

CHAPTER 1

The hammering on his eardrums, the insistent hammering, is the trigger.

Dive-bombers scream overhead like demented hornets and are gone, but the shelling from the hills doesn't stop. Wedged into a slit trench half the size of a grave, Lieutenant Frank Hill clamps his hands over his ears as the next shell wails overhead.

He clenches his eyes shut. His mother is standing at the chancel steps arranging flowers just as the organ gives a stentorian shout, shaking the whole church. Frank was about five; and his only defence was to sing at the top of his voice, to ride the crescendo of sound and save himself from drowning.

Another whistling glissando as a shell drops. Another shudder. Frank cringes. Inundation threatens again, and again he starts to sing. He hasn't chosen the song, yet somewhere deep inside the sounds are forming.

“Ich such' im Schnee vergebens.
Nach ihrer Tritte Spur,”

His voice grows stronger. Briefly the firing stops as though the Germans are listening too.

“Wo sie an meinem Arme
Durchstrich die grüne Flur.”

Frank hears the hissing again; he glances at Corporal Wakefield beside him in the trench, and blenches at the air-splitting blast. He has been with Wakefield since Gazala where they waited for the German attack under orders to fight to the end. But then a counter-order came and they fled east towards Alexandria. Now at Salerno there's only the sea, a mile behind.

Wakefield smiles. He has heard Frank sing before - in the revues he staged in the desert. But he hasn't heard him sing in the throes of battle, and never in German. He looks away when Frank catches his eye.

“Ich will den Boden küssen,
Durchdringen Eis und Schnee
Mit meinen heißen Tränen,
Bis ich die Erde seh'.”

Frank knows little German but the bleakness of *Winterreise*

mirrors his state.

*In vain I search for her footprints
Where on my arm she wandered through the fields.
Now the ground is covered in snow but my burning tears
Will melt it and restore the meadows to life.*

It's four days since they landed. At least Frank thinks it's four, but he may have lost track; little sleep and the numbing bombardment has jumbled his brain. They got ashore successfully but a counter-attack drove them back. Now they're clinging to what remains of the beachhead. It's the infantry's job, as usual, to sit tight and somehow survive.

A thunderclap bursts the ground, showering them with earth. Frank rakes his fingers across his face and spits; the taste of rotten vegetation remains, masked by the stink of high explosive. He pushes himself lower in the trench, desperate to get below the parapet, but his bulk stops him and his head is still exposed when a white flash blinds him. Heavy weights pin his legs, and he nearly throws up. He's certain he's been hit.

His head aches from ear to ear, yet slowly his vision clears. He starts a stocktake of his limbs but is stopped by a smothered cry from beneath the debris that half-fills the trench. He claws with both hands until he feels Wakefield's coarse uniform and tugs, provoking a stifled scream. He worms his hands beneath the Corporal, raises him clear of the earth, and softly, like a young mother, lays him on the ground.

Frank kneels beside him. From above, Wakefield looks unscathed, but behind his head a dark stain is spreading. Frank turns him gently, not wanting to look. Shrapnel has torn away part of his skull, above and behind the left ear. Unable to clean the wound, Frank wraps a bandage loosely around Wakefield's head to hold it all together. Blotches seep across the dressing. If only they could get him to the landing beach and onto a hospital ship. But they can't move him until nightfall and Frank doubts he'll last through the day. He finds his morphine tablets but Wakefield can't swallow them. Frank wishes he had morphine to inject.

Wakefield briefly opens his eyes and seems to speak, but with the ringing in his ears Frank doesn't believe what he hears. He strains forward.

'Shoot me!' Wakefield breathes. 'For mercy's sake.'

Frank opens his water bottle but when he tries to lift

Wakefield's head he cries out. And lying flat he can't drink.

'Shoot me, Frank! For God's sake, finish me off.'

Frank smears his palms down his trousers and takes Wakefield's hands although his own are trembling. For the first time he looks up, in search of help. Beyond the narrow Salerno plain, early mist shrouds the crescent of hills. There's no help there; just the Boche artillery, which welcomed the Fifth Army ashore.

Another wing of Stukas howls above Frank's head. He shakes his fist as they strafe the unprotected troops. He'd seen a few Hurricanes earlier. Where the hell are they now? He scans the beachhead towards Agropoli, shrouded by smoke and dust. Before the landing he'd hoped to visit Paestum. Now he doubts he'll make it; even if he survives, the Greek temples to Hera and Pallas Athena will be lost.

"Wo find' ich eine Blüte,
Wo find' ich grünes Gras?
Die Blumen sind erstorben,
Der Rasen sieht so blaß."

*Are there flowers in bloom? Is the grass still green?
No wonder the flowers have decayed and the grass has died.*

Frank stops singing. Major Edmund Manley is approaching through the murk at a steady trot. Before he reaches Frank's trench an explosion brings down the rigging of the nearest row of vines but he seems oblivious to the shelling. He looks down at Frank, probably for the first time as Frank is six inches taller than him. Then he stares at Wakefield who shudders a strangled scream.

'Looks like he's bought it, poor sod!'

Frank nods, not daring to speak. It's all too much. Already he's lost a third of his Platoon.

Wakefield opens his eyes with a start. 'Shoot me, Sir. I beg you. Please shoot me!'

'Frank, you heard what he said!'

'I'm not sure.' Frank fumbles with his holster.

'You wouldn't think twice, if it were your horse. Show some compassion, for Christ's sake.' Edmund crouches down and speaks to Wakefield. 'I'm sorry, old chap. You're a fine soldier. You shouldn't have to suffer any more.'

Frank's hands shake as he raises his pistol, but Wakefield is

looking at Edmund. Edmund glances round. Then he rests his own pistol against Wakefield's temple and gently squeezes the trigger.

