

"4 STARS OUT OF 4 STARS" ONLINE BOOK CLUB
A NEW NOVEL BY CURTIS STEPHEN BURDICK



RESCUING GENERAL PATTON

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What if the real reason General George S. Patton was relieved of his command in Sicily in August of 1943 was to cover up his capture by the Germans?

RESCUING General PATTON

Known only to General Eisenhower and General Bradley, it was the most daring, bloodiest, top-secret, 'suicide rescue mission' ever undertaken in WWII.

A new novel
by
Curtis Stephen Burdick

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RESCUING GENERAL PATTON

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Praise for the author's other books and work...

Protectors of the Black Prince

"This is awesome! I had to use an appropriate expression to match the flavor of this story. The premise is exciting and unusual, the structure is perfect and the action is non-stop, which suits the genre. As I neared the final pages, I felt genuinely disturbed that the story would end soon, because I didn't want it to. The writing is top notch. I was literally unable to tear myself away from this story."

**Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences
Nicholl Awards, reader/judge comments.**

"This exciting historical work explores the adventures of an aspiring master archer as he discovers the horror of war and the ugliness of xenophobia. The author powerfully conveys the protagonist's moral dilemma as he grapples with the decision to either show obedience to the kingdom or pursue justice, an act that would brand him a traitor."

Burdick's prose is elaborately descriptive and evocative. The author draws upon historical and medieval fiction tropes and familiar themes of aching romance, loyalty, and warring kingdoms. However, Burdick excels at creating a full and vivid world that readers of the genre will ultimately find captivating. Characters are developed with care and compassion, made to reflect their historical era, while offering relatable characteristics and emotional resonance."

Publisher's Weekly (Book Life Prize)

Tales from the Gray Area

*"An amazing blend of science-fiction, fantasy and reality. This book consists of seven spellbinding novellas, each with a satisfying ending, yet they all have the potential to be continued. Every novella offers something intriguing to keep the readers hooked. There are supernatural beings, magical powers, UFOs, aliens, and monsters to lure the readers to keep turning the pages. There is also a touch of suspense and mystery to add a dramatic effect to these tales. The characterizations are also uniformly very impressive. The book as a whole is enthralling. That is why I am wholeheartedly giving it **4 out of 4 stars**. And the book is professionally edited. I would recommend this book to fantasy/sci-fi readers and to people who like to read a blend of reality and fantasy."*

Online Book Club, Aniza Butt, reviewer

RESCUING GENERAL PATTON

CURTIS STEPHEN BURDICK

*For Allie, Riley, Benny, and Max
The best grandchildren a grandmother and grandfather
could ever possibly have*

RESCUING GENERAL PATTON

Prologue

General George Patton, a brilliant military strategist who revolutionized the aggressive use of the tank as an attack weapon and the most successful combat commander in US history, had millions of admirers in the summer of 1943. He also had enemies, including a muck-raking newspaper columnist who leaked information about a slapping incident.

Soon after, in a stunning announcement by General Dwight Eisenhower, Commanding General, US Expeditionary Forces, Patton was ordered to apologize to the entire Seventh Army Group, with as many of the men as possible assembled in the main square in Messina, Sicily. Immediately afterward, he was ‘reassigned’ to England without a command; all taking place, incredibly, on the eve of the invasion of Italy.

German intelligence believed this was a ruse, certain he was preparing to lead the invasion of Europe. They were partially right. It was a ruse. But the American people, Allies, Army Chief of Staff, George Marshall, even President Franklin Roosevelt himself, never knew what really happened . . .

RESCUING GENERAL PATTON

Chapter 1

John Harding sat ramrod straight as he signed his latest book at a table thirty feet beyond the main entrance of the venerable Whitman & Sons bookstore located in the Georgetown neighborhood of Washington, DC. The sixty-two-year-old retired US Army major had carefully combed his remaining wispy strands of graying hair over an ever-expanding bald spot. Almost all the brown had deserted his neatly trimmed goatee years ago.

Half-glasses were perched low on his narrow nose—a result of thirty years of squinting at documents, having worked in and then led the archival division of the Army’s Department of Records. A light brown, herringbone tweed jacket, white shirt, dark tie, and tightly creased brown slacks completed his civilian uniform. All who entered could not miss noticing the military historian who had spent the last eight years of his retirement pursuing his passion, writing military biographical histories. He was a fanatic about historical accuracy and doing the tedious research needed to uncover the truth and verify seemingly accepted ‘facts.’ Truth, no matter how long it took to unearth, and no matter how inconvenient to our national mythos, was what drove him. How, after all, could one learn from the past if the historical record wasn’t accurate?

Harding was positioned under a modest display of the type of non-denominational Christmas decorations he despised—candy canes and holiday wreaths stripped of any deeper meaning. The

table had a large sign on one end announcing his appearance that day to sign his new book, with a flattering, professionally taken picture of him in uniform holding *Patton and the Battle of the Bulge*. On the other end of the table, carefully arrayed copies of his book stood at attention in neat rows. Directly behind him and his table was the bookstore's wide, curved stairway that led down into the reading room and café furnished with comfortable couches, lounge chairs with reading lamps on end tables, and two fireplaces, framed with garland and holly, that had gas-fueled flames flickering up between realistic-looking ceramic logs.

Harding continued to cordially greet those who presented their newly bought books for his signature from the short but steadily maintained line of men, most of whom were elderly, wearing or holding winter coats and hats. Curiously, the line was joined by an impeccably dressed older woman, appearing to be in her late fifties or early sixties, with an erect bearing, intent gaze, and an elegant air that set her apart from the others in line. She held a distinctive, dark green Whitman & Sons bag in her hands along with her tailored coat.

The woman waited patiently as she moved up in the line. A man with a cane had taken up the spot behind her. A few moments later another fan of Harding's work, younger than the others, wearing a military officer's uniform, his trench coat in hand, joined the short line. Eventually, it was the woman's turn to approach Harding, and she removed his book from the bag and presented her copy to him.

Harding looked up, and his face reflected a momentary expression of surprise that a woman stood before him. He smiled at her, and as he opened the book's cover to sign, she said, "I bought it the first day it became available."

"Really. Well, thank you." With his pen poised to sign, he asked, "Your name?"

"I've already read it," she added frankly, causing Harding to raise an eyebrow. As he was about to respond, she answered his question. "Julia *Patton* Walton."

Harding's eyes widened, and he looked up instantly, surprise covering his face now. His eyes locked on hers.

"I'm General Patton's granddaughter."

Harding's jaw dropped, and he stood up slowly and extended

his hand. “Oh my. It’s—what an honor—a-a surprise to meet you.”

Julia shook his hand briefly then also quickly produced a worn manila envelope from her bag and put it in his hand. Harding frowned and for a moment was unsure what to do.

“My mother gave that to me before she died. I think you are the right person to see it, perhaps even believe it.”

“Oh? Wow, um, thank you,” Harding said with a puzzled look and now feeling an innate skepticism that he applied to fact-checking every historical detail of his manuscripts. It made him wonder now if she really was Patton’s granddaughter. “I’ll certainly look—”

“My phone number is included,” Julia interrupted. “I hope to hear from you.”

She quickly turned and walked away, leaving Harding standing there, confused and stunned in equal measure. He glanced at the envelope in his hand and slowly began to sit back down as the old man with the cane approached. He noticed Julia’s book on the table, immediately stood back up, and called out to her as she walked away.

“Miss—Ma’am, um, you, you left your book!”

Julia turned as she put on her coat near the door and yelled back to Harding, “Give it to me when we talk!”

John Harding drove through the rolling hills of northern Virginia’s white-fenced ‘horse country.’ The countryside was covered in a light coating of snow that had fallen during the night and still stuck to many of the tree limbs, creating a winter wonderland that would quickly disappear once the temperature rose another degree or two. He had been in a constant state of excitement and felt an almost unbearable sense of anticipation, both of which had gripped him immediately after he read the contents of the envelope that General George S. Patton’s granddaughter, Julia, had given him. He still couldn’t believe she had selected him to read the stunning and tantalizing information that her mother, the General’s own daughter, had given to her just before she died.

Harding saw the expertly made and carved sign with a colonial

era design announcing, “Walton Manor” and knew then that the precise directions Julia had given him when he called her had, in fact, been correct. She had warned him not to rely on GPS directions since they were invariably inaccurate. The sign also proudly proclaimed in gold italic lettering below the homestead moniker: “*Home of Julia Patton Walton, granddaughter of General George S. Patton.*” A holiday wreath with a red bow was on the fence below the sign.

Harding turned into the driveway entrance between open, elaborately made wrought iron gates just beyond the sign and drove along a tree-lined parkway that he thought must look glorious in the spring. The driveway led to a modest but still impressively maintained colonial-era two-story home. It was painted white, and dark green shutters with black forged iron hinges framed each of the home’s many windows.

He parked his eight-year-old Jeep Wrangler behind another vehicle that faced toward him, a pickup truck with a horse trailer attached. A light cover of snow dusted the vehicle, where it had been left in front of a large, detached garage that had probably been, in another era, a carriage house. He got out of his car carrying a well-traveled leather briefcase and left his coat in the car. His anxiety was palpable as he hurried across the crushed stone driveway to the cobblestone path, leaving barely noticeable tracks in the thin cover of already melting snow that led to the entrance. To his surprise, Julia was standing there with the door open, waiting for him.

“Oh, hello, Mrs. Walton. I—”

“Julia, please. May I call you John?”

“Of course. Yes, um, Julia, please do.”

Julia followed him into the large formal foyer with a distinctive colonial period staircase with intricately hand-turned spindles and a beveled oak railing. It continued up to the second floor and along an open mezzanine that connected with hallways on either side that led to bedrooms. The adjoining dining room and living room were easily viewed from the foyer. The expertly restored colonial era exterior was perfectly matched inside both rooms with their period decorating, as well as furnishings that appeared to be mixed with genuine antiques. Julia led him into the living room. He detected the faint smell of Bee’s Wax furniture polish and its telltale mix of

lavender and turpentine, which instantly evoked pleasant memories of his childhood home.

“My word. What a comfortable room!” Harding exclaimed. “I must compliment you on the impeccable early colonial decor and furnishings. I am quite partial to the time period.”

“Thank you. That doesn’t surprise me since you are a historian.”

“Very true.”

“Can I get you some coffee or—”

“No, no thank you. I’m fine,” Harding responded anxiously.

Julia sat on a couch and motioned Harding to a chair close to her. He sat while immediately opening his briefcase, fumbling nervously with the two straps. The moment at hand was such that he could not engage in any further small talk.

“Julia, I must tell you,” Harding began as he pulled out the envelope she had given him at the bookstore and extracted several pages inside, “the information these pages contain is simply *astounding*! If you hadn’t given me the diary pages also, I, well, I—”

“Wouldn’t have believed it?” Julia interrupted.

“Wouldn’t have even considered believing it.”

“I’m glad I included them,” she responded as the excited enthusiasm on Harding’s face and in his voice increased and he talked rapidly.

“I immediately filed a Freedom of Information Request, and a friend got it for me quick. Turned up some, well, curious fragments of information, clues, interesting leads, and—”

“My late husband said I should have used my name to talk with the Secretary of the Army, but I didn’t know how to—”

“I don’t think that would have helped,” Harding quickly interrupted.

“Really?”

“I’m quite sure. I worked in that bureaucracy, and—”

“I had assumed, eventually, even though I realized it must have been top secret, that it would have become known by now. After fifty years aren’t secret records supposed to be released?”

“Normally, but some can be kept secret longer when deemed necessary, which I suspect this was. I’m betting, though, documents

related to this have been declassified by now and are piled up, waiting to be archived.”

“Piled up?” Julia frowned.

Harding nodded, relaxed somewhat, and sat back in the chair. “There’s an enormous backlog, especially from the ’90s and early 2000s, when hundreds of thousands of most of the remaining WWII documents were released without much fanfare. It will take decades to catalog and make them accessible to researchers and historians.”

Julia looked even more surprised. “Seriously? Why so long to—”

“Budget cuts. Archiving military records is hardly a priority. WWII is almost ancient history.”

“Yes. I know,” Julia said and let out a deep sigh.

“But don’t worry. I’m just gonna wade through it all. Archives are my old stomping grounds. Will get my retired military friends, former administrators in Records, university grad assistants, and other volunteers to help.”

“So, you *are* going to investigate this?”

“Yes! Absolutely. A historian’s dream. Especially for a Patton geek like me!”

They shared a laugh for a moment, then Julia turned serious.

“I really want you to tell this story, before no one cares anymore.”

Harding’s expression became equally serious. “I’m genuinely honored and excited. Next to the Manhattan Project, this has to be one of the great secrets of WWII, and still unknown! I’ll learn the truth, the whole story, and tell it. I promise.”

Julia bent forward on the couch, leaning toward Harding. “Thank you, John. Ever since my mother gave me that envelope I’ve so wanted to know”—she hesitated as she turned and looked up and over at a framed picture on the wall behind Harding— “what really happened, the secret he kept to the end, and . . . and why?”

Harding turned around in his chair and saw what Julia was looking at, a framed picture of her grandfather, General George S. Patton, Jr. He was in his WWII short field jacket, wore a polished dark green helmet, with the three gold stars of his general’s rank on his epaulets and helmet, chin strap on, just the top of one of his two pistols, the ivory-handled Colt .45, visible. He was looking out into

the distance, perhaps at a battlefield, an expression of fierce, fearless determination, the eyes between his patrician nose filled with the exhilaration of commanding soldiers in combat.

And they both just sat there in silence and stared at the photograph, wondering about what *exactly* had happened to him in Sicily in August of 1943, and the secret he had kept to the end.

RESCUING GENERAL PATTON

Chapter 2

On August 15th, 1943, at 2:05 p.m., five minutes later than scheduled, the three-star commanding general of US 7th Army Group, George S. Patton, wearing a helmet and his pair of ivory-handled revolvers—contrary to descriptions that they were pearl-handled—a Colt .45 and a .357 Smith & Wesson, hurried into the officers' mess tent at 7th Army headquarters. He had a no-nonsense combative look with eyes that seemed to fill with the manifestation of the anger that would erupt in his voice and tightened facial muscles, which was exactly the way he looked at that moment. Although fifty-seven, he looked younger and still had the athletic build that had allowed him to compete in the 1912 Olympics pentathlon.

He moved to the front of the tent and unleashed a string of profanities at the assembled group of division and brigade commanders and a few of their frontline combat battalion officers who somehow managed to attend. He was even more livid than normal, which was saying a lot. His anger belied the fact that the Germans had finally been routed and were in full retreat through passes within the Peloritani Coastal Mountains along the northeast corner of Sicily.

They had all been ordered to the 7th Army headquarters to attend what Patton had labeled in capital letters as an 'URGENT' briefing. The summons had been hand-delivered by 'runners,' who

had, in some cases, braved enemy fire in their jeeps while delivering them.

They were now all gathered in the officers' mess. Most were in the grime- and sweat-infused combat fatigues they wore on the frontline battlefields they had traveled from. A large map of Sicily hung over a chalkboard behind Patton. Stark black and red arrows drawn on it pointed at Nazi swastikas grouped in the northwest corner. Both stood on a twelve-inch platform hastily constructed out of supply pallets. The stagnant air within the confined area was made even more intolerable by the smell of body odor and the heat during the hottest part of the day of what had been an exceptionally oppressive Sicilian summer.

"This is bullshit!" Patton yelled as he grabbed a wooden pointer from a table nearby. "I'm goddamn tired of fuckin' excuses from you sonsofbitches!"

His officers stood there with looks that said they were used to his tirades, although some thought he was a little more out of control than normal.

Patton became even more incensed by their lack of reaction. Every one of the officers in attendance was visibly exhausted from lack of sleep and being in combat almost continuously for the last thirty-eight days.

The general pulled off his helmet and slammed it onto the platform. It bounced wildly into the group, where one of his officers deftly caught it. He banged the pointer in his other hand against the map and chalkboard underneath.

Nearby, General Omar N. Bradley, Patton's second-in-command and his II Corps commander, sighed and shook his head. He was also used to his boss's outbursts, which were often just well-calculated 'performances.' This time, though, he suspected it wasn't. Bradley was born in poverty in rural Missouri and had an everyman's, unassuming face with sympathetic eyes, which led Ernie Pyle to describe him as "the GI's general." But behind the non-threatening look and patient demeanor was one of the most brilliant and cunning military minds in the US Army.

"Goddamn it to hell! We're just letting the entire fucking kraut army, a hundred thousand troops, get down to the beaches and escape! Gonna have to fight those same goddamn Nazi

sonsofbitchin' bastards when we invade fuckin' Italy!"

"They still control the passes in those coastal mountains, George," Bradley responded in an even voice.

"Why the hell, Brad? Why? Goddamn it!"

Referring to each other by first names was unusual but not unheard of and spoke to the closeness of the two friends, even though Patton was the senior rank, and the fact that all in the meeting were senior-ranked officers.

"Monty can't break through either," Bradley said matter-of-factly.

Patton pointed his stick at Colonel Henry 'Hank' Mueller, commander of the lead brigade fighting in one of the key passes.

"What the hell is goin' on up there, Hank?! Gotta relieve you too?"

Mueller was a forty-six-year-old ruggedly built colonel who had been in the worst of the fighting in Belleau Wood as a lieutenant in WWI. His hair was completely gray, and his face was tanned so brown and leathery it camouflaged the ground-in grime clogging every pore. He responded to Patton without reaction in his look or voice to the general's threat.

"German rear guard units, their best. General Baade's 15th *Panzergrenadiers*. Sniper teams all over, and they laid mines every—"

Patton broke the pointer against the map.

"Bullshit! Guess I gotta go out and kick some asses!"

"Now wait a minute, George. It's chaos up there," Bradley responded in an uncharacteristically blunt tone.

"Hank! Get a goddamn jeep and driver ready. Mount a fifty cal, and get a sergeant who knows how to use the damn thing!"

Colonel Mueller hesitated and looked over at Bradley.

"Goddamn it!" Patton shouted. "That's an order, Colonel!"

Bradley jumped back in. "George, Hank's gotta get back to his men and—"

"That's where the hell I'm taking him, Brad!"

An hour and a half later an Army jeep barreled and bounced

along a crude mountain road within the Peloritani Mountains. The jeep was manned by Colonel Mueller's driver, a visibly nervous twenty-year-old corporal named Sam Bauer, from Fresno, California, the only son of an avocado farm family. But his anxiety was due more to the passenger next to him—General Patton—than his breakneck speed. In the back, sitting between a mounted fifty-caliber machine gun and holding on for dear life rode Colonel Mueller and Sergeant Frank Bera, an expert on the heavy machine gun. Mueller also straddled an M1 Thompson submachine gun between his legs.

Patton glanced over at the driver. "Jesus, Corporal, you know where the hell we are?"

"Um, God, General, we-we may have taken a wrong turn back there."

"We? *You* missed it, goddamn it!"

Corporal Bauer slowed the jeep.

"Sorry, sir."

Colonel Mueller leaned forward. "Corporal, get us turned—"

Mueller never finished the command as the jeep hit a mine, and a moment later small arms fire erupted.

The jeep ended up on its side, lying across the road. Colonel Mueller and Sergeant Bera were dead. Patton's right foot was under the jeep door and broken. Though in excruciating pain, he still managed to pull it free. Corporal Bauer, head and left arm bloodied, helmet gone, fired a submachine gun from behind the jeep at a group of advancing German infantry, killing two and sending them to cover.

Patton, grimacing, crawled over to the corporal.

"You're okay, General?"

"Yeah, just keep those sonsofbitches pinned!"

Through sheer force of will Patton laboriously got the heavy machine gun off its mounting. Bauer saw that Patton was in pain, wounded.

"They're makin' a move up, General!"

Patton, kneeling, laid the weapon across the jeep's side, awkwardly held the ammo belt out, and began firing while Bauer did the same. Together, they killed or wounded more enemy, scattered them, and bought themselves some time.

“What’s your name, son?” Patton asked, grimacing in pain as he dropped to the ground and leaned against the jeep.

“Sam Bauer, sir.”

“You’re a damn good soldier, Sam.”

“Thank you. Um, General?”

Patton began taking off his shirt, surprising Bauer.

“Okay, Sam, here’s what we’re gonna do. Pretty sure the krauts’ll wait for help before moving again. Go and get the colonel’s shirt, tags, and anything in his pockets and bring ’em to me.”

“Oh-okay, yes, sir,” Bauer replied, though looking completely puzzled.

“And put your shirt and tags on the colonel.”

Bauer hesitated.

“Just do it, Corporal. Now!”

Bauer was startled into action and stripped the shirt and tags from the dead colonel and replaced them with his own. He emptied the colonel’s pockets and scurried back to Patton.

“Now, put my shirt and tags on.” Patton took off his own dog tags. “And my things in your pockets.”

Patton handed them to the corporal, who did it immediately as ordered. Patton pulled his ivory-handled Colt .45 out of his left holster—his other holster was empty—and handed the gun to Bauer.

“Shoot the colonel in the back of the head and the top of his head. A .45 exit wound will make his face unrecognizable,” Patton said unemotionally.

“What!” the corporal exclaimed.

“Whoever finds his body has to believe he’s a corporal.”

“But-but won’t that mean—”

“Son, I’m gonna be captured. I can’t walk. They *can*’t know who I really am. *Understand?*”

Bauer nodded, but his wide-eyed look said he really didn’t.

“What-what if they kill you?”

“Doubt they’ll kill an officer, especially a colonel. They looked like German Wehrmacht not SS. Hurry, son.”

Bauer moved to the body of the dead colonel.

“Hurry!” Patton yelled.

The corporal quickly turned Mueller over, moved back, swallowed hard, and fired Patton’s famous Colt .45 twice into the

back of the dead colonel's head, obliterating the face as the exit wounds splattered brains and pieces of skull over the dead sergeant nearby.

"One more in the top of the head at an angle," Patton ordered.

Bauer, with an even more repulsed look on his face, immediately fired into the top of the head at an angle, turning the dead colonel's gray hair red with blood and bits of brains and skull bone. He handed the .45 back to Patton.

"Now I'm going to cover your escape until my ammo runs out," Patton said to the shaken, grim-faced corporal, shocking him.

"I-I can't leave—"

"I'm ordering you to make it back to General Bradley!" Patton yelled. "And ONLY General Bradley. Understand? *Only* Bradley!"

"Yes-yes, sir. Only General Bradley." Bauer nodded rapidly.

"Listen carefully! Tell him I've been captured, but the krauts don't know it's me. *No one* must know. *Only you and General Bradley*. NO ONE ELSE, understand?"

"Yes, sir. I-I understand."

Patton took off the belt with his holsters, put the Colt in one of the empty holsters, and handed it to Bauer.

"Put it on. But I'm gonna want it back, son."

Bauer, hands shaking noticeably, buckled the belt around his waist.

"My other pistol and my helmet are out on the road. I want them to think I got away. *So don't fucking get killed*. That's also an order."

The corporal nodded, smiled weakly, and offered the submachine gun to Patton.

"No. You need it. Go. Get the hell out of here. I'll cover you."

Patton turned away and aimed the heavy machine gun. "Go now!"

He began firing, spraying the sides of the road where the Germans had taken cover.

The corporal scampered off. Bullets kicked up dirt on the road near him and pinged off rock, but he made it around a bend. As he slid down a crude embankment off the road into the cover of a ravine, the sound of the fifty-caliber machine gun abruptly stopped.

With the ammo belt exhausted, Patton dumped the machine

gun and grabbed handfuls of dirt and rubbed it into his hair and face. He looked around and picked out a rock with a sharp edge and struck a glancing blow above his right eye that opened a gash and drew blood. He smeared the blood into the dirt on his face and slumped against the jeep as unrecognizable as he could make himself.

RESCUING GENERAL PATTON

Chapter 3

A jeep carrying Corporal Bauer, a bandage around his head visible under his helmet and an arm in a sling, raced up to a heavily guarded Army entrance into a Sicilian villa that was part of 7th Army headquarters. Bauer talked with the guard as the driver produced a document. After they both showed dog tags and answered questions the jeep was allowed through. It accelerated along the villa's expansive courtyard and moments later skidded to a stop at the steps of the villa's main entrance.

The driver once again showed the document to other guards as Bauer grabbed a knapsack off the floorboard between his feet and fumbled with opening the door, then finally kicked it open in frustration. He jumped out and ran to the steps of the villa's entrance, where the two guards, both sergeants, were hesitant to allow entry.

"I'm Corporal Sam Bauer, and I must see General Bradley now!" Bauer said loudly.

"Calm down, Corporal. What—"

"I have an *urgent* message from General Patton!"

"Okay, hand it over, then," the toughest-looking sergeant said.

"It's not written. The general told me to tell General Bradley in person. I was-I mean, I *am* his driver!"

The two sergeants exchanged skeptical looks.

"General Patton himself *ordered* me to give it to General

Bradley *immediately!*”

The guards looked at the driver, who shrugged his shoulders. They finally nodded to each other.

“Follow us, Corporal,” the toughest-looking sergeant said.

General Omar Bradley stared at Corporal Bauer in disbelief. They were in an anteroom just outside Bradley’s bedroom in the villa that housed the 7th Army’s senior staff. On the table in front of them were Patton’s dog tags, a belt with holsters holding one ivory-handled Colt .45, and the general’s pocket contents. The fifty-year-old Bradley stood in a rumpled uniform. His drawn face and mussed hair revealed he had just been aroused from sleep, and it was also painfully obvious he had indulged in very little of it recently.

“And I’m pretty sure he has a broken leg,” the corporal added.

Bradley shook his head.

“You sure no one else knows about this?”

“Yes, sir. When I finally got picked up, I said the general was okay and in another jeep that had already headed back to headquarters.”

In Cheltenham, England, one hundred twenty miles northwest of London, a compound of eighteenth-century manor buildings housed the Allied Command Headquarters. Just past midnight on August 16th, 1943, perimeter lights illuminated the area over two hundred yards in every direction, with the stumps of cut-down trees still evident in the quiet, humid summer air.

The compound was patrolled by heavily armed soldiers with rings of double-spaced barbed wire, fortified with sandbag barriers and machine gun emplacements. The entrance had multiple checkpoints with support units of US Army sentries in full combat gear.

Inside the main manor residence, on the second floor in a suite of connected rooms, was an elaborately appointed master bedroom in which slept Dwight D. Eisenhower, Commanding General, United States Expeditionary Forces and—supposedly known only to Chief of Staff of the Army, General George C. Marshall, and

President Roosevelt—soon-to-be appointed Supreme Commander of Allied Expeditionary Forces after the invasion of Italy.

There was a knock on the bedroom door. The knock was just a courtesy, since immediately afterward Colonel Tom Stanik, Ike's thirty-year-old Chief of Staff, entered and turned on a light. Stanik was six feet tall, with facial features that were harder and more chiseled than his boss's, and he displayed a far more direct and brusquer manner, which was needed in his job. It was no coincidence that they shared Kansas as their home state.

"General, sir . . . General Eisenhower."

Eisenhower began to stir. His eyes blinked open. He shielded them from the light for a brief moment and then moved up on his elbows with a look of frowning irritation. "Ike" as his friends and fellow ranked officers called him, had an affable face that could easily be that of any Kansas farmer, with features that gave testament to his Pennsylvania Dutch ancestry. He had a pleasant Midwestern-accented voice almost monosyllabic in tone. But his eyes became steely and piercing when distrustful or angered, and he always looked people in the eye in a strong, direct way with the appraising instinct of an expert poker player, which he also happened to be.

"What is it, Tom?"

"Sorry to wake you, sir, but we just decoded an urgent message from General Bradley. Your eyes only."

"Read it."

"Have intel of the highest priority. Must only brief in person. Request permission to depart tonight. Urgent." Stanik then added, "The last 'urgent' was in capitals, General."

Ike stared at the colonel, and they shared similar incredulous expressions.

"Goddamn, Tom. What the hell?" was all that Ike said in response.

At 2:00 a.m. on August 16th, General Bradley walked up to a P-38J 'Lightning' fighter-bomber on a runway at an Army airfield, just outside of Palermo. The sleek, unique aircraft had a short

stairway rolled up against the inner part of the wing attached to the center nacelle that held the cockpit. The plane and runway were dimly lit by spotlights rigged on a heavily damaged but still functioning control tower. Following Bradley was another individual dressed as a general, who pulled his hat down a bit lower on his forehead.

The pilot, Captain Paul Rollins, came around the aircraft's distinctive twin boom tails after doing his inspection and hurried to General Bradley the moment he saw him, saluting smartly. Rollins quickly did the same to the other officer who stood behind Bradley. The pilot's eyes widened when he saw the insignia of a three-star general on the shoulders of a short waist jacket, but what really caught Rollins's attention were the holsters with two revolvers, only one of which was ivory handled, but the mismatch didn't register with the pilot.

"This plane can take all of us, Captain?" Bradley said loudly enough to get Rollins's attention.

"Um, yes, sir." Rollins shifted his stare from the pistols. "Cockpit extended for a pilot and two passengers. Ike—um, sorry, I mean, General Eisenhower—and his staff have used it."

Rollins spoke with a thick Southern drawl mixed with the characteristic cockiness of all fighter pilots. "No armaments, of course, extra fuel tanks, and a little cramped, but—" Rollins saw Bradley's frown and hurried to assure him, "If I see trouble, we'll outrace it, pure and simple, General."

"How long to our destination?"

"Twelve hundred miles with a coupla zigzags. Low level, though, even over the mountains. Dependin' on head winds, the hour time change, should have ya both eatin' kippers and blood sausage 'round dawn."

Bradley gave Rollins a wary look. "Okay. Let's get in the air."

"Yes, sir. Honor piloting for y'all, especially you, General Patton, sir."

Bradley gave a sigh, but it was one of relief. A slight smile revealed cautious satisfaction that Corporal Bauer had pulled off looking enough like Patton in the dim light to fool the pilot. He was sure he would tell others that he flew General Patton to England in his P-38, which was exactly what Bradley wanted.

Once in the air the P-38 powered by twin turbo-charged Allison engines, widely considered the fastest fighter aircraft in the air, streaked along at over four hundred miles per hour. It flew just above the mountainous nighttime topography of southeastern France, over the Alps a hundred miles north of Marseille, then made a sharp turn and headed due west on a zigzag flight path over the Massif Central mountainous area. Once it cleared the French coast just south of Bordeaux and after a hundred miles out to sea, it made an abrupt turn north and dropped to wavetop level over the Atlantic.

Less than two hours later the plane streaked low over the White Cliffs of Dover and soon after landed at the 8th Air Force's massive airfield at Duxford, England, fifty miles north of London, just as dawn yielded to a hazy sunrise.

An Army staff car pulled up to the P-38 as the engines cut out. The ground crew pushed a stepped platform up to the cockpit. Rollins assisted General Bradley getting out first, but Bradley insisted on helping 'General Patton' out of the plane. Rollins frowned when Bauer quickly exchanged his airman's cap for his officer's hat that he quickly pulled down as low as possible.

The staff car driver, a sergeant, saluted the generals, but looked perplexed as he opened a door while 'Patton' buckled the belt holding his pistols.

"General Eisenhower sends his compliments, General Bradley and, um, General Patton? Didn't know—"

"Yes, Sergeant, Generals Patton and Bradley."

'Patton' hurried into the back seat and slid over for Bradley.

"Let's go!" Bradley barked as the sergeant continued staring at 'Patton' while getting in.

"Yes, sir!" the startled sergeant replied and quickly closed the door.

The staff car entered the Allied Command Headquarters compound in Cheltenham two hours after picking up Bradley and Bauer. It cleared the multiple checkpoints and pulled up to the main manor building, where Colonel Stanik already awaited them on the

gravel driveway.

The driver jumped out and opened the car door. After Bradley got out, Stanik was visibly surprised at the sight of another general sliding over to get out.

“Welcome, General Bradley, oh, um, and General—”

“Let’s get inside, Colonel,” Bradley said dismissively.

A frowning Stanik led the generals into the manor residence’s expansive, elegantly appointed foyer and back to the right. From there, they traveled up the grand staircase through a connecting hallway, where two fully armed guards flanked the doors to General Eisenhower’s suite of offices. One of the guards opened a door, and they entered the outer office reception area. The desk was unoccupied, and Stanik led them directly to another door, opened it, and allowed the two generals to enter first.

Sitting behind a desk in the office was General Dwight D. Eisenhower in an unadorned working uniform, no tie, collar opened, with a mug of coffee in his hand, eyes puffy from lack of sleep and looking noticeably irritated.

Bradley, Bauer as ‘Patton,’ and Stanik saluted an incredulous-looking Ike, who didn’t get up and just stared at Bauer.

“Need to talk in private, sir,” Bradley said.

“No secrets from Tom, Brad,” a deeply frowning Eisenhower replied.

“Who in the hell is he?” Ike pointed at Bauer with his coffee cup. “And why—”

“He’s Corporal Sam Bauer, sir. And I believe General Patton’s been captured by the Germans.”

Ike’s hand dropped, and the coffee cup banged loudly on the desk.

Ten minutes later, after Bradley and Bauer explained the entire chain of events, Ike was still the only one sitting.

“Un-fucking-believable!” Ike yelled. “Goddamn Patton! Why the hell didn’t you stop him, Brad?”

Bradley’s eyebrows went up, as he looked directly at Eisenhower but said nothing. An exceedingly uncomfortable, wide-eyed Bauer looked away. Stanik’s look of disbelief had remained unchanged from when Bradley told them Patton had been captured.

The room remained silent until Eisenhower broke the tense lull and stood up. He gave Bradley a contrite look.

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Goddamn it to hell!”

Eisenhower’s eyes moved to Corporal Bauer. “Great job, Corporal.”

