

CHAPTER 17

0430 hours

“Go, go, go!”

The petty officer’s handheld flag slashed downward like an executioner’s blade, and the first line of soldiers surged over the ship’s rail. Boots hammered on metal as they swung themselves into the swaying rope nets, slick with sea spray. The Channel heaved beneath them, lifting the great transport ship with a slow, ominous groan. Men scrambled downward hand over hand, packs banging against the steel hull.

Some hit the deck of the landing craft hard, collapsing to their knees or sprawling on their faces. Other soldiers hauled them upright by their webbing straps. The boats pitched violently alongside the ship, their hulls slamming against the waves.

“Next group, go!” the officer barked again as the flag snapped downward.

Brogan looked down into those upturned faces below, hollow-eyed and glassy with sweat, full of strain and fear. The landing craft they had just filled roared away from the ship’s side, engines coughing black exhaust as it peeled off into the darkness. Immediately another boat took its place, the drill repeating with mechanical precision.

Then it was Brogan's turn.

He swung over the rail, boots finding the first rung of the net as gravity yanked at him. Wind tore at his uniform and the salt spray stung his eyes. Below him the landing craft rose and fell like a bucking bronco trying to unseat its rider.

He glanced across the shifting sea at the nearest ships and could see more men scaling the side to board the other small landing craft. From this distance they reminded him of the big fat raindrops that used to run down the window panes back home. A jarringly serene image overlaid on this nightmarish scenario. He dropped the final few feet, landing beside Kowski, who was grimacing and rubbing at his palms.

Billyboy gave the Corporal a wicked grin. "Aww, Kowski, did the nasty net hurt your delicate little hands? Want me to get you some o' that fancy hand cream from my pack? Make 'em all soft and dainty-like."

Kowski scowled at the trooper, "Ah'll tell ya what ya can do wid yer fuckin' cream, Billyboy."

Billyboy spread his hands dramatically at the boat's occupants. "Now that just ain't nice. Try an' help an ol' buddy out and get nothing but abuse."

"Save yer cream fer when ya get shot in the ass," Kowski retorted. All those within earshot laughed at the exchange.

Brogan was glad for these moments of lightness that took their thoughts away from what they were about to do.

The small boats lurched violently away from the ships, feeling the swell lift them and dash them back into the water. The throb from the motors intensified, the thrum vibrating through the soles of their boots,. The landing craft began a lazy circle, a holding pattern waiting for others to be loaded with more men. Bob Kelly shouldered his way past a couple of soldiers to where Brogan, Kowski and Billyboy were holding court.

“I thought the ship was bad enough,” Kelly complained. “This t’ing feel like it might roll on over an’ sink at any moment. Do the jerries’ work for ‘em.”

Around them a few soldiers were throwing up. Brogan steadied himself against the wall as another swell pitched the craft sideways. He wasn’t sure how long they had been circling. It felt like hours but was probably no more than thirty minutes.

At the head of the landing craft, Lieutenant Hannagan raised himself up above the heads of the soldiers. He cupped one hand around his mouth and shouted, “Okay men, Any minute now we’re going to be heading inshore.” With his other hand he made a gesture out into the still darkness. “When we get close, don’t go getting curious and try an’ get yourself a peek of France. Sun’ll be up directly and you may just get yourself a slug in the head for your trouble. Curiosity killed the cat, so they say, and it might kill you, so keep your heads down.”

A collective chorus of voices came back at him. “Yes, sir!”

The Lieutenant continued. "In a short while, when we are about halfway to the beach, the big ships behind us will open fire. It'll get loud. It'll get rough. But that barrage is our best friend today, remember that."

"Ah hopes they be a better aim than Kowski, sir," Kelly shouted out. "Or we be in big trouble."

The boat erupted in laughter. Hannagan made a quiet down motion with his two hands, palms down. "Very funny, Kelly. Our hosts are very capable. They've looked after us and got us here in one piece."

"Amen, sir," another soldier shouted out.

"When we hit that beach, I want you guys to exit orderly and spread out," Hannagan said. "We don't know the extent of what is waiting for us, and hopefully these big guns will dampen their enthusiasm."

"Just as long as they leave some for us, sir," another anonymous soldier shouted from the throng.

Brogan shook his head. *Out of the mouths of babes*, he thought. He remembered the last time he stormed a beach. The bombardment hadn't cleared much of anything. The Germans had still been waiting.

In the distance, he could just make out the pale bloom of dawn colouring the horizon. It was still too dark to see far but that would change rapidly. Another swell slammed against the boat, throwing them all sideways as the landing craft dug into the oncoming wave crests.

“Jeez,” Kowski hissed. “I had me a Chevy back home use ta buck like dis.” He grinned at Brogan. ““Specially when ah was socialising if yer ged mah drift.”

Brogan grinned back at him. He noticed a change in the motion of the boat as it stopped circling and began surging forward ahead of the big ships. Around them it seemed like the sea was whipped into a foaming frenzy. They were finally on their way to the beaches. The pitching of the boat was less violent now as it cut through the water, dipping and lifting with the waves. He could make out the landing craft next to them, a dull silhouette. Dawn was close now, and the sun would soon be up and reveal their positions to the enemy. In the distance was the black smudge of what he assumed was land, set against the dark backcloth of the receding night.