Edmund replaces it in his holster. 'If I'm badly wounded, Frank, I hope you'll have the gumption to put me out of my misery.'

Edmund stands for a moment, his head bowed. Beside him Frank wipes his eyes, leaving bloody brown streaks across his face. He isn't crying just for Wakefield or for the others they've lost. It's for the whole ruined world, and especially for Maggie. Edmund wouldn't understand of course and Frank is damned if he's going to tell him.

The next shell is closer and stirs Frank from his stasis. He chases Edmund to an empty slit as the bombardment grows more intense. Any more pressure on his ears and Frank's head will explode.

'Get the men ready for when Jerry attacks!' Edmund shouts between blasts. 'The buggers aim to split the centre ... separating us from the bloody Yanks ... they'll turn their full force on us ... it could be today ... make sure your men are ready ... they may want to write home ... or get some sleep ... it'll be a long night ... our orders are to hold on here.'

'Are the Yanks planning to pull out? Can they get their men off the beaches?'

'We managed it at Dunkirk.' Edmund stiffens. 'But no one's leaving.'

At Dunkirk the Germans weren't dug in just above the beaches. But Frank isn't going to argue, although the strategy for Salerno has always seemed flawed. The Colonel insisted they'd land unopposed. But what made him imagine that the Germans wouldn't keep fighting after the Italian armistice? Frank was sure they'd fight twice as hard. And when he'd looked at the map of southern Italy it seemed clear where the Allies would land. No wonder the Germans were waiting.

Edmund stares at Frank. Does he expect him to argue? They'd disagreed about tactics in Egypt where Frank had soon learnt that only Edmund could question the Colonel. Because of his sporting prowess, he's deemed to walk on water.

Nearby the British guns have maintained a steady rate of fire throughout the bombardment, but now they've attracted attention from more powerful German artillery. A six-pounder has taken a

direct hit and Edmund sets off to see what help is needed. Frank watches him fade in the smoke. Despite their differences he can't help admiring Edmund, with his conviction that he was born to rule the world. His breed may soon be extinct but still Frank feels awed by his courage and style.

Frank watches a group of German tanks move forward in the distance. He checks his watch; it's 0700. Jerry's plan for the day is unfolding. It'll take a miracle to save them now. Frank wants to be sick but he pulls himself together. Still sweating he gathers his men, who look like a rabble after days without shaving and sleep. Most of them have been in North Africa and Sicily where, as part of the Eighth Army, they grew used to winning. But they haven't forgotten the shambles before El Alamein.

'Any questions?' Frank ends a stumbling briefing about the expected attack.

'Can we go back to Eighth Army?' Corporal Huggins asks brightly, provoking a cheer from the others. Huggins puffs out his barrel chest. 'I say bring back Monty and send the Yanks home.'

Frank tries to smile. He likes Huggins and chose him as his batman in Sicily. 'Corporal Huggins, as you well know Monty and the Eighth Army are moving up the east coast after their landing at Reggio. The Americans' job is to take the west coast. They've asked for our help and I know you'll give generous support. Won't you, Huggins!'

'I'm always ready to help, Sir.' Huggins' remark is greeted with ironical cheers. 'But this Yankee, General Clark, is useless. What does he know about fighting?'

Frank finds it hard not to warm to Huggins' blunt approach. 'You'll get the chance to show him how it's done, Huggins. I promise you that.'

The men give another cheer. In other circumstances Frank enjoys these exchanges with his Platoon and ignores Edmund's complaints that he fraternises too much; he fears it'll lead to a loss of respect but that isn't Frank's experience.

Huggins is ready to go on but Frank stops him, although he doesn't disagree. He'd watched Monty land unopposed at Reggio, which was probably just good fortune. But generals need luck and on the present showing General Mark Clark, who is leading the combined US and British Fifth Army, isn't the lucky kind.

Frank hands round his cigarettes. 'If the Germans can split the centre, they'll turn the attack on us. So you'll need to get some

rest. You may want to write to your loved ones; we'll try to get the post out tonight.'

'If you're telling us to write home, things must be bad.' Dutton says.

'I'm just saying we'll get your letters out tonight. Why not take the opportunity?'

Frank is struck again that the mention of the mail makes the men more thoughtful. Letters from home are sacred but replying is another matter. They can't describe the fighting, but just thinking what to write makes them conscious of their predicament. They also fear for their loved ones, who in the weeks since they last wrote might have been injured or killed, have become sick or homeless or broke, or have been unfaithful. Experienced soldiers never speak about their families, the feelings are too raw. If a man talks about home he's either a new arrival or about to crack.

The men disperse and Frank settles into a slitter. There's no one he wants to write to, but the relentless shelling has brought back the London blitz. He's standing outside the house in Ealing staring at the wreck of their home. Where windows were there are now blackened holes, like the eye sockets of charred skulls he saw in the desert.

'No, Sir, you can't go in there. It's unsafe.' An ARP warden is pushing him back. 'BUT MY WIFE! WHERE IS MY WIFE?'

Now Frank grips his arms across his chest to hide the crater that opened when Maggie died three years ago. He joined up soon afterwards, knowing he couldn't settle until he'd avenged her death. He'd learnt already in Spain that he wasn't much of a soldier, but he hates bullies and has to play his part in defeating the Nazis.

"Soll denn kein Angedenken
Ich nehmen mit von hier?
Wenn meine Schmerzen schweigen,
Wer sagt mir dann von ihr?"

*Can I not take some token of remembrance?
When my sadness grows silent, what will remind me of her?*

The sentiment of *Erstarrung* numbs Frank's grief, and for a while he closes his eyes and feels removed from the mayhem all

around. The last time he sang this song Maggie was playing the piano. He still feels her presence.