The young soldier gave a sigh of relief.

“Th-thank you, General Eisenhower, sir.”

“Probably should decorate you. Someday, maybe.”

With the break in tension, Colonel Stanik jumped in. “But you didn’t actually see him taken prisoner, right, Corporal?”

“Correct, sir. I didn’t. Only heard the fifty-cal stop. Assume it ran out of ammo. Not much left in the fifty’s belt when I escaped. No other gunfire. I know the sound of German weapons, so I assumed—”

“I’ll ask the Brits to check their back channel with the Jerrys on new POW officer names not posted yet,” Stanik said.

“Good idea,” Bradley chimed in. Ike nodded in approval. The officers knew that the Allies and Axis militaries, except for Japan, had agreed to share information about their officers who were killed, captured, or died in captivity.

Stanik continued, “And if he’s listed, then, um, we’ll have to report this to Mueller’s family to maintain the ruse, let them send packages through the Red Cross and so on.”

Bradley gave a somber nod in agreement. “Gotta do it, as cruel as that will be.”

“Brad, you and I need to talk,” Eisenhower said gravely, with authority. Ike turned to Stanik. “Tom, see to the corporal’s accommodations.”

Eisenhower moved to Bauer. “We’re going to have to keep you cooped up here for the time being, Corporal.”

In reflex, the corporal came to attention as Ike moved closer. “Yes, sir. Understand, sir. Um, sir, ah, what about my family?”

The question appeared to catch Bradley by surprise.

“Will they be told I’m, . . . well . . .”

“Dead?” Bradley interrupted, looked at Eisenhower, then answered the question. “I’m afraid so, Corporal. Your dog tags will eventually be found on Colonel Mueller’s body.”

A grim silence enveloped the room. Ike began to pace as

Bauer's stricken expression reflected his inner agony over the effect on his family.

Ike stopped pacing and heaved a tired sigh. He eyed Bradley, Stanik, then Bauer.

"Son, maybe we can figure out a way to report you missing instead."

Bradley looked skeptical, as did Stanik.

"And then, when the time is right . . ."

"I understand, sir. Thank you, General."

Ike nodded. Stanik saluted to signal the meeting was over, and Bauer immediately followed suit. Eisenhower returned the salute, and they left the room. Bradley and Ike were alone.

Ike resumed pacing, then noticed Bradley still standing.

"Have a seat, Brad. Jesus, you must be exhausted."

"Thanks, Ike. I'm more sore all over from that sardine can P-38 than tired," Bradley said, easing himself into a comfortable chair. Ike continued pacing.

"A goddamn unbelievable situation."

"Yeah." Bradley looked around at the room, eager to change the tone.

"Sure beats your headquarters in Malta."

Ike forced a smile. "Nothing like it in Kansas either."

"Scuttlebutt has it you're to be named Supreme Allied Commander."

Eisenhower gave Bradley a look and changed the subject.

"Had breakfast?"

Bradley smiled and shook his head.

"Terrible food service on the plane."

The two generals sat grim-faced, coffee cups in hand, the remnants of breakfast on a coffee table in front of their chairs in a corner of Ike's expansive office. Colonel Stanik stood before them with a message in hand. He had just finished reading it to them.

"How reliable is that, Tom?"

"Very. Germans are meticulous about documenting POWs, especially officers."

“Can’t let *anyone* in Washington know,” Bradley said emphatically.

Ike gave Bradley an uncertain look. Stanik was shocked.

“It’ll leak the second they find out,” Bradley added gravely.

“We *cannot* let this leak,” Eisenhower replied in the unwavering tone of giving a direct order.

Ike stood and Bradley immediately followed.

“*No one* else can know about this,” Eisenhower decided. “The Germans think they’ve captured a Colonel Mueller.”

Stanik broke the lull that followed Ike’s remark.

“German name. They’ll treat him good and—”

“Damn it!” Eisenhower pounded a fist in his hand. “We’ve *got* to keep this secret, and we’ve *got* to get him back, Brad,” he said emphatically, eyeing his old friend intently as he added, in an ominous tone, “For what’s coming.”

Bradley nodded gravely. “I agree, sir,” he replied, addressing Ike as ‘sir’ this time, as he would in acknowledging a direct order.

Stanik followed suit. “Yes, sir!”

Ike paced with an intense look of concentration. He stopped abruptly, a look of realization expanding on his face.

“Brad, I think . . . yes, um, the slapping incidents we hushed up, we could use them to—”

“Relieve Patton?”

“Not relieve, reassign.”

“Of course. Can’t end his career.”

“In case we do rescue him somehow,” Stanik added.

“*Exactly*,” Ike responded forcefully.

Eyes met; nods were exchanged; a decision had been made.

“Okay, first, I’ve got to find another Patton to go back with you *tonight*,” Eisenhower said bluntly.

Bradley and Stanik exchanged a surprised look, eyebrows raised.

“And then, Tom,” Ike continued, “you and Brad”—Eisenhower hesitated as he poured more coffee for Bradley and filled a cup for Stanik, then handed it to him— “are going to figure out how to rescue *Colonel Mueller* as soon as it’s goddamn humanly possible.”

Bradley’s and Stanik’s eyes met, and Bradley moved to join

Stanik, already on his feet. Understanding Ike had just given them a direct order, they instantly responded together, “Yes, sir!”

“Okay, need to make a call. Tom, see what can be moved off my schedule today. Brad, I order you to get some sleep.”

After Bradley and Stanik had left, Eisenhower sat alone at a small desk in a study/library just off his main office. Mulling over his current predicament, he picked up the receiver of a phone on the desk a few moments later.

A voice responded almost immediately, “Yes, sir?”

“I’d like you to track down someone for me.”

A few minutes later the same phone rang with the low, almost muffled tone of British telephones. Ike answered it.

“Director Astley picking up, sir,” said the operator, her cockney-tinged English accent affecting every word. “Apologies for the delay.”

“None needed. Thank you.”

A moment later Joan Bright Astley’s voice was on the line. Her accent had a distinct aristocratic tone in stark contrast with the operator’s.

“Oh, what a treat, General. My rank doesn’t often chat with a renowned American Allied Commander.”

“That’s because you’ve got far more important things to do, Joan. Things that those of us with stars on our collars will, of course, get credit for.”

Astley sat at a desk in a cramped excuse for an office within the British Intelligence Center, where she was Director of Special Services, with the nominal military officer’s rank of lieutenant, located in the basement of a former minister’s residence across from Number Ten Downing Street. She had smiling eyes, pleasant features, efficiently short, light-brown hair held back with clips at her temples, and she was clothed in the light-brown uniform of the fledgling British Intelligence Services.

“Flattery will get you positively everywhere, sir,” Astley replied.

“Not with Monty,” Ike said dryly.

Astley responded with a loud but brief laugh.

“I’m sure this isn’t a social call, so how can I help you,

General?”

“I can’t explain the details, but I need an actor, a *great* actor, who can mimic voices, and who could impersonate, say, someone like, um, General Patton, for instance.”

“Impersonate General *Patton*?” Astley responded in a voice that didn’t betray her bemused smile.

“Yes. And I also need the best disguise expert in British intelligence. And I need both *now*, literally. He’ll leave tonight for an undisclosed location.”

Astley’s smile transformed into a serious frown, and she said nothing further for a few moments.

“Still there?” Ike asked.

Astley was standing now, pacing in the limited confines, the phone at her ear, the cord dangling across her desk as she moved.

“Yes, General. I am thinking, sir. Not a request I get most mornings.”

“And you can’t mention this to anyone,” Ike added.

“Anyone, General?”

“Well, um, of course, if you want to bother the Prime Minister with something like this, I guess . . .” Eisenhower’s tone became deadly serious. “All I can tell you, Joan, is this could affect the outcome of the war.”

“If I had a copper for every time I heard that . . .” Astley trailed off, more to herself than Eisenhower, her look far more serious than the tone of her voice.

“I was fully prepared to say I was not the one to help you, General,” she continued, “but, in actuality, I think you’ve come precisely to the right place.”

“I was rather confident of that,” Ike said.

“*Rather*? You’re starting to talk like a snobbish, aristocratic Brit.”

Ike gave a short laugh. “Been working hard at it.”

“I’ll be back in contact soon, General.”

“Delighted. I am exceedingly grateful to you, Lady Astley. Cheerio,” Ike said in an exaggerated, upper-crust British accent.

Astley laughed. “Grateful? Get me and a friend into the Criterion and I’ll believe you!”

“You’re in. And the check’s taken care of. Just tell me the day

and time the next time we talk.”

“Oh my. We’ll be chatting soon, then.”

Director Astley hurried along London’s Shaftesbury Avenue in the West End in a misty rain until she reached the small plaza in front of the venerable Palace Theater. She wore a light raincoat over her uniform and a women’s version of an officer’s hat. She entered through the side stage door.

Inside, the actors were rehearsing Noel Coward’s *Blyth Spirit* as Astley came through one of the emergency exits that had been propped open by stage hands taking a smoke break. She sat in the ‘stalls’ center stage, fascinated to observe the rehearsal until there was a break.

The play’s director eyed her presence with a frown. When the scene being rehearsed was finished, he called a halt and came down from the stage. He entered the seating aisle in front of Astley.

“And you are?” he asked in an irritated, condescending tone.

She stood and produced her credentials from her uniform pocket.

“Director Astley, British Intelligence Center.”

The irritation in the director’s voice transformed, almost comically so, to a tone of profound respect.

“Oh, quite right. I see, yes, of course. How can I help you?”

“I’d like to talk with Nigel Milbury.”

“Nigel?”

“Was I unclear?”

“Not at all. Nigel, yes. Straightaway.”

A few moments later, a frowning, forty-three-year-old Nigel Milbury came down the stage’s side stairs. He was of above average height, somewhat stocky, and rumpled looking in an old wool sweater. Along with that, though, he had a full, handsome face with a dashing, neatly trimmed mustache, and possessed a deep, rich, baritone voice.

Astley extended a hand, which Milbury warily shook.

“Joan Astley, British Secret Intelligence Center.”

“Heavens. Of what have I been accused? I assure you, it is

not true.”

“I am here on behalf of your country at the behest of His Majesty and the Prime Minister.”

Milbury looked both surprised, impressed, and finally, confused.

“We need *your* assistance.”

The actor’s eyes went wide, and his jaw fell open. For the first time in Nigel Milbury’s career, he was at an absolute loss for words.

Three hours later, in an elegantly appointed meeting room on the third floor of Allied Command Headquarters—that had once been the formal dining room of the original occupants, the Earl and Countess of Cheltenham—Generals Eisenhower and Bradley, Colonel Stanik, Director Astley, and Nigel Milbury sat at a table with the lights down, watching and listening to black-and-white newsreel movies of General George S. Patton addressing troops and the media.

The newsreels ended. Stanik turned on the lights.

Ike turned to Milbury. “Guess you’re still wondering why Director Astley brought you here?”

Milbury started to reply, had to stop and clear his throat, and finally managed to say, “Quite correct, yes, sir, General Eis—”

“We desperately need your help,” Eisenhower interrupted. “And Astley feels you are the man we need for the job.”

Milbury was taken aback for a moment, but he quickly regained his composure and assumed a theatrical posture.

“And the job is, precisely?”

“Can you mimic General Patton’s voice?” Bradley asked.

Milbury frowned and took a moment to respond.

“Yes, I believe I can. It’s quite distinctive. I’ve mimicked other famous voices, of course. Why—”

“Can you do his mannerisms, look, walk?” Ike asked.

Milbury looked around the table. “Yes, I am an actor, after all,” he said as if offended. “But why—”

Ike leaned forward. “Mr. Milbury, we want you to *play* Patton, impersonate him for a period of time.”

“Is this for some elaborate practical joke, a surprise birthday—”

“No. It’s deadly serious. And it could affect the outcome of the war,” Ike responded gravely.

Milbury, for the second time that day, was rendered speechless.

“We desperately need your help, Mr. Milbury,” Bradley said as Milbury gathered his thoughts.

“Um, I-ah, I’m not that tall, and, and my face—I’d shave my mustache, of course, but how would I possibly—”

“Do you know Richard Brant?” Astley asked.

“*Of course*. Everyone in theater does.”

“He is here, Nigel,” Astley revealed. “And he will teach you how to look the part of the illustrious General Patton and play him convincingly on the *world stage*, as it were.”

Milbury straightened in his seat, and the expression on his face was worth a thousand words.

Chapter 4

Captain Rollins landed the P-38 at the Army airfield near Palermo shortly after midnight on August 17th. He carried the same two passengers back to Sicily; although, after he helped them in and out of his plane, he felt General Patton somehow looked and acted more like what he had previously seen of him in the newsreels regularly shown with movies to his airwing.

“Musta got a mighty lot of rest or somethin’ in England,” Rollins would later relate to his fellow pilots, in the 9th Fighter Wing stationed in Sicily and part of the Army Air Corps 9th Air Division headquartered in Tunisia.

Bradley and a spot-on ‘General Patton’ walked to a waiting staff car. Milbury leaned over to General Bradley.

“The lifts in these atrocious boots are positively punishing my arches.”

“For King and country, Nigel.”

“For King and *your* country, General.”

At 8:00 a.m., Milbury/Patton entered the 7th Army Headquarters map room with General Bradley. The officers in attendance snapped to attention. Milbury oddly stopped before reaching the platform and saluted as a subordinate officer would. This resulted in some confused return salutes, even as others began applauding.

Milbury became nervous, unsure what to do. Bradley quickly stepped up onto the platform. Milbury's composure returned.

"Okay, okay. George had a close call, but—"

"Sit down!" Milbury yelled and jumped up onto the platform. "Nothing to applaud while we're still sloggin' it out in those fuckin' passes!"

Bradley, although impressed by Milbury's perfect impression, was surprised by the outburst, as were the officers, who exchanged confused looks.

"George means while we're mopping up the passes and moving toward Messina."

Milbury instantly understood Bradley's correction. "Right, Brad. Exactly. So, so, um, get me into Messina before that limey prima donna Montgomery gets there!"

'Patton' abruptly stepped down off the platform and began to leave the map room. The officers snapped to attention and saluted this time, but, once again, looked confused. Bradley jumped in.

"Um, okay now, listen up! Ah, George wants me to review the plan with you—"

Milbury stopped immediately at the entrance, realizing his mistake, that he'd forgotten his lines! He turned and stood at the entrance, nodding at Bradley.

"Right. Get on with it, Brad . . ."

Ten minutes later Bradley ended the briefing. Milbury, who remained at the entrance, saluted the surprised officers as they left the room.

Bradley called out to Brigadier General Walter Marks, one of Lucian Trucott's 3rd Infantry Division's new regimental commanders and a long-time friend. "Walt! Stay a minute."

Marks came over to Bradley as he stepped off the platform. He was younger than Bradley and had served as his executive officer in the Tunisian campaign. Bradley liked him because he was a straight-talking, no-nonsense New Englander who was both smart and tough.

"Need your opinion on something," Bradley said, weariness in his look and voice.

"Shoot, Brad. You look beat."

"I'm okay. Have a mission I need a combat-hardened Ranger

officer for, along with his company. Know anyone?"

"Have to be a Ranger?"

"Terrain is a factor. And I trust Rangers."

Marks shook his head. "Ranger officer, shit, talk about prima donnas . . . yeah, I know someone."

"Put your life in his hands?"

"An insubordinate bastard, but yeah, I'd want him in a foxhole with me.

Name's Pizzio, Captain Peter Pizzio."

"Italian, that'll be helpful," Bradley replied.

"He's a mustang," Marks continued. "The krauts were killing second lieutenants faster than we could replace 'em, so I gave him a battlefield commission. I was a lieutenant colonel then. He was the best Ranger sergeant the battalion had; got a couple of commendations—approved one myself—tough as nails, men'll go to hell and back for him and did. He survived, performed well, got promoted again."

"Interesting. And now he's a captain?"

"Yeah, krauts killed a lot of them too. His company needed one, he was still alive, so his new CO promoted him. He does have a couple of, um, wrinkles, reprimands on his record, though."

"Really . . .?" Bradley thought for a moment. "Know where he's at now?"

"Lost track after you gave me the 3rd Division. But I think what's left of his Ranger company might have been folded into the seventh's 2nd mountain battalion. He might be dead by now or in an Army brig somewhere."

Bradley raised his eyebrows. "Okay, thanks, Walt. See ya in Messina."

"Soon, I hope. Hey, the old man, still kinda recoverin'?"

"Lack of sleep more than anything."

"Looks, I don't know, different." Marks laughed. "Even shorter."

Bradley laughed back. "War grinds us all down a bit."

"That's for damn sure," Marks replied and added, "On to Messina!"

Later that morning Colonel Stanik arrived on another plane and took over ‘handling’ Milbury/Patton while Bradley headed out that afternoon to check out the Ranger captain recommended to him by General Marks after his staff determined the man was, fortunately, still alive.

Bradley got an officer from his planning staff to drive him, First Lieutenant David Feldman. Short, thin, unimposing, looking as if he could still be in high school, he had graduated from West Point a little over a year earlier but was already a twice-decorated combat veteran. Bradley knew he could trust him if confidences had to be shared.

Feldman drove Bradley up into the Peloritani Mountains northwest of Messina to the sprawling, disorganized tent encampment of the just-established headquarters of the 7th Army’s Second Mountain Battalion recently attached to the Third Division.

They drove into the camp in a jeep without a rank flag. Their helmets and uniforms likewise lacked any indication of rank to avoid giving German snipers still in Sicily easy targets.

Bradley was finishing up a conversation with the young lieutenant as they slowed.

“And if it all works out, as I hope it does, I’ll assign you, Lieutenant, to Pizzio for this mission. Can’t give you details yet but want you involved, my eyes and ears as it were.”

“Yes, sir,” Feldman said without hesitation.

The jeep came to a stop near the battalion’s headquarters tent with a crude, handmade sign identifying it as such. They got out.

“Locate Captain Pizzio. I’ll let the CO know I’m here.”

“Yes, sir. Will do.”

“Then come and get me. I’ll meet with the captain wherever he’s at.”

Bradley moved to enter the tent when a young private, a sentry he hadn’t seen sitting between stacks of ammo crates, called out to him. He flicked away a cigarette and stood up. He looked no older than eighteen, and his uniform was spotless.

“Colonel’s busy! Can I help you, um, sir?” Though Bradley had no insignia, the soldier still assumed he was an officer based on his clean uniform, the fact that he looked older, and he had a .45 on

his web belt.

“Looking for Colonel Henderson, Private.”

“He’s inside. We just moved up here, sir. Things are a mess.”

The private slung his weapon and came over. “Who should I say wants to see him?”

“General Bradley.”

The private’s jaw dropped. He came to attention and saluted. “Holy shit! Um, I mean, ah, sorry, General, sir. You, ah, don’t have any—”

“I know. It’s okay, son.”

“Follow me, sir.”

In the back of the tent, Colonel Willard Henderson was setting up his temporary office. Henderson was thin, his face had a gaunt look with dark bags under his eyes and deeply tanned, leathery skin right up to his receding hairline. A cigarette dangled from the side of his mouth.

The private loudly announced their distinguished visitor. “General Bradley, sir!”

Henderson looked up. “What?” The cigarette fell from his mouth.

It took the colonel a few moments in the dim light to recognize that the unadorned visitor walking toward him was in fact, General Bradley. His eyes widened, and he immediately straightened to attention and saluted.

“At ease, Colonel,” Bradley said and smiled.

“Sorry, sir, I didn’t recognize—”

“It’s fine. Unlike some colleagues, I prefer to travel in unsecured areas without insignia.”

“Of course, sir, of course.” He pointed to the private. “Resume your post outside, Private.”

“Yes, sir.”

Henderson shook his head as the private left. “They’re getting younger and younger, sir.”

“I know. Wartime,” Bradley replied.

“Sorry the way it all looks. Just moved up this morning.”

“Understand. I’ll try not to take too much of your time.”

“Would you like a chair, sir?”

“No. Been in a jeep for two hours.”

“So, what can I do for ya, General?”

“I want to talk to a Captain Pizzio, who has a Ranger company attached to your second mountain battalion.”

“Another court-martial inquiry?”

“No. Not at all.”

“Pardon me saying so, but he’s an insubordinate sonofabitch. Brave as all hell, his men love him, nobody can deny that, but—”

Lieutenant Feldman entered the tent and saluted the colonel.

“Pardon me, sir. General, I found Captain Pizzio.”

“Thanks, Lieutenant.”

Feldman left, and Bradley turned back to Henderson.

“We’re trying to track down his records, but you said *another* court-martial inquiry?”

“Yes. I haven’t seen his file, only have a summary of it along with his company’s info, but I did talk to his new Ranger battalion CO before he was transferred back to Tunisia.”

“I see.”

“His men call him Captain Pizza,” Henderson said disgustedly while impatiently checking boxes in search of the file.

Bradley frowned. “Colonel, can you, um, quickly tell me what you know?”

“Of course, General.” Henderson gave up looking for the file. “A couple of weeks ago his Company CO, a major, initiated a preliminary court-martial inquiry just before getting himself killed.”

“The charge?”

“Disobeying a direct order during combat.”

“What?”

“To be fair, from what I read and found out, he didn’t *exactly* disobey an order. Pizzio delayed calling in artillery and attacking an enemy position because he said there were children in a cellar near the enemy positions.”

“I see,” Bradley replied, calmed somewhat.

“You know Patton—attack, attack, attack without letup.”

“Yes, Colonel. I’m familiar with General Patton.”

“Oh, right, of course, sir.” Henderson chuckled nervously to himself, realizing the stupidity of his remark, and continued.

“Well, Pizzio waved a flag of truce, and the Krauts held their fire while he walked out and explained to a German officer there

were kids trapped in a cellar of a destroyed building. Goddamn idiotic thing to do. I think you'd agree, General."

Henderson paused, waiting for a response from Bradley, but there was none.

"Well, Pizzio was lucky it was a Wehrmacht unit not SS, and they gave him time to dig the kids out, actually helped I heard, and got the kids to safety. This did, of course, give the fuckin' Krauts crucial time to allow hundreds of Germans behind them, probably more, to escape."

"That's a tough call," Bradley said without emotion.

"With respect, sir, it's not. We're gonna have to fight those bastards again and lose God knows how many of our men."

Bradley's face tightened at the pointed rebuke.

"Colonel, General Patton was concerned about a *hundred thousand* German troops who managed to escape down to troop ships on the coast. What role did you play in that?"

"Um, well, that's true enough, but I didn't mean—"

"Get on with it, Colonel." Bradley was clearly losing patience with the officer.

"Yes, sir. Um, well, all I can say is that General Patton was furious about the Krauts who escaped, and he apparently ordered Pizzio relieved, arrested, and court-martialed."

"What? I was—am—his exec, and I didn't know anything about that."

"I understand the general drove up to the area and told the CO himself."

Bradley let slip a look of disgust for only a second.

"Yes, the general is known for doing that."

"Pizzio's CO, a major, couldn't remove him in the thick of battle but managed to file the inquiry. The next day he was killed, and that was that."

"I see," was all Bradley said, but with a barely disguised tone of disgust in his voice.

"Then the sonofabitch led an assault on a heavily fortified eighty-eight position," Henderson continued. "Lost a third of his men, took the objective, saved God knows how many of our guys and at least a half-dozen tanks in the process. His new CO puts him and some of his men in for medals, unaware of the court-martial

inquiry ordered by Patton.”

“Only in wartime,” Bradley said, more to himself than the colonel, shaking his head.

“Ain’t that the truth, General. But gotta say, he’s still a loose cannon, sir. I understand he was probably a great sergeant but should have never been made an officer in Tunisia.”

“Sometimes you just don’t have a choice in combat. You should know that, Colonel,” Bradley said with a harder edge to his voice.

The colonel blanched at the pointed rebuke.

Bradley was well aware of the Army’s elitist attitude toward enlisted men and especially the disdain for the occasional ‘mustang’ promoted from the ranks. As far as he was concerned, it should happen more often. Sergeants as a group were far more experienced with combat situations and handling men under fire than most officers were, especially with so many new ones rushed into combat. And he was sure he had not gotten the whole story about Pizzio from the colonel.

“Yes, sir, understand; you’re right, sir,” Colonel Henderson responded deferentially but couldn’t help adding one more damning comment.

“But he even received a reprimand in Tunisia for a similar situation, sir, trying to save some Arab kids.”

“Really?”

“It was in the summary. I’ll try to find it for you somewhere here.”

Henderson rummaged through a box of files and continued, “Fuck it. I know it’s here somewhere. Oh, sorry, General, for—”

“Never mind, Colonel. I’ve heard worse from higher ranks than you.”

Henderson laughed weakly, still trying to find the file, and seemed to be talking to himself.

“Of course, tryin’ to save kids is noble, have kids myself, but the enemy doesn’t play by the same rules.”

“Maybe that’s why we’re here. Because we’re different from the goddamn, fucking Nazis.”

Henderson didn’t know how to respond and was saved by Lieutenant Feldman at the tent entrance.

“Pardon, General, just a reminder of the time, sir.”

“Thanks, Lieutenant. Be right there.”

“Sorry, General,” Henderson said. “I know that file is here somewhere. Just can’t—”

“Never mind, Colonel,” Bradley said as he checked his watch. “Thanks for the information. Good luck.”

“Thank you, sir. We’ll be invading Italy soon, I guess.”

“Can’t say, Colonel. Just get your men ready as if it’ll happen tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.” Henderson snapped to attention and saluted. Bradley returned the salute, went through the tent flap, let out a long sigh, and shook his head.

The lieutenant was waiting outside for General Bradley and led him to where Pizzio’s company was bivouacked and pointed at a tent nearby.

“The captain’s in there.”

Inside the tent twenty-five-year-old Captain Peter Pizzio sat in front of a typewriter on a makeshift desk—a board across four stacks of mortar crates. A lantern provided light, since he preferred to keep the tent flaps closed while he struggled to write after-action reports or, as he was attempting to do now, write letters to the families of his men killed in action. And at the camp’s mountainous elevation the Sicilian heat was far more tolerable. He was born and raised in Queens, New York, but the trademark accent, although noticeable, was not a heavy one.

Pizzio hadn’t shaved in two days, his black hair was matted with old sweat, his dirty uniform blouse had a ripped shoulder seam, and one of his captain’s bars on the collar was missing. As he ‘hunted and pecked’ on the typewriter, his eyelids drooped with exhaustion, but he forced himself on. Finally, his frustration boiled over.

“Fuck this shit!”

He tore the sheet and carbon out of the machine with one hand, ripping the precious carbon in the process, crumpled both, and with the other hand, flung the typewriter to the ground.

“Where’s a fucking pencil? Private Gorski!”

At that moment Lieutenant Feldman pushed aside a tent flap, revealing himself and General Bradley.

“Captain, General Bradley.”

Sunlight flooded the tent. Pizzio’s hollowed eyes widened with confusion and surprise. The open flap allowed the sunlight to fully reveal the face of what could have been an Italian matinee idol, but one marred by a two-inch gash along his left jaw, where his beard didn’t grow and a mangled ear sat above it.

“Stand at attention, Captain!”

Pizzio started to stand, hesitated, then straightened up, even more puzzled.

“That’s all, Lieutenant. Leave us,” Bradley said as Pizzio slowly saluted.

“At ease, Captain.” Bradley returned the salute and noticed the typewriter upside down on the ground. “Sorry to interrupt writing those dreaded letters.”

Bradley pulled an empty camp stool over and sat down.

“Please sit, Captain.”

“You’re General Bradley?” Pizzio asked in a noticeably skeptical tone.

“Yes. Travel without insignia. Makes it harder for the snipers to decide if they should waste a bullet on me.”

Pizzio sat down and let out a deep sigh that matched his deepening frown.

“What’s this about, sir?”

“I need to talk to you about a mission. It’s difficult, *top secret*, and—”

“Another one?” Pizzio interrupted, not even bothering to hide his look of disgust. Bradley didn’t react as the captain continued.

“With all due respect, *sir*, we’re beat to hell. General *Patton* has kept us in combat for weeks on one fu—um, *secret* mission after another, *sir*. All *difficult* . . .”

While Bradley talked with Captain Pizzio, Lieutenant Feldman, also without insignia, moved among the exhausted, battle-scarred Rangers in their haphazardly built camp. They cleaned weapons, ate rations, chain smoked, slept, or read and reread stained, creased letters from home.

He drew curious looks.

One of the Rangers, Staff Sergeant Carmine Rosen, with a

small group of Rangers lounging against munition crates and eating rations, eyed Feldman suspiciously. Rosen had a stocky build, the face of a streetwise tough, raised in a mixed Brooklyn neighborhood, with a Jewish father and Italian mother. He had the same ragged uniform as the others, dark semi-circles under his eyes, and the gaunt, used-up expression everyone wore. He had been with Pizzio from the beginning, even before Tunisia, having volunteered for the Rangers at the same time, a year and a half earlier, when the first Ranger units were being formed.

Rosen flicked away a half-smoked cigarette. “Lookin’ for somethin’, Soldier?” Rosen asked with an accent that left no doubt about where he was from.

“Just killing time waiting for my officer.”

“Why no rank patches on your uniform?”

“My officer insists because of snipers.”

“Maybe you’re a goddamn infiltrator and I should shoot your fuckin’ balls off.”

Rosen reached for his Thompson.

“Just a GI, Sergeant—7th Army command staff.” Feldman didn’t give his rank because he wanted to find out any information about Pizzio he could casually, and he knew giving his rank would eliminate any chance of that.

The group listened, seemingly uninterested.

“Your CO is Captain Pizzio?” Feldman asked.

“Yeah. Who’s yours?” Rosen had his submachine gun in his hands now.

“The captain a good officer, good leader?”

“What the fuck is that to you!” Rosen yelled, loud enough to wake up Private Ernest Gorski, who had been dozing against a fuel drum.

“Hey, just curious if you all thought he was a good officer. Didn’t—”

“The best goddamn officer there is,” Private Gorski blurted out, sitting up and alert. Gorski was a blond-haired, blue-eyed, young man of twenty, a second-generation Polish-American from Chicago. He looked older because of a scar under his right eye that reached across the bridge of his nose with discoloration that was permanent. A medic had done a poor job of closing the wound up

properly in the midst of a battle. He had been with Pizzio and Rosen since joining them in Tunisia as a replacement, having been accepted into the Rangers primarily because he spoke Polish and no one else did.

Sergeant Rosen slowly stood as Gorski continued.

“Captain Pizza is why we’re all still breathin’.”

“Captain Pizza?”

“What we call him. He doesn’t mind,” another raggedy Ranger, Private Enos Holly, chimed in. He was a burly farm boy of nineteen from the Shenandoah Valley and the best of the ten expert snipers in Pizzio’s Ranger company, all of whom were volunteers from other Army units.

Sergeant Rosen, eyes narrowed and menacing, leveled his gun at Feldman.

“Maybe no insignia, but we *all* have dog tags. Let’s see yours.”

Feldman eyed Rosen and saw he was deadly serious. He unbuttoned the top of his tunic and pulled out his tags.

“Read ’em, Gorski,” Rosen ordered. Gorski got up, undid the flap on his .45, moved to Feldman, and with a sudden look of distrust in his expression, took the tags in his hand. Hanging with the tags were the bars of his rank threaded through the chain. His eyes widened, and surprise filled his face.

“Goddamn, Sarge. He’s—” Gorski eyed Feldman. “You’re a lieutenant?”

“Yeah, Private.”

Rosen was still skeptical. “Who won the World Series in 1940?” he asked Feldman.

“I’m not much of a baseball fan, but I’d guess the New York Yankees.”

“Wrong. Cincinnati Reds.”

Feldman sighed impatiently. “I told you, I—”

“You got regular ID in a wallet or pocket?”

Feldman pulled out a narrow leather half wallet that officers were issued and flipped it open, showing his Army ID in one framed panel and a security pass in the other across from it.

Rosen hesitated a second, frowned with uncertainty, then he slowly lowered his gun. He looked at the dog tags again and

lieutenant bars still held out by Gorski.

“*Attenhut!*” a convinced Rosen yelled out in a sudden, reflexive response.

Rosen started a salute as everyone else stood up, just as surprised.

“Stay sitting! At ease,” Feldman said loudly, waving the men down.

“Exactly who is your CO, sir?” one of the other dirty, exhausted-looking Rangers asked.

“General Omar Bradley,” Feldman replied.

Rosen’s jaw dropped about as far as it could go.

In Pizzio’s tent an uneasy silence hung in the air between the captain and Bradley as Pizzio tried to control his emotions before responding to the general. He finally spoke with a look that matched his barely restrained angry tone.

“*Attack a German POW camp somewhere in Italy?*”

Bradley answered with an equally intense look. “Southern Italy. We confirmed it’s a German POW camp, but intelligence says it’s mostly guarded by Italian troops and—”

“Intelligence?” Pizzio interrupted with disdain, more to himself than Bradley, who ignored the comment. It was obvious to Bradley the captain had been through hell and was exhausted.

“And the captured officer knows secret plans that—”

“Pardon me, *sir*. Can I speak bluntly?”

“You haven’t been? Go ahead, Captain.”

“General, that’s bullshit! You’re gonna sacrifice my entire company for him?”

“It’s not just to save—”

“Court-martial me, but I’m not gonna order my men on another suicide—”

“This is not a suicide mission! And I’m not ordering anyone to—”

“Yeah, right. Want us to *volunteer*. No. This is wrong. And everyone knows the krauts treat big-shot officers well in captivity.”

“You don’t understand,” Bradley shot back but in a remarkably patient way. “This will affect—”

“Sir, *don’t!* Respectfully, please don’t give me that, this-will-

affect-the-outcome-of-the-war crap either!”

