

PART 1

THE ONCOMING STORM

All the great things are simple,
and many can be expressed in
A single word: Freedom, justice,
Honour, duty, mercy, hope.

Winston Churchill

CHAPTER 8

June 1, 1944 – Afternoon. Weymouth, England.

Sergeant Daniel Brogan

Sergeant Daniel Brogan stood on what passed as a hillside in this tiny island country. It was nothing more than a raised mount of earth with scrub grass and weeds, and a few pathetic trees dominating the apex. At least from up here he could see the whole camp, hundreds of tents lined up under camouflaged netting. At the back of this small makeshift shanty town was a large swathe of open ground where the men carried out daily drills and exercise. The wind had a bite to it despite the sun, carrying with it the mingled scents of wet canvas, oil, sea salt, and the ever-present exhaust of vehicles that never seemed to stop growling through camp.

From his vantage point Brogan could see Weymouth Bay in the distance, its waters crowded with the silhouettes of LSTs, Liberty ships, and tank-laden barges, all riding low like beasts burdened. Over the harbour, barrage balloons bobbed in the sky, fat silver sentinels protecting the masses of steel below from Luftwaffe strafing.

Tiny island or not, England was now the world's largest armed camp. Brogan had heard there were two millions soldiers caged in many more such encampments dotted around the south of England, small communities from different parts of the states and other parts of the world all crammed together in this one cause, this historic operation to end the war. He had read somewhere that this country was smaller than his home state of Colorado. And yet, despite its size, Britain had held the combined might of Germany at bay for nearly five years. Looking across the chaos of preparation, the ingenuity, the quiet resolve of British civilians, he couldn't help but

feel a tinge of admiration for these Limeys. They were going to give ol' Hitler a bloody nose, as one English soldier had put it. Brogan hoped they were going to do much more than that.

Today there was a break in the weather and the sun had appeared, enticing the men out to enjoy its meagre warmth. On the open ground, a baseball game was underway. Brogan, standing six four, was a football player, a quarterback. If he hadn't screwed up his knee he might have played for the Colorado Buffaloes.

He watched the pitcher wind up and throw, the batsman catching the ball sweetly; the sound coming to Brogan a fraction of a second later, sharp and clean, like a training grenade going off in the distance. The ball soared high towards the boundary of the field, a home run, the men scrambling from the loaded bases. For a split instant Brogan saw another scene bleeding through; figures running not across a dusty field but across a killing ground of machine-gun nests and Belgian Gates, boots sinking into wet sand under a hail of fire. His chest tightened with the chill of premonition. If only the Germans were throwing baseballs at us, he thought, we'd have the bastards beat.

He took a slow walk back down the hill and entered the maze of tents. Everywhere men were keeping themselves occupied, distracted from the creeping dread in the pit of their stomach. Some read, while others slept in chairs, taking advantage of the afternoon sun. A few sharpened fighting knives or cleaned rifles for the tenth time that day. Small groups played cards, smoked, or penned letters that would be read by the censors, before leaving the island.

Those letters always got to him. Especially the ones written slowly, the *just in case* pages that men folded carefully and tucked inside their jackets.

Brogan wondered what his last words would be.

To his mother? To his wife, Gracie?

This would be the first time many of these young men had dealt with their mortality, the morbid shadow of Death that walked with all of them on this journey. What could he see in their faces? Boredom, anger, fear, longing for home. They were like caged tigers, training every day to kill the enemy and held back like a revving sports car at the start line of a race, waiting for the flag to drop.

Brogan spotted a few of his Italy veterans crouched around a dice patch scratched into the dirt. Around them the camp pulsed with activity: supply trucks grinding past engineers loading Bangalore torpedoes onto trailers. Unlike the new recruits, kids barely shaving, Brogan's Italy boys carried the slouched shoulders of men who knew exactly what waited for them on the far side of the Channel.

The soldier shaking the dice in his cupped hands was William Parker. Billyboy to his friends. Parker was one of his Brogan's Corporals. He was twenty two, small and wiry. He hailed from Wyoming and was a crack shot. He had lived on a farm and had grown up with a rifle in his hands, hunting in the woods. It was rumoured he could hit the arsehole of a moving prairie dog at five hundred yards.

Billyboy blew on the dice and cast them into the small area between the circle of men. They came to rest showing one dot on both. The call of *snake eyes* went up from the group.

"Aw hell, I don' believe it," he groaned.