After a while he opens his eyes. He watches the battle unfold and wonders how much longer they have. Eventually he takes out his book, the play *Journey's End*. He'd seen it before he went to Spain and for the first time had glimpsed the awfulness of war. He reads for a few minutes and decides Edmund is a bit like Stanhope who is also a cricketer and a good commander. But Stanhope took to drink.

Frank's thoughts move to his father and what he must have gone through in the trenches. It was a miracle he'd survived, especially as he was weak - at least according to Frank's mother.

Frank dimly remembers a shambling man who smelt strongly of alcohol. But his memories are also stained by his mother's bitterness. After the shame of the divorce she never mentioned him again and not until she died did Frank learn of his father's arrest for gross indecency with another man. His mother said she'd destroyed all her photographs so Frank grew up not knowing what his father looked like. But after his mother died he'd found one picture of their wedding. His father was tall and broad like Frank.

Frank doesn't know whether his father is still alive. But faced with his own probable extinction, he feels a sudden longing to find him if he comes through the war. He imagines what he'll say if ever they should meet. He pulls out a notebook and writes in a shaky hand.

13th September 1943

Dear Dad

I expect you're surprised to hear from me but I wanted you to know that I think about you often and wonder how you are. Did you know I'm in the army overseas? There's quite a big battle going on so I wanted to write while I have the chance.

Now I'm a soldier I have some idea of what you faced in the Great War and I feel I understand you better. Fighting and the prospect of being killed put things in a new perspective. So despite all that's happened I still want to love you.

It was hard for mother when you left. And I was so angry I couldn't speak. Now I can see it was hard for you too. I imagine you lying awake steeling yourself for those few dreadful steps that were going to change your life.

Perhaps you felt as I do now, bracing myself for battle and hoping I can rise to the challenge. I think of my darling Maggie - did you know that I was married? - and remember that I'm fighting for her although she was killed in the blitz.

There's so much to say and I don't know how to start. I just hope that when all this is over we'll meet and we'll both have the courage to say the things we feel.

Your loving son

Frank

He folds the paper. Although he has nowhere to send it, he can't throw it away. He feels pleased that he's written and for a few minutes he dozes. When he awakes he forces himself to get up. He has to check his men's letters home, a job he deeply dislikes. It feels heavy-handed not to trust those on whom his life so often depends. But in case the letters fall into enemy hands Frank has to censor them.

He finds it helpful to cover the signatures so he doesn't know the writer of each letter. But still he's moved by the concern and affection they convey. One speaks of a father's joy at seeing the first picture of his boy, born after he left England. The words "let him see his son" repeat in Frank's head like a prayer. He looks away before continuing.

After sealing the letters Frank stares across at the slit where they buried Wakefield. He knows Edmund was right. 'Damn you!' he shouts amidst the continuing din. 'You've killed another good man. You'll pay for this.' He stands and shakes his fists at the guns hidden in the hills. He sinks his face into his hands. 'Oh Maggie!' How he misses her.

*"Mein Herz ist wie erstorben,
Kalt starrt ihr Bild darin;
Schmilzt je das Herz mir wieder,
Fließt auch ihr Bild dahin!"*

*With my heart frozen, her image has turned to ice,
And if my heart should thaw her face will melt away.*

CHAPTER 2

'That must be Castelnovo,' Captain Robert Hawksby says, 'with its medieval walls.'

'And two towers,' Edmund laughs. 'Perhaps bloody Jerry's still in residence.'

'There's only one way to find out,' Rob lowers his binoculars and puts away the map. 'We'd better take a look.'

Rob sets off briskly. Edmund follows. His legs feel heavy from the day's exertions, but his senses still tingle with the pleasure of being in grand countryside in the late afternoon sun. It isn't like the moors of the West Country but Edmund feels at home and even at peace.

It has been a week since the Germans withdrew from Salerno, driven back by waves of heavy bombers and the fifteen-inch guns of Allied battleships. Edmund was awed by this firepower, but he felt little sympathy for the Germans as they took the full force of the storm and swallowed their own wretched medicine. Yet he was impressed that they stuck it for so long and made an orderly withdrawal.

'Shall we billet the men for a change?' Rob touches Edmund's arm to slow him down. 'They could do with sleeping in a bed.'

'You're getting soft!' The creases in Edmund's face show he's smiling but he still declaims the words. 'Or were you thinking of something else?'

'It never crossed my mind. You're the one who's incorrigible. Personally I'm whacked.'

'Don't count your chickens.' Edmund says sharply. 'If bloody Jerry's still around, there could be a bit of action.'

'We'll soon find out,' Rob sets off towards his Platoon.

'Watch your step, for Christ's sake!'

They have learnt from grim experience to watch constantly for mines. They have especially come to fear the "S" mine or "debollocker", which jumps three foot into the air before exploding, and the Schu mine, which is made mostly of wood and is almost undetectable. They have also encountered booby traps in surprising places, even attached to growing fruit in the orchards. And that isn't all. Every bridge has been blown and often the roadways leading to the bridges are mined, making the erection of new bridges more dangerous. And usually the Germans are dug in on the far bank and open up with machine guns and mortars when they approach.

Edmund hates these cynical tricks and the resultant loss of men, but he doesn't let them get him down. If he's learnt anything in three years of fighting it's the ability to control his mind and

leave behind the things he's seen. He knows that given free rein such memories could overwhelm him and leave him burnt out, like a torched tank. So blinkering his thoughts from the future and the past, he forces himself to live in the present; and this is now his cocoon of relief, which he defends with resolution.

'The war will be over by Christmas,' is a message Edmund hears every day, encouraged by the armistice with Italy, but he won't entertain the thought. Like a drunk groping his way home, he only takes short steps, looking no further than the next battle or the next meal. In action he's free to be himself, just as when he occupies the crease. But in quieter moments his thoughts are harder to control. He knows that unless he maintains his guard old lodgers will take up residence, bringing memories and even hopes. Such intruders have to be disciplined or distracted by fleeting amusements. He rather hopes that Castelnuovo may furnish some entertainment.