Bradley’s face reddened.

Pizzio realized he’d gone too far. He let out a deep sigh.

“I-I apologize, General. I haven’t slept in . . . I don’t even know how long, and I’ve got twenty-two more letters to—”

“Apology accepted,” Bradley said, the tension broken and his anger dissipated by Pizzio’s pathetic-looking expression.

“It’s okay, Captain,” Bradley continued. “I apologize also.”

Pizzio looked at Bradley in disbelief. *A general apologizing to me? Or anyone, for that matter.*

“Sir, I’ve lost nearly half my men to plans some officer put together based on half-baked *intelligence*, poor maps, and—”

“I’m probably responsible for some them.”

Pizzio ran his hands through his hair and let out another deep sigh.

“My men have given everything they have, sir, obeyed every order . . .”

Bradley stood and patted Pizzio on the shoulder.

“Here’s the only order I’m gonna give you today. You and your men go to the rear, get hot food, and a real rest. I’ll tell your CO. Okay?”

Pizzio quickly forced himself up and slowly saluted. He really didn’t understand, more confused than anything at that moment.

“Yes, sir. Th-thank you, sir. Sorry for—”

“Get some rest, Soldier, and I’ll come back later and tell you why I need you and your men.”

For the first time Pizzio was lost for words.

“I assume you and your men are still going to fight again at some point?”

Pizzio’s darkened, soulful eyes just stared at Bradley.

“Unless you plan to just up and leave and take your men back home.”

Bradley smiled, and Pizzio let a smile begin to show also.

“Givin’ me dangerous ideas, General.”

“And, regardless of what you’ve been told before, what I need you to do, if successful, will *most definitely* affect the outcome of this war.”

“Yes, sir,” Pizzio said, but his reply was still tinged with

skepticism. He saluted, and Bradley returned the salute, started to turn to leave but stopped, having thought of something.

“Oh, you speak Italian, right?”

“Um, no, General. But Sergeant Rosen understands a little, sir.”

Bradley’s eyebrows went up, and a slight smile showed.

“Your name is Pizzio and you don’t speak Italian, but your sergeant named Rosen does.”

“Mother is Albanian, General. A tough woman. She told all of us, including my father, speak English. And that was that.”

RESCUING GENERAL PATTON

Chapter 5

Five hundred years earlier, at the start of the renaissance, Cosenza had been a prospering medieval village in the Calabria area of southern Italy. Now, on the site of a former monastery, stood an Axis prisoner of war camp. It was one of the few that also had a staffed infirmary and was primarily used to intern wounded allied officers, mostly airmen, and also treated locally based Axis soldiers in need of medical care. A nine-foot-high, barbed wire fence encircled a crumbling stone wall with guard towers constructed from wood logs cut from a nearby forest and manned by soldiers with mounted heavy machine guns.

Colonel Frederick Koenig, a fifty-two-year-old Luftwaffe officer, walked with a limp from his headquarters office on the outside of the fence, through the gate, to the camp's infirmary on the warm, sunny morning of August 20th. The limp was the result of a flack injury suffered when he flew as an observer in the lead plane of a Luftwaffe bombing mission on the London docks in 1940.

Koenig entered the infirmary that had been set up inside a stone building that had been the monastery's church, which remained cooler in the Calabria summer heat. He had the imposing bearing, stern expression, and sharply drawn facial features of a proud Prussian officer unaffected by his leg injury. Doctors and orderlies saluted him, something he insisted on, and he simply nodded in return. The patients in the main room were a mix of German and

Italian soldiers—who manned the prison camp or were stationed in nearby villages—and allied prisoners, British and American, who were kept segregated in an area in the back, separated with a metal screen that had two German guards posted at its entrance.

Koenig approached the entrance, and the two guards clicked heels and came to attention before one opened the screened gate. He entered and walked past a dozen beds where Allied air crew officers were being treated, most with serious but not critical injuries. He continued through the area to a smaller ward and pushed aside a curtain to another smaller room reserved for officers.

Koenig entered the room with four beds, two of which were occupied. In one bed lay ‘Colonel Mueller,’ awake, a bandage over an eye, a foot and lower leg in a cast and elevated. In the other occupied bed lay an unconscious British major who moaned sporadically.

Colonel Koenig looked over at ‘Mueller,’ ignoring the Brit, and Patton calculatingly saluted him. With a slight smile, Koenig saluted him back.

“Ah, Colonel Mueller, a true *Preußische*—um, professional, I believe is your word. So few of us. You salute first, yet I may be junior.”

Koenig moved to the foot of Patton’s bed and spoke in heavily accented but precise English.

“I am Colonel Fredrick Koenig, commandant of this camp.”

Patton was wary and said nothing, just nodded.

“You have a German name but do not speak the language, I’m told.”

“No, sir,” Patton responded. “Understand some words, but my parents insisted on English always.”

“A pity to dismiss heritage. I learned English as an attaché in London.”

“You are quite proficient, Colonel.”

“Being treated well?”

“Yes. Better than I expected.”

Koenig smiled. “Many of us still honor the code of the officer corps. And you were wounded in combat, as was I. Officers who lead from the front must always be treated with respect!”

The British major moaned louder.

“Doing all we can for him. But . . .” The Luftwaffe Colonel shook his head, began to leave, then stopped.

“The date, of your commission?”

“November 1942.”

Koenig nodded with a satisfied look. “You were right to salute first.”

The commandant began to turn but paused as if just remembering something.

“I must regrettably allow interrogation.” Koenig bent closer and lowered his voice to add, “*Others* here require it. Of course, as I would do, you will offer only that which is required by the Geneva Convention.”

Koenig straightened. Patton saluted him.

“You are a worthy adversary, sir,” Patton said.

Koenig gave a perfect German salute, boot clicked, and left the room.

On the morning of August 22nd, General Bradley and Colonel Stanik were driven in a nondescript light truck to a Ranger training compound in a rough, hilly area outside of Palermo. The bombed ruins of a village sat abandoned on the periphery.

They exited the vehicle near where Captain Pizzio watched his men, in new uniforms, as they conducted light drills. Bradley and Stanik approached, and Pizzio noticed them. He saluted both officers.

“Good morning, Captain,” Bradley said. “This is Colonel Stanik, General Eisenhower’s chief of staff.”

Pizzio eyed the colonel warily, seemingly confused by his presence.

“Morning, General, Colonel.”

“Let’s walk.”

Bradley led them to an isolated area, then stopped and looked around. His tone was tougher this time, with an impatient edge to his words.

“Okay, Captain. This is *top secret*. It gets out you *will be* court-martialed and sent to prison for twenty years.”

“Only if I’m still alive. Which isn’t likely, right, General?”

“Are you always this insubordinate, Captain?” Stanik shot back.

Pizzio’s eyes narrowed, and he gave Stanik a look but said nothing.

“Captain, just shut up now and listen,” Bradley ordered.

Pizzio sighed and nodded.

“I want you and your men to rescue a general who was captured.”

Pizzio’s face filled with disbelief. He couldn’t keep silent.

“What? The officer’s a *general* now? A suicide mission to—”

“This is *not* a suicide mission.”

Stanik was about to erupt at Pizzio, but Bradley stopped him with a raised hand. The general turned away and began to pace.

“The Germans don’t know the identity of the man they captured. The general changed uniforms and dog tags with a dead officer, a colonel. If they do somehow learn who he really is, the SS will torture him for everything he does know, probably kill him in the process. We absolutely *cannot* let that happen, Captain.”

“Who is—”

“I need a battle-hardened Ranger company for this operation,” Bradley interrupted, deliberately not answering Pizzio’s question.

Pizzio’s expression hardened.

“Sounds like I’m being ordered to—”

“You *are* being ordered!” Bradley erupted. “*I’m* ordering you and your men on this mission,” Bradley added, making an effort to lower his tone.

Pizzio forced himself to keep his calm and looked back and forth between the general and Stanik before responding with resignation in his voice.

“My company’s below half strength, General. I already told my CO to re-form us with another beat-up Ranger company in the 5th battalion.”

Pizzio’s response broke the tension.

“A good idea. Need you full strength,” Bradley said.

“And their captain would be the senior officer, but he’s a damn good one, and—”

“Guess I’ll have to promote you, then, *Major* Pizzio. I want

you in command.”

“And no one else can know what we just told you. *No one*,” Stanik suddenly chimed in.

“Yes, *sir*. Got that already, *sir*.”

Stanik became even more visibly irritated with Pizzio and was about to say something further, but Bradley continued.

“You’ll still officially be part of Second Mountain, but you’ll report directly to me and Colonel Stanik. He’ll be it if I’m no longer involved.”

Pizzio frowned. “No chain of command?”

“No.”

Pizzio eyed the two intently but spoke to Bradley.

“Okay, *sir*. So, tell, me, who exactly is this general my men and I are going to die trying to rescue?”

“That’s one secret I can’t tell you. But the Germans think they captured a colonel named Hank Mueller.”

Pizzio gave Bradley a puzzled look.

“We’ve confirmed the POW camp he’s in,” Stanik said, “and we’ve got to move right away.”

“Oh, one other thing,” Bradley added, “Mueller has a broken leg.”

Pizzio’s face revealed what immediately went through his mind and he wanted to say out loud but restrained himself from verbalizing. “*What the fuck!*”

At the very ‘toe of Italy’ along a stretch of Calabria’s Nunzio beach, just before midnight on August 22nd, a dozen German Commandos—three sniper teams—dressed in black overalls loaded weapons and equipment into three motorized, inflatable rubber boats. They were also black and had a remarkably low profile on the water.

They were led by Captain Herman Kessel, considered old at twenty-five, to be commanding such a group. They were part of a specialized unit known as *Brandenburgers*, who were trained as infiltrators, were also expert saboteurs, learned to speak the language of the country they were operating in, and could live off

the land for long periods of time. All were selected precisely because they had been raised in families from rural areas of Germany and had grown up with hunting rifles in their hands.

Kessel gathered the commandos and authoritatively but calmly reviewed their mission with the eleven others, not one of whom was over twenty years old. He pointed at a map spread out on the sand lit by a small flashlight he held.

“Hans, you and your Team One will land to the north here, near Villafranca, and operate in the hills above the ports the Americans are using. Diestel, you will go south, land near Santa Teresa, and go inland. I will land due east of here across the strait, just south of Messina on the rocky coast and move inland from there.”

Kessel looked up at the faces of the men and, as expected, they were all intently focused on the map.

He continued, “We’ll move quickly to *crossroad points*, here, here, and here. Ideally, take up positions as close to airfields as possible. *Patience*. Target general officers. Colonels secondary. Understand?”

They all responded, “*Jawohl*, Herr Capitan.”

Kessel folded the map, stood up, and gave the hand signal to move their boats into the water.

“Good hunting!” he said in German.

Kessel and his team landed less than an hour later, having the shortest distance to cover, after traversing the three miles of choppy sea across the narrow Strait of Messina. They came ashore along a confined stretch of beach on the desolate, rocky coast of northeastern Sicily just south of Messina’s ancient seaport.

They hid their boat as best they could, took out their backpacks and weapons, and then tied the boat to heavy rocks to stay anchored against the tide. They took off their black overalls, revealing only their German uniform shirts with their unit patches. They put on clothes and hats from their backpacks typical of those worn by Sicilian partisans. They all had Mauser S717 sniper rifles in sheaths they slung across their backs.

Captain Kessel handed out two potato-masher grenades to each

man, which they stuck into straps on the outside of their backpacks, and then heaved them onto their backs over the rifle sheaths. Luger-Sauer machine pistols were picked up and hung around their necks at waist length for quick use. After ammo belts were buckled around their waists, they were ready to move out.

“Speak only Sicilian now. If approached by civilians, we are helping the allied armies by searching for German rear guard units left behind. If there is the slightest doubt that they believe us, we will kill them without hesitation.”

Kessel led the men up through a narrow opening in the rock that led to a path up onto overgrown pastureland that had, months before, been stripped of its sheep.

RESCUING GENERAL PATTON

Chapter 6

On a gray, rainy afternoon in Washington, DC, a notorious, muckraking columnist paced impatiently at the base of the Capitol steps without an umbrella, his thin raincoat nearly soaked through. He had a narrow Errol Flynn-type mustache on a thin, bony face, and a forehead wrinkled with a deepening frown. As he paced, he repeatedly looked up at the steps as his soaked fedora began to drip accumulated rain.

Another individual, wearing an Army officer's hat and a military trench coat over his uniform, hurried down the steps. The agitated columnist saw him and stopped in his tracks. When the officer reached him, they huddled in the rain while the officer opened his coat, unbuttoned the top button on his uniform jacket, and pulled out an envelope he handed to the columnist.

"A War Department dispatch you'll find interesting. About that sonofabitch Patton. Have fun."

The officer hurried away.

"Thanks!" the now-smiling writer yelled to the officer, who quickly vanished within a sea of umbrellas.

In the cavernous lower basement level within the dull, gray stone slabs of the Romanesque facade of the *Washington Post* on K Street, DC's most venerable newspaper published since 1877, massive presses printed the August 23rd evening edition.

A pressman plucked a paper from the high-speed sorter to check the ink coverage. He read the headline first: *Patton Accused of Slapping Hospitalized GIs*, then quickly paged through the paper, nodded in satisfaction, and tossed the paper aside.

The Patton ‘slapping incident’ quickly became sensational and controversial news. Local DC radio reporters also continued to fuel the Patton Slapping Story. Soon after, newspapers across the country and the national radio networks carried even more sensational follow-up reports and news bulletins: *Patton Career Over?* and *Can Ike Win Without His Most Successful Combat Commander?* These were followed by a blockbuster announcement: *Patton Relieved of Command!* A sub headline slightly but importantly contradicted the other: *Ike Reassigns Patton to England to Await Decision on Future.* This fueled more newspaper speculation about Patton’s future: *Patton Resigning?* and *Will Army’s Richest Officer Enter Politics?*

SS *Obersturmführer* Dietrich Gutner, the equivalent rank of a US Army lieutenant, wore a black leather great coat over his black uniform. Both had been the unmistakable trademarks of the Gestapo and were quickly adopted by the SS when they absorbed the Gestapo in 1940. Gutner attracted immediate attention as he got out of a German Volkswagen sedan that pulled up to the exterior gate of the Cosenza POW camp. Even though a junior officer in the SS, the fact was he was shown an inordinate deference by ranking officers, a fear all members of the SS reveled in. He was a short, frail-looking young man with thick spectacles. He carried a bulging briefcase as he entered through a security gate, where he was met by a stoic Colonel Koenig. They exchanged formal ‘Heil Hitler’ salutes and said nothing more to each other as they promptly moved to the infirmary building.

Gutner was oblivious to the fact that he outpaced the limping Koenig with an intent look that hid his inner anxiety. As he walked, it also became obvious that his coat hung on him as if a size too large. He reached the infirmary’s door and became aware that the colonel was not there to open it. He looked back, and it was then he

realized Koenig limped.

“Apologies, Herr Colonel. I was unaware—”

“Never mind,” Koenig interrupted tersely as he caught up and reached to open the door.

All conversation stopped the moment Gutner’s black topcoat was seen, which instantly and ominously announced the Gestapo’s presence. The distinction between the Gestapo and SS was meaningless to them. Koenig now led the way across the main room, through the smaller ward, and swept aside the curtain to the room where Mueller was. The bed the British major occupied was empty. ‘Colonel Mueller’ was the room’s only occupant. Gutner entered. Patton was asleep. The cast that covered his lower leg, ankle, and foot was still elevated, but the bandage on his eye was smaller.

“Thank you, Commandant. I wish to talk with the prisoner alone now.”

The sound of German being spoken awakened Patton.

“As you wish, *Obersturmführer* Gutner.”

Koenig sighed, gave the semi-alert Patton a wary look, and left.

Gutner plopped his briefcase on the empty bed next to Patton and took off his coat, revealing the SS officer’s black uniform with a skull head insignia on one shoulder. Patton was fully awake now. Gutner noticed.

“Excuse the intrusion, Herr Colonel,” Gutner said in English with a heavy accent. “My name is Dietrich Gutner. I am an intelligence officer with—”

“The Gestapo?” Patton asked, interrupting.

“The SS, actually,” Gutner said with a brief, tight smile.

He opened his briefcase and took out a flask, two shot glasses, and American cigarettes and placed them on a table next to Patton.

“We are enemies, but . . .”

Gutner poured brandy from the flask into the glasses. Patton noticed his hand shook as he did so.

“Courvoisier, the very best of French cognacs.”

He offered a glass to Patton, who hesitated only a moment before taking it.

“Thank you,” Patton said and nodded his head.

Gutner smiled. “As I was saying, we are enemies, but, regardless, we are deferential to rank.”

Gutner offered a cigarette, but Patton shook his head. "I've been treated well."

"Good. Prior to the war, I was an *Ubestaten*, what you would call a police inspector, in a small town in Bavaria."

Patton frowned. "And they sent you here?"

Gutner's look hardened at the comment. "Yes."

The young SS interrogator's smile returned quickly. He raised his glass to the imprisoned colonel. Patton sipped the expensive cognac in contrast to Gutner, who drained his glass and filled it again.

"You are Colonel Henry Mueller, I understand."

Patton nodded as he took another sip of his drink.

"Henry? Was it originally Heinrich, perhaps?"

"Colonel Koenig and I have already talked, and we agreed I'm only required to give information as required by the Geneva Convention."

Gutner's look and mood turned dark. "But you must understand, Herr Colonel, *I do not report to Colonel Koenig*. Interrogation here is under the authority of the SS."

Gutner downed his second cognac. His look changed to conciliatory.

"They, um, *insist* on cooperation. As a colonel, you possess information that, well, I strongly suggest you give the appearance of cooperating."

An uneasy silence followed. They exchanged an intense stare. Patton broke the tension.

"I understand you have a job to do," Patton said calculatingly to the obviously nervous young SS officer earnestly trying to play the role of intimidating interrogator.

Gutner looked visibly relieved.

"Good. Exactly. I am here merely doing my job. Now, forgive my speaking frankly, I am puzzled by what appears to be an age unusual for an American colonel."

"I'm not that young."

Gutner smiled and nodded to Patton's cleverness. Patton continued.

"War ages a combat commander fast. Together with the high rate of mortality for those who do not lead from the rear, it

necessitates some of us being kept on even if repeatedly passed over for promotion.”

“That is not the case in our officer corps.”

“You’ve been winning, until recently.”

Gutner held up the flask, but Patton declined.

“You are of German ancestry, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Parents were emigres?”

Patton shook his head.

“No? Grandparents, then?”

Patton nodded.

“I have relations in America,” Gutner responded. “On my mother’s side. She made me learn English so we could join them someday.”

Gutner leaned in closer and whispered, “Frankly, wish we had immigrated. But my mother and father could not leave other relatives, home, family graves, as poor as it became.”

“Too bad you didn’t leave.”

Gutner finished his brandy, and for a moment looked unsure about how to respond, “Um, *sprecanze Duette*?”

“No. After the first world war began, my parents wanted no German spoken, so we would grow up Americans.”

“You would have still been old enough to learn and remember, no?”

Patton shook his head.

Gutner’s eyes narrowed. He frowned, and his tone became harder.

“So, you know, of course, about plans for the invasion of Italy, correct?”

The directness of the question surprised Patton.

“No. I’m just a passed-over colonel. The genius generals failed to seek out my brilliant input.”

Gutner gave a pained smile in response.

“What, in your brilliant opinion, then, is the likely landing location for the invasion?”

“When we invade Europe, it will likely be Calais. I’m sure you already know that.”

“I speak of Italy!” Gutner suddenly yelled at Patton.

Patton calmly finished his cognac, eyeing his unnerved SS interrogator intently.

“You really didn’t expect me to answer that question, even if I knew the location, did you?”

“I *expect* a great deal, Herr Colonel. And prefer to get right to the point.”

Patton frowned and realized Gutner, although a provincial police investigator with some experience, more than likely had never conducted a military interrogation before as a member of the SS.

“My name is Colonel Henry C. Mueller, United States 3rd Army, first division, fifth Combat Battalion, serial number—”

“Enough, Colonel *Mueller*.”

Gutner put the brandy, glasses, and cigarettes back into his briefcase while eyeing Patton with disdain.

“I hope your wounds continue to heal. I look *forward* to our next meeting.”

Gutner donned his leather topcoat, all pretense of respect in his look or voice now replaced by utter contempt.

“In the basement of the commandant’s building, I think. More, how would you say, *private*.”

Gutner turned and left as abruptly as he appeared.

In a hastily erected Quonset hut, a half-moon-like building made out of corrugated tin, a crucial meeting was underway. It served as the temporary headquarters of the Ranger Training Camp and R&R area.

General Bradley, Colonel Stanik, *Major Pizzio*, and Captain Buck Hansen were bent over a map on a makeshift table. Hansen was a twenty-five-year-old, tall, gangly Texan with a pronounced drawl that was comical when he swore. Dirt poor as a kid, his family had clawed a living out of a small West Texas ranch. Like Pizzio, the men who had been with him the longest revered him.

“This intel comes from the partisan group in Calabria, southern Italy,” Colonel Stanik said and circled an area on the map with a red pencil. “One of our own officers has been with them for three

months. So, it's as reliable as it gets."

Pizzio rolled his eyes.

"The Cosenza camp is where they've sent most officers and many air crews," Bradley added. "Where Mueller is. Calabria hill country."

"Grew up in South Texas hill country," Hansen chimed in.

"So, we attack the camp but only bring out one guy, Mueller," Pizzio commented, his words tinged with skepticism.

"Yes. Impossible to extract a couple hundred prisoners and your men too, Captain."

"And remember, Colonel Mueller's leg is broken—have to carry him out."

"Poor bastards we leave behind ain't gonna understand," Hansen said.

"No they won't," Bradley agreed.

"Okay, after all hell breaks loose, we get the colonel, and then exactly how do we get *extracted*?" Pizzio asked.

"You'll be only thirty kilometers, twenty miles, from the coast. We'll pick you up."

"Twenty klicks over hills is a hell of a long way with God knows how many zig-heil krauts and garlic-eating guineas on our ass," Hansen blurted out and then realized his insult.

"Sorry, um, Major, gotta watch my mouth."

Pizzio smiled. "This garlic-eating guinea takes no offense to your inbred, redneck way with words, Captain."

Hansen gave a mock salute and smiled broadly. "Touché, as the Frogs say."

Bradley and Stanik couldn't help but smile also.

"You're right, Captain, it is still a long way," Bradley responded, continuing, "but there are other things in the works I can't tell you about that will help."

Hansen frowned. "Why can't you—"

"In case we're captured, Buck," Pizzio immediately answered.

"Oh, yeah, gotcha."

Stanik continued with his part of the briefing.

"We've set up a training exercise just south of here that's similar terrain. A valley surrounded by hills to practice parachute drops."

“Parachute drops!” Pizzio exclaimed, shocked. “Why didn’t you get an airborne company?”

“Para—” Hansen started to say with alarm in his eyes.

“Wanted *Rangers*,” Bradley replied sternly. “Quicker to teach you and your men to jump out of planes.”

“Jump outta ah plane?” Hansen muttered to himself, the alarm in his eyes turning to outright panic.

“Okay, that’s it. Start training tomorrow morning, early,” Bradley said, signaling that the meeting was over.

Pizzio and Hansen saluted. The general and Stanik returned their salutes, and the two Ranger officers left.

Stanik eyed Bradley skeptically and spoke, in a hesitant tone.

“Airborne troops do have at least six practice jumps before—”

Bradley’s angry look stopped Stanik and he let out a long, tired sigh. “We don’t have time, Tom.”

Stanik nodded in understanding.

“And I definitely don’t have the damn time to try and find someone else for this mission.”

Stanik was surprised by the remark and the obvious frustration Bradley exhibited. He didn’t know what to say.

Bradley continued, “He’s an insolent sonofabitch, but he’s a born leader—one men will follow to their deaths. And that’s exactly what this goddamn impossible mission requires.”

It was the first time Stanik had heard Bradley use more than one swear word in a meeting.

Chapter 7

SS Lieutenant Gutner walked briskly outside the barbed wire-topped fencing that separated the commandant's headquarters—a stone building still in good repair within the ancient monastery's compound—from the POW camp's confinement area. A severe frown was visible just below the rim of his coveted black SS officer's slouch hat. It bore the trademark Gestapo's appropriated skull and crossbones insignia on the front between the German eagle and swastika, and the double gray braid trim above the visor. His mouth was pursed in determination as he entered the headquarters. He carried his black leather briefcase.

Inside, Gutner saluted a major, Colonel Koenig's adjutant, whose disdain for the Gestapo interrogator showed in his narrowed eyes and the tightness of his lips. He silently led Gutner down a hall to a doorway that the major opened.

"Lieutenant Walshiem is inside, *Obersturmführer*."

Gutner entered, and the major closed the door. Sitting at a bare desk with two chairs in the otherwise sparsely furnished room was a young officer, Lieutenant Frederick Walshiem. He immediately stood at attention and nervously gave a "Heil Hitler" salute, which Gutner returned in a perfunctory manner.

"Be seated, Lieutenant," Gutner said casually with a smile.

Walsheim sat down but shifted anxiously in the ominous presence of the black leather-clad SS officer.

Gutner plopped his bulging case on the desk and took off his coat. Walshiem eyed the SS skull patch on Gutner's black uniform, the skull and crossbones on his hat, and the anxiety in his expression increased. The coat was thrown down on the desk next to the case.

Gutner sat down opposite the perspiring lieutenant. He put on his spectacles and pulled a file from his briefcase. Looking up at Walsheim as he did so, he smiled cordially. He opened the file and looked directly at the young, pensive officer. This was the type of interrogation he was far more comfortable and familiar with.

"You recently, how would I say, redeployed from Sicily to just west of here to man defenses on the coast. Correct?"

"Yes, Obersturmführer."

"I read the after-combat report you submitted about your patrol taking Colonel Henry Mueller prisoner. My compliments on your heroic actions."

"Thank you," Walsheim said, relaxing somewhat.

"So, an American jeep carrying the colonel and three others ran right into your ambush."

"Yes."

"The colonel was the only survivor?"

"Yes." Walshiem shifted in his chair. "We, we killed the others."

"The colonel was the highest rank?"

"That is right, yes."

"You checked the other bodies?"

"Yes," Walshiem answered, frowning nervously.

"And what was their rank, Lieutenant?" Gutner asked, this time with a harder edge in his voice.

"Um, a sergeant . . . private, a, a corporal I think."

"I see. Thank you. We are finished. You may leave," Gutner closed the file. Walshiem, surprised and relieved, began to stand.

"Oh, apologies. I should mention that one of your men I questioned, a Private Lisk I believe, said there were only two dead bodies found at the scene."

Walshiem's expression turned to surprise. The sweat on his brow became noticeable.

"Forgive me. I should have mentioned I have talked with others."

Walshiem swallowed hard. “There, um, may have been just two bodies. Two, three, what differ—”

“No difference, really. One may have escaped? No harm done, I guess.”

“Is that all?” Walsheim asked anxiously.

“No. What about the souvenirs?”

“What?”

Gutner opened the file and read from it. “An American pistol, *an ivory-handled* pistol, a helmet, a flag on the jeep that you took from the scene of the engagement.”

“Who told you that?”

Gutner stood up slowly, anger filling his face.

“I’m asking the questions, Lieutenant!” Walshiem was cowed. “And if you do not want me to mention this to others, you will leave, go back to your unit, and return with them as quickly as humanly possible.”

On August 25th a dozen C47 Army Air Force troop-carrying planes—the military version of the DC3—flew in a diamond formation of three planes at each point and at exactly the same altitude. The sky they flew through was clear, with cirrus clouds several thousand feet above them, but the wind at the lower altitude was increasing.

Inside the lead plane, with an open doorway and little else other than the thin metal skin of the plane’s fuselage to lessen the deafening sound of the engines, Major Pizzio sat, obviously uncomfortable and visibly agitated.

They all had full paratrooper gear on, seventy pounds of it, including a main chute and a reserve chute on their chest. A fifth of the men had M1903 Springfield sniper rifles with the scopes in their musette bags. Another dozen had Browning automatic rifles, BARs, that could fire twenty rounds of thirty-caliber ammunition in five seconds with accuracy at a hundred yards. The other Rangers all had Thompson submachine guns, which were devastating at closer range, and Pizzio had ordered they all use the new thirty-round magazines, with two taped together for quicker reloading. The

weapons were hung around their necks and down across their chests under the reserve chute and musette bag, which were also filled with ammunition and grenades. The longer and heavier BARs hung broken down into two pieces. The many pockets on their pants and jackets were filled with crucial supplies, including rations. All the men also carried a .45 Colt semi-automatic handgun in a holster on their web belt. An Army M3 trench knife was strapped around a leg.

Adding to the apprehension Pizzio and his men felt was the fact that they had only one day of drop training off a hastily built tower at the Ranger camp the day before. The plane started to be increasingly buffeted by stronger crosswinds, which only increased everyone's anxiety and, in some cases, nausea.

Pizzio eyed the faces of his seated, nervous, and fidgeting men down the two lines in the plane. Sergeant Rosen, next to Pizzio, yelled above the din.

"Suppose to jump at night, right, Captain?"

Pizzio gave the sergeant an irritated *look*.

"So why—"

"You'll jump when I tell you to!" Pizzio yelled, taking out his anxiety on Rosen. He added angrily, "And I'm a fucking major now, Sergeant!"

"Sorry, Major, sir . . . um, what I'm gettin' at is, shouldn't we have black chutes instead of white if we're jumpin' at night?"

Pizzio just stared at Rosen. He frowned deeply but didn't respond.

Rosen decided to change the subject. "While we're up here, General Patton is apologizing to the 7th Army for slapping—"

Pizzio erupted, "*Fucking Patton!* I'd like to slap the shit outta that sonofabitch!"

Rosen was taken aback. He hadn't wanted to make Pizzio angrier.

At that moment the jump instructor sitting at the open door stood up and yelled as loud as he could.

"GET READY!"

He activated the red warning light, and Pizzio stood up, then Rosen, and everyone else followed.

"ATTACH!" the instructor yelled again, and everyone attached their parachute hooks to the overhead line.

“CHECK YOUR BUCKLES!”

Everyone checked the buckle attachments at their waists and chests.

The green light began flashing, and the instructor yelled frantically, “JUMP! JUMP! FORWARD! JUMP! MOVE! JUMP!”

The sky was filled with the white chutes of nearly an entire company of Army Rangers, 226 men. They dropped toward a thin haze of red marker smoke that wafted across the landing zone in a valley below them.

The first Rangers who jumped, including Pizzio, descended into the smoke and hit the ground almost simultaneously. Some landed upright and stayed on their feet like he did. Some hit the ground and rolled as instructed. Some hit awkwardly and struggled with their chutes.

But some, also among that first group to hit the ground, immediately touched off explosions!

Agonized cries, yells of terror, erupted and quickly escalated, overwhelmed only by the rapidly increasing, ear-piercing explosions as more parachutists landed.

Pizzio’s face filled with horror at the sights around him as he fought against the wind to pull in his billowing chute.

“What the fuck! MINES! MINES!” he screamed to all those nearby who hadn’t touched off explosions.

A struggling Ranger to Pizzio’s right was dragged by his chute, and a moment later exploded a mine, severing his legs.

Pizzio thought he had experienced and seen everything, that he was numb to the brutality of war, past being horrified by anything he might yet live through, but what was happening now induced a terror in him he had never felt before—a terror born of his utter helplessness in the face of the carnage inflicted on his men. They had encountered minefields before but never found themselves *within* one.

He dropped down on his butt and dug his heels into the ground, fighting against being dragged. He frantically unhooked his parachute harness and yelled out while letting the harness and chute blow away, hoping the harness wasn’t heavy enough to detonate more mines.

“Sergeant Rosen!”

Rosen was behind Pizzio, frantically pulling in his chute to keep himself from being dragged.

“Yes, sir!”

“Yell out to detach chutes! Drop down!”

Rosen immediately detached his chute, and they both started yelling in different directions, “Detach chutes! Drop down! Yell out in turn! Detach chutes!”

The shouts of other Rangers were heard. One of the unintended consequences of the order, though, was that two of the chutes being blown across the drop zone entangled other Rangers and knocked them off balance, and, as they moved to recover, they detonated mines.

Rosen and Pizzio continued yelling warnings, as did others, but their yells were momentarily drowned out by more explosions as the last of the parachuting Rangers hit the ground. Aluminum cylinders containing equipment were also being dragged by their chutes heavy enough to turn the cylinders and contents into even more devastating shrapnel.

A terrified Ranger who could not control his panic tried to run out of the killing field, only to be horrifyingly torn apart by a mine he detonated. Pizzio saw a Ranger medic blown to bits when he bravely tried to reach a wounded man bleeding to death and was close enough to be buffeted by the concussion of the explosion and shards of bone mixed with clumps of rooted dirt. The bone caused contusions on his face, and the dirt temporarily blinded one eye.

“Everyone! Take out knives! Probe the ground around you! CAREFULLY!” Pizzio screamed out, and Rosen did the same. Pizzio rubbed the eye in an effort get the dirt particles out.

One by one, the Rangers followed the order amid the drop zone chaos around them. Explosions nearly ceased entirely with no more Rangers landing. The sounds that replaced the explosions were the agonized screams and moans of the wounded.

Pizzio cleared his eye enough to allow him to begin carefully inserting his knife in the ground around him, gradually increasing the radius. Abruptly, he felt resistance and heard the sound of metal on metal as his knife touched a mine. He froze. He felt his heart pounding against his chest. *No explosion, thank God!* he screamed

in his mind. He took off his helmet and marked the spot as others also yelled out that they had found mines.

