooting at all now. Obviously, all the remaining defenders were either incapacitated, or worse.

The sound of the trucks came closer and closer, until they rattled to silence, and Dodd heard the slamming of truck doors and the crunch of running boots on the patio. He reached out, clasped Brownlow’s hand and said ‘It’s been a great privilege to serve with you, Sar’ Major.’

Brownlow winced and said ‘Now don’t start, Skipper. But we did all right, didn’t we, with just a handful of odds and sods.’

There was a stampede of boots on the steps and the great doors were thrown wide.

‘Goddammit, Dodd, if I have to pull your ass out of the fire one more time I’ll .... Medic!’ yelled Colonel Bullivant, ‘Medic!’

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