

CATALYST

PAUL BYERS



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For my big bro, Mark

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ONE

THE car drifted slowly to a stop with its engine and lights off.

The driver hesitated for a moment, his eyes darting back and forth, surveying the area for any hidden dangers that might be lurking in the shadows. He knew this had been planned out to the last detail, but even with the best-laid plans, things could go wrong. A cold shudder traveled the length of his spine because he knew what the deadly consequences would be if this plan went wrong. He took a deep breath to calm his fears, pushed his glasses up off the bridge of his nose, and opened the door. Even before his feet touched the ground, two figures emerged out of the darkness and moved toward him like specters.

Both men were dressed in military uniforms, but in the dim, pre-dawn darkness, he couldn't tell if they were American, British, or German. The taller of the two phantoms spoke as he held out his hand. "Good morning, Doctor Strovinski. If ya'll just step this way, we'll have you outta here and back in England in no time at all."

As soon as the soldier spoke, Strovinski knew: American. He hated the way the Americans had butchered the English language with their slang, but this American was even worse. He had a . . . what did they call it? A Southern drawl? He thought the man sounded like one of those cowboys from their shoot-'em-up western movies.

Doctor Nicoli Strovinski was on the high side of his fifties with thinning brown hair, and his large waistline reflected the fact that he was a man dedicated to science and little else. "Let's be quick about this," he said in Russian. Let the Cowboy try and figure that one out.

The Cowboy replied politely in perfect Russian, "Right this way, sir."

So what? Strovinski thought. The cowboy can understand and speak Russian.

He followed behind them in silence, clutching his worn leather briefcase. The night air was cool and clear, washed clean by heavy rains earlier in the day.

In the stillness of the night, their shoes crunched against the gravel, sounding like a column of marching soldiers rather than just three men walking. They rounded the corner of a small building that he guessed to be a barn because of the foul animal odors coming from inside. Strovinski stopped dead in his tracks. It was a peculiar sight to see two fighters and a bomber parked behind the barn. But it was an even stranger thing to see a cow grazing peacefully under the left wing of the bomber and a goat rubbing its head against the propeller of one of the smaller planes. These cowboys must be smarter than he gave them credit for, he thought, getting three Allied aircraft this deep behind enemy lines.

Strovinski was a little disappointed with the small two-engine plane that was taking him out of Germany. He had expected to be whisked away by one of their big B-17 bombers. Although he didn't know much about American aircraft, everyone in France and Germany knew what the Flying Fortress looked like. After nearly three years of seeing the big plane dominate the skies over France and Germany, it had become the symbol of the advancing Allied forces. To those in France, it represented their impending liberation; to the German Army, it represented impending defeat. For Strovinski, perhaps it would mean a new life.

He followed the two cowboys around to the back of the plane and watched the shorter one climb up a small ladder and disappear into the black abyss. The taller cowboy motioned for Strovinski to follow. Drawing a deep breath, he realized that this was no longer a dream but that it was really happening. There was no turning back now as his foot came to rest on the first rung of the ladder.

He froze in mid-step, a cry of terror on his lips, as another apparition appeared from the black void in the form of a disembodied hand that reached out to grab him. The phantom materialized into a round, baby-faced crewman who was reaching out to help him up the ladder. The blond young ghost looked to be only eighteen or nineteen years old, barely old enough to wear long pants, let alone fight in a war. He wondered if he had made the right decision.

The young man reached out to take his briefcase, but Strovinski refused to give it up. It contained the culmination of nearly twenty years of work and he wasn't about to trust it to a child who didn't know the meaning of life. Not even for a second while he boarded the plane. Grunting, and feeling a little foolish for letting his vivid imagination get the better of him, Strovinski managed to hoist himself up through the small hatchway with one hand. Once inside, he let the boy lead him through the bowels of the plane.

He thought that a bomber by its very nature should be big and spacious,

but reality proved him wrong. He struck his head twice on the short trip from the hatch to his seat. He quickly sat down and nervously fastened his seat belt.

The plane had a dusty and oily smell to it. He could also smell the telltale odor of gunpowder, sweat, and something else . . . Was it the faintest trace of fear that mingled with the other aromas? But was it the plane crew's fear or his? His stomach answered his brain's question by rumbling and reminding him of just how much he hated flying.