“Use your helmet, equipment, to mark mines!” Pizzio yelled.

Rangers continued to probe for and mark mines they found as the moans and desperate cries for help by wounded men seemed to multiply and escalate.

A terrified, frantic-looking Ranger plunged his knife in the ground too hard and detonated a mine, causing an explosion louder than others. He was instantly blown apart, covering the men around him with blood, guts, and body parts.

“This is a mixed minefield!” Pizzio yelled out, realizing then that some of the mines were far more powerful, probably meant for tanks.

One Ranger’s moans got Pizzio’s attention. The gruesomely wounded soldier was only fifteen feet away, clearly bleeding to death from a severed leg, and trying in vain to tie off the wound.

Pizzio probed with his knife and moved as fast as he could toward the maimed Ranger. He stopped suddenly when he found a mine. He marked it with his pistol and continued toward the soldier who, moments later, collapsed into a semiconscious state from the loss of blood.

Pizzio tried to move faster, and he was only a few feet away but stopped, alarmed, when he noticed one of the heavier equipment cylinders with dual chutes was being blown toward them. The chutes were tangled, preventing it from moving steadily, and its movement was sporadic but still unrelenting and could touch off a mine at any moment.

The wounded Ranger stopped moaning and lost consciousness. Pizzio pushed himself to probe faster. The cylinder continued its erratic movement closer without yet causing an explosion.

“Fuck it!” Pizzio screamed and crawled as fast as he could, past the Ranger’s severed leg, and into a blood-filled patch of ground until he reached the dying soldier.

Gunfire erupted and momentarily distracted the stranded Rangers from the desperation of their situation. The gunfire came from GIs on the road into the valley who were a hundred yards away and shooting into the air to announce the arrival of two mine sweeper tanks they followed behind. The tanks were equipped with

long, front-end extensions with curved steel shields that whipped chains into the ground and exploded mines as they moved forward. They detonated several, including a large tank mine that sent debris over the closest of the rangers.

Cheers erupted from the desperately trapped Rangers. Pizzio remained focused on tying off the stump of the unconscious Ranger's leg with a makeshift tourniquet and ripping his uniform shirt in order to bandage the soldier's other leg wounds.

The windblown cylinder lurched closer, and Pizzio decided to pull the wounded Ranger away along the path he had come through and cleared.

The mine-sweeper tanks stopped, having moved as close as they could. Soldiers with handheld wands took the lead then, with two men crawling between them, close to the ground, looking for the telltale wires sticking up from the wooden mines that the wands couldn't detect. They slowly moved forward with other soldiers behind them marking the mines detected with tripod poles. They gradually began to create a zigzag path that reached the first of Pizzio's stranded men.

Pizzio stopped and frantically checked the wounded soldier for a pulse, but the young man's lifeless stare said it all.

"NOOOO! Goddamn you, NO!" Pizzio screamed up at the sky as if directing his rage at God, devastated over his failure to save the young soldier.

A gust of wind suddenly accelerated the path of the cylinder toward him, and Pizzio saw how fast the tangled white chutes were moving at that moment and dropped down prone, literally pressing himself into the ground a second before a mine and the cylinder on top of it exploded spectacularly.

Chapter 8

While Pizzio and his men were being rescued from their desperate fight for survival within the mined drop zone, Patton's entire 7th Army staff, and as many soldiers as possible, crammed Duomo Square in Messina, Sicily, with formations of tanks on the periphery. They were assembled to hear General Patton, at the top of the city hall steps above the square, deliver an apology as ordered by General Dwight D. Eisenhower. An Army camera crew filmed the startling and unprecedented event.

"I apologize for any action that may have appeared disrespectful to any soldier under my command." Milbury paused and seemed to stand even more erect. "I have been proud to lead you, serve with you, and know you will continue to fight with courage for whomever leads you, until total victory is achieved."

The disgraced general stepped back from the microphone and saluted the assembly, and every soldier present returned the salute.

Milbury pivoted and walked to side steps where Bradley and Stanik accompanied him down to a waiting motorcade.

"How did I do?"

"Remarkable," Bradley said. "And you'll also fool everyone who sees the newsreel, including Roosevelt and Marshall."

They were about to get into a staff car between two jeeps with mounted machine guns when an aide to Bradley, a lieutenant, ran up to him with a dire look on his face and saluted.

“General Bradley, sir!”

“What is it, Lieutenant?”

“There’s been a situation involving Major Pizzio’s training exercise.”

The lieutenant handed an alarmed Bradley a message. As the general read it his face morphed from alarm to shock. He handed the message to Stanik. His frown of concern turned to a look of disbelief.

“My God.”

Bradley moved Stanik away from Millbury and the lieutenant, trying to control his emotions.

“You get Milbury to the airport. Go with him to Malta, then on to London as planned without me. I’ve got to find out what happened—if Pizzio’s still alive.”

It was organized chaos around the II Corps’s 3rd Division field hospital thirty miles west of Messina and ten miles east of the ill-fated drop zone. Its entrance area swarmed with ambulances, trucks, and jeeps all carrying wounded, driving up as close as they could get and then frantically unloading the wounded from wherever they had to stop.

Bradley was driven up to the scene in a jeep by the same lieutenant who had brought him the alarming news. They maneuvered through and around the congestion, and when they couldn’t move any farther Bradley jumped out and hurried to the hospital’s entrance.

The general rushed into the field hospital, unmarked helmet still on, where the noise level matched the frantic pace of what appeared to be chaotic activity, to which the medical personnel had still managed to bring a measure of organization, even though not readily apparent.

Bradley stopped a medic rushing by, shouted out a question, and the medic impatiently pointed, oblivious to who he was giving directions to. The general worked his way totally unnoticed through the crush of medical personnel, stretcher bearers, and haphazardly placed cots.

Yells for morphine, plasma, sulfa, bandages and clamps were continuously heard as Bradley carefully worked his way back to the area the medic had pointed to.

He caught a glimpse of Captain Hansen and moved faster toward him. Bradley worked his way past partially curtained surgical gurneys, where doctors and medics frantically worked on the critically wounded.

He reached Hansen, who was helping a surgeon cut off the shirt of a Ranger covered in blood. Bradley was about to ask the captain about Pizzio when he spotted the major slowly guiding a limping, blinded Ranger to an open cot. Pizzio was also covered in blood, shirt torn, his face encrusted with dirt and sweat. His hair, equally filthy, was matted down around a bandage tied around his head.

Bradley pushed through the congestion and reached Pizzio in time to help him lay the wounded, shaking soldier down on the cot. Pizzio didn't recognize Bradley at first, but after they finished getting the blinded Ranger as comfortable as possible, Pizzio looked up to thank the person for helping, and for a moment wasn't sure it was actually the general in front of him. His eyes widened, and anger contorted his mouth.

"You? It's YOU!" Pizzio began yelling. "They dropped us onto a minefield, General!" Pizzio was enraged. He screamed, "A fucking *minefield*!"

Those nearby looked over after hearing Pizzio say 'general'.

"I know. I came as soon as I heard."

If it wasn't so painfully obvious that Bradley was utterly devastated Pizzio might have physically attacked the general.

"Which of your genius staff officers did this?"

Bradley shook his head. "I-I was told the wind—"

"Thirteen dead I know of, including your Lieutenant Feldman. *Blown to bits*, General!"

Bradley winced at the news and looked away, shaking his head. If those around them weren't so busy treating the wounded they would have stood and listened to their confrontation, but they didn't have the luxury to do so and got on with their critical work.

"Three dozen wounded brought in so far, lot of 'em critical." There was anguish in Pizzio's eyes. "All for nothing, sir, for *nothing*!"

It took Bradley a few moments to respond. “A tragic accident, Major. The wind—”

“*Accident!*” Pizzio screamed again. “It was fucking *incompetence!*”

Bradley’s ire was raised. He’d had enough of Pizzio’s ranting.

“The wind shifted, Major! And remember who you are talking to, Soldier! The wind shifted and blew the marker smoke into an area not cleared—”

“The WIND! You blame it on-on . . . the-th—”

Pizzio became unsteady. Bradley reached out to him, alarmed at seeing for the first time the blood oozing from the bandage on the side of Pizzio’s head and dripping onto his shoulder.

“Medic! MEDIC!”

Pizzio collapsed into Bradley’s arms.

The three-vehicle Army convoy carrying Milbury and Stanik sped along a busy, winding coastal road west of Messina, Sicily. Most of the traffic on the road was American and British military trucks repositioning military personnel and material at the huge Messina port for eventual use in the expected invasion of Italy. An Army staff sedan, with Milbury and Stanik as passengers in the spacious back seat and painted with a camouflage design, was bracketed by two larger, modified jeeps. They had higher armored side panels that protected heavily armed soldiers and mounted fifty-caliber machine guns. But, in keeping with Patton’s well-known insistence about the vehicles he traveled in, they prominently displayed flags with three gold stars affixed to their front fenders.

Inside the sedan, next to the driver, a newly minted second lieutenant in the Army’s public relations branch sat turned around in the front seat to face Milbury and Stanik while he briefed them on Patton’s schedule in Malta before going on to London.

“And after you inspect the defenses there, you’ll make a brief statement about meeting with General Eisenhower in London and learning about your next command, which I’ve prepared.”

In the hills above the coastal road west of Messina, the German

sniper team led by Captain Kessel, dressed as Sicilian partisans, was in place and hidden within rocky outcroppings on one of the hills. It had been selected precisely because it had the best strategic, unobstructed view of a long stretch of the well-traveled coastal road that led to the newly expanded Allied airfield, where additional runways were being built.

Kessel, serving as the spotter, surveyed the road with binoculars as the other three young commandos targeted the road with their sniper rifles and adjusted the crosshairs on their scopes for wind and distance.

“A motorcade, approaching from the east . . . three vehicles,” Kessel said urgently.

“I see it,” the first sniper, who was intently focused on the road, announced. “Three hundred meters.”

Kessel continued to observe the vehicles through his binoculars.

“Unbelievable,” Kessel said, excitement in his voice. “A sedan in the middle actually showing *three stars* on its fender.”

Two snipers confirmed they had the motorcade in their sights. The lead sniper already zeroed in gave his confirmation to Kessel. “Targeted. Wind slight, from the west. Two hundred meters.”

Kessel intently followed the oncoming motorcade through his binoculars.

“On my order,” he said tersely. “First two shots each on back seat of sedan. One shot on driver next. Then targets of opportunity.”

“One hundred meters,” the lead sniper said anxiously.

In the next moment Kessel gave the order: “Now!”

Six, high-powered, *eine B-Patrone* metal-piercing .44 bullets tipped with white phosphorous, penetrated into the back seat area of the sedan through the auto’s side window. Some shattered the opposite side window and blew out the back window.

The first bullet blew apart Milbury’s forehead as another ripped into his left shoulder and exploded just as Stanik was hit in the upper back as he reflexively tried to pull Milbury down with him, already covered in blood and Milbury’s brains, a second too late after he heard the first shots. The impact propelled Stanik against the door, saving him from two more bullets that shattered the partially open window above his head.

The driver had only a second to be shocked by the shattered windows before bullets brutally killed him. The lieutenant next to him grabbed the wheel and tried to steer.

The sedan slowed with the driver's foot off the accelerator and veered into boulders on the coastal side of the road, spinning the sedan around and causing it to slide wildly across the road into the path of a truck, which managed to break and steer around the sedan. After that, their vehicle ended up in a drainage ditch on the other side, nearly flipping over before coming to a stop.

The jeep following nearly collided with the out-of-control sedan and slammed on the brakes. The lead jeep finally reacted seconds later and broke hard. Soldiers in the jeeps reacted to the shots and began firing indiscriminately up at the hills above them on the left, but the two soldiers manning the fifty-caliber machine guns were promptly shot through their helmets, the heads within exploding.

Other military vehicles stopped on the road, and both British and American soldiers jumped out and began firing up at the hills. An American major took charge and ordered the soldiers to advance up toward the snipers. Three of them were gruesomely shot in quick succession, stopping their advance. The rest were pinned down but continued spraying fire at the hilltops.

Kessel ordered his men to withdraw. "Cease fire! Down to the ravine!"

Once his men were moving away, Kessel took grenades out of his pack and, one by one, turned the pins on the handles and threw them down the hill to cover their escape. He backed away and started down the rough path toward the protection of the darkly shaded ravine, with his machine pistol ready. The explosions of the grenades gave him time to rejoin his men.

At the II Corps 3rd Division field hospital where Major Pizzio and the wounded men in his company were being treated, many fighting for their lives, a jeep maneuvered through the congestion of ambulances still bringing in wounded. The impatient corporal who drove the jeep honked the horn incessantly to get vehicles to move

over out of the way, drawing angry looks and shouts from the other drivers also trying to get close to the hospital's entrance and drop-off area.

The corporal finally gave up, pulled over as far out of the roadway as he could, and abandoned the jeep in favor of running up to the entrance.

"An emergency!" he yelled. "Need General Bradley!"

"The whole damn place is an emergency!" an angry medic covered with blood yelled back.

An Army doctor rushing by into the field hospital heard the driver and called to him, "The general is inside. Follow me!"

The doctor moved through the crowded aisle with the corporal in tow. He reached the back of the hospital, where another aisle widened into an area that contained rows of open cots without curtain separations.

The doctor pointed to General Bradley standing in a far corner of the area with a medic who was busily administering to Pizzio on a cot. Once the driver had seen Bradley, the doctor hurried off in another direction.

The medic was changing a saline bag on a stand that Pizzio was attached to. A new bandage was on his head, his face was peppered with cuts, and small bandages were around his right arm and shoulder. His bloodied shirt had been taken off. The medic finished getting the saline drip started.

"His wounds are bleeders—look worse than they are. Nothing really serious, General. More exhaustion and dehydration than anything. He'll be okay," the medic said as he continued to adjust the saline flow.

The corporal reached Bradley and saluted. "General Bradley, sir, pardon me."

Bradley looked over at him with a deep frown.

"What is it, son?" Bradley responded with uncharacteristic irritation in his voice.

"Sorry, sir, an urgent message, sir."

The corporal pulled a message from an inner pocket in his jacket and handed it to Bradley.

"And I'm to take you to the Messina Hospital immediately, sir."

“Messina Hospital?” Bradley questioned as he opened the message. His eyes widened as he read: *General Patton's motorcade attacked by snipers. Casualties. Come immediately to Messina Hospital.*

“Jesus H. Christ! What the hell’s happening!” Bradley erupted, surprising the corporal, the medic, and others within earshot.

“Let’s go,” Bradley said in a quieter voice, struggling to control his emotions.

Bradley led the way, and they hurried through the hospital.

“Sir, I was ordered to commandeer an ambulance to drive you in, ’cause of snipers, General,” the corporal said, following right behind Bradley.

“What? Hell with that! They need every ambulance they got here.”

The corporal drove General Bradley as fast as he could in the jeep back to Messina and its hospital on the southern edge of the town. The moment the jeep stopped at the entrance Bradley was out and rushed to the doorway, where a colonel was pacing and waiting for his arrival.

The colonel immediately saluted when he saw who was hurrying toward him.

“General Bradley. I—”

“Is General Patton alive?” Bradley asked, cutting him off.

“No, sir.”

Bradley was stunned by the words. His head went back and his eyes closed.

“We know he was an impersonator—a decoy, sir. Colonel Stanik told us the real General Patton is okay. Um, he said that before he died.”

“Stanik is dead too?” Bradley exclaimed with a look and tone of utter disbelief.

“They did all they could, sir.”

Bradley was trying to think, to make sense of all that had so suddenly happened.

“I need to get a secure message to General Eisenhower, *now!*”

“Yes, sir. Come with me.”

At the Allied Command Headquarters in Cheltenham, England, General Eisenhower picked up the phone in his inner office. He sat tentatively on the edge of his chair behind his main desk. He looked exceptionally troubled with his frown accentuating the lines on his face and around his eyes that also readily bore testament to his chronic lack of sleep.

Lying on the desk in front of him, flanked by open files, two partially unfolded maps, and a magnifying glass, was a deciphered message on light brown paper stamped *Top Secret*. It sat next to an Army green envelope marked *For General Eisenhower's Eyes Only*. It was from General Bradley, and the communique had been delivered to him minutes before at a little after 6:00 p.m. and interrupted a meeting reviewing the operational plans for the invasion of Italy.

The message read: *Milbury dead. Need replacement immediately. Check casualty list for our other close friend. Other developments. Full report being flown to you tonight.*

He sat alone now, having abruptly dismissed the others who had been in the office meeting with him. He held the phone a moment, sighed deeply, and the operator's voice interrupted his inner preoccupation.

"Good evening, General. How can I help you?"

"Get me Director Astley, please, British Intelligence Center," Eisenhower said, uncharacteristically dispensing with his normal cordial greeting, and he hung up the phone to await the connection. A few moments later the dull, flat ring of his phone sounded, and he answered quickly.

"General Eisenhower, what a pleasure. And thank you again for that absolutely scrumptious dinner."

"Oh, um, you're welcome, Miss Astley. I—"

"So formal, General. Please, just Joan, sir. What can I do for you?"

"Of course, sorry. It's just—well, I have bad news. I need another Milbury."

"Another—"

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Eisenhower cut her off.

“And I need him *immediately*, Joan.”

Chapter 9

Two German soldiers carried Patton fireman style between them—the cast visible on his lower right leg and foot under a newer pair of GI pants—from Cosenza Camp infirmary through the entrance gate, past the guards, and into the headquarters building.

Patton had not shaved since being captured and now had a noticeable salt-and-pepper mustache and the makings of a beard on a face that still had a bandage across his left eye.

At his office window Colonel Koenig watched with a deep, disapproving frown as the American officer was carried into his headquarters.

Once inside the building Patton was awkwardly handed from one guard to the other down narrow stone steps into what had been a wine cellar and now functioned as an interrogation room. It also had two cells with improvised metal walls and heavy, wood plank doors to use for solitary confinement. Patton winced in pain as the soldiers set him down on a rickety wooden chair and put a three-legged stool under his injured leg. They surprised Patton by not only tying his hands behind him but also tying them to the back of the chair. Once that was accomplished, they took up positions on either side of him.

Moments later the sound of boots on the steps was heard, and Lieutenant Gutner entered the room wearing his black leather coat over his SS uniform. He took off his coat and, with what was to

Patton a comical flourish, tossed it on a nearby table and positioned himself in front of Patton with legs astride, hands behind him. Gutner looked down on his captive imperiously with a satisfied smile.

“Leave us,” he said to the guards, and they promptly saluted, clicked their heels, and left.

Gutner just glared down at Patton for a few moments with an amateurish attempt at intimidation, and his smile turned to a scowl. Patton stared up at Gutner. His face revealed he was in pain but was not at all intimidated by the Nazi.

“You have not shaved? You do not care to maintain the appearance of a disciplined officer in front of the other men?”

“My hands hurt,” Patton said.

“Your hands were not injured,” Gutner replied with disdain.

“I mean now. My hands hurt now,” Patton said with equal disdain. This infuriated Gutner.

“It is time you dispensed with the pretense! You are not Colonel Mueller, are you?” Gutner yelled. “Your pathetic unshaven face and eye bandage cannot hide the truth.”

Patton said nothing. He just let out a loud sigh in return.

“You are *General Patton*. And you are going to answer many, many questions for me. I am quite sure of it, Herr General.”

“My name is Colonel Henry Mueller, United States 7th Army. Serial number 3845176839.”

Gutner gave a sneering smile in return and moved down closer to Patton’s face.

“Colonels, generals, they all think they deserve special treatment, even as a prisoner, but—”

“If you’re going to torture me, get on with it,” Patton said defiantly.

“Torture? You are being *interrogated*, no different than what you do to us.”

“Call it what you want. Just do whatever you’re going to do.”

“You think you are so morally superior to us, don’t you?” Gutner sneered.

Patton gave Gutner a look of utter contempt.

“Tell me, General, if you captured Germans who knew, let us say, the placement of a phalanx of Tiger tanks in your path, and

knowing this would most assuredly save hundreds, if not thousands, of your men, would you not use every means at your disposal to *interrogate* them?"

Patton did not hesitate to answer. "I'd *torture* the sonsofbitches until they screamed for their mothers. Okay? So do what you need to. Let's find out how long it takes me to scream. But I'll die before I tell you anything."

From Gutner's expression, this was not the response he was expecting. Anger contorted his face. He kicked the stool out from under Patton's injured foot. Patton's face twisted with the intensity of the unexpected pain that he forced himself not to give voice to.

Gutner, though, by sheer force of will, controlled the emotion in his next words and, with obvious effort, managed a slight face-saving smile.

"We'll see soon which comes first. But that's all for tonight. I will be back in the morning, and we'll *talk* more then."

Gutner moved to the table and put on his coat as Patton tried with little success to choke back his moans of pain.

"You will remain here until my interrogation is completed to my satisfaction."

Gutner went to the door and turned back to Patton.

"Good night, Herr *General Patton*."

"Your superiors . . . don't believe you, do they?" Patton said, forcing the words out with considerable effort.

The unexpected comment stopped Gutner at the steps. His eyes widened and his expression tightened.

"They will. I *assure you* they will."

A jeep driven by Captain Hansen, with Major Pizzio seated next to him, pulled up to a villa just outside of Messina that had been hastily converted to the 7th Army's new headquarters. They had been stopped at the main entrance checkpoint, their identifications checked, and a call made ahead to confirm their meeting with General Bradley. Security procedures had been tightened since a significant number of sniper attacks had occurred and, just as threatening, if not more so, a number of infiltrators in American

Army uniforms had been captured in the twenty-four hours since Milbury and Stanik had been killed.

Guards at the villa's entranceway steps saluted them as the officers got out of their jeep. They both had anxious, angry looks, but there was fire in Pizzio's eyes. Hansen noticed and pulled at Pizzio's sleeve to slow him down.

"Won't help any of us if you get relieved or court-martialed, Pete."

"Gotta have my say, Buck. Those families I just wrote all those damn letters to deserve it."

"Don't forget about those of us still alive," Hansen said, and Pizzio gave him an agonized look just before they gave the guards their .45 pistols—also a new security procedure—after which they were allowed up the stairs and into the villa.

Soon after, outside General Bradley's office and converted conference room, yelling was heard. Inside, it was clear that the voices involved were Pizzio's and Bradley's. They were sitting at a table across from each other with Hansen next to Pizzio, who was livid. Hansen was clearly uncomfortable with the confrontation and touched Pizzio's arm to distract his ranting. Bradley's look was that of a person trying to restrain his temper.

"Well, *General, sir*, they should have thought about the damn wind shifting!" Pizzio yelled in response to the explanation Bradley had just given.

"Well, *Major*, this wasn't the only mission being planned!"

Pizzio looked at Hansen's hand on his arm, looked up, saw the alarm in the captain's eyes, and shut up. It was a momentary standoff.

Bradley took a deep breath. "Everyone is literally working around the clock, and there's bigger things they have to worry about than you, Major."

"Then they should do less and do it right, sir!"

"You *know full well* we don't have that luxury! This is war, goddamn it!"

"Well, I'm not throwing my men's lives away anymore without being involved—"

"You'll do what you're ordered or you'll be replaced and court-martialed, and someone else will lead your men!"

Pizzio's eyes filled with fire, and he tried to move around the table to get at Bradley.

"No one else will—"

Hansen pulled Pizzio back and stood up to block him from moving toward the general.

"Captain, leave us. I want to talk to the major alone now."

The look of surprise on Hansen's face was matched by Pizzio's.

Hansen shook his head. "General, I don't think—"

"That's an order, Captain."

Hansen swallowed hard. "Yes, sir," he answered reluctantly. He saluted as he backed away, then turned, opened the door, and left.

Silence enveloped the room. Bradley and Pizzio stared warily at each other. It was an extraordinary situation. A major arguing with a three-star general who allowed him to do so.

Pizzio had no idea about the other tragic situation Bradley was dealing with.

"I want you, Hansen, and the men you have, ready to—"

"You mean the men I have *left*, less the forty-four just killed or wound—"

"Just shut up, Major!" Bradley yelled and banged a fist on the table, at the end of his rope with Pizzio's insubordination.

"You and your men will make the jump into Italy, outside the Cosenza POW camp *tomorrow night*!"

Pizzio eyed the livid, barely in control Bradley, reddening with anger, his own barely suppressed rage contorting every line in his scab-covered face. But he held his tongue now.

"Get your men ready," Bradley said, still seething. "That's a direct order, Major," he added with finality.

Pizzio looked away, thinking about how to respond when Bradley suddenly lowered his voice. It was quieter, almost pleading in tone.

"We're out of time, and we *must* rescue Mueller."

Bradley looked directly at Pizzio, who made eye contact with him.

"I'm sorry about what happened to your men, Peter."

He got Pizzio's attention. It was the first time Bradley had

called him by his first name. Bradley began pacing.

"I can't even remember all the mistakes that have been made, that *I have made*, that cost so many lives, *thousands* of lives. But the war doesn't stop for us to mourn."

"No, sir," Pizzio responded solemnly, calming down.

"We just have to force ourselves to press on every day and hopefully, one day, we'll find out that we won." Bradley sighed deeply. "And, and that all the people we ordered to their deaths didn't die in vain."

Pizzio was obviously moved by Bradley's heartfelt words and nodded.

"Yes, sir," he said.

There was silence between them then. The lull was broken by Bradley.

"You've got eleven hours before you jump. I've assigned Lieutenant Collings from my *planning staff* to jump with you to replace Lieutenant Feldman."

Pizzio's eyebrows went up.

Bradley continued, "He was directly involved in preparations for your mission."

"Yes, sir," was all that Pizzio could manage to say, but he was impressed with the news.

"You'll rendezvous with Italian partisans at your drop site led by an American intelligence officer who knows the terrain and the camp."

Pizzio nodded, resigned to his fate. He began to get up and salute, but Bradley wasn't finished.

"One more thing." Pizzio sat back down. "Shouldn't say, but . . ." Bradley hesitated as if unsure if he should say more. "An hour before you take off, an air and naval bombardment will begin, followed by the Brits, under General Montgomery, invading Italy less than eighty miles south of your drop zone."

Pizzio's resigned, almost fatalistic expression was replaced by surprise and a momentary glimmer of hope in his eyes as Bradley continued.

"We'll control the air, and German reserve units should be drawn from the area around the POW camps."

Bradley paused to gauge Pizzio's reaction and saw that his

seemingly ever-present frown had relaxed.

“Thank you for—” Pizzio started to say, and Bradley interrupted.

“Cannot tell Hansen, *anyone*.”

“Understand, sir.”

“And the Italian troops may not put up much of a fight now that Mussolini has been arrested.”

“Hopefully.”

“So, this *might* be the least *suicidal* mission you’ve ever been given, Major.”

There was nothing more to say, and they both realized that. A moment later Pizzio stood and saluted Bradley, who slowly returned the salute, exhaustion now becoming more and more apparent in the general’s look and manner.

“Good luck, Major,” Bradley said, let out a deep sigh, and added, “Just bring that sonofabitch back alive.”

Bradley’s comment about the general they were being sent to rescue surprised Pizzio. It was the only time he heard him call someone that. And, Pizzio thought, to say that about another general in front of him was jarring. But he shrugged it off and left.

RESCUING GENERAL PATTON

Chapter 10

Just outside the entrance to Colonel Koenig's headquarters office within the Cosenza POW camp, as the sun set on September 2nd, the loud voices of Colonel Koenig and Obersturmführer Gutner could be heard as they engaged in an increasingly heated exchange.

Inside the office, Koenig and Gutner stood across the colonel's desk with faces that reflected both their growing anger and Koenig's building frustration, his animated manner uncharacteristically breaking with his normally disciplined and rigid Prussian demeanor.

"I want to see these orders!" Koenig yelled.

Gutner shouted back, "They were given over the radio phone! Call SS headquarters in Rome. Go ahead, Colonel!"

Koenig considered Gutner's challenge.

"You know the invasion is imminent," Gutner added but in a somewhat tempered tone.

"Your suspicions are utterly ridiculous, Lieutenant," Koenig replied but in a more controlled voice. He added, "He admitted nothing under your torture."

"I disagree. As do my superiors now. But why, Colonel, why do you object? Even care?"

"He's a wounded officer, wounded in *combat*, a POW under my command and deserves respect."

"I am simply moving him to another location for further interrogation."

“Yes, a SS facility,” Koenig said with disdain in his voice.

Gutner frowned, genuinely baffled by Koenig’s attitude.

“Of what possible concern is that of yours?” Gutner said with an incredulous look and tone. “I am an SS *Obersturmführer*. My authority is not to be questioned.”

But Gutner’s next words became threatening. “Your interference is puzzling and *disturbing*, Colonel Koenig.”

Their confrontation was interrupted by a knock on the door.

“Enter!” Koenig responded angrily, taking out his frustration on whoever was there.

Koenig’s adjutant entered and saluted. “The Italians have been disarmed and are being taken to the detention area. Major Hisle’s men are in place.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

The captain left. That was another situation that troubled Koenig, that Major Hisle and his men were SS troops, but had been the only unit close enough to move to the camp quickly when it was decided to disarm all Italian soldiers protecting German installations.

Koenig eyed Gutner for an uncertain moment. He moved from behind the desk and looked out a window.

“How will you travel?” he asked tersely, having decided against further confrontation.

“In my staff car with motorcycle machine gun escorts that were sent here at my request and arrived with Major Hisle.”

“When will you leave with Mueller?”

“I will leave with *General Patton* tonight.”

“Tonight?” Koenig said, surprised, ignoring the reference to Patton.

“We must only travel at night for the first half of the journey. The Americans now control the air in the south.”

Koenig sighed deeply, simply nodding. He did not turn back to look at Gutner, and after a few moments the incensed SS Lieutenant left without saluting or saying anything further.

That same night, shortly after 2:00 a.m., a formation of C47

Army transports flew at wave-top level fifty miles south of the Strait of Messina on a heading that would take them a hundred miles south of the sole of the boot of Italy, where it would abruptly turn north toward their drop zone through a mostly barren coastal area not as heavily defended with anti-aircraft installations. The sky was clear with few clouds, a star-studded sky easily observed, and a half moon that made the wave tops luminescent. The occupants of the planes, though, would have preferred more clouds and a sliver of a moon.

Inside the lead C47 Sergeant Rosen sat across from the open door next to Pizzio as they were buffeted by the wind. His frown deepened, and he yelled to Pizzio above the droning engine noise while he pointed out the door.

“We’re still low enough to see waves!”

Pizzio checked his watch. “Not for long!” he shouted back to Rosen.

To Pizzio’s initial surprise, as he surveyed the men on the plane, they did not look as apprehensive and fidgety as they had on the practice drop. His eyes met those of Private Gorski, a favorite, who had been with him since North Africa along with Rosen. Pizzio smiled at him, and his frown was immediately replaced by a smile. He nodded to Pizzio and gave him a thumbs-up. Of course, these were men who had survived the horror of the mined drop zone. *What could be worse than unexpected random death against an enemy they couldn’t see, that made them utterly defenseless when they hit the ground?* Pizzio thought.

At least combat was something they were experienced at, had faced many times before, and were as prepared for it as any soldiers could be. Yet, this was only the second time they had jumped out of airplanes and the first time they jumped into a combat zone. *What incredible bravery! They had been to hell and back so many times,* Pizzio thought further, *but could he bring any of them back this time?* No matter what General Bradley had said, he had dark premonitions about this mission.

They felt the plane abruptly angle upward to quickly gain altitude just as they crossed the Calabria Coast, where moments later anti-aircraft guns opened up on them. They banked suddenly and severely to the left on a northwestward course toward their drop zone.

Flack bursts from German 88 aerial artillery were everywhere, interspersed with the streams of tracer fire from 20mm guns. The nine planes carrying twenty Rangers each managed to avoid significant damage. As they quickly approached the drop point, the planes tactically, and again abruptly, dropped down to the lowest parachute drop altitude possible.

Once the lead pilot saw the drop zone lit with alternating white-and-red phosphorous flares, he alerted the other planes and activated the red 'ready' light.

An explosion lit up the sky suddenly as one of the planes at the end of the left formation took a direct hit, and flaming wreckage and bodies fell to earth with no chutes deployed.

Seconds later the green 'jump' light blinked on in the planes, and the black parachutes of Pizzio and his Rangers, faintly silhouetted by moonlight, filled the sky as the remaining eight C47s disgorged their contents over the drop zone within the Cosenza Valley.

Fortunately, the wind was not a factor, and Pizzio and his men hit the drop zone nearly perfectly as planned, with their fear of mines, reemerging within them, quickly allayed once they landed. They gathered their chutes without incident in the dim moonlight and waning ghostly glare of the phosphorous flares.

Three platoons immediately set up a perimeter as Rangers regrouped and formed up while another designated platoon led by Sergeant Rosen set out to locate the supply canisters using flashlights.

What they eventually found was a minor disaster. Apparently, the canisters did not have big enough chutes to counter the weight and low drop altitude used, and the heavy canisters dropped like rocks before the chutes had any effect and, with little wind drift, landed well short of the drop zone and hit trees and rocky outcrops instead.

Rosen ran across the drop zone to Pizzio and reported the development.

"They hit the trees and rocks like bombs. The chutes weren't big enough for such a low drop, I guess."

"Shit! So much for eliminating planning staff fuck-ups!" Pizzio erupted. "What did you salvage?"

“Most of the ammo, ordinance, just two mortars, a coupla bazookas, but only one of the fifty-cals.”

“One? What the fuck!”

“Barrels on the rest all bent ta hell, sir.”

“Shit! Well, get the ammo and whatever’s left distributed, Sergeant.”

“Will do, Major.”

Captain Hansen joined up with Pizzio with a report. He had a deeply troubled look.