Edmund sends Rob's Platoon to the right of the village, and Bewdley's to the left. Then he accompanies Frank's Platoon as they approach the main gateway. With the aid of a mine detector they confirm in less than half an hour that this part of the village is clear. Edmund plants himself in the middle of a small piazza while a few residents - all men - watch with suspicion.

'Frank, go and ask them when the buggers left.'

'I speak a bit of Spanish but not Italian.'

'They won't know the difference!'

Edmund watches as Frank approaches one of the men.

'I think they said the Germans left this morning.' Frank says when he returns. 'But they're more interested in when we're going. They're not very pleased to see us.'

'Tell them we'll stay over night and we need bloody billets for the men.'

Frank sidles back to the villagers and gestures the need for accommodation for the whole Company. The men react excitedly and quickly win the hand-waving contest.

Edmund steps forward.

'Men!' He lifts his fingers to his mouth. 'Eat!'

Then he signals that the men will need to sleep. The villagers bristle, but he dismisses them with a sweep of his arm. 'I want it done now!'

Edmund turns to his batman. 'Smythe, liaise with the officers to ensure that every man is fed and housed. Report back when it's

done.'

Edmund watches Frank. He knows the men like him, even though he seems to be going nuts. He's heard about Frank's singing at Salerno. And in German, for Christ's sake. If they hadn't been together for more than two years he'd suspect that Frank was a spy. But Edmund has learnt from experience that Frank is merely odd, and probably queer. Salerno was the final straw. They'd all been affected of course but they hadn't all fallen apart.

Edmund climbs onto an old stone wall and sits in the sunshine until Smythe returns with news that the men have been housed.

'I like the look of that place, Smythe,' he points at a building reminiscent of his family home. 'Arrange my billet in there.'

Smythe reappears a few minutes later. 'I think it'll suit you, Sir. It's the house of the Conte.'

Edmund hears the sound of a horse's hooves from across the village.

'Shall I stop him, Sir?' Smythe glances at Edmund as he drops down from the wall. 'We haven't swept that part for mines.'

'It's probably too late, Smythe.'

Smythe grabs a mine detector and advances along the street towards the still invisible rider. He's only walked a few paces when an equine head emerges fifty yards away. Edmund catches his breath as he sees the rider. She looks at home in the saddle and is altogether rather splendid with long black hair pinned up on the back of her head. And she isn't riding side-saddle; perhaps Italians aren't so backward after all.

The men fall silent as the horse walks on steadily with Smythe waving the mine detector in front.

'You won't need that in the village,' the rider announces in English as she stops the horse and dismounts in front of Edmund. 'I insisted with the Germans that they mustn't leave any mines.'

She hands the reins to a servant who leans forward and speaks into her ear. 'I hear you're going to stay,' she looks at Edmund quizzically. 'In that case you'd better come inside.'

Edmund takes the woman to be the Contessa and greets her politely.

'I hope you'll be comfortable here,' she smiles and leads Edmund upstairs, followed by a servant with a steaming water jug. 'There's a fine view of Vesuvius from the window.'

'I hope it's not inconvenient.' Edmund says, trying to imagine

what the form is when billeted with minor aristocracy.

'Of course not. We're used to it. We had a German officer here last night.' She glances at Edmund again. 'He looked a lot like you.'

Edmund goes to inspect the arrangements that have been made for the men and is agreeably surprised. Many of them have already shaved and look more like themselves, although deep shadows still ring their reddened eyes.

Satisfied that all is in order, Edmund returns to his room. He sniffs the air and detects a curious smell, probably that bloody German. He pulls back the bedclothes; thank God the sheets are fresh. Turning, he catches sight of himself in the mirror. His sandy hair is rather too long and has even started to curl, but he certainly doesn't look German. If anything, the prominence of his nose at the bridge makes his face more Roman.

After one more glance in the mirror Edmund puts out his things on the solid chest of drawers. He stares at the photograph of Vermillion, which he hasn't taken out for weeks. He met her in Cairo, where she worked for Y Section, monitoring German communications. He has pursued her with gusto ever since, in so far as the war has allowed. But staring at her now he feels he hardly knows her. She looks beautiful, although the picture doesn't do justice to her complexion and how stunning she was on that first weekend in Alexandria. Still it catches her innocence. Thank God she's safe in Cairo, away from the fighting.

It's never easy to shave in the field and the pleasure of hot water raises Edmund's spirits. As he draws the blade across his creamy cheeks he wonders what Mother would make of Vermillion. She might not think her suitable for an eldest son, but surely even Mother would see that for the youngest, or since James's accident the younger, son she was perfect and the only girl he could marry. But that would be in a different world, where past and future could connect with the present and where Vermillion would be familiar again. In the meantime he'll take his chances and have fun with the local girls, as he'd done in Sicily when the fighting was over. Thank God Vermillion was sensible about such things. It would be tiresome if she didn't understand.

Edmund goes down to dinner expecting to meet the Conte and other members of the household but he notices soon that the table - in the faded but elegant dining room - is set for two, with an elderly servant to wait on them. Conversation is formal. The

Contessa asks about Edmund's life before the war and he starts to tell her he played cricket, but he backtracks quickly when she asks him to explain the game. Instead he talks about his love for the family estate, where he knows there's common ground. The Contessa talks about her family but says nothing about her husband. Edmund becomes curious, and once the food and wine has taken effect he casually asks about the Conte.

'My husband was a soldier ... like you,' the Contessa takes a deep breath, 'he fought in the desert ... against the British ... until he was killed last year ...'

