



Whatlingbridge, East Sussex (pop. 2,991). Notable for the Elizabethan manor house, Watlyn Hall and its ingenious priestholes, the Norman church of St. Stephen's, and timber-framed Crossed Keys Inn (c1190). Market Sat. Annual Horse Fair last Fri in September.

A.A. Road Book of England & Wales, 1939

22:25 Tuesday 24 December, 1940.

Forward HQ, 1st Armoured Division, Maidstone, Kent

Lieutenant Duncan Williams was twenty-one years old and he had been in the Army for only 334 days, and this was not how he preferred to spend Christmas Eve. It was also the worst day of his life so far. The Humber came to a halt.

'Out you get, old boy,' announced Major Bassett, battalion intelligence officer. 'They're in there. Good luck.'

Duncan sighed. 'You wouldn't want to go in for me, would you, sir? I don't know if I can tell this bloody story again.'

'Hardly!' Major Bassett recoiled. 'They want this straight from the horse's mouth.'

'Don't mention horses.' Duncan pulled a long face. 'I'd almost put them out of my mind.'

'Out you get, come on!'

Duncan flexed the door handle in his gloved hand. 'And this is my last port of call?' he asked. 'Once this is over, I can go and get absolutely blotto, right?'

'Gloriously blotto!' The major tapped his overcoat pocket. 'Finest Scotch and it's all yours, old boy. Now come, run along and do your bit. It should be second nature by now.'

Duncan pulled himself from the car. He held the door open a crack. 'And who exactly are these people in there, sir? They sound a bit fishy.'

‘Fishy?’ Now Major Bassett laughed. ‘Hardly!’ He took both hands back off the wheel and waved his fingers in Duncan’s direction. ‘Spooks! *Ooooh!* Creatures of the shadows and the night. Neither living beings nor dead.’

‘Thanks!’ Duncan slammed the door.

‘Yes, yes. Come in, lieutenant, come in, and put the wood in the hole. Quick as you can!’

Duncan had been out in the field for eighteen hours, he had told his story a dozen times so far, and he was frozen stiff, dog tired and sick to his soul. He quickly tugged back the curtain, brushed snow from his shoulders, stamped his frozen feet, and came to attention.

Within the gloom of the candlelit room, two officers sat before him. The senior of the two, an un-military major, came to his feet and indicated a stack of cased Mills bombs. ‘At ease, lieutenant. Plonk yourself down there,’ he said, adding with a smile: ‘I hear you had rather a nasty shock?’

‘Yes, sir. You could say that, sir.’ Duncan cast his eyes around the room as he sat down. No furniture, just cases of ammunition. They could at least offer him a drink.

The officer remained standing. ‘My name is Jones,’ he said. ‘And this is my colleague Captain Smith.’

Captain Smith gave Duncan a thin smile.

‘Now look,’ said Major Jones. He lowered himself onto a wooden case. ‘A few formalities first. Let me see your paybook.’ He stretched out a hand.

‘Second Lieutenant D. C. Williams, 2nd Battalion, Dorset Regiment, correct?’

‘Correct, sir.’

‘And you have been out and about scouting towards the coast?’

‘Yes, sir.’

The major pulled himself upright and cleared his throat. ‘Lieutenant, perhaps you could begin by telling us what you told your commanding officer.’

‘Where would you like me to begin, sir?’ Duncan’s eyes had grown accustomed to the gloom. The captain gave him a cold stare.

‘At the beginning.’

‘Well, sir. I was tasked to take my section as far as the crossroads at Whatlingbridge, to check out the village green, note everything I saw, and report back to company HQ.’

‘What route did you take?’ asked the captain.

‘The Hastings Road, sir.’

‘You kept to the road?’

‘Well, no, we went cross-country, for the most part, sir. Hugging the hedgerows.’

‘And what was the first thing you noticed?’

‘At Whatlingbridge, sir?’

‘Yes, at Whatlingbridge.’

‘First off, were the horse carcasses.’

‘Horse carcasses? Explain.’

‘Well, I can’t exactly, sir. Just horse carcasses. Loads of them. All over the place. Frozen solid.’

‘And then what?’ asked the major.

‘Well, once we got closer to the village there were loads of lorries, sir. Dozens of them all pushed to the side of the road.’

‘What sort of lorries?’ asked the captain.