“A handful of injuries, Pete, sprained ankles mostly, ’cause of the low drop. Lieutenant Collings’s plane was the one hit.”

“Jesus, Bradley’s man again. Who else on that flight?”

“Sergeant Weiss, Corporal Barnett, Paulsen, lotta my men,” Hansen said sadly. Pizzio now understood the reason for the look he had when he reported.

“Hate like hell to lose Weiss,” Hansen said with a stricken look now. “Been with me a hell of a long time. Lost Lieutenant Stokes too, goddamn it! Was the last lieutenant I had.”

“Lieutenants just don’t last long,” Pizzio muttered.

“He had a rough go with the men at first,” Hansen said sadly, “but survived his first two assaults and settled in. Came aboard right after we landed in Sicily.”

“Know the feeling, Buck.” Pizzio let out a frustrated sigh. “At least we didn’t drop into a minefield.”

“Yeah, from the fryin’ pan into the fire.”

“All right, leave a small platoon with the injured until we return.”

Sergeant Rosen ran back to them.

“Made contact with the partisans and their American intel officer.”

Pizzio and Hansen met with twenty-one-year-old Army lieutenant, Rocco Moretta. Powerfully built, his dark complexion and hair, with thick facial stubble, immediately betrayed his Italian ancestry. He was from New Orleans, which, to Pizzio and Hansen’s surprise, he told them had a large Italian-American immigrant community. He spoke fluent Italian which, along with his English, was flavored with a distinctive Louisiana Creole accent. With him

was the Calabria partisan leader, Giuseppe Porro, who had a grandfatherly appearance with whitish hair and dark, sunbaked, leathery skin. He was actually younger than he looked, at age forty-one. But the war and loss of his wife and one of his sons during SS reprisals against suspected partisan families had aged him considerably. Moretta was dressed the same as Porro, as an Italian local, which meant if Moretta was captured he would be shot immediately as a spy.

"Welcome to Calabria, Major, Captain. I'm Lieutenant Moretta, Army Intelligence, and this is Giuseppe Porro, the partisan commander."

Giuseppe nodded but remained silent.

They knelt down to review a map illuminated by a flashlight Pizzio held. They were at the base of a hill and tree line, which the entire company was now moving toward to quickly form up into their platoons.

"Major, just before you dropped in, I got the coded message that the invasion is on. The Brits are landing at eighty clicks to the southwest. Kraut reserves have started moving out of this area to the coast."

"Finally, some good news," Pizzio said.

"Good news? Fucking incredible news!" Hansen blurted out, unable to contain his elation.

"The general told me before we left, Buck. Couldn't say anything. And you never know if it would really happen."

Hansen gave Pizzio a surprised look, as did Moretta.

"But there's a development," Moretta added ominously.

"What?" Pizzio asked, exchanging a here-we-go-again look with Hansen.

"All Italian troops have been disarmed and replaced with German soldiers."

"At the POW camp?" Hansen asked.

"Yes. After the Italian government arrested Mussolini, the Germans got nervous, I guess. And the Italian soldiers there were moved to a detention center north of the town."

"Shit! We'll be fighting goddamn krauts," Pizzio said and considered the news. Giuseppe looked at Pizzio and said something in Italian. When Pizzio didn't respond, he looked to Moretta.

“Um, Major, the German troops that replaced the Italians are from an SS regiment.”

“SS? Fuck!” Pizzio said and exchanged an even more disgusted look with Hansen.

Giuseppe looked at Pizzio and asked another question, and Moretta translated.

“Giuseppe asks, with your name, Pizzio, you don’t speak Italian?”

“No,” Pizzio said testily.

Giuseppe shook his head, shrugged his shoulders, and continued to speak to them in Italian with Moretta translating.

“Giuseppe has an idea. His men recently captured some vehicles and German SS soldiers. Stripped their uniforms before executing them.”

Once the German-made saloon-style, hard-top, staff sedan left the Cosenza camp, its headlights illuminated the early-evening darkness along with the lead machine gun-armed sidecar motorcycle escort fifty feet ahead of it. The other followed a hundred feet behind. Inside, Gutner let a self-satisfied smile show. He was almost giddy over the fact that *his* investigative work uncovered a stunning—perhaps *the most* stunning—discovery of the war; that the American general most admired and feared by the German high command had actually been captured and tried to pass himself off as a colonel. And it was he, SS Obersturmführer Dietrich Gutner, who brilliantly revealed the ruse.

Patton, clean shaven on orders from Gutner before they left, sat between Gutner, on his right side, and an officer, a lieutenant, on his left. Koenig agreed to send the lieutenant to command the six soldiers also involved—two motorcycle drivers with two soldiers in the side cars manning MG42 light machine guns mounted on each, and the sedan’s driver, a sergeant, and, next to him, the SS corporal who had originally accompanied Gutner to the camp and was heavily armed. He was equipped with a coveted side-fed, Steyr MP34 submachine gun that held a 32-round magazine, and a Walther P38 semi-automatic handgun in a holster, the most

powerful German handgun made with an eight-bullet clip. Their greatest concern was an attack by Italian partisans during the long journey to Rome that did involve traveling along mountain roads for part of the journey.

Patton was obviously in pain, his ankle cast and lower leg bumping along on the floorboard over the notoriously poor Italian roads. He said nothing, trying to stifle any moans from the constant stabs of pain. He managed to stay silent, although winces contorted his face, and he kept his eyes closed since there was nothing to see in the nighttime countryside as the sedan motored on.

The officer on Patton's left had dozed off, and his head rested against the window, his sleep unaffected by the rough road. The back windows were opened slightly to allow some air that was much cooler once the sun set but was mixed with dust from the motorcycle that led the way fifty feet or so in front of them. The motorcycle behind them took the brunt of the churned-up dust, with both soldiers wearing goggles and cloths over their faces.

Gutner couldn't help but try to gleefully engage Patton in conversation. He was insufferably pleased with himself.

"You thought you were so clever, didn't you, Herr *General Patton*," Gutner said with a grin that bordered on being a sneer.

Patton turned his head toward Gutner and opened his eyes to the pathetic grin on the SS interrogator's face. Patton turned away without responding, closing his eyes once again, angering Gutner with the snub.

"The SS facility in Rome is staffed with experts in the *art* of extracting information from *anyone*. The secrets you know, the plans, details about the invasion going on, all of it you will divulge, I promise you."

"I took the . . . the poison pill . . . hidden . . . in my belt. We give it to, to all command officers . . . who go to the front," Patton said haltingly with what little energy he had left to respond. He was playing with Gutner's head, the best he could, hoping to put a damper on Gutner's feeling of success. Having observed the insecurity the low-level SS officer had exhibited, he thought it might work.

"I'll be dead before we reach Rome."

"A pathetic lie!" Gutner yelled out, startling and awakening the

lieutenant next to Patton who, in reflex, reached for his sidearm. Gutner looked away; clearly Patton's pronouncement troubled him.

"You had no chance to—" he began to respond, turning back to Patton, who quickly interrupted him.

"Koenig helped me," Patton said in a barely audible voice, but Gutner heard him and frowned. Patton had hit a nerve. Gutner knew the colonel was a Prussian idealist. *He is capable of doing such a thing*, Gutner thought.

"You would be dead by now if you—"

"Not, not as fast as cyanide . . . but easier to hide," Patton interrupted.

"Then we'll just have to see. Either way, the great, invincible General Patton will no longer be a threat to Nazi Germany."

Patton let out a deep sigh and moaned purposefully for the effect it would have on an unnerved Gutner. He opened his right eye and glanced sideways at Gutner and took great pleasure in the frowning, distressed expression he saw on the face of the previously exuberant SS Obersturmführer.

RESCUING GENERAL PATTON

Chapter 11

Pizzio confirmed that the Allied invasion of the toe of Italy had in fact commenced when he observed the Cosenza POW camp through binoculars in the dim moonlight also illuminated by the spotlights on the guard towers. He was on top of a hill a hundred yards from where the tree line had been cut back to allow a clear field of fire for the guards. On the horizon, he was able to see the faint flashes of the naval and air bombardment taking place to the southwest, in advance of the landing of General Montgomery's troops that was the opening thrust in the invasion of Italy and continental Europe.

His focus was on the four guard towers at the corners of the internment section of the sprawling camp. Each had an MG37 heavy machine gun on a swivel stand with three German soldiers, two manning the gun and one manning a spotlight. It was surrounded by barbed wire-topped fencing that connected old stone walls that centuries ago had encircled the entire ancient monastery. The drone of diesel generators that provided the camp's electricity was heard in the background.

The entrance gate had sandbagged bunker emplacements on either side with German soldiers behind lighter but no less deadly MG42 machine guns. They also provided added protection for the outer buildings—the camp's three clapboard barracks buildings, which housed at least forty or more German soldiers, including the

SS replacements for the Italians and the commandant's headquarters building for the officers—that were adjacent to the fencing separating the POW barracks and infirmary.

Pizzio lowered the binoculars and moved back down to where the Rangers and a dozen partisans under Giuseppe's command had gathered. Two of them, a Ranger and a partisan, were changing into captured German uniforms.

Hansen, Moretta, Rosen, Giuseppe, and the other sergeants gathered around Pizzio once he returned. He checked his watch before addressing them.

"A couple of extra machine gun bunkers at the gate but looks like the recon photos. Didn't see many guards."

Giuseppe spoke with Moretta translating for him. "More German soldiers are also in the barracks just outside the camp. Came in last night."

Pizzio frowned. "Rosen, take the fifty-cal and a few men to cover the barracks from the south when we attack."

"Yes, sir."

"And take care of that fifty. Only one we got."

Rosen nodded.

"Buck, move the snipers into position at the edge of the tree line. Get your men ready. Got to take out the towers before we can move."

"On it," Hansen said and moved out.

"Moretta, get the vehicles moving."

He nodded. "Yes, sir. And Giuseppe told me he will have his men positioned down the road in case German units still in the area are drawn by the attack."

"Good idea." Pizzio nodded to Giuseppe.

"Move into position," Pizzio said and ended the discussion.

Pizzio's attacking force took up their preassigned positions around the camp hidden by the forest up to the very edge of the area that had been cleared.

Two vehicles, a black sedan and a German armored half-track behind it, moved out from the cover of a hill onto the road that led to the POW camp. The half-track was significantly damaged, and one of the metal tracks that had been poorly repaired wobbled badly,

but in the dim moonlight, that wasn't as readily apparent. The vehicles moved along at a slow but steady pace toward the camp's entrance gate.

The German sentries in the towers became alert, and in the corner tower closest to the road, the machine gunner swiveled around and took aim at the vehicles as a precaution. The soldiers manning the smaller machine guns in sandbagged redoubts at the gate also were alert and took aim.

One of the guards moved out from a sandbag position onto the road and yelled out to the approaching lead vehicle, the sedan, and put up a hand, ordering it to stop.

"Halt!" he yelled in German with the word being the same in English.

The automobile slowed down but continued to move, causing the guard to ready his weapon and yell out again.

"Halt or we will shoot!"

The vehicles stopped. The Ranger and partisan in German uniforms exited the sedan. The partisan was dressed as a German captain and spoke flawless German. He walked forward and took a paper out of his breast pocket with an arrogant flourish, then held it up and out to the guard.

"My orders! I am returning this automobile to the commandant!"

The guard looked uncertain about what he should do. He looked back to the other guards, one of whom yelled out something to him. He turned back to the captain.

"Wait here, sir. I will call the colonel!"

The captain impostor yelled back, "No need to wake him. We'll just leave the car and return to our unit."

The two impostors walked away, back to the half-track.

"You-you cannot leave the vehicle!" the guard yelled out.

"Keys are inside!" the impostor captain yelled back, and the pair got up into the half-track's open, rear armored area that was still stained with the sticky blood of German soldiers who had recently occupied it and took positions behind the vehicle's mounted heavy machine gun.

The half-track made a difficult U-turn on the narrow road, knocking down the remnants of a stone wall in the process, all

watched by the still-perplexed guards. Once the truck completed the turn, it began to slowly move away at the same time the heavy machine gun swiveled around facing out the rear end, confusing the guards further.

Pizzio checked his watch and moments later gave Hansen the signal to launch their attack. The German guards in the towers were taken out with a lethal and brutal barrage of thirty-caliber bullets simultaneously fired by a dozen Ranger snipers, three targeting each tower.

Seconds later, before the other guards could fully react, the staff car exploded and blasted away the gates, guards, and machine gun positions.

The half-track reversed direction and accelerated backward with its machine gun spitting tracer fire at other SS soldiers running out of the barracks half dressed, trying to react. It didn't get far before the wobbly repaired metal track came apart and brought the vehicle to an abrupt stop.

Ranger bazookas totally destroyed the same guard towers so they couldn't be reused as Pizzio led his men out of the tree line to the west. The bazookas were then used to blast holes in the internment fencing. Hansen charged out with his men from the south tree line.

The surprise attack overwhelmed any resistance offered by the Germans. American and British POWs who could walk or hobble huddled near the doorways of their stalag barracks. When a German soldier sought refuge in one, the prisoners promptly overwhelmed him, took his weapon, but didn't kill him since he had been reasonable with them.

The attack was over in minutes, with the German soldiers who hadn't been killed or wounded throwing down their weapons. But one battle continued for the commandant's fortified stone headquarters, where those inside, five SS soldiers, Colonel Koenig, and two of his staff continued to fight, unaware that the Germans outside the headquarters building had been overwhelmed and defeated quickly.

Pizzio, Hansen, and their men swept through the camp and encountered no further resistance. A few guards who had taken cover quickly threw down their weapons and surrendered.

As gunfire continued to erupt from the entrance area headquarters building, Pizzio motioned Hansen over to him.

“Buck, keep sweeping through the camp and barracks and find Mueller. I’m going to the headquarters building.”

“Will do.”

Pizzio joined Rosen and his squad, who had moved up through the internment camp when the fighting began and were now behind stone walls as they continued to take sporadic fire from windows.

“The walls are like a stone fortress, Major. Didn’t want to use grenades through the windows in case Mueller is in there.”

“Agree.”

“The back entrance is covered, sir.”

“Set up the fifty and concentrate fire on the handle and hinges on the door,” Pizzio said.

Rosen motioned for the fifty-caliber machine gun and set it up on top of the stone wall.

“Ready, sir.”

“Fire, Sergeant!”

Rosen directed the fifty’s fire on the door. Once the ammo belt ran out, Pizzio yelled, “Okay, men! Provide enfilade on the windows. I’ll rush the door and ram it and hope it gives in. Follow me!”

Pizzio ran to the doorway as his men provided cover fire at the windows, and he slammed into the heavy planked door. It gave way at the hinges, and Pizzio let out a moan of pain. Then, as if in slow motion, the door fell away, hanging at an odd angle from the lock. But the space was enough for Pizzio to dive through while firing his Thompson at the inner windows to his right, killing the two defenders ducked down as Rosen and the rest of the men rushed the building, blasting their submachine guns at the windows.

Rosen and three men burst through the doorway behind Pizzio, and in the exchange of gunfire, they killed defenders at the other inside windows. Meanwhile, two fled to inside rooms, with one of the Rangers killed in the brief battle. More men rushed through, and the fight continued from room to room.

But it took just a few moments of furious gunfire before it abruptly subsided and the inside of the headquarters became eerily quiet, except for the moaning of wounded men. Sergeant Rosen

anxiously waved to Pizzio from the doorway of an inner room as Pizzio got himself up from the floor, rubbing and trying to manipulate his injured shoulder.

"Damn shoulder's gone numb," he said to no one in particular.

Rangers emerged from the basement and shook their heads at Pizzio, indicating that no one was down there.

"Captured the commandant! He's wounded," Rosen yelled frantically.

Pizzio hurried into the room. Koenig was slumped against a wall, half-dressed, seriously wounded in the chest and arm. His Luger pistol lay on the floor nearby. Pizzio stood over the commandant and gave Rosen an order.

"Find Captain Hansen; see if he's found Mueller."

Pizzio knelt next to Koenig as the colonel's eyes widened.

"Mueller? You . . . you said Mueller?" Koenig hoarsely forced out the words in English.

"Colonel Mueller. Where is he being kept?"

Koenig gasped for breath.

"You-you all came for *him*?"

"Where is he!" Pizzio yelled at the dying commandant.

Koenig coughed up blood. "Gutner . . . was . . . right. He was . . . right," he said, speaking in German this time.

"What?"

"He was right . . . about, about Mueller. He, he was *right*!" Koenig said in English this time, as loud as he could, but his voice was hoarse and weak. He stared at Pizzio. "Too late."

"What do you mean?" Pizzio asked, alarmed.

Sergeant Rosen ran into the room, out of breath.

"The captain couldn't find him. And one of the prisoners, a—"

Pizzio held up a hand to cut Rosen off. Koenig's eyes held on Pizzio, who leaned closer.

"They took him."

"Who took him?" Pizzio pressed angrily, "When? Where!"

"SS . . . last night. He was . . . *right*." Koenig grabbed Pizzio's uniform lapel, his eyes wide with a growing realization that fought the disbelief in his voice.

Koenig's last breath left him, and his agonized eyes remained

fixed open in death.

Pizzio stood. The confused frown that had twisted his face turned into a look of utter frustration.

Rosen had more news to add and was anxious to pass it on to Pizzio.

“Major, in the barracks, a British captain needs to talk with you. He’s—well, he and, and all the others think we’re here to liberate them.”

“Sergeant, I’ll deal with that later. Right now, go get the radioman.”

Pizzio, Hansen, Moretta, and Giuseppe were on a forested hill, the highest one near the POW camp. They watched the radioman climb down a Calabrian pine tree after rigging the radiophone’s aerial as high up the tree as possible. Dawn was just breaking in the east, with the tallest treetops the first to catch the sun’s first rays of pale, yellow light.

Once back on the ground, the radioman turned on the box-like radio wrapped in a waterproof pack with a zippered front flap, put on the headset, and worked the dial while repeating their call signal—Eagle Ranger One—into the hand mic.

A few moments later the call signal was acknowledged over the short distance between Cosenza and Medina, and the code word *talon* was given back. Live contact was established. The radioman removed the headset, handed it to Pizzio to put on, and gave him the hand mic. “General Bradley on the radio, sir.”

“This is Eagle leader, sir. Objective taken. Fought Germans, SS. Italians were replaced and taken to a detention center. But package not on location,” Pizzio said tersely. “Repeat. Package not on location.”

“What! Where—”

“Before he died, the commandant said the SS took him out last night.”

Rosen ran up the hill to Pizzio, motioning he had information.

“Wait, sir. Just getting more intel,” Pizzio said and waved Rosen toward him. He held out the hand mic so Rosen’s voice would

be heard.

“A German doctor at the infirmary who took care of Mueller said he was told a staff car accompanied by two motorcycles with machine gunner side cars took the colonel out last night.”

“Did you hear that, General?” Pizzio asked anxiously.

“Yes. God Almighty . . . they must have found out who he is,” Bradley said, and his voice trailed off into silence.

Pizzio frowned. “You mean found out that Mueller’s really a general, right?”

“Major, you’re not alone there, are you?”

“No, sir.”

“Then shut up!”

Pizzio’s headset became silent. After a few moments Pizzio interrupted the lull. “General, you still there?”

Bradley’s voice came back. “Put Lieutenant Moretta on.”

Pizzio handed the headset and mic to Moretta.

“General wants you.”

The lieutenant answered questions about the Italian detention center and handed the headset and mic back to Pizzio.

“Stay by the radio, Major,” Bradley said. “We’ll come up with a new plan.”

Pizzio let out an audible sigh of frustration. “Sure, General, right. I’ll stay by the fu—the, the damn radio, *sir*.”

Pizzio threw down the headset and mic and eyed the group around him.

“We’re to wait here. The general and his *staff* will come up with what to do next, another *brilliant plan*.”

“Could be a counterattack at any time,” Moretta said with anxiety in his voice. “There still might be a hell of a lot of German troops in the area.”

“They gotta be moving to the coast, to the invasion,” Pizzio countered. “Why worry about a POW camp?” But there was uncertainty evident in his voice.

“With respect, sir. Krauts know C47s flew in low,” Moretta said. “Someone must have seen the chutes. We’re an enemy force unexplainably within their midst. Someone must have heard our attack. Has to have been reported by now.”

“Just gotta fuckin’ wait, Lieutenant,” Pizzio lashed out angrily

this time but then took a deep breath and looked over at Giuseppe.

“Lieutenant, can your partisan friend there put lookouts on hills, wherever, to warn us of krauts moving toward us?”

Moretta translated the request to Giuseppe, who shrugged his shoulders, then nodded and proceeded down the hill.

Pizzio paced anxiously as he waited for the radioman to signal contact with the command staff in Messina had been reestablished. Rosen, Hansen, and Moretta had sat down to rest against trees nearby, and Hansen had actually dozed off and begun snoring just as the radioman called to Pizzio.

“Major! I have General Bradley!”

Pizzio hurried over, and the radioman handed the headset and hand mic to him. The radioman’s loud call woke Hansen.

“Yes, General?”

Pizzio listened, frowned, and finally said tersely, “Yes, sir.” He took off the headset and handed it to the radioman. All eyes were on him.

“One of the general’s staff is in the air. He’ll *parachute* into our valley soon with the plan.”

“What?” Moretta said in disbelief.

“Gonna just jump in on us in broad daylight?” Hansen added, shocked.

“Yep,” Pizzio answered tersely.

“What the hell is going on?” Moretta said loudly.

“The general didn’t want to chance the Germans intercepting the plan over the radio, Lieutenant! That’s what the hell is going on!” Pizzio yelled back, taking out his frustration and anger about another unexpected turn of events on the young officer.

Moretta’s eyes widened, and he looked like he was going to yell something back, but instead, he abruptly turned and walked away.

Pizzio took a deep breath and forced calm on himself.

“Okay, Lieutenant, you deserve to know,” Pizzio called to Moretta. “You all do.”

Moretta stopped and turned around; a deep frown had replaced his anger, and he walked back.

“We were sent here to rescue *a general*, who, apparently,

pretended to be a Colonel Mueller. Who he really is I don't know, but he's obviously somebody pretty important."

Those around Pizzio exchanged surprised looks, no more than Lieutenant Moretta.

"Jesus H. Christ," an exhausted Captain Hansen said.

"A fuckin' general," Rosen muttered to himself.

"Okay. Buck, get a couple of men and stay with the radioman here until our visitor shows up, just in case something else goes *fucking wrong*."

Hansen nodded, poured water from a canteen over his face, and offered the water to Pizzio.

"I'm good," Pizzio said and turned to Rosen.

"Sergeant, take a dozen men and move to the drop area. I'll join you after I go talk with the POWs and a British officer who think we're here to liberate them and give 'em the bad news."

A little over an hour later, in the distance to the east and south, Pizzio and Rosen heard antiaircraft fire and explosions quickly followed by the unmistakable, high-pitched whining of powerful aircraft engines getting closer. Rangers lit red flares in the drop zone. Three P38s majestically buzzed across the sky overhead, and a few moments later the distinctive, droning engines of a C47 followed directly overhead.

"A chute, Major!" Sergeant Rosen shouted and pointed upward.

"Goddamn, that was fucking fast," Pizzio said, looking through binoculars at the white chute that drifted down into the valley drop zone area.

"Sure was, sir," Rosen marveled. "Wonder who else is seeing that damn chute?"

Pizzio gave Rosen a wary look.

"Let's go welcome him to Italy, Sergeant."

Chapter 12

Sergeant Rosen and a dozen Rangers ran out from tree cover to help Lieutenant Colin Rooney with his chute and provide a perimeter while they hurried him away from the drop area.

Once back inside the tree line, Pizzio, Hansen, Moretta, and Giuseppe met with the newly arrived and, once again, very young-looking lieutenant. He was from Quincy, Massachusetts, with red hair, a smooth face free of any indication of a beard, and if not in uniform would have been mistaken for someone in high school. He spoke with a slight Irish accent, occasionally intermixed with words tinged with a more pronounced Boston one. He promptly knelt down and spread a map on the ground in front of them all. His tone had a hard-edged authority that belied his youthful looks.

“And intel is convinced Colonel Mueller couldn’t have been moved that far north yet with all the German troop movements on the roads.”

When Rooney said, ‘Colonel Mueller,’ they exchanged knowing glances. Apparently, Lieutenant Rooney was still in the dark.

“He’s a general, Lieutenant. Best you know too.”

Rooney’s eyes widened. “A general?”

“Yeah. Don’t know who, but get on with it.”

With a deep frown and a tone of uncertainty, Rooney continued.

“Um, like I said, Mueller couldn’t have been moved that far north yet with—”

Pizzio interrupted with impatience and disgust in his voice. “So what, Lieutenant? Even if we force-marched up and down these damn hills, we can’t catch up to him.”

Pizzio’s look and tone couldn’t hide the bitter disdain he had for anyone involved with Bradley’s planning staff.

“Agree, sir. We’ll need to parachute near a town ahead of where the vehicle he’s in will pass and intercept it.”

“Parachute? Again!” Hansen exclaimed.

“Tell us exactly how in the hell we’re gonna do that!” Pizzio erupted, his anger fully unleashed on the young lieutenant now, who, surprisingly, wasn’t cowed.

Moretta appeared confused and looked over at Giuseppe, who rolled his eyes, shrugged his shoulders, and muttered under his breath, in a heavily accented English, “American, German. Both fucking crazy,” revealing he understood English despite lacking confidence in his ability to speak it without embarrassing fumbles.

Rooney continued, “Um, well, the staff worked up a plan—”

Pizzio instantly cut him off. “The *staff*? The fucking staff!”

“Approved by *General Bradley*, sir,” Rooney shot back forcefully and then continued, “A plan to assault and take the Cosenza Airfield, sir!”

Hansen’s jaw dropped. Moretta looked dumbfounded. Pizzio frowned, but his reaction wasn’t the expected one; he didn’t look surprised. He was intrigued and interested in hearing more. Rooney looked directly at Pizzio for his reaction.

“Go on, Lieutenant.”

“Yes, sir. Okay, once we take the airfield, C47s will land, pick us up, and drop us here.” Rooney put his finger on the map. “Near Natolli, a crossroads town. Must go through there to get to SS headquarters in Rome. No other way. And they definitely won’t chance flying with Allied fighter control of the air south of Rome.”

“Drop us there. And then what happens, if, somehow, we actually rescue the *general*?”

“We head east to the coast and we’ll, um, be picked up.”

“Just like that. Easy-peasy,” Hansen erupted, unable to contain himself any longer. “Take the airfield with what, ten times as many

fuckin' Krauts defending it?"

Rooney cleared his throat, eyeing Hansen.

"We know airfields are well defended, Captain. We'll need help to take it and—"

"No shit, Lieutenant," Pizzio interrupted, his disdain for intelligence and their plans once again apparent.

Rooney continued, nervous but undeterred, "There's just no other men available right now, and no time to get them ready to drop in here, so—"

Hansen angrily interrupted, "Few of the prisoners here can fight, many were wounded, a lot are air crews, for Chrissake!"

"PLEASE! Let me finish! . . . um, sir," Rooney yelled.

Rooney's outburst surprised and silenced them. His Irish-Boston accent had become more pronounced when angry. Pizzio let a slight smile show. He decided then and there that he liked the young soldier, as did Hansen.

"Continue, Lieutenant," Pizzio said calmly.

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. Um, okay then, what we have to do is free the Italian soldiers in detention."

Rooney had to clear his throat as everyone looked at him in disbelief, except for Pizzio.

"And, and then arm those who'll fight with us with weapons from the camp, and then, well, take the airfield."

There was silence. Pizzio eyed the others. Moretta shook his head but in a hesitant way. Hansen rolled his eyes. Giuseppe shrugged his shoulders but just slightly and moved his head back and forth in a way that indicated he was thinking it over before he began speaking. Moretta translated.

"Giuseppe says there is a good partisan group near Natolli he has communicated with in the past. Can your general make contact with them and let them know we're coming?"

Moretta added his own words: "I'm sure there are agents like me all over Italy working with the partisan groups and providing intelligence."

Pizzio eyed Moretta then Giuseppe, took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and nodded.

"Okay. Let's do it," Pizzio said with finality.

The others exchanged wary looks, except for Giuseppe, who

smiled, but no one objected.

“Just no choice now, goddamn it,” Pizzio added, seeing the looks from the others.

“Buck, get the men ready to move out. Leave a fortified platoon at the camp.”

Hansen hesitated.

“Captain, did you hear me?”

Hansen looked at Pizzio intently. “Yeah. On it, Pete, sir,” he finally replied, but his tone reflected what he was thinking, that this was insanity.

Hansen left, and Pizzio turned to Moretta.

“Lieutenant, do you and your partisan buddy here know the layout of the detention center?”

“Yeah—yes, sir. Just fences and tents thrown up on an old soccer field outside of the town. But there’s a fair number of German soldiers guarding it.”

“Draw the area out in the ground here the best you can.”

Disarmed Italian soldiers milled about within a makeshift detention camp with haphazardly erected canvas tents behind barbed wire-topped, flimsy fencing. It had been hastily erected when the German-Italian command decided they could not trust Italian soldiers and officers after Mussolini had been arrested by the Italian government.

It was located just outside of Cosenza in an open field that had been a local school soccer field. It was well patrolled outside the fencing by heavily armed German soldiers and teams with guard dogs that barked viciously at any Italian prisoners who got too close to the fence. A large German command tent had been erected with troop trucks and supply vehicles parked nearby. Guards patrolled the perimeter.

Not far from the detention camp, Moretta and Giuseppe moved through the outskirts of Cosenza with shovels over their shoulders among a group of workers on a road. They soon detached from the work gang and headed into the forest and joined Pizzio, Hansen, and

Rooney.

They quickly reported on their surveillance of the detention camp.

“Only thirty guards, maybe a few more, but heavily armed,” Moretta said nervously. “Saw a lot of units moving out in trucks to the south. But defenses at the detention center have improved since we last checked. Probably heard our attack last night at the camp.”

“Reserve units anywhere?” Pizzio asked.

“None we saw. Pretty sure any reserves have been moved south to meet the invasion. There are light machine gun emplacements on the hills nearby, though. Could be other small units around there. And a perimeter patrol passed near us.”

“Hate fuckin’ daylight assaults,” Hansen complained again.

“Yeah, I know, Buck,” Pizzio said with as concerned a look on his face as Hansen had. He turned back to Moretta.

“Lieutenant, you, Giuseppe, and his partisans stay with me while Captain Hansen and his group take out the hill defenses simultaneously at oh-ten-hundred and then engage any reserves there. We’ll attack the camp on all sides with our main force the second we hear their gunfire.”

Pizzio turned to Rooney. “Lieutenant Rooney, you stay with Sergeant Rosen.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh, and try not to get killed. That’s an order.”

“I’ll definitely do my best to carry out your order, sir,” Rooney said with a boyish smile.

The German guards around the Cosenza internment camp immediately began to take defensive positions when they heard the crackling of automatic weapons fire and grenade explosions from the hills above them. But they had little time to get fully protected within sandbag emplacements, as they were quickly overwhelmed by machine gun and small arms fire and grenades from Pizzio and his assault group as they attacked the camp on all sides.

The Germans were quickly and brutally decimated. A few who had survived the onslaught threw down their weapons and raised their hands in surrender. The Italian prisoners had dropped to the ground the moment gunfire erupted nearby. They were confused at

first. Some thought the Germans had begun executing them, as they had done to their officers two days before. Pizzio and his men proceeded to blow holes in the fences and sweep into the camp.

The Italian soldiers couldn't believe their eyes when they saw it was Americans who were attacking and killing their German guards and blowing apart the fences.

"The Americans!" they began yelling. In Italian, others yelled out their disbelief, "Have they invaded already?!"

The Italian prisoners began to run out of the camp. Pizzio yelled to Moretta and Giuseppe to stop them from dispersing and to keep them together.

The surviving German guards who had thrown down their weapons and kept their hands raised, staggered around, unsure of what to do. They had panicked looks on their faces, especially as the increasingly angry Italian soldiers eyed them, picked up abandoned weapons, and began shouting at the Germans. Moments later, when emotions reached the boiling point, they began slaughtering the German prisoners.

Pizzio yelled for them to stop, and he and his men leveled their weapons at the Italians. There was a standoff for a few moments, and Moretta and Giuseppe promptly interceded and defused the situation, screaming at the angriest of the Italian prisoners. Hansen jogged to the scene and yelled out to Pizzio, unaware of the volatile situation.

"The hills are secured, Major!" When Hansen reached Pizzio his eyes went wide, seeing the Rangers and the Italians with weapons pointed at each other.

"What the hell?"

"They started killing the Germans who gave up," Pizzio told him.

Moretta called back to Pizzio, "They say the German SS executed all their officers."

Pizzio winced. "Those fuckin' bastards!"

Moretta shook his head in disbelief. "They were allies a few days ago."

Pizzio calmed himself. "Lieutenant, you and Giuseppe tell them why we're here."

"Yes, sir. But before I do. What *are* we going to do with the

rest of the prisoners captured?”

Pizzio took a deep breath, let it out slowly, saw all the faces looking at him, waiting for his answer.

“We’ll tie ’em all up and leave them in the main tent. Whatever happens after that isn’t our problem.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay, Lieutenant, first tell them that the booms and flashes of guns they probably heard and saw just before dawn was the start of the invasion of Italy that began this morning on a beach to the south only eighty kilometers from here.”

Moretta did as Pizzio ordered. The Italians looked at each other and then, as if on cue, began to cheer. Moretta held up his arms to quiet them. And Giuseppe explained why the Americans freed them, that they needed their help to attack and take the Cosenza Airfield held by the Germans.