“GOLDILOCKS, Papa Bear, Mama Bear, and Baby Bear are ready for takeoff.”

Captain Jack Lofton of the Royal Air Force, or RAF, shook his head at the radio message from the bomber as he flipped on the ignition switch to his Supermarine Spitfire, waking up his sleeping warhorse. The bloody Yanks and their silly code words, he thought. When he'd been asked to volunteer for a joint U.S.-British mission, he immediately agreed; but he'd signed on to fight the Germans, not recite nursery rhymes. He was “Mama Bear,” and his wingman, Lieutenant Reginald “Reggie” Smyth, was “Baby Bear.” What next? he thought. If they got in trouble over the channel, were they to land on the Good Ship Lollypop?

At twenty-six, Lofton had a soft, youthful smile and bright blue eyes that were in contrast to the premature weariness which now fit him like his uniform. He had been barely more than a boy when he'd joined the RAF, but after nearly five years of fighting he appeared to be the age of a man ten years his senior.

He looked over to Reggie, whom he imagined wore a grin from ear to ear, eager for the adventure to begin. A sad smile crossed his lips as he shook his head. He wondered if he'd ever been that young. With one last good tug on his harness, he signaled Baby Bear to take off.

The fast, steady rhythm of the British Rolls-Royce Merlin fighter engines joined the loping sound of the twin Pratt & Whitney eighteen-cylinder radial engines of the American's Martin Marauder B-26. They combined for a mechanical harmony that reached a pitched crescendo when full throttle was applied.

“Papa Bear to Goldilocks, Papa Bear to Goldilocks: the package is in the basket and we are on our way home.”

CAPTAIN Griffin Avery of the Office of Strategic Services, or OSS, took off his headset and dropped it on the table. He let out a sigh of relief and rubbed the back of his neck. He pushed himself away from the table that held a fifteen-hour collection of cigarette butts, empty coffee cups, and several stale, half-eaten sandwiches and doughnuts. It had been a very long day and night.

From his basement office in a nameless government building in London, he had monitored the flight of the Three Bears and their pick up of Dr. Nicoli Strovinski. He had watched them since they'd left England in the pre-dawn hours, followed them across the English Channel and over occupied France. Now at last, they were on their way home.

Avery stood and stretched. At forty-five, his hair was already turning gray, but he took comfort in the fact that he at least still had all his hair—unlike his father, who was bald on top with only a fringe of hair running around the side of his head. He preferred to think that his graying temples gave him the distinguished look of a gentleman and not that of an old man.

He heard sharp, fast-paced footsteps coming down the hall and wondered who could be coming here at this late hour. The door opened and Avery sprang to attention. “Good evening, General,” he barked with as much enthusiasm as he could muster.

“At ease,” came the reply. At sixty-two, Brigadier General Arthur Sizemore carried himself like a man half his age. He was a short, barrel-chested man with the personality and face of a bulldog that liked to chase parked cars. Like his height, his demeanor was short and direct.

“Got a hot date, sir?” Avery asked, seeing his boss was wearing his dress uniform. Immediately Avery cringed, regretting his choice of words. *Got a date?* What was he thinking?

Sizemore ignored Avery's feeble attempt at humor and surveyed the messy desk. He scrutinized the room like a father visiting his son's college dorm room for the first time and not liking what he saw. “My ‘date’ is with the chiefs of staff at a late-running state dinner—a damn waste of time, if you ask me,” Sizemore replied, plucking at his collar that vanity wouldn't allow him to admit was two sizes too small. “This is the fourth scientist this month we've nabbed. Who is this guy again?”

“Doctor Nicoli Strovinski, one of Germany's top nuclear physicists. It's been suspected that for the last year or so he's been working closely with Werner Heisenberg, head of the Nazi atomic program. He's also known in the academic community for his work in quantum mechanics and—”

“Right, he's some sort of hot-shot egghead. Didn't he also work with Von Braun at Peenemunde on the V-2s?”

“Yes sir, that's why we decided to grab him. If Germany could develop some sort of atomic weapon with the V-2 as the delivery system, then they could hold the world for ransom. We have no defense against a V-2.”

