

## CHAPTER 19

0730 hours

Now the guns at their back had fallen silent, it was like the Germans had woken up. They had crawled out of their bunkers and holes and were firing everything they had back at the advancing landing craft. The sea around the small tightly packed boats churned under the storm of mortar blasts and machine-gun fire, each explosion spurting geysers of seawater skyward. Brogan could hear the rapid patter of impacts against the landing craft's metal hull, like a heavy rainfall. This deluge was made of lead.

Beside him, Billyboy inhaled sharply through his gritted teeth, "Christ, Sarge... I thought this was supposed to be some kinda secret."

Kowski snorted. "I think we kinda let da cat outta da bag when we started shootin' at 'em."

All around them, the other boats bucked in the surf, their hulls grinding against underwater sand ridges as they closed with the beach. The ramps fell open like the lolling tongues of exhausted beasts lapping at the water. The weight of incoming fire was being concentrated towards the boats disgorging the soldiers, and every time a ramp fell, a section of the front rank was ripped apart before they even had a chance to set foot in the water.

The men in Brogan's boat recoiled at the unfolding scene of carnage, some gagging, others gripping their rifles so tightly their knuckles whitened. The screams from the surrounding craft merged with the thunder of artillery.

Lieutenant Hannagan, his helmet lopsided on his head and his uniform, too new and too clean, tried to press through the group to the center of the craft to issue the order to disembark.

"Keep your weapons dry, boys," he shouted. "The first bottle of champagne is on me." He was rewarded with smiles and cheers. He scanned the young faces of the men scattered around him and raised his hand. "God be with you all."

Brogan said a silent prayer of his own and hoped the Big Guy was listening. The landing craft gave a shuddering jolt as it ground into the sand, hard enough to knock some men off balance. The flap dropped into the sea and exposed the men, and immediately a young soldier slumped forward with a soft out-rush of breath, blood streaming from beneath his tunic. More men in the front row fell dead before taking a step. Lieutenant Hannagan was among the first killed, his bright new uniform splashed with his own blood. A hail of bullets zinged off the metal hull, sending sparks cascading into the boat.

"Over the side," Brogan shouted. "Get over the side, into the water. It's suicide to go out the front." The men didn't need to be told twice. They scrambled over the side, tumbling into the cold surf. Bullets stitched the water around them.

Brogan was one of the last out of the craft just as a mortar shell found its target. The shockwave hurled him beneath the surface. For a moment there was

only darkness, and the muffled roar of distant gunfire. He kicked upward violently, breaking the surface and gasping for air as bullets peppered the sea around him, He quietly marvelled at how none of them hit him. Maybe the rumours about his invincibility were true after all.

Then he was up and running headlong towards the shore, the knee-high water slowing his progress to a crawl. The beach was close now and offered little in the way of cover until the sea wall higher up. He turned and looked back, seeing more of the landing craft dropping their gates, spewing more brave soldiers into the cold unforgiving water. And then his eyes caught a sight that turned his blood cold. The sea was awash with bobbing corpses, hundreds of them. Some were face-up, eyes wide in disbelief. Others floated face-down, helmets slipping away with the push and pull of the tide. Brogan felt a sob escape his mouth, and an overwhelming anger burn in his throat. He pushed on and passed a body face up, an expression of surprise fixed at the moment of death. Through the torn tunic he could see the tattoo of a dagger and the remnants of a girl's name in the gore on his chest.

"Damn you, Kowski," Brogan muttered under his breath.

Now was not the time to mourn. That would come later, if there was to be a later. For now he would content himself by killing as many of these bastards as he could.

At last, he reached the shore and collapsed behind one of the jagged barricades to catch his breath. The air was ripped apart by the ceaseless

screaming of bombs and the stuttering coughs of machine-guns as they raked the sand and water in a relentless tide of metal.

A soldier sprinted past him only to vanish in a sudden blast. When the smoke cleared, the man's leg lay several feet away, still twitching. His lifeblood pumped from the gaping wound as his mangled body writhed on the sand. His screams slowly faded to silence.

"Medic, medic!" Brogan shouted, even though he knew it was hopeless. All around he heard the sickening thud of bullets impacting soft flesh. He tore himself away from his meagre cover and ran further up the beach. His foot snagged on something. He looked down at a bloody hand gripping his boot. A soldier with his jaw shot away was trying to say something, the exposed tongue flapping uselessly in the bloody cavernous maw of his face. Brogan stooped and took the soldier's hand but the man gave a last gurgling breath and died. The Sergeant had to wrench the stiff, dead hand from his own. He continued running until he fell exhausted at the base of the sea wall. The bullets now passed over his head or thudded harmlessly into the sand above him.

He breathed in sharp grit as he sucked in huge amounts of air. He had made it. He had got out of the sea, clambering over the corpses of his countrymen as they were sucked in and pushed out by the tide. He didn't know how he had got here but he was still alive. Billyboy fell into the sand beside him followed by Bob Kelly.

“Good to see you, Sarge,” Billyboy said, breathing heavily. “Is it just my imagination or are we getting our asses kicked?”

“We gots ta get off this beach,” Kelly said. “Or we’ll be goin’ for a swim afor too long.”

“Kowski bought it on the beach,” Brogan said. He didn’t meet their eyes. “Hannagan too. Never got out of the landing craft.”

“Jeez,” Billyboy groaned. “If the other beaches are as bad as this one, this invasion will be short lived.”

Ahead of them, two German bunkers spat angry lines of machine-gun fire across the sand, pinning the men down in a deadly bottleneck.

“We gotta silence those guns,” Brogan said. “Bob, how good is that pitcher’s arm of yours?”

“It’s major league, Sarge,” Kelly said.

Brogan unpinned a grenade from his tunic and pressed it into Kelly’s hand. “Think you could hit the slit in that pillbox over there from here?”

“Why, sure thing, Sarge.”

Kelly lifted his arm slowly. A bullet grazed him, tearing a red line across his forearm. He hissed in pain but didn’t stop. He clenched the pin in his teeth, yanked it free, and hurled the grenade with everything he had.

The projectile arced towards the bunker. It rebounded off the underside of the slot and into the interior. They heard a satisfying explosion and screams of pain as the grenade ripped flesh from the bodies of their enemies.

"That there is fo mah friend Kowski," Kelly said, with a satisfied grin.

"One down," Billyboy said. "About two dozen more to go."

As the smoke began to clear, they saw the remnants of the machine-gun hanging impotently in the slit.

"Looks like we are pinned down by the other guns," Kelly said.

"Well, thank you, Mr stating-the-fuckin'-obvious," Billyboy said.

"What we gonna do, Boss?" Kelly asked. "You're in charge now."

Brogan thought for a moment and finally made up his mind. "If we can take out that other pillbox, it will clear an avenue to blow the wall and get off this beach. Then we can do some real damage."

Before he could give further orders, something caught his eye. Down the beach, between dead soldiers and the living, figures were moving.

Civilians.

A woman among them, strolling calmly across the sand as if she were walking through a market square.

"What the fuck are they doing here?" Brogan said. "Are they trying to get themselves killed?"

"What have you seen, Sarge?" Billyboy asked, turning to look.

More smoke drifted across the beach and when it cleared, the civilians had disappeared.

"Nothing, I guess," Brogan said. "Just thought I saw something."