Edmund waits for her to continue but she just stares at him. The silence hangs heavily; he can't think what to say. 'I'm terribly sorry,' he says at last, not looking at the Contessa. 'It's rotten for you.'

He glances up.

'Don't say you're sorry!' She looks straight at him. 'You didn't know him.'

Edmund puts his napkin on the table. He can't spend the evening with a widow who blames the British for her husband's death.

'My husband was a bad man!' she declares, before Edmund can move. 'He supported Il Duce, who has brought disaster to Italy. I'm happy my husband is dead! I hope Mussolini will soon follow!'

Edmund replaces his napkin on his lap. He compliments the Contessa on the wine and takes another mouthful.

'I felt sure you'd like it,' she laughs. 'It was my husband's favourite.'

Edmund struggles to swallow; then he laughs too.

After dinner she shows him into the drawing room and he admires the furniture and the collection of clocks. She smiles and asks whether he likes the piano.

'I don't play myself,' he says, taking out his cigarettes. She laughs again. 'What's so bloody funny about a soldier playing the piano?'

She sits down at the piano and carefully arranges her long skirt. She plays with obvious skill but classical music isn't Edmund's bag and he recognises none of the pieces. Even if she had mentioned Domenico Scarlatti, he'd have been none the wiser. Still, he lets the music wash around him as he lights a cigarette and sips some golden grappa.

The house is quiet apart from the piano but Edmund hears whistling in his ears, a legacy from Salerno. Yet he feels content in this fine old building. Its style is unfamiliar yet it brings back forgotten feelings. The Contessa is playing a slow movement, each note sustained by the chestnut panelling, and Edmund is back with Father's clocks while Mother is playing the piano. One day he'll see the estate again. It has been the one enduring thing in his life. When he was away at boarding school it wasn't Mother he missed, it was the estate. But he can't live there whilst Peter is alive, knowing that Peter will inherit.

Edmund's thoughts about his elder brother bring him back to the music, as the Contessa attacks a vigorous final movement. She looks alluring in the candlelight. He guesses she's in her mid-thirties, the age when to him women are at their best. The business about her husband's death is a pity; it makes him reluctant to attempt a seduction. He drains the last of the grappa and stands up as she plays the final note.

'Thank you for a delightful evening,' he says. 'I'm leaving early tomorrow.'

'You're welcome to stay on.'

Is it his imagination or did a flicker of disappointment cross her face?

'Good night. And thank you again.'

Edmund goes upstairs. He gets himself ready and sits down on the wooden-framed bed. He's blown out most of the candles when he hears a knock on the door.

'Come in!' he says gruffly, assuming it's one of the servants.

The door opens and the Contessa appears, wearing a dressing gown of black silk. Under one arm she carries a large ginger tom, which eyes Edmund with suspicion.

'Do you have everything you want?' she asks.

Edmund studies her. What is she referring to? The Contessa waits for a reply but Edmund just looks admiringly. As though to break the silence, the Contessa's dressing gown slips open. Edmund thinks he sees the brown skin of her thigh but he isn't sure in the shadowy light. He moves towards her, his hopes rising and they make love under the cat's furious gaze. From time to time it hisses as they encroach on its territory and at a critical moment it attacks Edmund's arm with its hind legs, but without spoiling his pleasure.

CHAPTER 3

'Did you really fall for Edmund while watching him play cricket?' Jackie Platt grins. 'Was it really love at first ball?'

The two young women press against the troopship rail, straining for a glimpse of Italy in the pre-dawn grey. From the deck below, where a group of soldiers wave to attract their attention, the two look indistinguishable in their ATS uniforms. But closer inspection would show that Vermillion Henthorpe is slighter and her hair is darker and more orderly than Jackie's, which waves in the breeze.

'I didn't fall for Edmund then!' Vermillion looks cold and tired after three cramped nights on board. 'And it was months before I saw him again.'

'You still showed indecent haste. And to think you were such a nice girl when you left England! You remember the bruises I had all down my back from making love with Norman in a lifeboat. You should have seen your face when I told you.'

Vermillion's cheeks burn at the memory. Jackie's revelation came as they reached Port Suez. They were leaning over the rail then as well, and Jackie's revelation made Vermillion feel ill. It wasn't so much that Jackie did it in a lifeboat but more that she did it at all. Vermillion doesn't want to be reminded that she was so innocent less than two years before. She hopes Jackie doesn't notice her discomfort.

'Norman was married, you know,' Vermillion says.

'You never told me.'

'I only found out at the match.'

'When you were going weak at the knees over Edmund.'

'I wasn't weak at the knees,' Vermillion stares into the distance. 'I just admired his batting.'

'So what did you hear about Norman?'

'I met a pilot who trained with him. He told me Norman was married and he knew his wife who'd had a baby before he left England.'

'The beast.' Jackie says coolly. 'No wonder he vanished into the woodwork. To think I was pining for Norman all that time and you never said a word.'

'You weren't pining for long, as I recall.' Vermillion laughs. 'I thought about telling you. But when I asked Simon what was best he told me to let sleeping dogs lie.'

'Oh yes, good old standby Simon. I'd forgotten you knew him then before things got going with Edmund. Simon was always ready to sit up and beg, if you'd give him a titbit. He has that way of hovering, like a pesky moth. Why wasn't I surprised when he fluttered back this summer?'

'You're jealous.' Vermillion looks away again but there's still no sign of land. 'Simon was just good company when Edmund was away.'

'Which was most of the time. And even when Edmund was in Cairo he had that other girl. No wonder they called him "Bodyline".'

Vermillion was shaken when she found out about Edmund's other girls. But he explained quite calmly he wasn't serious about them; they were just for having fun. "I'm not living like a neutered cat!" was his final comment, and as Vermillion wouldn't sleep with him she accepted the arrangement. But when a year later they finally made love Edmund agreed to give up his other girls, at least whilst she was around.