"Giving your money away again, Billyboy?" Brogan asked.

"Jeez, Sarge, I won't have no money left by the time we leave."

Another soldier laughed and said, "Y'ain't got no use for no money where we be headed."

“I’d planned t’buy me a sweet dame in Paris,” Billyboy said.

“Ain’t no dame gonna give you a second look when they clap eyes on ol’ Bob Kelly.”

Corporal Robert Kelly was the only black soldier in the outfit. He hailed from Louisiana and played a mean guitar. Kelly was good looking and stood six foot, built like the statue of some Greek god, all ripples and bulges. Especially one particular bulge as rumour had it.

Brogan had no truck with any of that racism shit that he knew went on in the service and back home. The irony of fighting for freedom was not lost on him when he considered the way Kelly and his like were treated in the States. If Kelly was man enough to stand beside him when the bullets and the bombs flew, man enough to lay down his life for his country, he was good enough to call friend. Good enough to be his equal.

Billyboy cast the dice down again and threw another losing combination. He threw his hands up in frustration and said, “Come on, that just ain’t fair.”

Another of the players said, “With luck like that, Billyboy. I don’t wanna be standing next to you when we land on those beaches.”

“Knock it off with that kinda talk,” Brogan said. “You guys ain’t allowed to die ‘till I tell you it’s okay to die. Is that understood?”

“Whatever you say, Sarge! But what happens if the first bullet gets *you*? Does that mean we get to live forever?” Billyboy said, exchanging a wink with Kelly.

“Ain’t gonna happen, Billyboy,” Brogan said. “Because under this shirt I have a big S and a red cape.”

“Aww, Sarge, you still reading those dopy comics?” Billyboy asked.

“Dey is educational,” Kelly added, wryly.

Brogan played along earning more laughter, but inside he whispered a silent plea.

Please don't let it be Billyboy. Don't let it be any of these idiots. If someone has to go first... take me.

The soldiers laughed at the banter, a nervous sound full of false bravado. Brogan could see the muted fear behind their eyes, the tremor in their voices as they pumped out their chests and joked about their deaths like it was nothing more than a grazed knee. Soldiers like him and Billyboy were no less afraid. They were just more resigned to the fate they expected daily.

Billyboy passed the dice to another soldier and asked Brogan, "Any word on when we're heading out, Sarge?"

Brogan shrugged. "I don't know, Billyboy, but next time I'm taking coffee with General Eisenhower, Ah'll be sure an' ask him."

"Six months," Billyboy complained. "We bin on this goddam island half a year drillin' an' trainin', trainin' and drillin'."

"I guess we'll be going real soon, Billyboy," Brogan said. "And then you'll wish you were back here drilling and training."

He left them to their game and moved on.

"Hey, Sarge."

Corporal Leon Kowski was sitting outside his tent, his tanned bare chest covered with a huge tattoo of a dagger with the name Rosemarie looping around a blade adorned with roses. He was reading a dog-eared book about England. He looked older than his twenty-four years. A Chicago bruiser with a thick accent and thicker loyalty. He could've made Sergeant twice over, but he didn't want the responsibility. Didn't want to be the man whose orders sent friends to die.

“Wad is it wid dis place, Sarge?” Kowski asked, licking his finger and turning another page. “Ah mean, ah come from Chicago. Sounds like it’s spelt, yer know, shi-car-go. But dey got dis place called Glow-sester-shire,” he showed Brogan the page, holding his finger on the printed text. “But yer see, dey don’t say Glow-sester-shire. No sir, dey call it Gloster-shire. It don’t sound like it’s spelt. There ain’t enough letters in Gloster-shire. An’ dis other place, Bi-cester. Dey say Bister. It’s seriously screwing wid my head, Sarge.”

“What can I tell ya, Kowski. The Brits are odd,” Brogan explained.

“An’ dey don’t got no coffee ‘ere. It’s all tea an’ cake.” Kowski lifted an imaginary teacup with exaggerated delicacy, little finger extended. “An’ wad is dis game dey play, crickets or summat? It’s kinda like baseball but so slow. It takes dem forever t’throw da damn ball. But da dames are okay, yer know. Dey paint lines on da back of their legs to make it look like they’re wearin’ stockings.”

Brogan shrugged. “It’s a fancy place, Kowski,” he said. “The English are eccentric.”

Kowski tried on the unfamiliar word. “Egsentrik? Wad da fuck dat mean?”

