

CHAPTER 15

June 4, 1944 – Morning. Weymouth, England.

Sergeant Daniel Brogan

The orders came through with the sunrise. Steam rose from the rain-soaked ground, swirling around the tents like wraths as men stumbled about with wild, hollow-eyed purpose. It felt like the whole world had missed its alarm call and had woken up late. Brogan burst from his own tent half-dressed, boots unlaced, adrenaline surging before his brain was fully awake. The camp was already erupting around him, trucks revving, officers shouting orders, the jangle of mess tins and plates.

Billyboy's head poked out from his tent. "This it, Sarge?" he hissed. "We actually goin' finally?"

"Looks like it, Billyboy," Brogan said, tugging on his belt. "Get the boys up. I figure we'll eat before we ship out."

Billyboy vanished back inside, shouting something unintelligible, while Kelly appeared behind him, yanking his trousers into place. "'Bout damn time," he grumbled. "I wuz getting stir crazy."

Brogan left them bickering and moved toward the admin tents. The rising light glinted off the soft dew, and for a moment it looked almost beautiful, before the weight of why they were here slapped him in the face, a real wake up call.

Lieutenant Hannagan emerged from his tent in a whirlwind, his hands performing a frantic, silent ballet of straightening, checking, adjusting. His salute was crisp, but his eyes betrayed the fear

“Well, Dan, looks like this is finally it,” Hannagan said. His voice tried to sound steady, but every word felt like it had been dragged through gravel. “We get to go and do the job we’ve all been busting our asses for.”

“It’ll be good to get out of here, sir,” Brogan said. “Boys are more than ready.”

“Good, good.” Hannagan swallowed hard. “Get the men fed, Sergeant. Make sure they’ve got their kits squared away. No doubt the word to move out will come real soon.”

“Yes sir,” Brogan said, saluting again.

As the Lieutenant drifted away, Kowski eased up beside Brogan, hands dug into his pockets.

“Guy’s scared shitless, Sarge.”

“Look around, Kowski,” Brogan said, making a broad sweeping gesture with his arm. “You show me a man here who’s not scared shitless, myself included.”

Soldiers were emerging from tents, eye’s wide with bewilderment, faces blanched with fear. They had all been living in this unreal bubble for the past six months, but now that bubble had burst and the reality of what they were about to do was crashing in and landing squarely on their shoulders.

“You know the routine, Kowski,” Brogan said. “Just like we did in Italy.”

“Yeah, Sarge, but Italy didn’t have half the world watchin’ us,” Kowski said.

“We’d better put on a good show then,” Brogan said. “Round up the boys and get them over to the mess tents. On the double, Corporal.”

“Yes, sir,” Kowski said, casually tapping his forehead and disappearing into the melee.

Brogan returned to his tent, washed in silence, and dressed slowly. He put his cap on and stared into the small square mirror taped to the tent pole. He forced his face to relax, hoping to smooth out the stress lines pulling his skin taut across his skull. “Game face, Danny boy,” he muttered to himself.

The mess tent was a wall of noise; plates clattering, boots stamping, utensils scraping across metal. Brogan’s stomach lurched when he smelled the food. He found his men and slid onto the bench next to them.

“Get some food inside you, boys,” he told them. “Don’t know when you’ll get your next meal.”

Kowski dropped heavily on the end of the bench, slipping a plate in front of Brogan. “Practice what yer preach, Sarge.”

Brogan studied his plate with distaste. “Kowski, this stuff violates the Geneva Convention.”

“Quit jawing,” Kowski said, through a mouthful. “Better than the wet sand we’ll all be eating later.”

Lieutenant Hannagan pushed through the tent flap as Brogan was starting in on his breakfast. The room stiffened. Men stood automatically.

“At ease, men, don’t let me interrupt your breakfast,” the Lieutenant said quickly, waving them back down. He turned to Brogan. “Dan, you and your boys ship out at oh nine hundred.”

“We’ll be ready, sir,” Brogan said.

Billyboy entered the tent and sat across from Brogan. “It’s crazy out there, Sarge,” he said. “They’ve started loading up the trucks already. Some of the guys are puking up in the bushes.”

Kowski pointed at him with his fork. “Bet you puke on da boat, Billyboy. Like you did in Italy.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna puke in your helmet,” Kowski, “Billyboy said, swatting the soldier playfully.

“France here we come,” Kowski said. “Hope they’re not as egsentrik as da Brits.”

Brogan checked his watch. “Listen up. We’re set for an hour from now. Gear check. Weapons perfect. Letters written. No excuses.” His voice softened, just a fraction. “You all know the drill. And you know why it matters.”

“Yes, Sarge,” the men said, in unison.

Brogan glanced around at their faces. Some he’d already fought beside. Other fresh-faced recruits he’d trained until they hated him and cursed his name when he dragged them over the assault course and through the mud. Every one of them pretending to be braver than they felt. Including him.

Soon, they wouldn’t have to pretend.