'Do you realise, Jackie,' Vermillion says, 'it's five months since I've seen him? And even then I spent most of his leave with that fever.'

'I'd have to be deaf not to know. You've told me every day for weeks.'

Vermillion is silent. For a long time she tried not to mention Edmund because she hated Jackie's teasing and wasn't sure she trusted her. So she learnt to be in love in secret. But now Edmund is so near she can't stop herself. And despite her reservations she finds Jackie entertaining; something is always happening when she's around. And sharing the flat in Heliopolis was fun, although it only really worked because of Barbara, whose down-to-earth manner provided a counterweight.

'It was hard luck on Barbara being left in Cairo,' Vermillion says. 'I'd still be there too, if I hadn't made a fuss.'

'With us away, perhaps she'll finally find a man.'

'That would be marvellous!'

'Provided he's not completely spineless,' Jackie says, 'like some of the specimens she brought in. I never understood where she found them.'

'It wasn't at the cricket match, Jackie. It was at Alison and John's party. That was when I fell for Edmund. John tried to introduce me but Edmund said I needed no introduction - he'd

done his reconnaissance and knew all about me already. I was amazed. He even told me why Daddy left the army, which I'd never understood. I felt touched. The trouble is he knows all about me but has said so little about himself. When I ask him he says it doesn't matter because it's in the past, and it's pointless to think about the past whilst the war is on.'

'Your father was a fine soldier,' Edmund told her. 'One of the few who emerged from the Great War with an understanding of the importance of tanks, and with the courage to say so. Throughout the twenties he tried to persuade the powers that be to develop our tank forces but the generals were still wedded to horses. Tanks were dirty, smelly things, not suitable for gentlemen. When your father became a Brigadier his unorthodox views started to cause embarrassment. So, on the verge of his becoming a General, they retired him instead.'

All that Vermillion knew was that when she came home for the holidays she found her father had suddenly retired. Nothing was ever said but she watched him decline and turn inwards. And she was moved to a day school.

Above them a plane grumbles invisibly.

'I wonder how the boys were feeling a month ago,' Jackie says, 'as they approached the Italian coast.'

'Do you think it was misty like this?' Vermillion touches her opal ring. 'They must have dreaded the moment when the Germans would open fire. I do think they were brave.'

'I expect Edmund sailed blithely through, unruffled as a swan.'

'But swans paddle hard below the surface, whereas Edmund makes no effort at all. I think he's more like a falcon rising on a thermal. Jackie, do you think he's forgotten me?'

'I expect so!' Jackie laughs. 'No, of course not. He isn't a fool and he knows you'll make a perfect wife.'

Vermillion isn't sure whether Jackie is serious.

'Edmund will need someone to look beautiful,' Jackie adds, 'and to run the manor house and have a litter of babies.'

'Don't be disgusting!'

'There's nothing disgusting about it. You'll be the lady of the manor handing out food parcels to the rest of us when the war is over. He must be your Mr Right.'

'I don't want to be married yet!' Vermillion says, remembering her father's ill temper after he left the army. 'I want

to visit more countries and learn more languages. My parents tried to make me marry like my sister. Daddy used to say that only then could he die in peace. And they wouldn't let me get a job. I couldn't even join up - until I was twenty-one and they couldn't stop me.'

'My parents couldn't wait for me to leave.' Jackie says. 'After my three sisters had married, my father said another wedding would kill him, or leave him in Queer Street!'

Jackie waves back at some men below.

Vermillion looks away; she still can't see land but the air has a different smell. Is it the first breath of Europe? She fills her lungs. Europe again, after almost two years away. She feels a quivering in her stomach at the prospect of Italy; another country with another language and another way to avoid going home. Cairo was exciting for a year. But once the fighting moved west, most of the men went too and the city reverted to desert.

'I hope Naples will have plenty of men,' Jackie says. 'Cairo was dead before we left. Thank God I had Harry, but now he's upped sticks.'

Vermillion didn't like Harry ever since she came back to the flat one night and in the dark encountered him sleeping drunkenly on the sofa. She could still hear their duet as they howled at the shock of the encounter.

'Do you think you'll see him again?'

'Who knows? I shan't sit and wait. I don't have your patience.' Jackie frowns. 'You don't think all the men will leave Naples as soon as we arrive.'

'They say they'll be in Rome by Christmas, so we may be heading north quite soon.'

Captain Ashburn, their section leader, marches across the deck and catches this last exchange. 'Who's spreading rumours about Christmas in Rome? We should be tying up within an hour. Once we've disembarked you'll be taken to your hostel. I'd like to see you tomorrow at 0800 at our HQ. However, it could be a while before you'll have any work. They've got problems with the monitoring equipment. But they'll soon have them fixed. In the meantime you can get to know the city.'

The young women look at each other. Jackie seems rather pleased, but Vermillion feels disappointed they'll have nothing to do.

Jackie turns to Ashburn as the droning of a heavy aircraft

makes the deck vibrate. 'I hope they're some of ours returning.'

'How can they fly in this fog?' Vermillion looks at Ashburn, and resolves never to expand to her size.

'Isn't that obvious?' Ashburn smiles. 'They're flying above the mist; it should burn off quite quickly. The forecast's fine for the rest of the day. By the way, I hear Naples is a bit of a mess. We've only been there for two weeks so it's not surprising, but don't expect too much.'

Ashburn strides away towards another ATS group.

'She's not a bad old stick, I suppose,' Jackie says.

'She's hardly a stick!' Vermillion wonders why the Captain's uniform always looks a bit too small. But for the most part she likes Ashburn and is happy working for her.