The Italians became quiet. One of them, who appeared to be their leader in the absence of an officer, stepped forward and saluted Pizzio. Two others followed, and one by one others did the same, until everyone who had escaped through the destroyed fencing—nearly fifty men—joined in saluting their liberators, signaling they would fight with Pizzio and his Rangers.

Chapter 13

Pizzio scanned the airfield through binoculars from one of the many rolling hills that overlooked the expansive valley that housed it. Hansen, Moretta, and Giuseppe were next to him. Although referred to as the Cosenza Airfield, it was eight miles to the south of the town and separated by a range of low hills that ran east and west and bordered the largest valley in the area, which made for a natural location for an airfield. It was actually much closer to the town of Cortina, but insignificant in size compared to Cosenza.

It had taken them three hours to move through the ravines and forests between and around hills, in the midday heat and humidity of the late Calabria summer sun, to get close enough to be in position for quick deployment around the airfield. They had taken a serpentine route to try to prevent giving away their presence to the German troops already on high alert and defending the airport. Giuseppe had led them on that route to also avoid small villages, that would have turned out welcoming celebrations over American soldiers having suddenly showed up so soon after the news of the Allied invasion on the southwestern coast.

Giuseppe explained through Moretta that the airfield and its buildings had been greatly expanded by the Germans over the last year and was now a substantial airfield facility. It had two parallel, east-west runways and one north-south runway that intersected the other two at the far eastern end. And less than a hundred yards from

the complex of buildings that held airfield personnel, new barracks that had been constructed when it was expanded. It was also protected on the northern approach by an extremely deep, boulder-strewn ravine and river that ran behind it, which made a surprise assault from that direction extremely difficult, even for Rangers.

Giuseppe told them further that the defenses had been significantly upgraded over what he and his men had last observed when they were doing maps for British intelligence, before Moretta had parachuted in and recruited him and his men for a secret American mission. He had been promised weapons, explosives, and money in return, all of which was soon also air dropped to them.

Pizzio, with binoculars still held to his eyes, focused on the specifics of the airfield's layout. He saw a well-defended installation with double fencing. Coiled barbed wire stretched across the space that separated them and numerous sandbagged machine gun emplacements. Guards and patrols were everywhere. Two small spotter aircraft and a lone Fokker transport were the only planes there and parked off the runways. The one hangar that had been constructed was empty, and the twisted ruin of a Messerschmitt fighter was next to it.

Three antiaircraft guns formed a triangle around the installation, and Pizzio was sure, as he observed them and their crews, they must have fired at their planes as they approached to make their jump. *They have to be taken out first*, Pizzio thought further, knowing full well how the Germans used them to repel assaults by lowering the guns level with the ground and chewing up the battlefield with a brutally devastating rapid-fire effect against advancing ground troops.

"Looks like there could be a full company of Krauts guarding the damn place," Pizzio said to those around him after finishing his survey of the airfield and its defenses.

"Why we needed the Italians, sir," Lieutenant Rooney said matter-of-factly.

"We should wait for night," Hansen muttered.

"I agree," Moretta added louder and more forcefully.

"Can't wait, Lieutenant! Goddamn it!" Pizzio yelled at Moretta, taking out his frustration on him in a way he couldn't with Hansen.

Giuseppe grabbed Moretta's arm and loudly said something in Italian, distracting Moretta, who was about to shout back, having had enough of Pizzio yelling at him. Giuseppe forced him to calm down and translate.

"Giuseppe says he and his partisans will lead the Italian soldiers on the first assault."

This got everyone's attention, including a surprised Moretta. Giuseppe continued—Moretta translated.

"They will fight like animals to avenge their officers. They will attack the entrance gates and the barracks buildings inside, drawing soldiers there and allowing you time to destroy the fencing and the other machine gun emplacements and . . ."

Moretta became quiet then as he listened to Giuseppe's next words, and he hesitated before he continued the translation.

"Giuseppe said that you can then use your bazookas to destroy the anti-aircraft guns before they can be turned back around toward you."

Pizzio and Hansen eyed each other, and the captain nodded his approval to Pizzio.

"That's, um, that's a good plan, a damn good plan," he said, looking directly at Giuseppe, who smiled, obviously understanding the response.

"You're gonna draw an incredible amount of Kraut firepower until we attack, though," Pizzio said gravely.

Moretta translated Giuseppe's next words with distress in his voice and face.

"He knows. But he says it's the only way."

Giuseppe continued, and Moretta's tone was grave. "As many of your men as possible must survive, so they can still be alive to jump near Natolli and help you complete your mission."

Pizzio was momentarily stunned by Giuseppe's matter-of-fact response, as were Moretta and Hansen.

Pizzio felt the partisan leader exhibited the same cold-blooded logic and manner of an experienced combat officer, and he felt a newfound and deepening respect for this diminutive, middle-aged Italian, who he now realized was as tough as nails. He was definitely someone you would want in a foxhole with you, the highest compliment a soldier could pay another.

“Okay, you’re right, Giuseppe. Creating a diversion is exactly what has to be done. But maybe we can improve the odds for you a little bit,” Pizzio said.

“I listen,” Giuseppe said in English.

“Do you still have those German uniforms?”

Giuseppe nodded.

Pizzio proceeded to explain what he had in mind.

A short time later Pizzio and Hansen assembled an initial group of Rangers in a thinly forested ravine area behind one of the hills and asked for volunteers. Pizzio gravely explained to the first group that it was for an operation with the partisans that involved a dangerous gamble. Hansen told them they had a plan to help them take the airfield and still be able to have enough men to go on and, as Pizzio added bluntly after a deep sigh and long pause, “Most likely die anyway trying to complete our original mission.”

They got all ten volunteers from that first group.

The Italian partisan who had impersonated the German officer at the POW camp and spoke flawless German with an imperious, aristocratic Prussian inflection that commanded attention, once again played the same role. He led a group of ‘loyal’ Italian soldiers and two German soldiers, who surrounded ten American prisoners with their hands on their heads, as they moved toward the airfield’s heavily defended entrance gate.

The guards, as expected, were taken by surprise and immediately became confused by the sight. Their training took over despite the unusual sight, and the guard in command quickly yelled out, “Halt!”, and leveled his weapon.

Pizzio had gambled on the possibility that the Germans would allow them to approach close to the gates, maybe even let them in. But he would also give them every advantage he could. He equipped them all with Thompson submachine guns and extra clips, which they would hang around their necks and down their backs. He also had the ‘prisoners’ fill their pockets with grenades and tuck .45s into their back belt as well. Pizzio had refused Moretta when he

immediately volunteered because, as he told him, he needed someone alive who spoke Italian for when they were dropped into Natolli. Both understood what Pizzio had left unsaid, that Giuseppe likely would not survive the assault he would lead at the gates.

Giuseppe assembled and staged the group quickly once they emerged from the forest around the road.

“Keep hand on head!” he yelled to the Americans in heavily accented English. Giuseppe was dressed in an Italian uniform and, like the other partisans, wore them over their peasant clothing. They were positioned just before a turn in the road that led to the airfield’s ten-foot-high metal, wood, and barbed wire-topped entrance gates.

Giuseppe gave the order to begin moving down the road, and they were quickly in view of the guards at the gates. But this time, the guards had a nervous German officer inspecting the soldiers and fortifications at the gates at that fateful moment, on high alert because of the invasion. He was also especially vigilant because of a report about American paratroopers who had dropped into the area during the night and attacked a POW camp, inexplicably to rescue the prisoners. This made little sense to him and others, since there were German units all over the area even after many had been sent to reinforce defenses at the southwest coast.

Nevertheless, the fact that he knew about American paratroopers in the area was a lucky and crucial turn of events for Giuseppe’s group now quickly approaching the gates. It was the very scene of American soldiers with hands on their heads that made him accept the ruse, regardless of the fact that so many Italian soldiers were involved and being led by just three Germans.

The German officer at the gates had only a few seconds to realize his mistake after he ordered the gates opened, and the approaching group suddenly charged through firing submachine guns with the Americans throwing grenades. Several .44-caliber bullets killed the German major and nearly every German soldier visible beyond the entrance area who hadn’t been killed by the grenade attack.

The moment Pizzio heard the gunfire from the gate area, he, Rosen, Rooney, and the squads of men they led, attacked the airfield’s outer fencing at the corner two hundred yards south of the

entrance. Hansen, Moretta, and their squads, attacked from different directions around the airfield.

Once Pizzio and his men destroyed the fencing, they charged across the beginning of the two parallel runways, and his men gave cover fire to the bazooka team that got into position just as the antiaircraft gun they were assigned to destroy began firing at Giuseppe's group.

The first bazooka shot missed to the right and hit the corner of a barracks building. Giuseppe's men and the Americans throwing grenades at the gun in the front of the attacking group were decimated before the bazooka team's next shot destroyed the antiaircraft gun and its three-man crew, but they were, in turn, killed by German fire.

Hansen and Moretta's squads met with unexpected fierce resistance from what turned out to be well-trained German combat troops, not the Army castoffs used for guarding POW and internment camps.

The Italians, and the few Americans Giuseppe led who still survived, continued to relentlessly attack entrenched German machine gun positions and took shocking losses as a result, but they did manage to destroy most of them and gun down defenders coming out of the barracks. They also killed those firing through the windows with grenades and drew German defenders away from Hansen and Moretta's attacks.

Hansen's and Moretta's Rangers destroyed the two antiaircraft guns they were assigned before they could do much damage, because they focused their attack on them. But now they faced a furious counterattack from the German defenders coming out of the airfield's largest main buildings, and they both lost their two-man bazooka crews and their weapons.

Pizzio saw the counterattack and redirected his two squads led by Rosen and Rooney to attack the German's right flank. This stopped their counterattack before it could overwhelm Hansen and Moretta's forces. But Ranger casualties were mounting as they also took heavy machine-gun and panzerfaust (rocket-propelled grenade) fire from the main buildings. Lieutenant Rooney was wounded in a leg. Although not serious, he was unable to walk or stand until the wound was treated.

Pizzio's quick reaction broke the counterattack and forced the Germans to fall back to their sandbagged emplacements in front of the main airfield buildings while the firepower from the top of the buildings and from windows gave them withering cover fire.

"Buck! Moretta! Retreat to the drainage ditches! We'll cover you!" Pizzio yelled to them, and he and his men provided covering fire at the buildings while Hansen and Moretta rallied their men and fell back to the drainage ditches along the outer runway. But they all took significant casualties in the process.

Giuseppe, although wounded, had gotten the surviving Italians and two of the surviving Americans to take cover on the side of the closest barracks building they cleared out.

Pizzio, now finding himself and his men in an exposed 'no-man's land' after stopping the German counterattack and then providing cover fire for Hansen and Moretta, realized he could not retreat without being slaughtered. He ordered a charge and led them in a frantic run-and-fire action toward the base of the buildings, where the retreating Germans were taking up defensive positions. They caught everyone—the Rangers, Giuseppe, Hansen, Moretta, and especially the Germans—by surprise. Rosen and another Ranger dragged Rooney along with them.

Pizzio and his men exchanged brutal close-in gunfire with the Germans, and both took heavy casualties during the furious firefight, but Pizzio and his men succeeded in forcing the surviving Germans to scramble frantically into the main building.

Pizzio and the two dozen of his men who could still fire a weapon, including Sergeant Rosen and Lieutenant Rooney, huddled outside at the base of the main runway building as German machine guns blasted from the roof and windows above them, keeping Hansen, Moretta, and their men pinned down in the runway drainage ditches. The lone medic to survive crawled along from man to man and did what he could to bandage wounds and keep as many as he could in the fight. Rosen put a bandage on Rooney's leg wound.

"Not a suicide mission, huh, General?" Pizzio muttered to himself as he took stock of their situation.

"What, sir?" Rosen asked, thinking Pizzio was talking to him.

"Sergeant, get a count on our grenades."

"Yes, sir."

Rosen scurried low along the wall and checked with the men.

"I can't stand up, but I can crawl, Major. So, when you attack inside, I can help," Rooney said.

Pizzio nodded. "Good."

"You won't have to tell me to stay low either, sir," Rooney said and smiled. And, for the first time in a long while, Pizzio smiled back. A brief moment of sanity in an insane situation.

Rosen returned.

"Six grenades, sir."

"That's it?" Pizzio said in disbelief.

"This is our third assault, Major."

Pizzio nodded, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly while thinking. He slapped the last full magazine into his Thompson and looked at Rosen and Rooney.

"We're damn lucky the krauts don't have mortars on the roof."

Rosen nodded, waiting for Pizzio's plan.

"Which men do you trust to throw grenades through the windows? If they miss, we're dead."

Rosen didn't hesitate. "Me, and, um, Gorski, sir."

"Okay. Give me two for the first floor, and you and Gorski take two each. Go."

Rosen moved to Private Gorski, handed him two grenades, and pointed up. "We *gotta* get 'em though the windows," he said, and Gorski nodded nervously. With a grenade in each hand, Rosen waved to Pizzio that they were ready.

Pizzio used hand signals to try to communicate with Hansen, who drew fire the moment he stuck his head up. But he kept doing it until he got the gist of what Pizzio was trying to communicate.

Hansen yelled down to Moretta hunkered down like he was in a ditch with his men twenty yards to his right. They were spread out along a forty-yard line adjacent to the runway. Like Pizzio, Hansen also thought about how lucky they were the Germans didn't have mortars on the roof.

"Lieutenant! The major's gonna make some kinda move! Tell the sergeants to get the men ready!"

Then he yelled repeatedly to the lines of men on each side of him.

"Get ready to attack! Get ready to attack!"

Pizzio pulled the pins on his two grenades and tossed them into the open doorway.

“Fire in the hole!” he yelled.

Seconds later two explosions sent debris out the doorway.

“Men!” Pizzio yelled as loud as he could. “Step out and give covering fire on my order . . . NOW!”

Pizzio and his remaining Rangers stepped out away from the base of the building and begin firing up at the windows. A second later Rosen and Gorski moved out, with Rosen moving farther away from the building than Gorski, since he was shorter and wanted to make sure he got his grenades through the windows. They pulled the pins on their first grenades, held them a second, then threw them perfectly through the windows above them. They immediately pulled pins on the second grenades, but Rosen had been seen by a fearless German soldier who managed a well-placed shot before being killed by Pizzio’s covering fire. The German wounded Rosen just as he was ready to throw his second grenade. He was knocked to the ground, and the live grenade rolled from his wounded arm.

Gorski, having thrown his second grenade, saw what happened to Rosen and immediately threw himself on the grenade, absorbing the blast a second later, saving Pizzio, Rosen, and other men nearby.

Pizzio knew he didn’t have time to mourn Gorski and ignored the tightening in his stomach at the loss. He immediately yelled to his men and led the charge into the building, his Thompson spraying at anyone moving.

Hansen saw Pizzio and his men move into the building.

“Attack!” Hansen yelled while jumping out of the ditch, and a moment later was shot in the head and killed.

Moretta led the Rangers across the runways and charged the buildings, taking heavy fire from the German rooftop machine gunners initially, causing heavy casualties until the German fire abruptly ceased.

Inside the main building there was brief but furious close-quarter fighting, and Pizzio and his men made it to the roof, forcing the German machine gunners to try to turn their bulky M31s around. They were riddled with submachine-gun fire before they could do so.

Giuseppe, his neck crudely bandaged and soaked with blood,

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had wisely taken his remaining men around to the back of the buildings, where they found a platoon of Germans hiding, waiting to ambush the Rangers and then make a run for better cover. They killed every one of them, even a couple who threw down their weapons, and then ruthlessly executed the German wounded.

Chapter 14

The fighting and search for lingering, hidden enemy was over.

Pizzio said nothing about Giuseppe and his surviving partisans and Italian soldiers executing the German wounded. He focused on relocating the American dead to the empty hangar and covering them with rain ponchos. Giuseppe and his group were busy burying the Italians, partisans and soldiers, in a wooded area just outside the entrance, where most of their casualties occurred. All the wounded were gradually being moved from where they lay so they could be treated out of the sun in one of the buildings cleaned out so medics could more quickly and efficiently work on them.

Rosen was on the radio phone on the roof of the main building that was littered with German dead. His arm was bandaged but had movement. He had the aerial in one hand as he walked around with the headset on and the mic in his other hand, trying to improve reception and reach their call station in Messina.

“This Eagle’s objective secured. Need resupply and pickup. Over,” Rosen said, and kept repeating the message.

One of the men in his platoon turned the battery-charging crank on the side of the radio unit while also slowly working the dial back and forth over the assigned frequency, hoping to connect and get a response back. Long-range radio communication was still more of an art than a science.

“This Eagle’s objective secured. Need resupply and pickup.

Over,” Rosen kept repeating.

In the airfield’s lone hangar Pizzio solemnly took a last look at Captain Hansen and Private Gorski and covered them with their ponchos. Moretta approached. He waited until Pizzio looked over at him.

“Sir, Sergeant Rosen finally made contact with Messina. The C47s will land as soon as it’s dark, along with the ammo, medicine, food, weapons, and the extra medics you requested. We’ll take off quickly and have fighter cover part of the way.”

Pizzio slowly nodded to Moretta, his exhaustion and grief both accentuated in the grime-filled lines of his face. He started to walk away.

“Sir . . .”

Pizzio turned back to him.

“Why did you tell the sergeant to give such low casualty counts?”

“I wanted the extra planes so our dead and wounded could be taken out.”

Moretta nodded back in understanding, and his face filled with admiration. They had just begun to leave the hangar when Rosen ran out of the main building and along a runway up to Pizzio.

“Major, Giuseppe finally made contact on the radio with the partisan group near our drop zone. I was able to patch him through to Messina, and they raised the partisans and got back to us, agreeing to the plan.”

Moretta just told me, Sergeant. Well, we might have a chance now—one in a million, but a chance.”

“Hopefully the krauts didn’t pick it up,” Rosen said more to himself than Pizzio.

“Had to chance that. What do we have to lose at this point?”

“Agree, sir. Giuseppe also said they’ll stage a diversion attack on a German garrison west of where we’ll drop.”

Pizzio’s expression didn’t change.

Rosen continued, “Another group will wait near our drop zone.”

“They’re all really excited about the invasion,” Moretta added.

Pizzio eyed them both before responding. “You do realize this

is a suicide mission now? Insanity.”

“Well, whoever this general is,” Moretta responded in a fatalistic, hesitant tone, “we have no choice now but to try to rescue him, sir.”

“You think he’s worth all these lives?”

“I don’t know, but General Bradley does.”

“*General Bradley*,” Pizzio said with disdain. “We’re all expendable to him. Fuck *all* generals!” Pizzio’s emotions were still raw after seeing the dead bodies of Gorski and Hansen.

“We’re all expendable to anyone who commands us, right, Major?”

Pizzio’s face reflected the realization that Moretta’s question had hit home, but he ignored it.

“You’re my second-in-command now.”

“What about Rooney, sir? He’s a *first* lieutenant.”

“He showed he’s a good soldier, but I can’t trust him yet to lead, unless . . .”

“Unless he’s the only one left?”

“Yeah, right. Okay, get Giuseppe for me, *Captain*.”

Moretta frowned. “Captain? You mean, *first* lieutenant.”

“I just gave you a battlefield promotion.”

“That would be two promotions, sir. I was a second lieutenant.”

“I know.”

“You can do that, sir?”

“*General Bradley* told me to do *whatever* was necessary to accomplish this mission. I’ll have Rosen send him a message from me so it’s official.”

Pizzio gave him captain bars, surprising Moretta even more.

“These were Buck’s. I’m sure he’d agree with giving them to you.”

Moretta accepted them, stunned and silent for a few moments.

“Thank you, sir, I, um, I think.”

Captain Moretta brought Giuseppe over to the main building where Pizzio was checking on the wounded. With only one medic left who was fully functional and another who was wounded but able to assist, it was a chaotic situation with thirty-eight Rangers in need

of medical care, many serious or critical. There were far fewer partisan and Italian soldiers being treated, since most of their casualties were fatal.

Giuseppe had a bandage on the right side of his face now, in addition to his neck, although the new bandage showed far less blood leaking. He also had a smaller bloody bandage on a forearm. Nevertheless, he had a .45 strapped around his waist and a Thompson over his shoulder, and the large pockets on his peasant jacket held extra magazines for the submachine gun.

"You okay, Giuseppe?" Pizzio asked.

"I alive," the partisan leader said in English, then smiled. "You look surprised by that," Giuseppe said, this time in Italian with Moretta translating.

Pizzio managed a smile, as did Moretta.

"I am. You and your men fought incredibly well. We'd all be dead now if it wasn't for you and them."

"Some, you men too," Giuseppe said in English.

Pizzio nodded. "How many men do you have left who can fight?"

Giuseppe answered, and Moretta translated, "He only has six partisans and eight Italian soldiers left who aren't dead or so wounded they cannot still kill Germans."

"Will they be willing to jump out of planes with you?"

Giuseppe understood and showed surprise, then hesitated, sighed, and shrugged his shoulders. Moretta translated his answer.

"They will do whatever I tell them to do. Jumping out of a plane the least dangerous thing I asked them to do so far."

Pizzio and some of his men stood outside the main building along one of the runways and watched the flashes of artillery in the twilight of the western sky as the invasion of Italy continued. Their attention abruptly turned to the south the moment they heard the staccato explosions of antiaircraft shells intermixed with bomb detonations that began to illuminate the southern coast less than eighty miles away.

Moments later the approaching high-pitched whine of the

powerful Merlin engines of a squadron of American P-51b Mustang fighter-bombers engulfed the airfield lit by flares as three of the planes roared in low and swept past waving their wings. They proceeded to patrol the sky with the others while, one by one, eight C47s landed on two of the three runways of the Cosenza Airfield and lined up on the third north-south runway.

An officer, Captain Steve Barnes, jumped down out of one of the planes while Pizzio's men moved to the planes to help the crews stack ammo, weapons, rations, parachutes, and other equipment on the runway, so the Rangers who were going to make the next drop could get resupplied.

The captain, a stocky six-footer with a broken, out-of-joint nose—a testament to his participation in his division's boxing exhibitions—looked around to get his bearings. He walked toward a line of wounded men limping or shuffling along the inner runway toward the planes for some reason he didn't understand. Behind them were pairs of men carrying stretchers with the badly wounded.

"Soldier, where can I find Major Pizzio?" Barnes asked the first man, who limped past the confused captain leading the line of the wounded.

The soldier pointed at the main building. "He's in there, sir."

Captain Barnes hurried toward the building. He spotted what he thought was an officer with a sergeant and other Rangers exiting a bullet-riddled doorway and called to him.

"Major Pizzio?"

Pizzio turned toward the voice and saw Captain Barnes coming toward him.

"Yes."

"Major, I'm Captain Barnes, the lead pilot. General Bradley asked—"

"Welcome, Captain. We need to talk."

Barnes noticed more makeshift stretchers with wounded being taken out the entrance past them toward the planes.

"Major, where are they going?"

"We're going to load my dead and wounded on four of the planes."

"What! Sir, no. The planes are for—"

"I've only got seventy-eighty men left who can fight. With

ammo and weapon canisters, that's four planes."

"Sir, respectfully, I cannot—"

"Sergeant, arrest the captain."

Sergeant Rosen pointed his submachine gun with his good hand at the captain.

"Hands above your head, *sir*."

Barnes was shocked speechless. Airmen from the planes had taken notice of the situation, especially the wounded being brought to the end of one of the runways and then seeing Captain Barnes with his hands held up.

"I'm ordering you to take these wounded Rangers, partisans, and our dead out, or we'll all stay right here. And *fuck* General Bradley!"

Pizzio yelled his last words. Captain Barnes's eyes went wide, and there was no mistaking that everyone around the runways heard.

A tense silence followed. The captain's airmen had stopped all work and were now watching the confrontation. More Rangers had gathered around the scene and exchanged surprised looks, followed by smiles, when Pizzio yelled his words of extreme insubordination.

"Give the order, Captain," Pizzio said with a sneer that even frightened Rosen, especially when Pizzio pulled his Colt .45 from his holster and aimed it at Barnes's head for effect.

Barnes still didn't know what to do. He looked back at his men, who were clearly confused and gathering closer.

"Or this mission ends *now*," Pizzio added in a chilling tone that left no doubt he meant what he said.

The captain surveyed the wounded still being carried or hobbling past him toward the planes.

"Airmen!" Barnes finally yelled out. "Help load these wounded!"

Everyone relaxed. Pizzio nodded to Barnes and holstered his .45. Rosen lowered his Thompson.

"Load them into the last four planes!" Barnes added.

The airmen began helping the wounded into the C47s.

"Major, you, um, you should have told headquarters. They might have been able to send you more men, sir."

"With an invasion on, Captain? I doubt it. But then we wouldn't have had the extra planes for the wounded and dead."

“We-we don’t have a flight plan, air cover, for the planes carrying the wounded back. All the planes were supposed to go to—”

“Well, get on the goddamn radio, Captain, and get one. Get the general on the radio at *my request* and tell him to give you both or, and make this clear, *my mission is over!*”

The captain swallowed hard. “Yes, sir.”

He started to turn away and stopped suddenly, removed a sealed envelope from a pocket on his flight jacket sleeve, and offered it to Pizzio.

“Almost forgot, sir. I had started to tell you that, um, General Bradley told me to give this directly to you.”

Pizzio took the small envelope from Barnes with a frown deepening the lines on his forehead. The captain saluted and quickly walked away.

Pizzio eyed the small envelope, tore it open, and took out a folded note. He read, then reread, the handwritten words as his eyes, his entire face, showed a look of disbelief. *If you find the target and are unable to accomplish mission, kill the target. REPEAT kill target. Target must NOT remain in enemy hands.* It bore the signature of, *General Omar S. Bradley.*

“What the fuck?” Pizzio said to himself.

He took out a Zippo lighter and was about to burn the note but stopped, thought for a moment, folded it back up, and put it into one of his jacket’s breast pockets.

On the runway while the Rangers, partisans, and the few Italian soldiers left were getting themselves equipped and fitted with parachutes, Pizzio assembled Rosen, Moretta, a limping Rooney, and Giuseppe around him. He proceeded to read General Bradley’s message, then passed it around to the shocked men to check it for themselves. Giuseppe waved it away when it was offered by Rosen.

“I wanted you to see this in case I don’t make it,” Pizzio said, eyeing each of them, “so you know what the orders are if we find this general but can’t rescue him.”

“Who the hell is this fuckin’ general?” Rosen muttered.

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Chapter 15

Four C47 transport planes carried Major Pizzio, his Rangers, newly promoted Captain Moretta, Giuseppe and his partisans, and the Italian soldiers who had survived the assault on the airfield. Seventy-eight fighting men were all that was left. Their drop zone was the Sienna Valley near the crossroads town of Natolli, Italy, two hundred miles to the north. They flew low in and out of nighttime clouds lit by a partial moon. They were bounced around continuously as the unpredictable turbulence in the air increased.

In the lead plane Pizzio eyed his Rangers, along with two of Giuseppe's partisans. The Rangers appeared resigned to the situation, although that was more likely due to the fact that they were already exhausted, and for them, this was their third parachute drop. The two partisans were wide-eyed, with terrified, fish-out-of-water looks. They were noticeably uncomfortable with all the equipment strapped to their bodies or in the many pockets of the American uniforms they wore over their clothes, in addition to their main parachute.

Pizzio had decided to split up his key leaders and the men just in case the antiaircraft fire wasn't significantly suppressed by the fighter bombers accompanying them. Newly promoted Captain Moretta was in another plane mixed with some Rangers, partisans, and Italian soldiers. Sergeant Rosen was in a different plane with

Rangers and two of the Italian soldiers. His plane also had a doorway in the back of the cabin that the three large canisters with heavy weapons and other supplies would be pushed out of. Pizzio made sure they added an extra parachute this time to prevent damage when they hit the ground. Lieutenant Rooney was in the fourth plane with Giuseppe, a few Rangers, and the remaining partisans and Italian soldiers.

Pizzio was convinced he and his men were ultimately doomed, involved in a desperate ‘one-in-a-million’ suicide mission gamble if there ever was one. He had seriously considered refusing to board the planes with his men after the wounded and dead had been flown out, after General Bradley himself had intervened and approved the flight plan and provided a fighter escort. But he knew the general would have immediately relieved him, had him arrested, kept at the airfield, and replaced with either Moretta or Rooney. Then, after he was taken back to Sicily and court-martialed, he would have been given the maximum sentence short of death. And someone else, instead of him, would lead his men to their deaths, which he would never let happen.

The undeniable fact was he would rather die with his men while leading them. And, if there was a way any of them could survive, he arrogantly felt they had a better chance with him as their leader.

The fact was that as a Ranger, especially a Ranger officer, his chances of survival weren’t good no matter what. If it wasn’t this suicide mission it would be another, equally impossible, future mission anyway. So, he and his men might as well get on with it and die. It was definitely better than the disgrace his mother and father would suffer from a court-martial and knowing their son would spend the rest of his life in a military prison.

Pizzio and his men in the lead plane, piloted by Captain Barnes, heard the first, muted anti-aircraft fire in the distance as the advance fighter bomber escort engaged the German anti-aircraft guns protecting the strategic, Italian crossroads area and bridges near the town of Natolli.

The copilot, a lieutenant, came out and yelled above the engine noise. His thick Southern accent still easily came through.

“Major, you’re hearin’ the fighters drawin’ away anti-aircraft

fire!”

“How long to the drop zone now?” Pizzio yelled back.

“A few minutes! But wind and clouds getting dicey, sir! Captain Barnes said we’ll have to fly awfully low, below clouds, to drop y’all on target!”

The copilot returned to his controls.

One fuckin’ disaster after another! Pizzio screamed in his mind.

Moments later the turbulence got noticeably worse, and Pizzio saw the two partisans were vomiting and their eyes were filled with the same terrified looks his men had on their first jump. The copilot came back out.

“Major! Winds gettin’ worse! Looks like we’re flyin’ into the edge of a squall! Captain says the drop should be scrubbed!”

Pizzio shook his head. “Too fuckin’ late now, Lieutenant! Radio the other planes that we’re gonna get scattered!”

“Yes, sir!”

“And tell the captain and other pilots to do their *absolute best!* General Bradley himself ordered this mission!” And Pizzio added, yelling out as loud as he could, “Can affect the course of the damn war! Understand me?”

“Yes—yes, sir!” the copilot said with a startled look in his eyes.

Pizzio couldn’t believe he had used the very words he despised that had been used on him so many times, but he was simply desperate for something profound to say.

The four C47 troop transports continued flying in and out of heavier cloud cover, intermittently lit by moonlight, but buffeted increasingly by strong wind turbulence. They saw the lightning flash ahead and moments later heard the thunder they were flying toward, even above the engine noise.

Captain Barnes, piloting the lead plane, was greatly relieved when he saw a white signal flare arc up into the sky ahead of him. It had been sent up from the middle of the valley drop zone by the partisan group in the area exactly on time. Soon after, numerous bright white ground flares could be seen ahead that had been ignited by partisans outlining the drop zone.

The green get-ready-to-jump light activated overhead, and a

shrill buzzer-like sound cut through the engine noise and forced them to become alert, something they hadn't heard before.

Pizzio quickly stood up. He was jostled around by an even stronger jolt to the cabin, and one of the Rangers still sitting helped steady him. Pizzio moved through the cabin, repeating his orders.

"We're gonna get scattered! Just cut chutes after you hit ground! Go to rally point!"

Pizzio returned to the front near the open door and hooked up his chute cord to the overhead wire

"Hook up!" Pizzio yelled to those closest to him, and they yelled out the order in turn down through the cabin. They stood and hooked up their parachute cords and checked each other's straps and buckles. Pizzio grabbed one of the handles along the opened door.

"Move up! Get ready!" he yelled out, and the men moved forward and tightened up their line. One by one, they gave him the 'thumbs-up,' except for the two partisans, who looked terrified. The Ranger immediately behind them tapped the partisans on the shoulders and motioned to them with a thumbs-up and pointed to Pizzio. They nodded in realization and each gave a wary thumbs-up.

The green light turned red.

"Go! Go!" Pizzio yelled and immediately pushed himself against the wind through and out the open doorway. The Rangers behind him quickly followed suit with the first of the two partisans hesitating at the doorway. The Ranger behind them immediately pushed both partisans out the door and followed them into the nighttime sky as it began to rain.

Parachutists streamed out of the doors of the other C47s, including the equipment canisters with *three* chutes attached and opened.

Giuseppe, his eyes closed tightly, swore nonstop in Italian as he drifted downward, buffeted around like a rag doll by gusts of wind.

Pizzio and the men who jumped first were surprised when their boots splashed down in a foot of water within a marsh-like area that made up the extreme eastern and southern edge of the valley that was supposed to be their drop zone. They landed dangerously close to forested, rocky hills that bordered it.

“We’re in a goddamn swamp!” Pizzio yelled out.

“Cut the damn chutes! Out of the water! Head toward the forest!” Pizzio ordered, yelling as loud as he could.

The increasingly strong winds had scattered the parachutists all over. Some landed within the marshy part of the valley, some in the dry, grass-covered flatland, but others came down in the trees on the hills or on the rocky outcroppings above the tree line with the wind dragging them to serious injury or death.

Sergeant Rosen sloshed up to Pizzio.

“Lotta men came down behind us in the fuckin’ forest.”

“Sonofabitch!” Pizzio screamed in frustration. “Round up some men. Find the canisters first. Drag them into cover. Then help the men in the trees.”

“Yes, sir.”

It began to rain harder. Pizzio shook his fist up at the dark, rain cloud-filled sky, his face being splattered with pouring rain.

“Fuck you too, God!” Pizzio screamed up at the heavens.