‘Hard to say, sir. Snow was covering everything. But most of them looked British – Bedfords, Scammels, and the like. We thought they might be some of our lot from Dunkirk.’

‘And they looked beaten up, did they?’ asked the major hopefully.

‘Yes, sir. A right mess. At first we thought perhaps there had been an air attack but on closer inspection they all seemed to have blown up from inside.’

‘From inside?’ asked the major in wonder. He exchanged a quick glance with the captain. ‘And then what?’

‘Well, sir. We pushed on into the village.’

‘And what did you see?’

‘Well, sir. The houses. There had been a serious fire. It was hard to see properly because of the snow, but the walls were mostly standing. There wasn’t anybody about. No sign of any action, so to speak.’

‘And then what?’ urged the captain.

‘Well, sir. We checked inside the houses as best we could. Everything was just lying about like the *Mary Celeste* and then we pressed on to the village green. I had been told to report what I saw there.’

‘And did you take photos?’ asked the captain.

‘Yes, sir. Yes, I did.’ Duncan removed his glove and reached into his pocket. He handed across a single roll of film and placed it in the captain’s outstretched hand.

‘If you don’t mind my saying so, sir,’ said the young lieutenant, taking a deep breath. ‘If this sort of thing had been expected, sir, I really do think somebody should have warned us. It’s not something anyone wants to just stumble upon. It’s had a terrible effect on some of my men, you know.’

‘Yes,’ replied the major. ‘No doubt.’

‘I’d never seen anything like it,’ continued the lieutenant.

‘Well, why would you?’ scoffed the captain.

Duncan felt his heart beat a little faster.

‘Just carry on, lieutenant, carry on,’ the major insisted. ‘You got to the green, and then what did you see?’

‘Well, I saw the people, sir. Hundreds of people.’

‘How many?’ The captain sucked the nib of his pen.

‘We counted just over six-hundred, sir. Six-hundred-and-twenty-nine to be precise. Men, women and children. And some very little children indeed.’

‘Excellent!’ smiled Captain Smith.

‘I beg your pardon, sir?’

‘And you think your pictures will come out, do you?’ asked the captain.

‘Yes, sir. I don’t see why not.’

‘Excellent!’ He turned the roll of film in his hand. ‘The snow should add a nice touch of the macabre.’ He winked playfully at the major. ‘Very stark!’ He snapped his head back towards Duncan. ‘You didn’t touch them, did you, lieutenant? You left them as they were?’

‘Yes, sir.’ Duncan swallowed with difficulty. ‘I wouldn’t have known where to begin.’

‘Excellent!’ Now the major clasped his hands together and gave them a gleeful rub. Both officers smiled.

‘And how long had they been there, d’you suppose?’ asked the captain. Duncan looked confused. He shuddered at the thought. ‘Well, sir. It’s hard to say.’

‘Because of the snow?’

‘Well, that and the fact that animals must have got to them. Birds, probably.’

‘How very ghastly for you, lieutenant,’ said the major.

‘It just gets better,’ smiled the captain.

‘I’d never seen anything like it!’ said Duncan again.

‘Yes, you just told us that,’ reminded the captain.

‘What’s this all about?’ Duncan looked from captain to major. ‘It was really bloody horrible! I don’t see what’s so excellent about it.’

‘Don’t you?’ asked the captain. ‘I should have thought that was obvious.’ He gave Duncan a pitiful look.

‘Sir?’ he asked.

‘The Yanks!’ explained Major Jones, with a sharp tut. ‘This is just what the old man wants to bring them onboard. Catch up!’

Duncan shook his head. ‘But what had they done? All those people! To warrant that?’

Major Jones let out a lengthy breath and shook his head. ‘Probably nothing, I shouldn’t wonder.’

‘Then why do it, sir?’

‘I should have thought that was obvious, too,’ put in the captain. ‘Reprisals, lieutenant. Welcome to Total War.’

‘But if they hadn’t done anything, reprisals for what?’

‘I don’t know that either,’ smiled the major. ‘Not yet. But I should assume it was something altogether pretty spectacular.’ He rubbed his hands briskly. ‘Some top-notch skulduggery!’

‘But all those poor people,’ Duncan was still shaking his head. ‘An entire village-worth! It was a wonder the trees could take them all.’