'All right. Not a bad old maid!'

'I thought Naples would be romantic and elegant, like Paris before the war. And with the sea.'

'You're just thinking of that film,' Jackie says. 'You won't find Admiral Nelson there, nor Laurence Olivier.'

'Wasn't Vivien Leigh wonderful? I cried so much when Nelson died and Emma was left alone. How could they all have abandoned her?'

'Because she was a whore!'

'Jackie! You can't say that. She was beautiful and she adored Nelson. In a war the normal rules can't apply. They must have known that.'

'But everything changed once he was dead.'

Vermillion stares ahead and starts to raise her arm but Jackie gets the words out first. 'Vermillion, look there, on the right,' she says. 'I bet that's the Sorrento peninsula.'

Vermillion peers at the faint outline of hills. Jackie's right. It's Italy at last! And Edmund is in Italy too - a few miles away.

'How far has Edmund's Battalion got?' Jackie asks.

'Before we left Cairo they'd reached the Volturno River. There may be more news when we land.'

Vermillion twists her opal ring. 'It's only twenty miles from Naples. The first thing I'll do in Naples is to send him a letter. I hope he'll get it soon. He will be surprised.'

'I never thought you two would last this long, not after the way you started.' Jackie glances at Vermillion. 'You looked quite out of your depth when he rushed you off to Alex.'

'It was all quite above board. The Buchanans were really top

drawer and couldn't have been nicer.'

'But you didn't know that when you agreed to go.' Jackie says. 'You've heard of the white slave trade. I thought they'd sell you off and we'd never see you again.'

'That's ridiculous. It was obvious Edmund was trustworthy.'

'I just feared you were going too fast, for a sweet young thing. But I'm glad it all worked out. You've certainly hung on through thick and thin. I don't know how you've been so faithful. Apart from Simon, of course.'

'Sandy Buchanan served with Edmund's father in the Great War. And Cecily was extremely kind. They were obviously fond of Edmund. Their villa was surrounded by exotic gardens, near the sea. And the weather was perfect and Edmund was a dream. After sweltering in Cairo it was like arriving in heaven. I wouldn't have missed it for the world. And then Edmund went straight back to the fighting in the desert.'

Vermillion stares down at a half-sunken ship less than fifty yards away. Then she sees another. She imagines German planes have hit them as they waited to unload. Or perhaps they struck mines?

'Naples looks pretty much untouched despite what Ashburn said,' Jackie surveys the hazy outline of the bay. 'And doesn't it look peaceful with all those ships at anchor.'

In other circumstances it might have looked at peace but Vermillion can't forget that the ships are here to make war. And that's why she's here too.

'Did you chase Simon just to make Edmund jealous?'

'Of course not, Jackie! I'd never do that! I just found Simon amusing, when Edmund wasn't around.'

'So he filled a gap. And you enjoyed the attention.'

'Do you know?' Vermillion is relieved they aren't talking about Edmund. 'Simon offered to fly me to Italy after Ashburn said I must stay in Cairo.'

'Oh yes?' Jackie looks exultant. 'That would have been a great help. Leaving Egypt without permission. They'd have thrown you in the clink. Or shot you as a spy.'

'I thought he was very generous. He'd have been in trouble too, if we'd been caught.'

'And what did he want in return?' Jackie raises her eyebrows as though sensing an unaccustomed chance to occupy the moral high ground. 'Did he want a kiss and a cuddle, or a dirty

weekend?’

‘That never came up.’ Vermillion prays she’s not blushing.

In fact it had been worse than she’s said, because the price for the flight was that she’d sleep with Simon. She refused of course but after days of agonising and still desperate to get to Italy she finally agreed. Then she got the news that Ashburn had changed her mind.

As the sun breaks through just a few puffs of cloud are left.

‘That must be Vesuvius,’ Vermillion says. ‘I can see wisps of smoke escaping from the top.’

‘Do you think it’s going to erupt? That will be exciting.’

‘Don’t you think there’s been enough destruction without Vesuvius joining in?’

They are now near enough to the shore to see Naples clearly and to make out the buildings. ‘Oh God!’ Jackie says. ‘It looks as though those buildings have burst.’

On the deck below the men’s banter dries up as they take in the scale of destruction.

‘Naples looks more of a desert than Cairo,’ Jackie adds.

Vermillion can’t reply. She’s praying that Edmund is all right.

CHAPTER 4

Drizzle rustles through the trees. But Paolo, standing sentinel like a heron about to strike, doesn’t hear. He squints at the sleeping man, trying to discern his features in the half-light. He’s probably in his thirties; it’s hard to tell with men who live rough.

Paolo’s chest aches and his heart thumps so hard he fears the man will wake. If he does, Paolo is ready. Unsheathing his knife he peers at the man’s canvas bag. Is it tied to his belt? He edges forward and stands right above him.

His hand reaches down towards the bag. There must be something he can eat; it doesn’t matter what, as long as it will fill his belly. He bends further and shifts the bag a little. It doesn’t seem to be tethered. He’ll have to kill him if it is.

‘NO YOU DON’T, YOU LITTLE SHIT!’

Paolo gasps. A heavy boot thumps into his stomach. His right arm is wrenched forward and the trees somersault past.

The ground slams against Paolo’s back. He pants, but no breath comes. ‘Jesus Christ!’ he mouths. He’s dropped his knife. The air rasps in his throat as he scrambles to move. But the man is

over him already.

At that moment Sandro grabs the man from behind, pinning his arms to his side. Paolo rolls over and staggers to his feet, claspings his stomach. He still can't see his knife.

'Get him!' Sandro yells but the man jabs his elbows into Sandro's sides. He tears his arms free and stands a couple of metres away. He's taller and broader than them, and much stronger. The bastard! Paolo almost retches.