“Man, I'd love to tell Ike that we bagged this boy.” Sizemore paused then grunted, his face even more serious than usual. “If he's so damn important, you'd better not screw this up. And remember, Captain”—he pointed his stubby finger in Avery's face—“it may be my butt, but it's your neck on the line here.” Sizemore turned to leave and stopped when he reached the door. “And clean this mess up.” He tugged at his collar again and disappeared.

As the door slammed shut, Avery collapsed in his chair. He wasn't sure if he was more relieved that the mission was almost over or that Sizemore was gone. He grabbed a pack of cigarettes out of his front pocket and lit one with his Ronson. Avery leaned back, took a deep drag, and put his headset back on. He would continue to monitor the flight until they were halfway over the channel. Only then would he relax and go to the airfield to collect the doctor.

Avery began foraging through the scattered doughnuts on his desk, searching for one that wasn't stale enough to use as a doorstop. He found an edible morsel buried amongst the greasy rubble and held it up as if he had discovered a nugget of gold, a look of triumph filling his face. He took a bite and sighed. It wasn't the freshest he'd ever had; if only he had some fresh coffee. He was devouring the last bite when the radio crackled to life.

"Break left Baby Bear, Baby . . . oh, bloody hell, Reg! Break left!" the voice on the radio shouted. "You've got two bandits behind you!"

Avery sprang up and checked the channel on his radio.

"Bloody good, lad," the radio blared again. It was the voice of Captain Lofton, and it sounded like they were under attack. Avery heard the roar of the airplane engine and the unmistakable sound of machine guns firing. How can this be, Avery wondered. How could the Germans have known about Strovinski?

"Goldilocks, Goldilocks, this is Papa Bear. We are under fighter attack! I say again, we are under attack. Mama Bear and Baby Bear have engaged."

The sound of the bombers' distress call shook Avery out of his stupor and he grabbed the microphone. "Papa Bear, this is Goldilocks, do you copy? Where are you? Do you copy? *Answer me!* Papa Bear this is Goldilocks, do you read me? Mama Bear, do you read me, over?"

"Breaking left. I'm going to flip over and bring him back in front of you," Smyth replied. Avery could hear and almost feel the tension in the young British pilot's voice

"Roger, swinging around now to line up." By contrast, Avery could hear the calm voice of the seasoned Lofton over the drone of his engine.

"You've got two more coming down on you, Reg, eight o'clock high!"

"I can't see them. I can't see them!" Smyth shouted desperately in the radio.

"They're right above the bomber, swing back to your left, behind the bomber, NOW!"

His mission was falling apart, yet Avery could only listen with morbid fascination as the battle unfolded before him. He was reminded of Halloween night back in 1938. He was home on leave and had just come back from the corner grocer. His mom had wanted fresh corn on the cob to serve with their steak in celebration of the return of their long-gone son.

When he walked through the front door, he found his mother hysterical, glued to the radio. She kept shouting about being under attack. He dropped

the bag of groceries on the table and rushed to the front room. On the radio, the reporter was saying something about people being killed and that the Army was on the scene but the enemy had some sort of new weapon, some sort of death ray. Avery could hear yelling and screaming in the background and something that sounded like gunfire. The reporter shouted that they were under attack, and then there was silence.

His mother was on the verge of crying, and his father just sat there and held her, not knowing what to do. Avery was reaching for the phone to call headquarters when the radio came back to life and the announcer said that he hoped they were enjoying the broadcast of Orson Welles and his Mercury Theater production of *War of the Worlds*. It took some convincing, but his mother finally realized that it was just a radio show and not the end of the world. Upon pain of death, she threatened him and his father against saying a word to anyone that she had believed the broadcast.

Now Avery sat and listened as his own radio played out its own scene. Only this time, the sound effects weren't made in a studio and those weren't actors. Real people were going to die.

"My left aileron's hit, I can hardly turn!"

Avery could hear the rising fear in Lieutenant Smyth's voice.

"Steady, lad," Lofton calmly responded over the radio. "I'm almost there."

Then silence.

Avery leaned forward in his chair as if that could help him hear better, but there was nothing to hear. The only sound was the pounding of his heart. "*This is Goldilocks! Does anybody read me?*" he yelled in frustration shaking the microphone as if he could bully it into working. Why won't this damn thing work? "Jack! Do you copy? He broke the rules by using Lofton's name, but he didn't care. "Jack, where are you?"