CHAPTER ONE

Whatlingbridge

Wednesday 5 June 1940

‘Oh, come on!’ groaned Sweeney.

‘I said *no*.’ Linda Hook tugged at the hem of her summer dress with one hand and pushed him away with the other.

In another hour, the sun would drop behind the hills and the worst of the heat would be gone from the day. For now, they lay under the welcome shade of an old peach tree at the foot of her parent’s garden.

‘I bet you wouldn’t say that if I were Canadian.’ Sweeney tried hard not to look at the sun-bleached hairs on her brown legs. He felt that his blood might boil. He sat upright, wrapping his arms around his knees. ‘I’ve seen the way they look at you.’

‘Get off!’ she laughed. ‘What do you mean “the way they look at me?”’

‘You know.’

‘No, I don’t know, actually.’ She smiled to herself. ‘And what so special about Canadians, anyway?’

‘They’ve got more money for starters,’ said Sweeney.

‘And they’re exotic,’ mused Linda. ‘They’re different, aren’t they? Anyhow, I like the Australians best, what with their saucy hats and the way they swagger about.’

‘And that’s another thing about this war,’ said Sweeney, an air of disgust. ‘All these ruddy soldiers all over the place.’ He turned and looked down at Linda’s legs once more. ‘They’re always hanging about the high street.’

‘Well, they ain’t got proper homes like ordinary people. What d’you expect them to do?’ She scoffed. ‘You’re just jealous.’

‘Jealous? Ha! I wouldn’t join the bloody Army. When my time comes I’m going in the RAF.’

‘If they’ll have you.’

‘Course they’ll bloody have me. Why wouldn’t they?’

‘You’ve got to be clever to get in.’

‘Thanks,’ said Sweeney. ‘Thanks a bunch.’ Now his blood was starting to simmer. He didn’t want to put his hand up her dress anyway.

They sat in silence, she pulling petals from a daisy and he studying the toes of his scuffed boots. Linda tried to lighten the mood.

'I had a funny dream about Hitler last night,' she declared suddenly.

'You're always having funny dreams.'

'I know. But it wasn't a political dream or anything. It was just funny.'

'Tell me.'

'Well,' she said. 'I dreamt that Hitler came in our shop. He had loads of other people with him and they were all kneeling on the ground like he was a god or something. But I knew it was only a dream, so I thought I'd cheek him.'

'What d'you do?'

'Nothing really.'

'You should have tried to kill him.'

'I didn't think of that.' Linda looked disappointed but carried quickly on. 'I was scared in a way. But he was ever so nice.'

'Nice?'

'Yeah, he had loads of money and said he wanted to buy everything in the shop.'

'Did you sell him anything?'

'Well, that's the funny bit. We didn't seem to have anything on the shelves. And then he said he wanted a bed and blankets and things but we didn't have those either.' Linda stopped and looked off into space.

'Is that all?' asked Sweeney.

'No,' she said. 'Then he started asking about Neville, our canary. He said he wanted his cage. Isn't that strange?'

'Strange?' he asked. 'Yeah, that's very strange.' He curled his lip. 'Not much of a dream, is it?' He shook his head. 'Rubbish, really. You should have stabbed him.'

'He was really nice.' She laughed. 'It wouldn't have been polite.'

'I just wish he'd hurry up and come,' said Sweeney. 'Nothing seems to be happening any more. This is a rubbish war. We don't seem to be trying hard enough to win.'

'And what would you do, eh? If they did come?' She looked at Sweeney.

'I was thinking of building a hide-out in the woods.' He nodded his head decisively. 'If the Nazis come, we could live there.'

'Oh, yeah?' Linda's smile spread across her face. 'What, Mummy Bear and Daddy Bear in the woods?' She giggled.

'As it happens, I know an old badger set. It wouldn't take much to make it bigger. I could line it with some old carpet and we could collect supplies. It would be warm and dry. Nice and snug. I bet we could live there for months. No one would find us.'

'Yeah, I know why you want to build a hide-out.'

'Actually,' said Sweeney. 'It makes great sense. Who knows what the Nazis will do. We could wind us as slave labour, working down the salt mines.'

'Give over! That is so defeatist!'

'We could spy on them and pass on information to the Army. We might even lay an ambush.'

'Now you're being silly.' Linda tossed the bald daisy aside. 'What could we do? I ask you! Besides, the Navy will have 'em before they even get to the coast.'