Brogan searched for something simpler. “It means they are charmingly peculiar.”

“You got dat right.”

“Well, you know, Kowski, we’re kinda related. There’s some of them in a lot of us. And this is the birthplace of Shakespeare, Isaac Newton and Henry the eighth.”

“He da fella wid all those wives?”

“Six,” Brogan said, showing Kowski six fingers. “Two of them had their heads lopped off.”

The Sergeant made a chopping motion with his hand.

“Jeez! Guy had a real unique way of ditchin’ his broads.”

Brogan gestured to the tattoo scrawled across Kowski's chest. "Are you and Rosemarie still history?"

"Sure are," Kowski said. "She's taken up wid dat skinny asshole from back home because he's a safer prospect."

Kowski said it without bitterness, though Brogan wasn't fooled. The man had carried that girl's name through Tunisia, Sicily and Italy.

Brogan slapped his back. "She's missing out on a fine figure of a man."

"Ain't dat da truth. Don't know wad ah'm gonna do about dis tattoo, though. Gonna need t'have it removed."

"Maybe not," Brogan said. "Find yourself a nice girl called Marie or Rose. Only half the work then."

Kowski looked up at Brogan like he had offered the most profound of statements. He said, "Ah guess dat's why dey made you a Sergeant." He licked his finger and flipped the page.

Somewhere, a lorry backfired, making several recruits flinch, some hitting the dirty. Brogan's own nerves jangled slightly but he stood his ground. He felt everything had a thinness to it, like the world was stretched too tight.

"Ah guess all da boys are a liddle tense," Kowski said.

Brogan followed Kowski's eyes and looked down the line of tents and said, "What do you think? Remember how we felt just before Italy?"

"As ah recall, ah crapped mahself before we hit da beaches."

"I remember."

“Had t’spend da whole day wid shit in mah pants. Think ah’ll avoid mah dinner before we push off dis time. No sir, Don’ wanna repeat history.” He chuckled to himself at the memory.

Brogan wrinkled his nose and said, “On behalf of myself and the boys, we’d rightly appreciate that, Kowski.”

Kowski grinned and went back to reading his book. For them the smell of shit was almost a pleasant distraction from the usual battlefield stench of blood and dead flesh, cordite and smoke and the one smell they all recognised, fear. He could smell traces of it now permeating nature’s summer fragrances.

Brogan left Kowski frowning at pictures of the game of rugby and wondering why they were not wearing padding and helmets. Five minutes later he passed the admin and logistics tents. Another Sergeant popped his head out of the flap and said, “Hey, Dan, gotta letter here for ya.” He handed the envelope to Brogan who sniffed it like it was a Cuban cigar.

“That ain’t from no man,” the Sergeant called after him, grinning.

Brogan stepped away to a quieter spot between two tents. He opened the envelope carefully, reverently. Inside were two pages and a photograph of Gracie, leaning against their garden fence back home, hands resting on her swollen belly. She was smiling sweetly for the camera but there was the shadow of sadness behind those eyes. He read the letter. Same stuff as all the others. Doing well, his parents okay, her parents fine. Her ankles had swollen up and she couldn’t ride her horse anymore. Despite the humdrum nature of the letter, Brogan drank in every word like it was precious water to a parched man. This was the anchor keeping him grounded, letting him know what he was fighting for, what was waiting for him back home.

“Letter from home, Dan?”

Brogan straightened as Lieutenant Jim Hannagan approached; young face, younger eyes, wearing command like a coat two sizes too big. Their last CO had been killed in Italy, and Hannagan had been stepped up quicker than anyone felt comfortable with.

Yes, sir. From my wife Gracie,” Brogan said, offering the photo.

“When’s she due?” Hannagan asked.

“Any time now, sir.”

Hannagan smiled, returning the picture. “Well, if we get this party over and done with, chances are you’ll be home for Christmas.”

Brogan looked wistfully at the picture. “Sure do hope so, sir. You think it’ll be over that quickly?”

Hannagan made a sweeping gesture and said, “With these guys, absolutely. Are your boys ready?”

“Ready as they’ll ever be,” Brogan said. “When will it start, Lieutenant?”

“Soon, Dan, real soon,” Hannagan said. “We’ve had orders to start moving units up to the staging area.”

Brogan felt a cold wind blow through his soul. He said a silent prayer. *Just let me bring as many home as I can.* He folded Gracie’s letter and tucked it over his heart.