Silence.

Avery was resigning himself to the fact that the entire mission had failed and eight lives were lost, when the radio blared again.

"What the bloody hell! Is that a red star? *REGGIE!*" Even through the roar of the fighter's engine, Avery could hear a faint explosion and he knew that Smyth was gone. Sitting in his warm and comfortable office, it was hard for him to comprehend that he had just heard a man die.

Avery sat like a statue, his chest barely moving as he breathed, a thousand thoughts bounced around in his head.

"Papa Bear, this is Mama Bear. Do you copy? Papa Bear, this is Mama Bear. Do you read me? Over." Slowly, like the incoming tide, Avery felt hope creeping back into his soul as he heard Lofton's voice on the radio. Perhaps Lofton had fended off the attackers and Strovinski was safe.

But the incoming tide quickly turned into a tidal wave as the radio blasted another warning: "Break right, Mama Bear, break right!"

“Look out, Mama Bear, there’s another one coming down on you! Break! Goldilocks, Goldilocks, this is Papa Bear. Mama and Baby Bear are both down, repeat, both fighters are down! Am under heavy fire. Wait . . . top gunner! Watch that one coming down, nine o’clock high! He’s in behind us, swing it around *now!* Tail gunner report! Report! Goldilocks we have—”

Silence: total, deafening silence now invaded his office. It smothered the room like a thick heavy fog, driving everything else out, all thoughts of reason, any lingering feelings of hope and, oddly, even of despair. The silence was so consuming that Avery found it difficult to breathe.

What had gone wrong?

Avery placed his elbows on the table and buried his head in his hands, trying to think. After a moment he leaned back and ran his fingers through his hair and noticed a small mustard and mayonnaise stain on his sleeve. His desk that looked like a high school cafeteria. He shook his head and sighed. Given the way the room looked, his stupid date joke and stains on his uniform, it was no wonder General Sizemore didn’t have much confidence in him.

But Sizemore was wrong! He’d planned everything, down to the last detail. It had taken him three weeks to go through each phase, step by step, and to finalize everything into a complete plan. He’d checked and rechecked it all at least a dozen times. Each of his two assistants had gone over it with a fine-tooth comb to see if they could find any flaws. And there had been none. He’d seen to the security precautions personally to prevent this very thing.

He didn’t know how long he sat there, seconds, minutes, hours; it didn’t matter. He fumbled mindlessly with a cigarette and burned his fingers before he realized that it was already lit. What had gone wrong? They should have been in and out before the Germans had even realized that Strovinski was missing, yet they had known and had been waiting . . . but was it the Germans? Something that Captain Lofton had said over the radio, something about a red star. The only aircraft he knew that carried a red star were Russian. In the dark of night and heat of battle had Lofton confused the swastika for a star? Not likely. He doubted that a man with his experience would make such a mistake.

Even though the Americans, British, and Russians were all allies, as they pushed further and further into Germany, it was becoming a race with the British and Americans against the Russians in an effort to capture German technology and resources. Did the Russians somehow find out about their plan and shoot Strovinski down themselves, Avery wondered, rather than let the Americans have him? Or was it just a case of blind luck? Had the Germans just been in the right place at the right time and stumbled across the three allied planes?

It didn’t matter now. They were all dead and it was his fault.

Avery stood and tilted his head from side to side, trying to get the kinks out of his neck. His mind was as numb as his body. He couldn't think straight. He needed to get some fresh air. This was the first mission in which he'd been directly responsible for the deaths of those under him. He'd sent men and women into France before to help the resistance and he'd found out later that some had been captured and even killed, but this was different. The Three Bears and Strovinski were dead because *his* plan had failed!

He grabbed his coat and wandered down the hallway, ignoring the few early birds arriving to work, then climbed the stone staircase up two flights to the street above. Warily, he leaned against the heavy wooden door and summoned all his remaining strength to push it open. Avery squinted his eyes as he stepped out into the street. It was one of those rare, bright sunny mornings in London.