'Well, if they do come, I ain't staying here.' Sweeney looked in earnest.

'So why don't you evacuate now? While there's still time, eh?'

‘Oh, yeah, great idea.’ Sweeney plucked at the grass. ‘You’ve heard the stories. I ain’t having some dirty old man interfering with me.’

Linda laughed. ‘That don’t sound so bad.’ She jabbed Sweeney in the side playfully.

He looked again at her legs. The flimsy summer dress had ridden up her thighs. He turned a blade of grass in his fingers as if it were the centre of his attention.

‘How about a dirty young man?’ he asked, suddenly laying back down. He stretched out a hand and touched her hair, lifting the blonde strands away from her neck and shoulders. And then he stopped and peered closer. ‘Where’d you get those bruises from?’ he asked.

‘Oh, don’t ask.’ Linda felt her mood change for the worse. ‘Just don’t ask.’

‘Let me kiss them better.’ Sweeney leant across. He could smell her scent.

‘Oh, give it a rest.’ She turned away. ‘It’s too hot!’

‘What’s for tea, mum?’

‘Bread and pull-it,’ she smiled.

‘Mum! Tell me. I’m starving!’

‘Well, let it be a surprise.’ She looked at her son. Dried summer grass clung to his hair. ‘You’ve got another surprise,’ she told him.

‘What kind of surprise?’

‘Well, you know how you’re always going on about people not doing enough for the war effort?’

‘*Mmm?*’ A warning bell sounded inside his head.

‘Well, we’re doing our bit. We’ve got a lodger.’

‘A lodger?’ Sweeney stretched out the word. ‘What d’you mean, a lodger? Do we need the money?’

‘Well, not a lodger as such.’ She hesitated. ‘What do they call a soldier that’s billeted in your home?’

Sweeney had a guess. ‘A *billetee*.’

‘Then that’s what we’ve got. A *billetee*. He’s ever so nice.’

‘Not a rotten Canadian?’

‘No, he’s not Canadian, more’s the pity.’

‘Where’s he going to sleep?’

‘He’s from Bath and he’s got such a funny accent.’ She turned and busied herself at the sink. ‘Sergeant Biddle. Keith. That’s his name.’

‘Mum! Where’s he going to sleep?’

‘Well, what with all this nice weather, we thought you might be comfortable down here in the kitchen. You can listen to the wireless if you want.’

‘I’ve got my own wireless. A crystal set.’

‘We can make you a comfy nest down here. And if you wanted anything in the night, you wouldn’t have to go far.’

‘I’m not sleeping down here. Why should I? He’ll have to go. War or no war.’

‘That’s him now.’ She cocked her head to the stairs. ‘He’s just having a wash and brush up, same as you should. Your dad’ll be home in a tick.’

Sweeney pulled himself erect and listened to the tread of boots on the stairs. There was a cough and a creak of a stair board and then a friendly face peered around the doorframe.

‘Hello,’ the man smiled. ‘And you must be young John.’

‘Nobody calls me John.’ Sweeney scowled.

The sergeant shook his head. He turned to the sink. ‘I though you said his name was John.’

She smiled. ‘Our surname is Todd, as you know,’ she told him. ‘We’ve always called him Sweeney. It’s a family joke.’

‘Sweeney Todd!’ The sergeant laughed and clutched his belly in a mock theatrical way. ‘Got any pies?’

‘Yeah, very funny.’ Sweeney wanted to be sick. ‘Only my friends call me Sweeney.’ He looked the sergeant up and down. He wore the shoulder-flash of a signaller and had a pronounced beer belly.

The sergeant stepped forward and held out his hand. ‘Well, young John or Sweeney, or whatever your name is. Pleased to meet you. You can call me Sergeant Keith, if you like.’ He continued to hold the hand out. ‘And I have to thank you, I believe, for the use of your bed. Very comfy. Very comfy indeed. I slept on the floor of a barn last night.’

‘There’s a war on,’ Sweeney told him. He took the hand reluctantly. The palm was moist.

The sergeant turned back to the sink and to Mrs Todd. ‘He’s a card, isn’t he?’

‘We think so.’