'Did your parents teach you nothing?' The man blinks, speaking in short bursts like a faulty machine gun. 'Santa Madonna! Teach these boys not to steal!'

'I was only checking you were all right,' Paolo coughs, 'what with the rain starting again.'

'Didn't they tell you not to lie?' The man isn't really blinking; it's more of a nervous tick.

The rain falls steadily; Paolo shivers.

'There's no point standing here, getting soaked,' the man growls, 'we'd better find shelter.'

They stumble on for several minutes with the man following, until they reach an overhanging rock. 'Now, listen carefully.' He speaks slowly, as though he thinks they're thick. 'Tell me who you are. Then we might share some breakfast.'

Paolo and Sandro glance at each other. Paolo shivers again; he wished he'd killed the bastard when he had the chance.

'I'm Pietro,' Paolo says, praying that Sandro won't squeal, 'Pietro Pisano.'

Paolo isn't sure he needs false papers, but as Italy has tumbled into anarchy he's learnt to be discreet and took identity papers from a body they found near Bologna. He quite likes "Pietro" but feels guilty about dropping his father's name. He hopes he'll forgive him - if he ever sees him again.

'Who ... who are you?' Paolo asks. In the growing light he notices the man's right cheek where a horseshoe-shaped scar, like a brand, is half-hidden beneath his burgeoning beard. Paolo holds out his hand, trying to control its tremor.

'Grossetti, Giorgio. Corporal in the King's Army, until it fell apart.'

Paolo stares at Giorgio's hands; they're frighteningly large, like a blacksmith's.

'Are you soldiers too?' Giorgio stares unblinkingly until they both nod. 'Didn't the army teach you any manners? Old comrades

should support one another, which means not stealing each other's food.'

'My name is Sergio,' Sandro says carefully.

As Giorgio tugs at his bag, Paolo fingers his knife. Supposing Giorgio - or whatever his name is - has a gun. The strength drains from Paolo's arms as Giorgio reaches to the bottom of the bag and pulls out half a loaf and then some cheese.

'If you stop behaving like savages, I might help you,' Giorgio looks each of them in the eye, 'as we're all travelling south.' He hacks chunks from the bread and cheese, and passes them to the others.

'You don't know where we're going!' Paolo clenches the bread and cheese in his fists.

'Really? I saw you yesterday ten kilometres further north. That tells me you're heading south.'

'It's not true. We never saw you.'

'You didn't look.' Giorgio cuts some cheese for himself 'I watched you, and I recognise your voices. That girlish sound is unmistakable, especially when you bicker.'

Paolo shoves some bread into his mouth and tightens his fists again. He hates the way Giorgio speaks, like a pompous elder brother. Stupid prick!

'Before conscription I lived near Terni so I know the country going south.' Giorgio pulls out some cigarettes. 'It's my last packet.' He draws heavily and lets the smoke drift from his mouth. 'I was in Livorno when the armistice came,' he says, blinking faster. 'We'd been part of the invasion of France in 1940. In '42 we went east.'

'Do you mean the Eastern Front?' Sandro asks.

'We were lucky. We lost so many men we weren't a viable force. So they brought us home.'

'We were in Bologna,' Sandro says. 'We've walked all this way, right across the Apennines.'

'Raw recruits!' Giorgio spits on the ground.

'We were in the army for more than a year!' Paolo strains to make his voice sound deeper like Giorgio's. 'We were set to go to Libya, until the Afrika Korps collapsed. Then they planned to send us to Yugoslavia, to be knackers for the Nazis. But when the Allies invaded Sicily they returned us to heaven, in Bologna!'

'So you haven't seen any action!' Giorgio's blinking is mainly his left eye. 'You're lucky lads, but easy to track. Where are you

heading? The rain's letting up; we should get going.'

Paolo looks out at the woodland where water still drips from the trees. Giorgio is right about the rain. Damn him.

'The armistice was a bloody disgrace!' Paolo says.

'Up this path,' Giorgio points ahead. 'We'll cross the ridge and have a clear view to the south. We can talk about the route and whether we travel together.'

'The first thing we heard of the armistice was on the wireless!' Paolo's voice still squeaks and his stomach aches.

'We expected orders to attack the Germans,' Sandro interjects. 'We didn't sleep all night.'

'Imagine that!' Paolo gestures to Sandro not to interrupt. 'How could we attack the Germans? They'd been our comrades the day before. Then they told us to parade at noon, for inspection by a German officer. In the meantime they opened the barracks.'

'It was the same everywhere.' Giorgio maintains the rhythm of his walking as they climb.

'But can't you see Giorgio? The armistice was totally wrong! For three years we fought alongside the Germans. Then on a whim we called a truce, just because the Allies landed. It was our duty to fight. Don't get me wrong, I don't like the Germans. I don't trust them. In fact I hate the fucking Germans! But we chose to fight on their bloody side. No one can just change sides and command respect. We'll be the laughing stock of Europe for fifty years. No, for a hundred years. Jesus Christ! Italians will live in ignominy for ever!'

'You're crazy!' Giorgio glares at Paolo. 'How can we fight against the British and Americans with all their tanks and planes? They could flatten the whole country. Is that what you want?'

'And don't forget our uncles who emigrated to America,' Sandro says. 'Their sons are in the American Army. I don't want to fight against my cousins.'

'Shut up, Sergio. Don't you have any pride? Mark my words; this is the end of Italy. What would Garibaldi say? Look what he achieved with just a thousand men. He made them proud to be Italians. Now he must be weeping. That's if he hasn't died of shame!'

'He died years ago, Pietro,' Sandro says, 'in case you haven't heard. And the armistice has happened. There's no point in fretting. You should be glad we escaped.' Sandro speeds up until he's walking next to Giorgio. Paolo trails along behind.