Moretta and Giuseppe sloughed their way toward Pizzio and Lieutenant Rooney using Army ‘L’ waterproof flashlights. They were helping Rangers with their chutes and to get up out of the marsh onto firm ground at the base of the forest. Pizzio was relieved they showed up and waved them over.

“Giuseppe says this is actually a rice field way east and south of our drop area,” Moretta said, out of breath after trudging through the marsh to get to them. They were all soaked through from the rain.

“A fuckin’ rice field. Well, at least we won’t starve to death,” Pizzio said sarcastically.

Giuseppe caught up to them.

“Luck it rain,” Giuseppe said in passable English, then changed to Italian, which Moretta translated.

“Nazis less likely to have seen, heard us, with the storm and rain.”

Pizzio, even though looking absolutely miserable, reluctantly nodded in agreement with Giuseppe, who then pointed north, across the marsh to higher ground at the base of the adjoining forest.

“Those lanterns over there are partisans,” Giuseppe said

through Moretta. “They are looking for men in the trees and rocks above. They’re experienced with rescuing Allied pilots and air crews.”

“First good news I’ve had,” Pizzio said and then yelled.

“Sergeant Rosen!”

“Yes, sir!” Rosen, who was twenty yards away, yelled back. He was helping men pull one of the canisters out of the muck onto solid ground.

“Get me a count of the men who are in good enough shape to move out!”

“Will do, Major!”

“And then you and Lieutenant Rooney put together mortar and machine gun squads so they’re ready in case any kraut bastards show up.”

“On it, sir,” Rooney answered and moved off, still limping slightly but significantly improved.

Rosen and his men got the canister onto solid ground and opened it up.

In a makeshift staging area somewhat shielded from the rain under trees in the forest on the northern border of the valley, Giuseppe introduced Pizzio to the local partisan leader, Enrico Tomasi. With them were Moretta and Rooney.

Tomasi was a thirty-year-old stone mason from the town of Caserta northeast of Naples and specialized in the repair of churches and cathedrals, as his father and six generations of male ancestors before him had done. He was short, barely over five feet four inches tall, but had powerful arms and shoulders and a head that appeared affixed to his body without a neck.

“Because of the invasion, we continuously monitored our radio frequencies and picked up the message in code from Messina,” Enrico said with Moretta interpreting.

“Glad you did. Well, how far from—”

Sergeant Rosen ran up on the scene with an update.

“Only sixty-five men fully mobile, sir, including Giuseppe’s partisans and what’s left of the Italian soldiers. Eight pretty banged up. Five dead from hitting trees, the rocks, and being dragged off—most were Italians. Lost two of our guys.”

“Jesus,” Pizzio said, shaking his head.

The lull in their meeting was shattered by a partisan ‘runner’ dashing into the camp, out of breath and clearly exhausted. He had an animated conversation with Enrico. Moretta filled them in once the urgent-sounding conversation ended.

“Twenty-five kilometers to the south a German staff car with two motorcycles with side car machine gunners have taken over an inn on the edge of the town of Vincenza,” Moretta relayed.

“Twenty-five kilometers away,” Pizzio repeated to himself.

“That’s *sixteen* miles,” Lieutenant Rooney said in response.

“Impressive calculation, Lieutenant.”

“Oh, thank—” Rooney belatedly realized Pizzio’s sarcasm.

Moretta continued, “He says they’ve been there since late this afternoon. The only German vehicles heading north.”

Pizzio looked at Rosen. “Could we get there before dawn?”

Rosen’s eyebrows went up. Moretta translated. Enrico looked shocked and shook his head, ‘no’ and blurted out in Italian, “*Impossibile!*”

Giuseppe shrugged his shoulders.

No translation was necessary for Pizzio.

“That’s not a fucking answer!” he said angrily.

Enrico got the gist of Pizzio’s angry response and responded back in an indignant and animated way, using his hands. Moretta warily translated.

“The runner took nearly three hours to get here. Only six hours of night left. You, Giuseppe, and your men have not slept!”

“My Rangers could do it, damn it!” Pizzio yelled defiantly, but his words seemed to be more to convince himself and a wary-looking Rosen.

Pizzio slammed his fist into a hand.

“Surprising them at that inn is a hell of a lot easier than ambushing as they go through Natolli!”

“I agree, sir,” Rooney immediately responded.

Rosen nodded, but his face was filled with uncertainty.

Moretta finished translating for Enrico and Giuseppe, who responded to Moretta.

“They both agree it would be better to surprise them in the village. I agree also. We’ve had little rest in the last twenty-four

hours. *Can* we get there in time, Major? If they leave before we get there I, um, well, there's no way we could catch up to them."

Pizzio gave Moretta a hard look, took a deep breath, then let it out slowly the way he did when deep in thought. He started to pace and stopped a few moments later.

"If it continues to rain into the morning those SS bastards may not want to travel roads made muddy by the rain and the traffic jams going south. They would likely delay their departure."

"Possibly, but that's a big 'if,' sir."

Pizzio considered the situation for a few moments more.

"Can Enrico send runners ahead and keep us posted if they move before we get there?"

Moretta asked the question, and Enrico's eyes narrowed on Pizzio. He surprisingly answered in English, "Maybe. We are rested."

Giuseppe looked at Pizzio and spoke. All that Pizzio understood was that he was asking a question. Moretta translated.

"Giuseppe wants to know what happens if we succeed in rescuing this, um, generalissimo?"

"*Good question.*" Pizzio looked over at Rooney. "Lieutenant?"

"Well, um, the plan is to head due east over the mountains to the Adriatic coast with the help of the partisans, make radio contact with—"

"If we still have a goddamn radio that even works."

"If not, we build a bonfire on the beach with lots of smoke and hope one of the subs or planes patrolling see it before the krauts do and send a team ashore to pick us up."

"Us?"

"Um, well, the general and, um—"

"You?"

"If I survive. If not, whoever—"

"Sergeant Rosen!" Pizzio yelled, cutting Rooney off and ending the conversation.

"Yes, sir?" Rosen replied, confused about Pizzio yelling for him when he was right there.

"Are you and the men up to a double-time march over rough terrain in the rain?"

"Is the Pope fucking Catholic, sir?" Rosen said, trying to sound

more confident than he felt with his profane answer.

“Okay. Get the men ready; choose the ones you know can move fast,” Pizzio said to Rosen, and loud enough for the men nearby to hear. Pizzio was anxious about what he was ordering them to do and was unconsciously covering that up by using a louder-than-normal, almost angry, voice.

“Those who can’t, who are injured, can stay here with a couple of partisans,” Pizzio continued. “Light packs. Ponchos. Extra ammo, and lots of grenades.” He knew from experience, grenades could be the difference maker, especially in close-action combat in a village or an equalizer if they found themselves suddenly up against an unexpected superior force. They were in the middle of enemy territory, and anything could and probably would happen.

“Eat rations on the way, and full canteens!” Pizzio yelled.

“Okay, Major,” Rosen said, his response tinged with irritation.

“And forget the mortars and heavy machine guns,” Pizzio added, and Rosen looked dismayed.

“The partisans can hide whatever we can’t take and make good use of it.”

Rosen nodded unenthusiastically and started to walk away.

“Just when we finally got fuckin’ heavy firepower, we gotta dump it,” Rosen mumbled to himself.

“What was that, Sergeant?”

“Just sayin’ how lucky I am you’re my captain—*fuck*, I mean, *Major*.”

For the first time in a very long time, Pizzio actually laughed, and that broke the tension.

“At this point you call me whatever the hell you want, Sergeant.”

Don’t tempt me, sir, Rosen thought this time, instead of mumbling.

RESCUING GENERAL PATTON

Chapter 16

Enrico and Giuseppe met privately in the light of a lantern, tucked under a tree to get out of the rain. Meanwhile, their partisans got ready for the grueling dash through heavily forested hills and ravines that covered the shortest route they would have to take to Vincenza.

Enrico held a Thompson submachine gun and admired the new, deadly weapon while stuffing his pockets with extra clips.

“The American Major is crazy, no?”

“He is. But tough as Carrara marble and fearless.”

“A name like Pizzio and doesn’t speak our language. American arrogance. Their language only one that matters.”

“True, but it is their arrogance that may save this fucking world.”

“Why are you, me, our men doing this?”

“To kill fucking Germans! If the Allies don’t win, we are all dead,

Enrico!”

“This American general the Nazis have is worth our lives?”

Giuseppe shrugged his shoulders.

“I don’t know. But the Americans are willing to die to rescue him.”

It was Enrico’s turn to shrug his shoulders and sigh.

“Our beautiful country is being destroyed, Giuseppe.”

“Not so beautiful to the millions who left to go to America.”

Pizzio walked up to the two partisan leaders with Moretta.

“Ready?”

There was no need for Moretta to translate. They both nodded.

Pizzio held out his hand to the Italians. “Grazie,” he said to them.

Surprised by the gesture, they both shook his hand with somber expressions.

Pizzio turned around and waved to Sergeant Rosen and Lieutenant

Rooney, which was the signal to move out.

Two of Enrico’s partisans scouted ahead of him as he led Pizzio, his Rangers, Giuseppe and his men, with the remaining Italian soldiers mixed in. They were followed by four of Enrico’s partisans, who lagged behind to guard against a surprise attack from their rear. The pace Pizzio insisted on was brutal and pushed everyone to their limits.

They all scampered along in a single-file line. They went up and down through the forested hills and rugged ravines that led to Vincenza, made even more treacherous by the rain, and lit only by the lanterns a few of them carried. The old lanterns were fueled with olive oil, much brighter than candles, and readily available since kerosene was not.

Two of Enrico’s partisans were also spread out on both flanks to warn of any German patrols in the area. For the most part they followed well-worn ancient pathways, and even though they were enshrouded in the dark of night, they still avoided the small, centuries-old buildings that made up what could barely be called villages.

Two hours and less than four miles into the forced march the light rain stopped. It was a mixed blessing, thought Pizzio. If it continued to rain, the motorcade carrying Patton might decide not to leave until the rain stopped, but it slowed their march and made traversing the ravines even more treacherous, time-consuming, and exhausting than anticipated.

The lack of any real sleep in the last twenty-four hours—and having fought three battles since they parachuted into the Cosenza Valley the previous night—finally began taking a toll on the Rangers in spite of how tough, experienced, and well-conditioned they were.

How far could he push these men? Himself? Pizzio wondered. And for what? To rescue a fucking stupid general who managed to get himself captured? But they were here now in Italy, engaged in the fourth and final assault of what had become, step by incredible step, an unbelievable mission that you couldn't even have made up if you tried. He and all who followed him that night had no choice now but to press on with this ill-fated mission until its conclusion. It had a psychological power over all of them and was beyond his or anyone's ability to stop it. They were driven by the accumulated momentum of events, and even the Italians were caught up in it now as well.

Pizzio checked his watch. It was 2:40 a.m. Enrico had told him it would be sunrise in a little over four hours.

An hour later Rooney struggled to move past others in the line in front of him to tell Pizzio they had to stop and rest. A few moments later, when Rosen did the same, Pizzio relented and called to Enrico to stop. Rosen told Pizzio that Moretta, Giuseppe, and his partisans and Italian soldiers had fallen behind them, with some struggling even more than they were.

Pizzio met with Enrico when Moretta had caught up with the main group. He asked if there was a faster and easier path to take, even if it brought them through larger villages than those they had passed.

"No," Enrico said and shook his head with Moretta translating as he continued. "At this point, we have already hiked the hardest part of the path."

"Thank God," Pizzio responded, immediately appearing energized by what he heard, until Enrico gave him the bad news.

"Are behind schedule," Enrico said in accented but understandable English while looking at his watch, prompting Pizzio to do the same.

"We only do *nove chilometri*," Enrico said.

When Pizzio frowned, Moretta added, “Nine kilometers.”

“Can we make it before the sun’s up?”

Enrico hesitated. “Maybe you, your least tired men, can go on ahead with me, and cause a delay if your Germans start to leave, buy time until all the men arrive,” he answered through Moretta.

Pizzio nodded in agreement and left to personally share the news with the exhausted men that the worst of their hike was behind them and to recruit a group he felt could advance ahead faster with him. Sergeant Rosen was the first to volunteer and helped Pizzio pick ten others of the fittest with enough stamina left.

“If you hear gunfire, order everyone to drop packs and come running,” Pizzio told Moretta and Rooney when he met with them and Giuseppe, just before they hurried off with Enrico.

“Yes, sir,” Moretta said, and a physically drained Rooney, who was limping badly now, could only nod.

Giuseppe shrugged his shoulders. “I’ll run if still can, but I will arrive,” he said through Moretta and let a slight smile show.

Pizzio smiled back at the tough Italian he had come to greatly admire and gripped his shoulder.

“I know *you* will.”

Chapter 17

As the first barely visible rays of an emerging dawn punctured the night sky seen through the trees in the east, Pizzio used the L-light attached to his pack strap to check his watch. It showed six fifteen a.m. He was using the last of his reserves of energy to press on before total exhaustion set in. Sergeant Rosen and the men behind him, only seven of whom had still been able to keep up, were using the last of their stamina to do so.

A partisan runner suddenly burst through the forest ahead and stopped when he reached Enrico in the lead, just ahead of Pizzio. He bent over, holding his sides, and spoke excitedly. Pizzio hurried to Enrico's side. He couldn't understand what was being said in excited, rapid Italian, but it was clear something urgent and alarming had happened.

"What is it, Enrico!" Pizzio said, desperate for any information.

Enrico pointed. "*Bosh*, go!" Enrico held up two fingers. "Due chilometro!"

Pizzio frowned. "Are the Germans leaving? Two kilometers away?"

Enrico nodded frantically. "*Fretta! Fretta! Correre!*" Enrico said and made a gesture with his fingers.

"Run?"

Enrico nodded rapidly. Pizzio yelled back to Rosen.

“Drop packs! Follow me!”

Pizzio dropped his pack, and he and Enrico began running. Enrico’s scout was down on both knees, holding his sides and trying to catch his breath as they left.

Rosen yelled the order to the men behind him. They dropped their packs and followed on the run, with the frantic order causing the last of their adrenaline to kick in.

Enrico, Pizzio, and Rosen, out of breath, arrived at the edge of a forest clearing twenty yards from a low stone wall bordering a road in front of a two-story inn. The inn was made of the same stone as the wall, light and dark gray with black obsidian streaks and sharp edges where they had been broken into smaller but still-heavy rocks for building. The inn was as ancient as the village of Vincenza. Pizzio motioned everyone down and crawled to a tree next to the wall.

The German staff sedan was being moved closer to the inn’s main doorway, and two soldiers already manned one of the two motorcycles with side cars and mounted MG42 light machine guns. The driver started up the motorcycle’s engine, blue smoke exploded from its exhaust, and the driver moved it into the lead position ahead of the staff car.

Pizzio stood up, hidden by the tree, and looked past the wall. He saw movement at the inn’s recessed doorway near the sedan, and someone wearing the hat of an officer appeared in the open entrance. Pizzio immediately put up a hand and motioned for Rosen and his Rangers to move up to the wall with him. But as they neared the wall, one of the Rangers stumbled. Another tripped over him, and his submachine gun went flying forward and over the stone wall. It immediately caught the eye of the driver in the lead motorcycle. He quickly shifted a machine pistol, that had been on a strap positioned on his back while driving, around into his hands and got off the cycle. He began to move toward the wall, to see what had bounced off the top of the rock wall to the gravel road.

Pizzio gave another urgent signal, to Sergeant Rosen and the Rangers kneeling behind him, with a hand holding a grenade. They immediately understood and got grenades ready. When he pulled the pin, they did likewise, and all threw the grenades over the wall toward the vehicles.

The explosions killed the German soldier moving toward the wall, shattered the sedan's windows, flattened the front tires, and destroyed the lead motorcycle. The German manning the side car machine gun, even though wounded, managed to begin firing wildly toward Pizzio, Enrico, and the Rangers. Pizzio killed him with a burst from his Thompson, and Rosen and Enrico riddled the driver in the sedan, who got out of the car firing a machine pistol. The lead motorcycle's leaking gas tank suddenly burst into flame and exploded.

Pizzio, Rosen, and the Rangers jumped the wall and rushed the sedan. Enrico stayed behind to cover them.

The German officer at the doorway fired a Luger pistol, hitting one of the Rangers, but he dove back in as the thick-planked recessed door and stone around it was riddled with submachine gun fire.

Pizzio, Rosen, and his men used the sedan for cover while they were shot at through windows on either side of the door. Assisted by Enrico, they directed withering fire at the windows with their submachine guns, allowing Pizzio and Rosen to rush the recessed doorway.

"Sergeant, send two Rangers around back in case there's another exit, to make sure no one escapes."

Rosen nodded and moved away under the window on the left and called to the two Rangers on the end of the sedan closest to him. He gave them the order, and they crawled to the inn's wall to avoid fire from the windows and ran off to check for an exit in the back of the inn. Rosen returned to Pizzio at the doorway. Enrico yelled and signaled he was moving back from the wall to meet the others soon to arrive, and the Rangers still behind the sedan gave him cover fire.

Inside the Inn, beyond the doorway, the two other motorcycle soldiers, the staff car driver, and the soldier-guard who sat next to the driver and held the Steyr MP34 submachine gun, were the first line of defense for SS Obersturmführer Detrick Gutner and his prisoner, who had moved back into an adjoining dining room.

Gutner held his pistol to the head of a noticeably emaciated-looking Patton on crutches in front of him.

"How fucking pathetic this is. Your friends cannot rescue you. I'll kill you first!" a shaking, desperate-looking Gutner said into

Patton's ear.

"Either way... they, they will have *succeeded* . . . you stupid sonofabitch!" Patton replied, wincing in pain as he did so.

Gutner was incensed. He pressed the Luger harder against Patton's head and was joined by the officer who fled the doorway just before it was riddled by bullets. He was a Wehrmacht lieutenant from the POW camp who had been assigned to accompany Gutner by the commandant. He was returning from a back room.

"I checked the back exit, Obersturmführer. I saw Americans taking up positions behind trees."

Their attention was galvanized by the sudden eruption of automatic weapons fire outside, which they recognized as the distinctive sounds of German weapons.

On Vincenza's main road just fifty yards away from the inn, the explosions and sound of the firefight at the inn alerted some German units who were on the march early that morning. They had been passing by, going south to meet the allied invasion. They quickly responded to what they assumed was a partisan ambush targeting the German vehicles parked at the inn.

Pizzio and Rosen saw the German troops advancing down the Inn's side road toward them. They began directing their fire toward them, and moments later, saw Enrico leading Moretta, Rooney with the rest of the Rangers and Italians arriving on the run. They had dropped packs as Pizzio had ordered the moment they heard the first gunfire.

Pizzio yelled for them to take up blocking positions along the wall and tree line that extended out along the inn's side road to the Vincenza main road.

"Grenades," Pizzio urgently yelled out again, and they launched a grenade attack that stopped the badly organized, advancing German troops, killing or wounding several. This caused them to retreat or scramble to cover behind the wall on the other side of the inn's access road. Pizzio and his men followed up their grenade attack with sustained submachine gun and BAR fire.

Rosen, though, kept an eye on the Inn's entrance, but his attention shifted the moment he heard the sound that all infantry dreaded—that of a *tank*.

It was a Panzer II, a light tank, with just a three-man crew, the smallest in the German mechanized arsenal but still deadly. It turned into the inn road but found it far too narrow to push through. The stone walls, although low, were still too thick and solidly built and just high enough to prevent the light tank—with its narrow, light tracks built more for speed than climbing—from surmounting or crushing them. But it was still able to support the advancing German infantry with the small auto cannon mounted in its turret, together with a machine gun fired coaxially by the commander also seated in the turret.

Rosen braved the German fire to jump back over the wall.

“Get that bazooka up here *now!*” he screamed at the top of his lungs toward the Rangers still emerging from the tree line.

Moretta, Rooney, Giuseppe, and arriving Rangers and partisans quickly joined Enrico and his men and secured blocking positions on the stone wall on their side of the road. They were only a few feet from the Germans behind the wall on the other side of the inn’s narrow access road. They also quickly took up positions in the forest on their right flank that led right into the main road. It became quickly obvious they were up against a rapidly expanding German force.

At the inn’s entrance, Pizzio yelled for more Rangers to support the two covering the inn’s back entrance to block any German infantry advance from that direction. Several Rangers broke away, jumped the fence, and hurried around to the back of the inn. They drew fire from the windows, and one Ranger was hit, fell, tried to crawl for cover, but was shot again and killed.

The Ranger with the bazooka and his partner, with only one crate of three rockets, arrived, and Rosen quickly moved them into position. They used the cover of the forest on the right flank close to their side of the wall and less than twenty yards from the light tank. Their first shot went over the tank and exploded on the main road. The tank crew did not see the Rangers with the bazooka until they made the first shot that missed. They could not turn the turret in time before the second shot hit the turret in its vulnerable point, the space where the turret connected to the tank base. It exploded into the commander’s compartment, killed him instantly, and filled the tank with smoke and shrapnel, causing the other two wounded

crew members to flee through a rear escape hatch.

The devastating cannon and machine-gun fire from the tank had finally been neutralized, but only after the crew had managed to kill or wound eleven Rangers and Italians. Nevertheless, it did allow the survivors to briefly go on the offensive and let Rosen leave and work his way back to Pizzio, who had taken cover with three Rangers behind the sedan. Pizzio gave Rosen a questioning look.

“What the hell was that?”

“What, sir?”

“A bazooka after I ordered no heavy weapons?”

“Only one. Just couldn’t give up the bazooka, Major.”

Pizzio smiled. “I’ll have to court-martial your ass when this is over.”

“Would expect no less, sir. We’ll probably attend together.”

“Ain’t that the fuckin’ truth,” Pizzio said, and they actually shared a laugh.

A moment later they were being shot at again from the windows on either side of the Inn’s doorway. They, along with three Rangers, returned fire with their submachine guns, which allowed Pizzio and Rosen to rush the doorway while the other Rangers provided cover fire.

Pizzio, wedged into the recess of the doorway, pulled on the iron handle and partially opened the door, which attracted a volley of MP34 submachine-gun fire. He let the handle go and the door closed.

Rosen motioned Pizzio out of the way and held up a roll of black friction tape from a zippered pocket, something every Ranger carried. Pizzio nodded, and Rosen taped grenades against the top and bottom hinges of the heavy oak planked door.

“Move under the windows against the wall, Major.”

Pizzio moved and laid down facing away, hands on his helmet. Rosen pulled the pins and took his cover position on the other side of the recessed door.

Two nearly simultaneous explosions obliterated the hinges, and what was left of the heavy door’s planks fell backward onto the ground, opening the inside of the inn’s dining room to view.

Patrons and staff had taken cover under tables. An Italian waitress behind a turned-over table in a corner peered up at Pizzio

and pointed back to a connecting room.

Pizzio motioned to Sergeant Rosen and the three Rangers still behind the sedan, to take up cover positions behind him near the doorway.

“I’ll dive in behind a table to draw fire, and you follow immediately and kill them before they can react.”

“Right behind ya, Major.”

Pizzio stood and dived into the room toward a table.

The sedan guard with the MP34 and the two other German motorcycle soldiers fired at Pizzio, who rolled the instant he hit the floor. He initially avoided the bullets and succeeded in causing a distraction by drawing their fire, but then took a bullet in his right side.

Literally a fraction of a second later, the Germans were killed by Sergeant Rosen and the Rangers, who rushed in as Pizzio scrambled for cover behind a table. The brief exchange of close-quarter gunfire resulted in one of the Rangers killed and another wounded. Moments later the officer in the adjoining dining room fired from the entryway of the connecting room and wounded the other Ranger before Rosen killed him with a burst from his submachine gun.

The smoke and smell of cordite lingered in the air as Rosen quickly checked Pizzio’s wound.

“It went through,” he told Pizzio.

Pizzio pulled a bandage out of a leg pocket as Gutner yelled out in English in his accented voice. The tone betrayed his desperation and fear.

“I have a gun to your General Patton’s head! Leave or I kill him! I’m not afraid to die!”

Pizzio exchanged an utterly shocked look with an equally shocked Rosen as the now-distracted sergeant tried to apply sulfa.

“That’s-that’s Colonel Mueller you have!” Pizzio yelled back.

“I *know* it is Patton! Why would you be here otherwise? This is suicide!”

Rosen finished tying the bandage around Pizzio’s waist over the wound as the sound of the battle raged outside.

“Fucking General *Patton*?” Pizzio said to himself, but loud enough for Rosen to hear.

“How, Major? Patton just, um, just addressed the troops—”

“General, if you are Patton, you’ll know my name. I’m Ranger Major *Peter Pizzio*!”

Patton and Gutner, in his half-buttoned SS uniform, were on the floor. An overturned table provided cover for Gutner, who had his knee on Patton’s neck while also pressing his Luger tightly against his head. Patton’s pain was added to by another overturned table on top of his broken ankle.

Patton frowned deeply. “Pizzio?” Patton responded in a hoarse, strained voice as loud as he could.

“Pizzio, Pizzio, Pi—” Realization dawned on Patton’s face. “I ordered you court-martialed!”

Pizzio looked at Rosen and nodded. “It is fucking Patton.” Rosen shook his head in disbelief.

“Yes, and General Bradley sent me and my Ranger company to rescue your fucking ass!”

“Nice of . . . nice of Brad to-to send you, Major!”

It was evident that Patton had forced out the words in a manner that made it readily apparent he was having difficulty breathing.

“Quiet!” Gutner screamed at Patton. He had heard enough. “Leave immediately or I will execute him!” he yelled to Pizzio with desperation in his voice. The SS interrogator had a frantic, wide-eyed look, and his hand holding the pistol shook.

A Ranger dove into the room as bullets peppered and ricocheted off the doorway stone, and he called to Pizzio.

“Major! We can’t hold much longer!”

“You have failed, Major!” Gutner yelled upon hearing the news.

Pizzio ignored Gutner.

“General! I have orders to kill you if we can’t rescue you!”

“Un-understand, Major!” Patton hoarsely yelled back.

“You, you are bluffing!” Gutner yelled with the frantic, halting manner and tone of someone who doubted what he is saying.

“Sir, if he doesn’t surrender immediately, we’ll toss grenades! Hopefully he shoots you first, General.”

“You’re insane!” Gutner screamed.

“Follow . . . your orders, son!”

“Grenades ready, men! Pull pins—”

“NOO!” Gutner screamed again. “WAIT!”

A moment later a Luger pistol hit the floor near Patton’s casted foot under the table. Pizzio bolted into the room with his submachine gun pointed at the cowering Gutner. A relieved Patton, bandaged eye, drawn face, hollow eyes, mussed gray hair, a shell of the general he remembered seeing, tried to move the table off his leg with his other foot so he could upright himself. Pizzio immediately lifted it off.

“Don’t kill me! Please!” Gutner pleaded with a terror-stricken look on his face.

“I won’t kill you,” Pizzio said and hit Gutner in the head with the butt of his Thompson, knocking him out. Patton moved himself around and grabbed Gutner’s Luger pistol. A disgusted-looking Pizzio, with Rosen’s help, got the cringing Patton up on his good leg. Rosen left Patton holding onto Pizzio as he and the other Rangers in the room checked the German soldiers to make sure they were dead and secured the adjoining kitchen.

Pizzio glared at the general. “Goddamn it, if I knew it was *you*, I would have rather gone to prison than obey orders, *sir*.”

“Can’t say I blame you. Fucking wartime, son.”

Rosen kicked open the back door and yelled out to the Rangers among the trees who guarded the back entrance and were barely holding off Germans attempting to flank the back of the inn.

“Move back around to the front! We’re leavin’!”

Chapter 18

Pizzio roughly and reluctantly helped Patton hobble to the front entrance, the sound of fighting outside growing louder and more intense. He peered out of the doorway and saw his Rangers and the Italians engaged in a furious firefight, barely holding off the German troops.

As Rosen moved back through the dining room from the rear entrance, he heard Gutner moaning. He looked down at the black uniform-clad SS officer with his skull and crossbones patches clearly visible on his open coat.

“You Nazi, *Gestapo* piece of *shit*!” He gave him a burst from his submachine gun.

“What’s happening, sergeant!” Pizzio yelled.

“That Gestapo bastard woke up and was going for his pistol, sir!”

Pizzio and Patton exchanged a knowing look, with Patton holding the Luger in his hand.

Bullets ricocheted off the stone around the doorway.

“General, you gotta lay the fuck down now.”

Patton looked surprised.

“I’ll pull you along the ground until we get to the stone wall. Only way with all the damn bullets flying around.”

Patton noticed the bloody bandage on Pizzio’s side.

“Sure you can do it with that wound?”

“Don’t worry about me. Just get fucking down. *Now!*”

“Let’s go, then!” Patton yelled above the escalating sound of gunfire as he slid against the wall down to the floor, letting out an agonized moan as he did so.

Rosen and the Rangers went out first to cover them. Pizzio immediately followed, pulling Patton by his collar into the middle of the raging firefight just twenty yards away. He jerked Patton over the rough cobblestones that lined the entrance for a few feet in front of the entrance until transitioning to the gravel and potholes of the narrow driveway. He did it with a certain grim satisfaction as he heard Patton moan in agony, as his leg and foot in the cast bounced on the irregular surface while Pizzio pulled and jerked him along, all the while firing the Thompson in his other hand.

“Gotta tell you, sir . . . I’ve, I’ve wanted to kill you many times!”

“You’re doing . . . a hell . . . of a good job of it now, goddammit, Major!” Patton replied, forcing out the words between grimaces of pain.

The Rangers from the back of the inn attempted to join up with them as they fought a rearguard action, but they were soon overwhelmed by German infantry who fired on Pizzio, Rosen, and the Rangers with them as Pizzio desperately pulled Patton all the way around the bullet-riddled sedan and to the wall.

Attacking Germans coming at them cut down the two Rangers providing protection for Pizzio and Patton, and Rosen killed two with perfectly aimed submachine gun bursts and forced the others to retreat to cover back behind the inn. His action bought precious time for Pizzio to get Patton to the stone wall, lift him onto it, and push him over. He heard Patton’s muffled moan when he landed. A moment later Patton grabbed the top of the wall, the Luger still in one hand, and pulled himself up to his knees.

Pizzio banged a new magazine into his Thompson and began firing along with Rosen to keep the Germans massing at the side of the inn at bay. Patton surprised them by expertly killing two of the enemy who appeared at the inn’s open entrance.

“This fuckin’ Luger beats the hell out of my guns!”

Pizzio and Rosen’s machine-gun fire caused other attacking German soldiers to scatter and fall back when they tried to go around

the wall through the trees on their left flank.

“Help me pull the general back into the trees, Carmine!”

Rosen was surprised by Pizzio using his first name. *He’s never done that before*, Rosen thought. But he immediately did as ordered and helped pull Patton away. They both aimed short bursts of their guns at Germans taking cover behind the wall they fled. Patton managed to kill another German who stuck his head up a bit too high to take a shot at them.

“Goddamn I love this gun. Wonder how many bullets left?”

Once they reached the cover of the trees, Pizzio jammed a new magazine into his submachine gun and gave Patton his .45.

“Just in case. For the other hand.”

Patton took it and nodded.

“Stay with the general,” Pizzio said to Rosen, who was also reloading. “I’ll be back with some men.”

But before Pizzio could leave, several Germans appeared on their left in the trees and began firing, but out of nowhere grenade explosions stopped their attack. It was Giuseppe.

He had seen Pizzio and Rosen’s desperate plight and ran over to help them. He handed them a couple of magazines for their guns from a russet sack around his shoulder and gave each a grenade.

“So, he sonofabitch generalissimo we die for?” Giuseppe said in the best English he could manage, pointing to Patton with his gun.

“Yeah. I’m that sonofabitch,” Patton said and smiled weakly.

“Stay here. I’m pullin’ everyone back now,” Pizzio ordered, and then ran off through the cover of trees, cutting over to the wall where the last of the Rangers and Italians were holding their own against the bulk of German infantry on their right flank. He reached Moretta and Rooney.

“We got the general. Moretta, pull every other man back to the forest where Rosen and Giuseppe are. I’ll stay here with Rooney and Enrico and we’ll cover you.”

Moretta started to say something, but Pizzio angrily cut him off, “Now! Go now, damn it!”

Moretta quickly did as ordered and moved along, tapping the shoulder of every other man, yelling for them to pull back with him. They executed the retreat perfectly while Pizzio and the others provided cover fire. When Pizzio saw the Germans begin to advance

from their positions, he yelled out, “Grenades on my order!”

The men readied the last of their grenades.

“Pull pins! Throw!” In the next instant, he yelled, “Pull back now!” as the grenades exploded and disrupted the German advance.

Pizzio lagged behind, covering the men with his submachine gun. Rooney saw this and moved up to help him just as Pizzio got shot in the shoulder. As the major went down, he also got hit in the leg.

Rooney yelled out for help. Rosen and Giuseppe, who had already moved Patton back within the protective shield, as it were, of the men who had already fallen back, ran up to cover Rooney, who was helping Pizzio crawl back to the cover of the trees.

The remaining Rangers, and especially the Italians—partisans and former soldiers alike—fought valiantly to hold off the massing Germans as they pulled back to the cover of the trees. Rooney, with Rosen’s help, quickly pulled Pizzio into the tree cover with the other Rangers. Giuseppe provided more cover fire for them as the battle grew more intense by the second.

A medic ripped open Pizzio’s shirt, checked his shoulder, and pulled out a bandage from his bag.

“Hold this on to stop the bleeding, sir.”

The medic cut open Pizzio’s pant leg and checked that wound. Seeing it wasn’t bad, he went back to work on the shoulder.

“Leg okay. Shoulder’s not.”