‘Well, young Master Todd,’ said the sergeant. ‘I don’t suppose I’ll be here for long.’ He turned and tapped his signaller’s flash. ‘I haven’t stayed in the same place for more than two night running since I got back from Dunkirk.’ He let the magical name hang in the air. ‘I might even be going back soon.’ He winked, attempting a conspiratorial air. ‘And you can have your bed back.’ He smiled broadly. ‘Your nice, comfy bed.’

‘Yeah, great,’ said Sweeney.

‘Do you like soccer?’ The sergeant puffed out his chest and placed his hands on his hips.

‘Not really,’ said Sweeney.

‘Cricket?’ asked Sergeant Keith.

‘It’s all right, I suppose.’

The sergeant tilted his head to one side and looked at Sweeney. ‘You might not think so,’ he told him. ‘But I think we’re going to be good friends.’ He winked. ‘You wait and see.’

‘I’ll put the kettle on,’ said Sweeney’s mum. She stepped out the kitchen door for more firewood.

The sergeant leant close to Sweeney. ‘And if we ain’t friends, then we can only be one other thing and that wouldn’t be good, would it? Not living under the same roof.’

‘You can have my bed.’ Sweeney’s mouth felt dry. A hollow feeling settled in his stomach. ‘You’re welcome to it.’

‘Thank you,’ the man smiled. ‘That’s very decent of you.’ It seemed that he might never stop smiling. ‘It’s all for the common good. Anyway, you’re just a kid. And there’s a war on, don’t you know.’

‘Have one for yourself, dear.’

‘Best not,’ said Nell. ‘I’m off fire-watching tonight. I want to keep a clear head.’ She smiled as she popped the top off a bottle of stout and selected a glass from the rack.

Joan took the glass and bottle in her hands but stayed at the bar. ‘Enid’s husband got back last night.’

‘Well, that’s a relief,’ said Nell.

‘He was in a right state. He was still abed when I went round at dinnertime. Enid said he was just skin and bone. Poor bugger!’

‘Well, at least he’s back.’ Nell lowered her voice. ‘There’s plenty that aren’t.’

‘He had a tough time of it too, by all account.’

Nell looked around the bar.

‘Here. Listen to this,’ said Joan. She lowered her voice and lent forward. ‘Them Germans. They ain’t human. Enid’s old man saw a terrible thing. Apparently, he said the Germans got hold of twelve of our nurses. They’d stripped them and made them go in front of them. They were all torn and bleeding. It made our men go mad. They threw hand grenades at them and at the Germans. He said it was the only thing to do.’

‘Really?’ asked Nell. ‘Seems a bit extreme.’

‘Well, what could you do?’ asked Joan. ‘The poor girls would never be any good to themselves or anyone else, would they?’

‘Still seems a bit extreme.’

‘He says the Germans must be doped, they go along with glassy eyes. They just don’t look normal. And think! They could be here any day!’

‘Did you hear the news?’ asked Nell. She continued to look around the bar. It was quiet for a Wednesday night. ‘Some chap in Mansfield was fined ten pounds for spreading false rumours.’

‘Well, that’s not a rumour, is it? That’s a fact.’

‘And he had to pay five guineas costs. Just for repeating something he heard Lord Haw Haw say on the wireless.’

‘He’s funny, isn’t he?’ Joan laughed and poured her drink. ‘Did you hear him last night?’

‘Same again, please Nell.’ Another regular placed two glasses on the bar.

‘I was just saying,’ said Joan. ‘Enid’s husband got back last night.’

‘Well, there’s plenty that ain’t,’ said Dan, searching for his change.

‘He had a tough time of it too, by all accounts.’ Joan sipped her stout.

‘Well, hats off to those blokes that went through Dunkirk.’ Dan accepted his drinks and passed across his change. ‘Glad I didn’t have to go.’

‘Well,’ said Joan. ‘You blokes don’t go anywhere, do you? You just stay here.’

‘That’s the whole point,’ Dan told her. ‘That’s why we’re called Local Defence Volunteers. *Local*, you see.’

‘It’s not like the last war, is it?’ Joan topped off her glass and watched the stout foam to the top. ‘No one seems in any hurry to join up. Not like last time. They were queuing up outside the town hall as soon as war was declared.’

‘Well, it ain’t like last time, is it?’ Dan held the glasses in his hands and began to edge away. ‘This one won’t last. We had enough of it last time.’

‘You don’t think they’re going to come here, then?’ asked Joan.