The world abruptly exploded behind them as the big ships opened up a thunderous volley of fire from what seemed like a thousand guns, bright orange flashes that lit up the faces of the men in the boat. Half the soldiers in the craft ducked their heads with the sudden shock of the detonations. Then they heard the chorus of whistles as the first shells passed over their heads on the way to obliterate the opposition waiting for them on the beach. Another salvo split the air as the ships fired again, sending tons of metal towards the shore in a hailstorm of death. They kept up the relentless bombardment for over thirty minutes, and Brogan could hear the ringing in his ears from the continuous onslaught. He could taste cordite on the wind.

“Those damn Limeys won’t hit us will dey?” Kowski asked, looking back at the ships. The sun was up, and the scale of the landing was only now becoming apparent. There seemed to be hundreds of ships stretching as far back as the eye could see.

“Don’t worry, Kowski,” Brogan said, grinning. “If they hit us, you won’t know nothing about it.”

“Comfortin’, Sarge, real comfortin’.”

Lieutenant Hannagan was nearby and he handed Brogan a pair of binoculars. “Take a look, Sergeant.”

Brogan lifted the glasses to his eyes. He could see huge geysers of earth and smoke silently erupt along the shoreline, black plumes towering skyward and drifting across the beach like storm clouds. The thunder of impact followed seconds later, growling over the sea. He almost felt some sympathy for the German soldiers.

“What’s it look like, Sarge?” asked one of the soldiers next to him, a young kid scarcely nineteen. Brogan searched his memory for the name.

“Like Hell, Collins,” Brogan said. “Can’t see shit for the smoke but we sure are giving them a pounding.”

Collins grinned shakily. “Won’t be nothin’ left fer us to do. I was hopin’ to bag me a few jerries before this was all over.”

Brogan heard the slight tremolo in the young trooper's voice. False bravado sung in the high key of fear. He had the same clenched fist in his own gut making him feel sick and hollow. And now he joined the dreaded harmony.

"Just make sure you kids don't go getting lost in all that smoke, y'hear? I don't wanna be babysitting you."

There was more uneasy laughter, a spluttering nervous sound. Brogan smiled and felt a tenderness towards them, almost patriarchal, even though he was barely four years senior to most of them. He pulled the binoculars from his eyes and the beach receded, becoming a pale misty smudge in the distance.

A formation of planes flew overhead on their way to add to the enemy's misery. Some soldiers cheered and waved. They listened to the continuing bombardment of the beaches by the big guns. The noise helped to steady their nerves, to reassure them. Surely, nothing could live through that kind of punishment.

Omaha Beach was going to be a turkey shoot. They would land unopposed and the road would be open all the way to Berlin, strewn with the broken remnants of a defeated German army. Brogan clung to the Lieutenant's promise to be home with his wife before Christmas.

He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out the photograph of Gracie. In the photo, she was about seven months gone, and her bump had swelled, filling the light fabric dress she wore. She was glowing with the happiness of impending motherhood. He tried to imagine the same picture with a child standing between

them and it made him ache. He put the picture back in his pocket and could almost feel the weight of its presence there, like the grenades that hung from his tunic.

The Lieutenant's voice intruded on Brogan's brooding thoughts. "Get your men ready, Sergeant. We're almost there. Another thirty minutes, maybe less."

"Yes, sir!" He saluted and turned to his men. "You heard the Lieutenant. Last check."

The guns from the ships fell silent, and almost immediately, artillery from the shore opened up, sharp, brutal cracks that echoed across the water. A shell landed close, sending a sheet of icy spray into the air. Cold sea water rained down on the soldiers in the craft.

"Jeez, Sarge," Collins exclaimed. "There can't be nothing in one piece over there. Not after the pasting we just gave them."

Brogan slapped him on the back. "Don't worry, Collins. You'll be fine..."

A dull thud.

A spray of warmth across Brogan's hand.

He froze.

Collins's face was gone, replaced by a ragged crater where bone and skin had been. Blood splattered Brogan's hand and sleeve. He cried out and snatched his hand back like the blood was acid.

Collins slipped sideways, wedged between the side and a knot of other soldiers, not able to fall to the floor in the tightly packed craft. The shock rippled through the other troopers.

Brogan knew the Germans would be crawling out of their bunkers and holes ready to defend the beaches. More artillery fire began coming in from the shore, peppering the sea around the landing craft, the water seeming to boil with each impact. The nearest boat took a direct hit, throwing bodies into the sea. A second shell hit the already listing craft, decimating the remainder of the troops trapped in its confined hull. Brogan's own boat veered off trying to put some distance from the burning wreck.

"Damn, did you see that?" Billyboy said.

It was then that Brogan was aware of bullets ricocheting off the hull, sharp metallic zings like angry bees.

"Keep your heads down," he shouted.

The landing craft was about a quarter of a mile from the shore when Brogan realised the turkey shoot was about to begin, and with dread creeping into his guts, he also realised that *they* were going to be the turkeys.