Across the street was a small tailor shop with a bouquet of colorful flowers in the window, a splash of color that seemed so out of place in war-weary London. Half a block down there had been a little family-owned bakery. They made the best glazed doughnuts he had ever tasted. Each time he went in there, the sights and aromas took him back to his once-a-month family trips into the city when he was a boy. On the first Saturday of each month, providing his father didn't have to work, he and his brother would ride in the back of their old Ford Model T as it rambled and rumbled down the dirt road twelve miles into Portland, Oregon. His mother said that his eyes always grew to the size of the doughnuts themselves as he gazed upon row after row of the delectable delights. And the aroma . . . the warm, soft smells of the flour and butter baking made it an almost magical experience.

Sometimes when he felt homesick, he had gone into the British bakery just to remember; his own little personal escape from the war. Yesterday, before all this had started, he had stopped in and bought half a dozen.

Sometime during the night, he had heard the rumblings and felt the impact of what he guessed was a V-2 rocket that had slammed into the ground nearby, shaking his old building to its cornerstone. The V-2s were Hitler's *Vergeltungswaffen*, or Vengeance Weapons. It was a 46-foot-high, 3500-mile-per-hour monster designed for pure terror. They weren't extremely accurate, but by carrying over a ton of explosives, they didn't have to be.

Today, the bakery was a burned out crumpled ruin. It must have taken a direct hit last night. How ironic, he thought, that yesterday, like the bakery, he had been busy and full of life and hope for the future. Now, both the street and his spirit were a pile of broken dreams and rubble.



TWO

THE laughter was loud, drowning out conversation, music, and tonight, even the war. At the far corner of the bar sat an old man known to everyone simply as The Colonel. He was in good shape for a man of 81, too old to fight but not too old to proudly serve his country in the Home Guard, ready to rout the Huns if they dared to stick their noses across the channel. The Colonel had flaming white hair, a large handlebar mustache, and a passion for life still burned deep in his bright, clear eyes. His skin was a tough and leathery brown, reflecting decades of service for king and country.

Tonight, like most every night, he sat at the bar, reliving the glory days of his youth to whoever would listen. He often spoke fondly of the lads of the 24th Regiment of Foot and those fateful days in South Africa at Rorke's Drift in 1879—the time of the great Zulu uprising.

He reminisced about how he was just a lad, only fifteen at the time, and of how he had run away from home seeking adventure. He could think of nothing more exciting than camping out all the time, so he lied about his age and joined the army. He would describe the smashing old uniforms—how good they all looked in their bright red coats, white helmets, and bandoliers! He recounted how he and the lads had stood toe to toe with nearly four thousand Zulu savages and held them at bay.

One day, Avery remembered, a drunk British sailor had called The Colonel a liar and said he had never been in Africa or fought against the Zulu. The Colonel was silent for a moment then slowly stood and unbuttoned the top two buttons of his tunic. With great care and reverence he pulled out a Victoria Cross that hung from a tarnished chain around his neck.

“Twelve medals were awarded that day,” The Colonel said slowly, “but only eleven officially. It was the most ever issued to a unit for a single engagement. When the army found out that I was really only fifteen, they

couldn't acknowledge that they had let a boy fight, so they let me keep the medal but made me swear never to reveal my true age at the time."

After that, no one ever questioned The Colonel again.

SITTING at a table, Avery noticed, off to one side, was a group of women—girls, really—from RAF headquarters. They were with the Fighter Command. Some had helped direct the magnificent Spitfires and Hurricanes which had fended off the Luftwaffe in the dark days surrounding the Battle of Britain. They were young and pretty, but several, those who had been around since the beginning, had a few more worry lines and a few more gray hairs than the newer girls. They were seasoned veterans at the ages of twenty-three and twenty-four. Few people knew of the hard work they did or just how close the Germans had actually come to winning the battle and invading England.

There were several small groups of British and American soldiers scattered throughout the bar, telling tall tales and swapping lies in hopes of impressing the local girls. There were also a few civilians about doing their best to set aside the war for a moment. But most of the patrons that night were American airmen. It was easy to tell the bomber crews from the fighter pilots, Avery thought. The fighter pilots usually flocked in groups of three to four, while the bomber crews stuck together in packs of seven or eight.

At the far end of the bar were four flyboys, fighter pilots. One gestured with his hands, describing in great detail his latest aerial victory. In the back of the pub sat a group of eight flyers surrounding two empty chairs. They were much quieter than the rest of the patrons as they raised their glasses in a silent toast, a scene that was often repeated. They were a bomber crew who had lost two of their own and were now saying good-bye. Next to them was an empty table with ten chairs stacked on top of it. The crew that didn't come back must have been well known and liked, Avery thought, for the pub to hold a table in tribute to them on such a crowded night.