Dan shook his head. ‘Not if they know what’s good for them. Besides, they’ve got to get through the Navy and the RAF first. It ain’t like one of their European river crossings, is it? The Channel’s a treacherous thing.’

‘Old Hitler said he’ll land troops before this month’s out. And look what he’s done over on the Continent. I don’t think there’s any stopping him.’

‘Ten pounds,’ said Nell. ‘With five guineas costs.’ She nodded her head toward Joan. ‘Excuse me,’ she said and slipped off into the public bar.

‘Give me strength.’ Nell smiled at her dad, George. He straightened up from behind the bar and wiped his hands on a cloth. ‘Those old dears,’ said Nell. ‘They love all the gory details, don’t they?’

‘Who is it this time?’ asked George.

‘That silly old biddy Joan. Apparently Enid’s husband got back yesterday and now she’s full of horror stories.’

‘I don’t even listen,’ George told her. ‘Just smile and nod your head.’

Nell looked around the public bar. ‘What’s up with Hooky?’ she asked. A group of regulars hugged the far corner of the counter. ‘He’s got a face like thunder.’

‘Lost his job,’ said George. ‘It was on the cards now them Canadians have taken over Watlyn Hall. What they need a gamekeeper for?’ He laughed. ‘They’ll all outdoors sort of blokes those Canadians. I bet there won’t be any game left this time next week.’

‘What’s he going to do now then?’ she asked.

‘He needs a hobby,’ smiled George. ‘The lads are trying to get him to join the LDV, but he ain’t keen. He can’t stand that old fool Noakes.’

Nell strained to listen.

‘He’s a twat!’ Hooky spat the word and took a last pull of his pint.

‘But that’s not the point though, is it?’ Ray Todd offered round his cigarettes. ‘We ain’t in it ‘cos we like the bloke. It’s good fun.’

‘Fun, my arse.’ Hooky lit the cigarette and blew a thick cloud of smoke towards the stained ceiling.

‘Come on,’ said a short stubby man known as Sparks. ‘You got no excuse now. You’ve plenty of time on your hands.’

Hooky finished off his third pint of the evening. ‘I’ll think about it.’

‘Well, don’t leave it too long,’ said Ray. ‘We need blokes with experience for section leaders. If you don’t do it now, you’ll miss your chance.’

‘I’ll think about it.’

Nell turned her attention away as the blackout curtains swayed at the door. And then she smiled to herself. She did not hear Hooky’s next words.

‘Here he comes. Mister Nigel Travis. God’s gift to womankind.’

Nell turned and looked at the clock.

‘Go on,’ said George. ‘I’ll watch the saloon.’

The young man stepped up to the bar and smiled broadly at Nell. 'You ready then?' he asked.

'Two ticks,' said Nell. 'I'll just get my things.'

Nigel turned to the knot of men in the corner. 'Fire watching,' he announced. He smiled but got little response.

'Not Observer Corp, then?' asked Hooky. 'Not looking for Nazi bombers?'

'No,' said Nigel, a mild perplexed expression on his face.

'Shame.' Hooky placed his empty pint glass on the counter. 'Cos she won't see many fires laying on her back!'

St. Stephen's Church Hall, Whatlingbridge
Tuesday 11 June 1940

'During the Napoleonic War, a ship was wrecked here on the coast and the first survivor to swim ashore was a monkey - probably the ship's mascot. Sad to say, the locals immediately beat it to death, fearing it to be a Frenchman.' Major Noakes, commanding officer of No. 5 "B" Company (Whatlingbridge) Battle LDV rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet. 'Now, what can we learn from this?'

'That the Frogs look like monkeys,' called a voice from the ranks.

'No, Rapley, not that,' said Major Noakes. 'It tells us that we must know our enemy.'

He turned to the easel beside him and removed the cover with a flourish. 'This is a recognition chart,' he announced. 'It shows a variety of German uniforms of the type you may well see if the Huns do decide to land here.'

He pointed to a Nazi parachutist with a pudding basin helmet. 'I want you all to study this chart. Look at this specimen here.' He tapped at the chart decisively with his swagger stick. 'Thick-set jaw, heavy brows, positively Neanderthal and positively what you can expect of the *Wehrmacht*.'

