

CHAPTER 21

0800 hours

Brogan became aware of movement behind him, a ragged cluster of fifty, maybe sixty men huddled together, trying to disappear into the shallow folds of sand. Their bodies were soaked, uniforms plastered to their skin, helmets askew, faces drained of colour. They looked less like soldiers and more like refugees.

Brogan looked past this wet, bedraggled company to the carnage scattered across the beach. Bodies lay half-buried in churned and pitted sand, frozen mid-motion like grotesque statues in a macabre exhibition, limbs twisted, rifles abandoned, helmets cracked open like eggshells. The morning light glinted off pools of seawater and blood alike. The art of slaughter, he thought grimly.

The horror rose through him like a tide, feeding into an anger he knew only too well, the same white-hot rage that had taken him through Italy. It flooded his chest now, steadying his breath, sharpening his senses. If death were hunting them, then he was ready to look him the eye and spit in his face.

Ahead, only twenty metres away, a barbed-wire fence stretched in a snarl of twisted steel. Beyond it loomed the bunker, grey, angular and seemingly impenetrable. Brogan could see sunlight glinting off the spinning barrels of the MG42s as they raked the beach with ruthless precision.

He realised there were no officers here. These men were all looking to him to take the burden of command. He jabbed a finger toward the broken bodies littering the shore.

“You wanna end up like that or do you want revenge?” he shouted. He listened to their muted murmurs. These men were almost finished but somehow he had to put some fire back into their bellies. He needed to light the touchpaper of their rage. “We came here to do a job and I for one ain’t going back in that sea. We’re American Marines goddammit. We gonna let these bastards kick our ass?”

His little speech had worked and a clamour of responses were shouted back at him.

“Hell, no, Sarge.”

“We gonna make ‘em pay.”

“We’ll show them what American Marines are made of.”

“We’re with you, Sarge. Just tell us what to do.”

Brogan thought quickly, looking over the stretch of exposed beach, the wire, the bunker, and the seawall beyond it. “I need wire cutters, Bangalores and explosives. Anyone got any M18 grenades?”

“I got a couple, Sarge,” a soldier shouted from within the throng, holding aloft two smoke canisters.

“Okay, listen up, this is what we’re gonna do,” Brogan began. “We’re gonna lay down those smoke grenades and then throw some covering fire at that bunker. I want one man to crawl up and cut that barbed wire. Then I want two

more men to put together the bangalores with as much explosive as we got and push it all through the fence to the wall.”

“Then what, Sarge?” another shouted.

Brogan let out a wild grin, his eyes alight with fury. “Then we get our heads down because we’re going to blow those fuckers to hell.” The madness was in him now like the time he’d charged the machine-gun nest in Italy.

A soldier crawled up beside Brogan and said, “I got some wire cutters, Sarge.”

“What’s your name, soldier?” Brogan asked.

“Private Pete Danvers, sir,” the soldier said. “First Infantry; first in and last out.”

Brogan slapped the soldier’s back. “Well said, Pete.” He pointed at the barbed wire. “Think you can crawl up there and cut that wire?”

“I used to be a poacher back in Missouri, Sarge,” Danvers said, with a crooked grin. “I’ve pretty much spent my whole life on my stomach.”

“I need two more to lay the explosives,” Brogan shouted to the group.

Two more men crawled up holding the bangalores and several bags containing explosives. They saluted and one of them said, “Sir, Privates Bill Fresher and Gary Benson, Twenty Ninth Infantry. Think we got enough here t’give ‘em a headache, Sarge.”

Brogan directed his attention to the rest of the men, *his men*, because that was what they were now. They were lost sheep looking for a shepherd.

“We start in ten minutes,” he said, checking his watch. “When I throw the first smoke grenade, I want you all to direct as much fire as you can at that bunker. Pete here will cut the wire first and then Gary and Bill will feed the explosives through and blow the wall. I’ll throw the second smoke grenade and then we are all going through that breach and take out that bunker. I want one of you guys at the back to go back out on the beach and get as many stragglers as you can find and bring them back here.”

“I’ll go, sir,” another soldier shouted. “Private Abe Wheeler, First Infantry.”

“Good man, Abe,” Brogan said. “Keep your head down, son.”

As minutes ticked by, more men crawled up behind Brogan’s growing band. The ten minutes lapsed, and Brogan raised his hand. “We go in five.”

The Sergeant raised each digit in a slow, deliberate countdown. As his thumb lifted, he pulled the pin of the smoke grenade and threw it. It clattered across the sand and erupted in a billowing curtain of black smoke. Simultaneously, the men behind Brogan opened up, their shots cracking through the haze. Some lobbed grenades. The explosions threw up walls of sand.

The first man crawled forward under the cover, cutters in hand. He slipped into the smoke like a phantom, making quick, precise snips. Metal clinked softly. A gap opened in the fence. He began to shimmy backwards as the second two men inched forward with the bangalores, feeding the long tubes through the narrow gap, forcing the explosives towards the wall. The smoke thinned for half a heartbeat, just enough.

The MG42 roared.

One of the soldiers jerked as bullets tore into him. The remaining soldier kept feeding the tubes in. He activated the fuse.

“FUSE HOT!” he yelled, scrambling back. Two men grabbed his ankles and dragged him out as bullets snapped overhead.

“Take cover,” Brogan shouted, covering his ears with his hands.

The Bangalores detonated, igniting the other explosives with it and suddenly it was raining sand and chunks of masonry. Brogan looked up and saw a huge hole in the defense wall. He threw the second smoke cannister at the bunker. The black, dense smoke from the grenade mixed with the smoke from the explosion creating perfect cover as the Sergeant waved his men forward.

“Marines, give ‘em hell!”

By the time the men were rushing through the breach, many more had joined their ranks. A few fell to the machine-guns, but most of them made it through the hole and were now behind the wall, wreaking havoc with the enemy. Germans scrambled in panic as the Americans flooded into their defenses like a breaking wave.

Brogan sprinted past the bunker, yanked two grenades from his belt, and hurled them through the firing slit.

He didn’t slow down.

The explosions behind him sounded like justice.

“And that one,” he growled, firing across the dune, “was for Lieutenant Brannagan.”