“Just stop the fuckin’ bleeding!—Rosen!”

“Right here, sir!” Rosen yelled back and moved to Pizzio.

“Carmine, need ammo and grenades. Take some men and run back to the dropped packs. Bring up all you can carry. Hurry!”

Rosen tapped a few Rangers on their helmets and motioned to follow him, and they all dashed off.

“Help me up!” Pizzio yelled out.

Giuseppe heard him and fell back and tried to help him stand as the medic awkwardly continued to tie a bandage around his exposed shoulder, but Pizzio’s leg gave out.

At the same time, Patton killed another German who suddenly appeared through the trees on their left, and with the second shot the Luger clicked empty. Patton tossed it away and switched Pizzio’s .45 to his right hand. He expertly shot another German soldier taking

cover behind a tree. Rangers with Patton immediately raked the area with automatic weapons fire and scattered other Germans seen moving forward in the woods on their left flank.

The sustained gunfire so close caused Pizzio to frantically look around behind him, and he was shocked to see Patton standing up against one of the trees now, the .45 pointed and moving back and forth, covering the forest on the left, with Rangers on either side of him.

“Rooney! Moretta!”

“What, sir!” Rooney yelled back.

“Rooney, you, Moretta, Enrico, and his partisans get the general the fuck down and outta here!”

Moretta was finally able to move to join them.

“Captain, get Enrico and his men, take Rooney, and carry the general across the ravine while we can still hold off the krauts!”

“The ravine?” Moretta questioned.

“So you can get above the tree line over the ridge and start up into the mountains while we can still cover you, then head east to the coast.”

“Yes, all right, sure. Understand, Major.”

“Even if they overrun us, which they will, you’ll have the high ground. Why would they follow? They don’t know we’re rescuing fucking Patton!” Everyone nodded except for Rooney.

“We could cover you from the ravine ridge while you cross over and-”

Pizzio angrily cut Rooney off. “NO! You must keep moving! Anyway, I can’t climb now.”

They looked at each other, realizing what Pizzio was saying.

“Someone, get me over to Patton.”

Giuseppe immediately and easily picked Pizzio up in his arms, surprising him, demonstrating remarkable and deceptive strength. *He’s one hell of a tough old man*, Pizzio thought.

Giuseppe set Pizzio down against the tree next to Patton, who Rooney had convinced and helped to sit back down against the same tree that Pizzio was now against. They exchanged a brief but intense look. The general held up the .45 in his hand. “Luger ran out of bullets. If we can’t make it, I’ll make sure Bradley’s orders are followed.”

Pizzio erupted at the general, totally surprising him.

“Goddamn it, General! Nothing would make me happier than a fuckin’ bullet in your head, but now you’ve got to make this all mean something!” Pizzio winced in pain from his wounds as he tried to sit up straighter.

“You got to make it to that submarine, goddamn it! A hell of a lot of good men have died for *you*, General!”

Patton smiled. “You and I are two real sonsofbitches, aren’t we? And you’re one goddamn good soldier,” Patton said and saluted Pizzio.

“I’ll do my fucking best to follow your orders, son.”

Firing and explosions got louder and closer. The Germans were using grenades now too.

“MOVE OUT, NOW!” Pizzio screamed and then yelled, “Give me a Thompson!”

Giuseppe handed him one and stayed at his side while the medic finished bandaging Pizzio’s leg.

Two of Enrico’s partisans took hold of Patton and, with his arms around their necks, they swiftly moved the general away toward the ravine twenty yards behind them, with Enrico leading the way and his surviving partisans covering the flanks.

“Good luck, Major,” Lieutenant Rooney said. Moretta just nodded somberly, knowing Pizzio and the Rangers and Italians left would soon be overrun.

Moretta motioned to Giuseppe with his gun for him to join them, and the partisan leader shook his head. His eyes locked with the old Italian’s for a few moments. Like Pizzio, he had come to genuinely like and respect him. He just nodded to him, and they quickly departed without saying anything further to provide the rear guard for those moving Patton away.

Pizzio focused back to the battle still being fought in front of him. The intensity had deescalated almost to a lull that Pizzio knew simply meant the Germans were regrouping and repositioning for the final assault. He scanned the area and was surprised to see that Giuseppe was still there, near him, crouching by a tree.

“Why the hell didn’t you go with them?” Pizzio asked with genuine concern.

Giuseppe understood and shrugged his shoulders.

“Fucking stupido, like you.”

They smiled weakly at each other, and nothing more was said.

At the bottom of the ravine, Rooney and a partisan were the first to climb upward to get a foothold to provide cover fire if needed, so Enrico and the other partisans could form a human ladder of sorts with two lines up the side of the ravine. Once in position they took turns pulling Patton, using only one leg, up from the two men on either side who passed him along to the other two. They kept reextending the two lines upward until the exhausted Patton, the partisans, and, finally, Rooney and Moretta were over the ravine’s ridge line.

In the meantime, Pizzio and Giuseppe had rejoined the remaining Rangers and Giuseppe’s few surviving partisans and Italian soldiers, who Pizzio realized Giuseppe would never have abandoned. Pizzio could walk now, but with a severe limp, but it was better than crawling around as he had to do earlier. He checked the magazine in his submachine gun, frowned, reached along his web belt, and found that all the slots were empty. He checked the pockets on his pant legs and found one magazine still left. They were all dangerously low on ammo, and the last of their grenades had been used repelling the previous assault. Giuseppe moved among his men and distributed what ammo he could salvage from bodies as well as the German rifles, machine pistols, and ammo he gathered up and dragged to them.

Two minutes later, the Germans launched another assault on their position.

It escalated quickly into a furious firefight. Pizzio yelled repeatedly over the noise of the battle for them to begin falling back into the forest and form a tighter and tighter semicircle, using trees for protection. Pizzio jammed home his last magazine into his Thompson.

“This is it!” he yelled. “If you got a bayonet, get ready to use it!”

Then they heard the yells of Sergeant Rosen behind them.

“Major! Ammo! Grenades!”

Rosen and his three Rangers, loaded down with packs that had

been emptied and filled with taped, double ammo clips, magazines, and grenades, rushed in and threw the precious packs of munitions among them.

“Grenades first!” Pizzio yelled immediately. “Just pull pins and throw at will anywhere ahead and to the sides!”

Moments later, the intermittent groupings of multiple explosions followed until all the grenades were thrown. Sustained automatic weapons fire followed, intermixed with the agonized cries of more men being wounded or killed.

The sounds of the battle raging below began to fade for the group escorting Patton out of harm’s way. They moved faster once they connected with a well-worn trail that switch-backed farther up the mountain. Moretta and the others knew full well now that the fainter sounds of weapons and explosions signaled the last stand of Pizzio, Giuseppe, and the men still with them. They forced themselves to focus on completing their mission to reach the coast with General Patton, and they pushed their exhausted bodies onward and upward.

Chapter 19

On November 3rd, 1943 at midday, a man limped along a mostly empty London sidewalk. He wore a gray Burberry topcoat and a narrow fedora in a matching color pulled low over his forehead. An umbrella was held against a light misty rain, and in the other hand was a cane. He came to a corner and waited patiently for a black wrought iron framed stoplight to flip to the white pedestrian sign allowing him to cross over to the wider walkway that led through the open gate into London's Saint James Park.

He entered one of the open gates and approached a fair-sized crowd. They were mostly older Londoners, appearing to be of modest means. Evenly mixed between male and female, they were loosely gathered with umbrellas in front of a makeshift, covered stage where military officers were speaking. The surrounding Plane trees, their leaves having turned brown and falling in the light rain almost made the umbrellas unnecessary, but the onlookers were taking no chances.

It had taken him longer to walk the short distance from his Mayfair hotel than he anticipated, and he was alarmed when he arrived to hear polite applause, muted somewhat by the crowded umbrellas, just as a British officer finished speaking.

"Thank you, Colonel Ashforth, for your encouraging remarks. And we thank you for your service," said the event's host, a very young-looking British lieutenant from the Army's Home Guard

Public Affairs Section.

There was a brief pause, as Colonel Ashforth took his seat with three other Army officers, one British and two Americans, sitting on the platform under the canvas cover. The host continued.

“It is now my singular honor to introduce our next speaker, whose fame and victorious exploits in North Africa and Sicily precede him, General George S. Patton.”

The man was immediately relieved that he hadn’t missed the one speaker he had made such a considerable effort to come out to see and hear but frowned with disappointment and muttered under his breath in an accent that was distinctly American, “What the *hell* kind of introduction was that?”

General Patton stood up on the platform and moved to the front and center of the stage. He was greeted with the same muted, polite applause and began speaking.

As the man with the cane and umbrella listened, his expression changed and revealed he was impressed, but not just by what he heard.

“*Goddamn*, he does look and sound more like me *than me*,” the real General George S. Patton said to himself, genuinely and profoundly impressed, as the light rain suddenly became a heavy downpour, scattering the crowd and bringing down most of the remaining leaves on the trees.

Chapter 20

John Harding drove his Jeep along a picturesque rural road in northern Virginia in the tranquility of an early morning made even more stunning by the array of fall colors that were at their peak. The scene was further enhanced, as always, by the white fencing that hugged the contours of the gentle undulations in the pastureland of the area's famed horse country.

He had driven the route on more occasions than he could count since the first time he made the trip, but this time he once again felt the same excitement and nearly overwhelming sense of anticipation he had experienced the very first time.

He turned into the now-familiar driveway of the colonial home he had come to know so well, parked behind the empty horse trailer, and got out of his car with his bulging briefcase. He hurried to the house's entrance where, as always, Julia Patton Walton was there to greet him. This time they kissed before he entered the house.

"It's in your briefcase?" Julia asked anxiously.

"Yes," Harding answered and smiled in a way that exuded a sense of accomplishment but in a tone that also conveyed relief.

Julia sat on a sofa in a study just off the living room with a view out a newer, larger side window than the others. It allowed an expansive panorama of her home's white-fenced pastureland bordered by a truly stunning mix of trees at the peak of their fall

splendor, with the morning sun giving them a breathtaking, luminous glow. She sat on the center cushion of the sofa and had a thick, unbound manuscript on the cushion on the right side of her that she periodically took pages from and, after reading, deposited in the empty box the manuscript had been in on her other side. She was totally absorbed in their contents, completely oblivious to the stunning changes in autumn colors as the sun advanced across the landscape.

It was nine o'clock that evening when Julia finished reading the manuscript. She had taken breaks and had lunch and a light, quick early dinner with an apprehensive Harding, who busied himself in the interim with taking on the task of cataloging and then rearranging the books in Julia's impressive family library—including boxes of books that hadn't seen the light of day in years. They quickly rekindled his archivist passion and skills that were always easily summoned, and the task was the perfect distraction he desperately needed that day.

Julia had refrained from discussing what she read in detail during her breaks and meals, and simply told Harding, with tears welling in her eyes, that what he had written was profoundly moving and as riveting as any book she had ever read. The expression on his face was instantly one of both immense satisfaction and relief, upon hearing her heartfelt words.

Julia placed the last page of the manuscript neatly on the stack in the box on the cushion and then turned the box over so the manuscript came out with the title showing. Then she put it back in the box the same way she had received it from Harding. She didn't cover it. Instead, she just looked down at the title of the manuscript for a while, then set it aside, stood up, and moved to the window. She stared out at the blackness of night beyond the glass, still mesmerized by the story she had just read. She wiped away tears with a monogrammed lace handkerchief clutched tightly in her hand.

"My lord, how extraordinary . . ."

It was the *Epilogue* that had moved her profoundly and

produced the most tears, a steady flow when she had read those last words Harding had written. Homages to the men who sacrificed so much so her grandfather could play the crucial role in World War II that he was destined for, and about whom the world and, in almost all cases, even their families had known nearly nothing about.

Julia turned from the window and called into the adjoining living room.

“John! John!”

A few moments later Harding entered the study with his reading glasses low on his nose and a glass of wine and a sandwich in his hands. Julia dabbed away the last tear.

“I finished, darling. I-I really don’t know what to say . . . except you are to be congratulated. The last pages brought tears to my eyes. It’s a magnificently told, truly extraordinary story.”

“Only told because of you.”

“Yes, but *you* solved the mystery my dear mother, then I, lived with for so long.”

Julia continued while she turned back to the window and stared at the blackness beyond.

“And your epilogue, especially, was very moving, John.”

“Thank you. I felt the story would not have been complete without it.”

Julia gave a long, deep sigh and slowly turned back at Harding.

“My grandfather was a . . . a complicated man,” she said in a hesitant, measured way seemingly aware of her understatement.

“Yes, he was. Infuriatingly so,” Harding replied with a deep frown and nodding as he did so.

There were a few moments of silence between them as Harding handed her his wineglass and pulled another chair up next to her and sat down. She took a sip of the wine and broke the lull.

“How, how were you able to tell such a detailed story, the dialogue, recreation of events, and—”

“We dug out a lot of information that had been secret and released at various times in various forms,” Harding quickly explained. “Other diaries, Bradley’s own reports to Eisenhower, Rooney’s after-action report submitted directly to Bradley, and, the key to everything really, one written by Major Pizzio.” Harding stood now and also stared out at the blackness beyond the window,

his thoughts far removed from the room.

“Remarkable that he was even able to write it,” Julia added.

“Yes. And, of course, the totally unexpected manuscript I became aware of that a family thought was fiction, an unfinished novel, that sat in a drawer and was actually a memoir,” Harding said with a sense of awe in his voice and tone that he had found it. He let out a tired sigh.

“I’ll tell you all about it after I make you a very late dinner and we get a good night’s sleep. You must be tired.”

Julia stood up. “Not anymore, dear,” Julia said with a wide-eyed expression, and they shared a laugh that faded into a serious, contemplative quiet that had engulfed the room.

Over a late dinner that turned out to be an easily prepared early breakfast, scrambled eggs and slices of reheated ham, Harding continued with what had been an ongoing discussion.

“And there’s something else I discovered during my research that’s not in what you read.”

“Really? What?”

“The reason Peter Pizzio joined the Army in 1941, before the US was in the war, and then volunteered for the newly formed Ranger battalion.”

Julia looked at Harding with rapt curiosity.

“He had taken a job with the New York electric company out of high school and after his apprenticeship became a high-tension lineman. He repaired a downed line in a neighborhood in Harlem after a storm, and the repair connection he did apparently failed and electrocuted three children playing stickball in an alley. After the kids’ funerals, he joined the Army without telling anyone.”

“My God.”

“I don’t think he ever got over it.”

“That’s explains so much,” Julia said softly, tears welling.

“Yes, it does. And there’s something that I need to do now that you can help me with.”

Two days later, John Harding and Julia Patton Walton took the *Carolinian* commuter train from Washington, DC, to New York

City. They got a cab outside Grand Central Station. Harding gave the taxi driver a note with an address in Queens. When they entered the Queensboro Bridge, Julia, who held Harding's hand as she gazed somberly out the taxi's window, let out a deep sigh.

"It's been a long time since I last visited New York."

"Happy memories?"

Julia hesitated before answering, "Some."

Harding looked over at her and squeezed her hand.

"I'm glad you're with me."

Julia turned to him.

"I'm glad I am too. But I'm more nervous than I thought I'd be."

"Me too."

When the taxi exited the bridge it only took ten minutes to arrive at the address Harding had given the driver. He paid the cabbie, who gave him back his note, and helped Julia out of the taxi.

They found themselves standing on a street lined on both sides with typical Queens bungalows. They were in front of one, with well-maintained green-and-white striped metal awnings over the front picture window and doorway that had probably been on the house since the fifties. Harding, carrying his briefcase, went up the steps to the door and rang the doorbell while Julia waited below on the walkway below the first step.

A face appeared at the door's glass viewing panel and quickly opened.

Harding and Julia sat on a sofa in the small living room with Carmine Pizzio and his wife, Teresa, both in their late sixties, along with Carmine's sister, Adelina, who was five years younger. They were all close to the same age. They had introduced themselves, shook hands, and engaged in some small talk. It was clear Julia's full name, which she used, didn't spark any reaction or recognition. Carmine had graciously welcomed them to their home and commented about their feelings and discussions while awaiting Harding and Julia's visit. They all had somber expressions, with eyes that alternated between sad and curious.

"Of course, as I already said, we were all just so surprised,

shocked really, by your call and that you had information about our father's involvement in WWII."

"Still are," Adelina added with a slight smile but one that couldn't mask her anxiety.

"I certainly understand," Harding replied, nodding as he did so.

"Like I told you on the phone," Carmine continued, "my father just never said much about the war."

"He was active in his VFW post until he died, though," Teresa added.

Adelina jumped in, "We did know he fought in North Africa, Sicily, and Italy."

"Yeah, our mom saved his letters. But the letters never said much, if anything at all, about the war or what he was doing."

"They met on Dad's first leave in September of 1941," Adelina added, then burst into tears. Julia quickly offered her handkerchief from her purse as Teresa put her arm around her.

"I'm okay, thanks," Adelina said, quickly recovering.

"He was just the most wonderful man and father," Adelina added, wiping away tears.

"And when we were teenagers," Carmine began, "we started asking my mother questions—"

Adelina interrupted Carmine through her tears, "Because my father wouldn't ever answer them."

"She told us he had been a prisoner of war," Carmine continued, "and had been badly wounded, but she said *not* to tell him that she told us."

"When I was older, I asked him quite directly to tell me what he did in the war. I wanted to know," Adelina said. "And he would always patiently and very nicely say that one day he'd tell me all about it. But, of course, he never did."

"He wasn't patient or nice when I kept pestering him," Carmine quickly added, and they all shared a laugh. "But others we knew, uncles and family friends who were also all in the war, they didn't talk about it either. So, we really didn't think it was all that unusual."

"I remember your mother saying," Teresa chimed in, "that when the war ended, all her friends and relatives said their men, as

well as them, just wanted to forget about the war and get on with their lives, get married, raise families, enjoy life.”

“Many felt that way—most in fact, of those I knew personally,” Harding interjected.

“He didn’t save any mementos, either,” Adelina added with a sadness in her voice over something denied them. “Found nothing after he passed away.”

“But he did stay in touch with the family of an army buddy for a while, apparently a best friend, Carmine Rosen, who died in the war,” Teresa said.

“The Rosens lived in Brooklyn. My dad never said it, but I’m sure he named me after him.”

“Your mother thought so too. She told me that,” Teresa said and added, “I had asked her one day if you were named after a relative, a grandfather, and she told me she was sure it was after your dad’s army friend.”

“Well, he told me that he just always liked that name, and that was that,” Carmine said wistfully.

“Well, when we went through his safe deposit box, we found a canceled trust he set up to pay tuition at City College for a David Rosen, the son of his friend.”

“We never knew about it. We assumed my mom did, but . . .” Carmine hesitated, sighed and finished, “we’ll never know.”

“Carmine met David,” Adelina said, breaking the silence.

“Just a couple of times when were kids. He lived in Brooklyn.”

“That’s like being in a different state around here,” Teresa said, and they all smiled, glad for the momentary break in the somber mood.

“Never heard from him since,” Carmine said matter-of-factly.

“Probably thought the tuition was paid by one of his relatives and just wanted to remain anonymous or something,” Teresa offered.

Harding and Julia exchanged a knowing look.

“Well,” Harding began, “what I brought for you will tell you some rather surprising and extraordinary things about what your father did in the war. Much of—”

“And a lot about Carmine Rosen too,” Julia couldn’t help but add.

“Yes, that’s right. Much of which had been top secret until recently.”

“Top secret?” Carmine replied, stunned by the revelation. He looked at his wife and sister, and they shared his shocked expression, followed by looks that said they didn’t know what to make of the news.

“You’ll be proud to know he was a genuine hero in every sense of the word. And he saved my grandfather’s life.”

“Your grandfather?” Adelina asked.

“Yes, General George S. Patton was my grandfather.”

Carmine was the most surprised among his family about the revelation.

“He was? That’s—and my father, Peter Pizzio, saved his life?”

“Yes, in World War II,” she added.

Carmine, Teresa, and Adelina exchanged disbelieving looks, followed by expressions of puzzlement.

Harding quickly pulled out a white box of thin cardboard from his briefcase, the type and size that held blank printed stationery.

“This will address the looks on your faces and answer most, maybe all, the questions in your heads right now.”

Harding opened the box and pulled out his manuscript and handed it to Carmine.

“This is a copy of the book manuscript I’ve written that I mentioned on the phone. It’ll be edited and set in galleys soon and will be published, hopefully, right after the holidays.”

“We wanted you to have it first,” Julia said.

Carmine put it down on the coffee table in front of them, and they all stared at the title, *Rescuing General Patton*, by John W. Harding. Prominently, below Harding’s name, was another line in bold type: *Assisted by and dedicated to Julia Patton Walton, who made this book possible.*

“Regardless of the title, this book is really more about *your father*, Carmine, Adelina,” Julia said, looking at them.

The family continued to stare down at the manuscript, not sure what to say. Tears welled in their eyes, Carmine’s included, followed by Julia’s and Harding’s. Harding broke the lull.

“Julia and I decided that all royalties will be used to set up a scholarship in your father’s name,” Harding said.

Julia wiped a tear away with her hand, having given up her handkerchief, and added, "At whatever school you choose."

"Really? I-I, don't know what to say," Carmine said, looking directly at each of them as Adelina and Teresa began to quietly sob.

"It is our honor, truly. I—we, we really mean that."

"Thank you for doing this," Teresa said as Carmine and Adelina wiped away their own tears.

RESCUING GENERAL PATTON

Chapter 21

John Harding sat ramrod straight in a chair behind a red-white-and-blue draped table signing his latest book, thirty feet beyond the main entrance of Whitman & Sons bookstore. To his right, on the end of the table, was a large easel-backed poster with a striking picture of him and Julia holding a copy of *Rescuing General Patton* between them. The bookstore manager, a balding, appropriately bookish-looking, forty-year-old man, stood at the other end of the table replacing books taken from a previously prepared stack.

Those in line were all dressed in coats and attire appropriate for the late January weather. Most represented the advanced age and male gender of Harding's usual enthusiasts. But there were a few younger people and women in an encouragingly long line. Harding was familiar with many, waving to them as they joined the line, and then exchanging comments and handshakes after signing.

Eventually, Julia appeared and approached behind Harding wearing both a coat and an impatient look on her face. She had Harding's coat over one arm and his hat in another. She bent down and whispered something in his ear.

Harding stopped signing the book before him, his eyes wide with surprise, and quickly looked at his watch. Julia waved to everyone in line with the hand that held Harding's hat, confusing the bookstore manager nearby.

"I apologize, everyone! But Mr. Harding must leave right

now! We have a flight to catch!”

He quickly finished signing the book on the table, handed it to the customer, and stood up.

There were murmurs of surprise, disappointment, even irritation from some still in line. Julia responded sympathetically.

“I do sincerely apologize! But if we don’t leave now, we will miss our flight, and the cruise ship, *and* miss our *honeymoon*!”

The mood instantly changed. Everyone in line began applauding, including the manager. Harding was embarrassed and pushed his chair in.

“Sorry about this! I-I mean, I’m not sorry about our honeymoon, just, um—”

“Let’s go, John,” Julia interrupted, handing him his hat and helping him on with his coat.

“I-I promise I’ll come back! Soon!”

“Not that soon,” Julia added with raised eyebrows, and everyone laughed loudly at both her comment and expression.

Julia fixed the collar on Harding’s coat and began gently prodding him around the table toward the entrance. He waved one last time as they moved outside.

Waiting for them at the curb was a cab driver standing outside his running taxi, and he took one last piece of luggage from Harding, his bulging leather briefcase.

Inside the cab, Harding looked over at Julia, smiled, and gave a satisfied sigh.

“Thank you,” he said, then added, “Can’t believe so many people showed up.”

Julia smiled back and, with a sympathetic but practical look, replied, “Dear, most of them were your friends.”

Outside, it began to snow lightly as the taxi continued on its way in the building traffic for the short trip to Washington National Airport.

Epilogue

This epilogue is as it appeared at the end of John Harding's book, "Rescuing General Patton".

Colonel Henry "Hank" Mueller's family was notified that he had died from his wounds in the German POW camp. They never knew the truth about what had actually happened.

Corporal Sam Bauer, initially reported as "missing in action," had his status changed to "wounded in action and recovering" shortly after Patton's rescue, to the relief of his family. He was promoted to sergeant but never received a commendation for his role in the 'incident.' He served as one of General Eisenhower's drivers throughout the war. He died in 1989, having never publicly revealed what he knew about the entire affair.

Lieutenant Colin Rooney made it on board the submarine with a 'Colonel Mueller,' as he introduced General Patton to the sub's captain and crew. He was subsequently promoted to first lieutenant after he submitted an 'after-action' report directly to General Bradley that the general apparently shared with no one, put in a sealed envelope, and stamped, *Top Secret*. Lieutenant Rooney was killed a month after the D-Day invasion when the transport plane he was in crashed on takeoff from Duxford, England. He never received recognition for the role he played in Patton's rescue.

Lieutenant Rocco Moretta, Enrico Tomasi, and his partisan fighters successfully got General Patton and Lieutenant Colin Rooney over the central Apennine Mountains and down to the Adriatic coast, just north of the coastal village of Zaponeta to rendezvous with the American submarine, USS *Swordfish*. Soon after the submarine submerged, Moretta, Tomasi, and his men were attacked by German coastal infantry, alerted by a routine scout plane surveilling the coast. They engaged in a running firefight while retreating back up into the mountains. Tomasi was killed, along with half his men, but Moretta survived without a scratch and escaped into the mountains with the partisan survivors. His 'battlefield'

promotion to captain was formalized three months later with little fanfare, and he remained in Italy in military intelligence for the remainder of the war. He never received recognition for his actions in helping to rescue Patton. He retired as a full colonel in 1966 after a twenty-five-year career in the Army that included numerous combat actions in Korea, receiving many of the decorations he should have received in WWII. He had a short stint in Viet Nam commanding a team training field intelligence officers in the Central Highlands. He died of a fast-spreading form of lung cancer three months after retiring. Pizzio learned of his death only after the funeral. His family found a nearly finished manuscript in a desk that they thought was a novel but, in fact, was a thinly disguised memoir. They showed it to me when I met with them early on while doing my research.

Nigel Milbury's family was told only that he died in service to his country on a secret intelligence mission, leaving them baffled for the rest of his immediate family's lives. Other descendants only learned the details when reading a prepublication copy of this book that I had arranged to send one of them I had tracked down and interviewed.

Sergeant Carmine Rosen was shot twice while dragging Major Pizzio to a medic after Pizzio was wounded again by a German grenade. The Ranger medic saved Pizzio's life but could not save Rosen's. He never received recognition or commendations for any of his actions involved in the mission from its beginning to the very end. His family eventually received notification two weeks after he died and were told only that "Sergeant Carmine Rosen died from wounds received in action during the invasion of Italy."

Giuseppe Porro was among those captured with Pizzio, also wounded, but was immediately executed by the Germans as a partisan spy and saboteur. In 1948 his surviving family members erected a memorial fountain in Cosenza, Calabria, Italy, where Giuseppe was born. Rocco Moretta, who stayed in contact with Giuseppe's family, tracked down Peter Pizzio, told him about the ceremony, and they traveled together to Cosenza—Moretta in

uniform, still a Captain in the US Army at the time—stunning Giuseppe’s grateful family with their surprise attendance.

Ernest Gorski’s family, as was the case with Carmine Rosen’s, received a Western Union telegram saying only that their son had died in action during the invasion of Italy.

Major Peter Pizzio was taken prisoner after the battle near Vincenza, Italy. His wounds were treated, but he never fully recovered from them. In seriously failing health, he was removed from a German POW camp the day after VE Day by an elite Army medical team with special air transport clearances and flown directly to the top hospital in Paris. There, he underwent several surgeries for wounds that were never treated properly.

While a prisoner of war, Pizzio had been helped by other prisoners to obtain the many sheets of paper he needed to laboriously write, with his injured hand, an extensive ‘after action’ report so that, as he wrote on the first page, “*To someday honor all those who gave their lives to the mission, least it be forgotten or, more likely, kept secret until after the war.*” It was this sixty-six-page report given to General Patton by Pizzio, who in turn gave it to General Bradley, who promptly classified it *Top Secret*, and later unearthed by me, because of Julia’s information. I credit it with forming the basis of much of this book and providing the valuable leads that steered me to other sources and individuals, and furnished additional fragments of information that turned out to be crucial in my being able to piece the *entire* story together.

Curiously, Pizzio’s report contained only one specific recommendation for a medal—apparently, as I assumed, since he felt so much of what was done was commonplace for Rangers—for Private First Class Ernest Gorski, whom he recommended for the Medal of Honor, noting that he sacrificed his life to save him and Sergeant Rosen from a live grenade and most likely saved the mission with that act of heroism.

In June 1945, General Patton flew to Paris and visited a hospital and saw only one patient, Major Peter Pizzio. The visit attracted little attention and was never officially reported anywhere,

although it was noted in General Patton's diary. Immediately after, Pizzio was flown to the Army's Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, DC, on a specially equipped military aircraft. He was finally discharged from the hospital in September of 1945 and returned to his family's home in Queens, New York. As was the case with everyone involved in the mission kept top secret for over fifty years—until bits and pieces of records were declassified and unceremoniously released, along with hundreds of thousands of other remaining top-secret WWII documents—Pizzio was never recognized for, as General Patton himself wrote in the diary pages I received: *“extraordinary courage, valor, and leadership without regard for his own personal safety that, under any other circumstances would have, without the slightest doubt, earned him his country's highest commendation.”*

Peter Pizzio eventually returned to work for the electric company as an instructor/trainer of high-tension lineman. Six months later he received a formal reprimand and was suspended without pay for one week when he lost his temper and shoved a trainee into a wall. He had to be pulled off the shocked and terrified young man, after the cocky twenty-year-old made a joke about letting black kids pick up a live wire to see if they turned white. He was transferred and eventually became a foreman directing emergency response teams during outage events. He died in 1989 from a blood clot that formed in his wounded, reconstructed leg, that moved to his heart and quickly killed him.

General George S. Patton, leading the US 3rd Army in France, played a crucial role in defeating the massive German offensive during the Battle of the Bulge and led a lightning-fast drive into Germany to help end the war four months later. He was awarded his fourth general's star on April 14th, 1945. He was a very vocal, staunch anti-communist who hated the Soviets far more than the Nazis, many of whom he wanted to keep in power to help the U.S. go to war against them. General Patton was, without doubt, a military genius and one of the United States' greatest combat commanders, but I would be remiss as a historian not to mention that he was also a deeply flawed human being with well-known,

abhorrent racial prejudices. He died from injuries sustained in a collision of his staff car with a truck in Germany in December of 1945.

General Omar N. Bradley was promoted to five-star general of the Army after WWII and became the first Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It was his unknown WWII diary that covered the crucial period of August and September of 1943 that also provided a wealth of information for writing my book. Unexpectedly, I had come across a mention about a missing WWII diary in, seemingly, unimportant Bradley papers at the Missouri State Historical Association. That led me on a search, and I discovered that the general had decided not to destroy it but instead made it ‘top secret’ also. It was among the last of the WWII documents to be declassified and released in the late nineties.

Author’s note: Because of the truly extraordinary top-secret nature of the mission—which remained a secret from General and Chief of Staff of the Army, George C. Marshall, *and* President Franklin Delano Roosevelt—even *after* the mission—no medals, commendations, or battle ribbons, even Purple Hearts for wounds received, were ever awarded to any of the men, living or dead, involved in the mission to rescue General Patton. With the publication of this book, I have now begun the process of petitioning military and government officials to have the appropriate awards and recognitions issued posthumously to the families of all the men who were involved.

*John W. Harding, Major (ret.) United States Army,
archival division, Department of Records.*

RESCUING GENERAL PATTON

Afterword

RESCUING PATTON is a work of fiction.

Nevertheless, it was inspired by true events mixed with a what-if, imaginative, alternate history element that found its genesis in conspiracy theories widely prevalent in 1943, and that still linger to this day.

It unapologetically mixes historical fact with fiction to create an action-packed World War II ‘suicide-mission’ thriller that pays nostalgic homage to films such as *The Eagle Has Landed*, *The Dirty Dozen*, *Where Eagles Dare*, even *Saving Private Ryan* and, more recently, the riveting WWII tank crew film, *Fury*. And it combines a sub-plot with the ticking-clock thriller vibe of the original *The Day of the Jackal*. Of course, there’s an admiring, reverent nod as well to the Oscar-winning biographical film *Patton*.

Yes, Julia Patton Walton is a creation of my imagination who did not exist, and I did take liberties with some facts and the chronology of a couple of events. But, RESCUING PATTON was always meant to be, first and foremost, escapist entertainment. Admittedly, deep down inside, I fervently hope that this story is fully realized visually as a movie, an exciting, audience-pleasing, and memorable theatrical experience. That’s what really motivated me from the very beginning when, while doing research for another WWII project, the idea for this story took hold so powerfully that I was compelled to write it (originally as a screenplay), precisely because I became passionate about wanting to see this story on the Big Screen.

An impossible dream? Probably, but I’ve been driven by the inescapable fact that *I have already seen the movie*, in my mind’s eye, and *I know* you’ll love it as much as I do!

Okay, okay, forgive my embarrassing lack of humility; back to reality. I simply hope you enjoy reading this book as much as I enjoyed writing it. And I sincerely thank you for investing your time and hard-earned money in my work!

Curt Burdick
October 2020

RESCUING GENERAL PATTON

Acknowledgments

Writing a book, fiction or non-fiction, could not be done successfully without the help and support of others. That's especially true in my case with this book. I would not have become a published writer, much less a writer, without the unwavering support of my wife, Dolores, who encouraged me every step of the way.

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