Captain Avery sat in the back of the pub taking it all in. It had been two days since his report on the loss of Dr. Strovinski, and General Sizemore had not been pleased. He'd had dreams of moving "upstairs" and working with the big boys on major planning projects. But with the war winding down in Europe, his chances of being transferred to the Pacific and being involved with the invasion of Japan were all but gone now with the loss of Strovinski.

His less-than-glamorous nine-to-five job involved working with the resistance cells in France, gathering information about German troop movements, and aiding the recovery of downed Allied pilots. With the rapidly advancing Allied forces, he'd also been assigned the task of locating top German scientists and grabbing them before the Russians did.

With certain technologies, the Germans held a slight edge. In some cases, however, their advantage was monumental. Though the British had a jet

powered fighter in the Gloster Meteor, it was no match for the German Messerschmitt 262 . . . and the Allies had nothing to counter the dreaded V-2 rockets. While Russia was an ally, the United States and Britain still wanted to make sure that they were in control of these new technologies. It was Avery's job to get the scientists, a job he had now failed at miserably.

Avery took another sip of his beer—or his pint, as the Brits called it. It was his third, and he was nearing that place where he felt no pain, a place that suited him just fine.

The Three Bears had been his plan. His operation from start to finish. It was supposed to show General Sizemore that he could do more than just pass messages back and forth between headquarters and the resistance. It was to prove that he belonged upstairs with the big boys.

But none of that mattered now.

He'd gotten good men killed. In three large gulps, he downed the rest of his beer and waved his hand at the waitress for another.

"Griff, my boy, why the look of a man who's just found out his mother-in-law is coming to live with him?"

Avery looked up from his empty glass and watched The Colonel spin the chair around and sit backwards in it, holding his beer in one hand and leaning forward on the back of the chair with the other.

"Do you know what I had to do today, Colonel? I had to write letters to the families of the men I lost on a mission . . . a mission that I planned. I planned it down to the last detail, but somehow it went horribly wrong. I knew one of the men personally. I even ate with him and his family. He had a wife and two little girls, four and six. We don't even have a body to give back to her to lay to rest. She has no grave to cry over, only this lousy piece of paper saying her husband was a hero and is missing in action. For God's sake, I can't even tell her what happened to him or where he went down. They died for nothing."

The warmth and humor in the old man's eyes drained. "We were in France," The Colonel began, "in the early spring of 1916 during the war that was supposed to end all wars. The nights were still cold, as Mother Nature still hadn't taken off her winter coat yet, and the rains that April were unusually heavy, turning our trenches and the no-mans land into a sea of mud, muck, and mire."

A humorless smile slowly crossed The Colonel's lips. "It's funny what you remember, but what I remember most, other than my lads, was the smell. The rich, earthy smell of the soil was invaded by the musty stench of everything rotting and covered in mold from the continual rains.

"We'd been stalemated for most of the month, neither us nor the Huns taking more than a few yards of ground at a time, when some general back at headquarters decided that he wanted the stalemate broken.

"Our platoon was handed the nasty assignment of taking out a German

machine-gun bunker on a slight rise that controlled nearly the entire line in our area. If we were to advance at all, those guns had to be destroyed.” The Colonel paused and closed his eyes for a moment. Avery couldn’t tell if he was trying to remember or trying to forget what happened that day.

“It was particularly cold that morning,” he resumed, “and a thin layer of ice covered the mud. We were all cold so were stomping our feet to keep warm, and with each stomp of our boots, you could hear the crunching of the ice breaking. I think that the Germans must have heard the crunching and knew something was up because they were waiting for us.

“When the whistle blew, we all charged up over the top of the trench with our best war cries . . . straight into the teeth of hell. The war cries instantly turned in to screams of agony as the Kraut machine guns opened up on our boys.

“Johnny Biggelow was a scrawny mutt of a lad, but what he didn’t have in size he made up for in heart. He was the first one over the top, and the first to die. His foot hadn’t even cleared the top of the trench when he was hit. He was blown back and landed on top of me, and we both went tumbling down into the mud. He probably saved my life, because the whole first wave was wracked by machine-gun fire. I’ll never forget the emptiness of his eyes as they stared back at me.”

The Colonel paused.

“We eventually took those machine gun nests that day, but I lost three quarters of my squad. Three days later, we abandoned that field and the Germans moved right back in. It was my whistle that sent my lads over the top, my orders that got them killed. And just like you I had to write letters home to their loved ones. And to this day I remember each and every one of them. Did they die for nothing?” The old man silently shook his head. “No, they sacrificed themselves serving their country and serving their brothers; they died doing their duty and so did your lads. Don’t take that away from them. If you forget that, then their deaths truly have no meaning.”

“I guess you’re right,” Avery said. “I was feeling pretty sorry for myself and that’s not what it’s about.”

“Good! Just remember the lads and their death won’t be in vain.” The Colonel raised his glass in a toast and Avery followed suit. “To our boys!” He said as their glasses came together. Both men drank, and Avery put his glass down, still distracted. The Colonel followed the gaze of his American friend until it stopped on a table across the room.

A smile reclaimed its rightful place on the old veteran’s face as he saw that the center of his companion’s attention was focused on a table with two girls sitting at it. “I see you have other things on your mind too.” A spark of mischief ignited in his eyes. “Hm, is it the lassie with the short, dark hair? What is it with you American chaps and skinny women? She doesn’t have enough ballast on her to hold her down in a stiff breeze. I prefer my women with a

little more meat on their bones. When I put my arms around her to give her a hug, if my fingers can touch on the other side, then she's too skinny! Why, I remember this one lassie in Liverpool, she was—"

An American Army officer came walking up to the table and The Colonel stopped in mid-story. "Well, you have company here, lad, so I'll be talking with you later." He got up from the table and turned as he left. "Just remember what I said about your boys."

"Thanks," Avery replied with a small smile.

"There you are."

Avery looked up to see First Lieutenant Jason Peters. Peters was Avery's right-hand man and had come to work for him shortly after he'd arrived in England two years ago. He was a tall, lanky twenty-six-year-old drink of water from Alabama with curly blond hair and deep blue eyes. Jason had a bumbling country boy charm that the English girls found irresistible.

"I've been looking for you, sir," Peters said.

The waitress dropped off his fourth beer, and Avery downed half of it in a single gulp. He set it down and wiped the foam from his lips. In all the time he'd been in England, he still hadn't acquired a taste for English beer. He took another gulp and shook his head. What he wouldn't give right now for a hot dog and a *real* cold beer, like he used to get at the Dodgers games!

Peters sat down and put his hand on his boss's shoulder. "Still beating yourself up, Griff? You did everything you could to make sure things went right. Anna and I couldn't find any mistakes when we reviewed the plan."

"Anna," Avery said letting out a long, heavy sigh like a schoolboy with a crush on his first grade teacher. He looked around the room and his eyes stopped when they reached Anna's table. Anna . . . she was the love of his life, only she didn't know it. Anna Roshinko was a second lieutenant who also worked for Avery doing clerical duties. Over the last few months she had been helping him more and more, planning and assisting with her own French resistance cell.

"Look at her, Jay. She's beautiful, and she's as smart as she is good looking." Anna Roshinko was thirty-one with short, ebony hair that framed her heart-shaped face. She was a petite five-foot two inches tall and had a doll's figure that even the Army uniform couldn't hide. Her eyes had the piercing blue color of a northern glacier. Peters chuckled at his tipsy boss, glad for the distraction that took his mind off Strovinski and the failed mission. Roshinko was not bad looking, Peters thought, but not as beautiful as his boss was professing. Then again, he knew Avery was seeing her through a different set of eyes.

Anna sat at a table with her friend, another clerk from the office. The two of them had been there an hour and had been approached twice by American servicemen and three times by British officers, but had politely turned them away.

“Look,” Peters said, “Anna’s getting up. Looks like she’s getting ready to leave. I think she lives somewhere around here. Why don’t you go over and ask if you can walk her home? You know, be the gallant gentleman and all.”

“I don’t know,” Avery hesitated. “She’d probably just say no.”

“But she might just say yes.”

“You think so?”

“Yup. And besides, this isn’t the best part of town, you know. Look, there she goes. You’d better hurry.”