'Excuse me, sir,' said Captain Evans, the unit's second in command. 'Strictly speaking, parachutists are *Luftwaffe* not *Wehrmacht*.' He looked awkward. 'Small difference, I'm sure, but it could prove important, sir.'

'Yes, yes, thank you, captain. Precisely my point.' Major Noakes took a deep breath. 'I was coming to that. This is precisely the sort of mistake we cannot afford to make. Know your enemy!' He tapped the chart again more forcefully. 'And I certainly don't want any of my men taking pot shots at Canadians or South Africans or whatever, thinking that they've just fallen out of the sky. Yes, what is it, Rapley?'

'We can't very well shoot 'em, can we, sir? We ain't got rifles.'

'Not at the moment. No we don't, but that will soon change.' The major took a step forward and puffed out his chest. 'For the time being, we shall be concentrating on squad drill. Square bashing and the like. And we don't need rifles for that, do we now? Any other questions?'

'But when will we get the rifles, sir?'

'Thank you, Rapley. I shall let you know nearer the time.' He took another deep breath. 'Now, I shall need volunteers for Saturday afternoon. As you know, we have been instructed to place hazards on all likely landings sites. To that end, the plan is to dig holes all over the village cricket pitch to prevent a glider landing. Captain Evans here will take your names. I think that is all for now. Please study the chart and don't forget if you have

any new ideas for weapons or booby-traps I shall be glad to see them.’ He turned to the captain and gave a nod.

‘Company!’ called the captain. ‘*Attention! Right turn, dis-miss!*’

‘I think that went very well, don’t you, captain?’ asked Major Noakes.

‘Yes, very good, sir. Oh, that gamekeeper chap is here to see you. He comes highly recommended by some of the lads. Very experienced, apparently. He served in the Balkans in the last show. Irregular warfare by all accounts.’

‘Irregular warfare?’ The major creased his brow. ‘I’m not sure I like the sound of that. We shouldn’t want to stoop to the level of the Nazis. Anyway, best show him into my office.’

‘Hook, isn’t it?’ Major Noakes looked up from his desk. ‘I understand that you had some experience in the last show?’

‘Yes, sir. Quite a bit.’

‘And you would like to join the LDV, yes?’

‘I was thinking about it, sir.’

‘Well, as you know,’ smiled the major thinly. ‘We can afford to be picky.’ He indicated a pile of papers on his desk. ‘Applications, you see. And lots of them. Since this war began, we have received countless inquiries from all over the area from men of all ages who are, for one reason or another, not at present engaged in military service, and who wish to do something for the defence of their country.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘But you do seem to have left it a bit late.’

‘I’ve been a bit busy, sir.’

‘I see.’ He gave Hooky a quizzical look. ‘Local Defence Volunteers,’ he announced. ‘We carry a heavy responsibility. The name says it all. We are local, we are in the business of defence and we are all volunteers. I am sure, in time, there will be vacancies. Some of the men, as you know, are awaiting call up.’

He studied Hooky’s craggy features and greying moustache. ‘But I don’t suppose your age group will be called up just yet, eh? *Ha, ha!* If we were to accept you, when on duty you will form part of the Armed Forces of this country. You will not be paid but you will in time receive a uniform and you will be armed.’

‘I have my own uniform here, sir.’ Hooky pulled a brown paper bundle from under his arm.

‘Yes, all right,’ said the major. ‘Some of the old sweats have been wearing their fourteen-eighteen kit. I don’t see anything wrong in that, not for the time being anyway. Let’s take a look.’

Hooky pulled the string and lifted out an immaculately pressed tunic.

‘I see,’ said the major. He peered closely at the ribbons. ‘Is that the Military Medal?’

‘Yes, sir, with bar.’

‘I see. Well, we don’t like to be too showy. It’s that sort of thing that might make some of the other men feel uncomfortable. We are all in this together, you know. That’s how it is.’

‘And what about the stripes, sir?’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Well, I made sergeant last time round.’ He let the sentence hang in the air.

‘Oh, no,’ said Major Noakes. He shook his head. ‘At this stage, I want to appoint men by merit and not allocate positions of authority just because somebody happened to pick up a few stripes at the end of the last war.’

‘I see, sir.’ Hooky narrowed his eyes. ‘I tell you what.’ He bundled the tunic back into the brown paper and pulled the string tightly. ‘LDV you call it? A bunch of girls more like.’ He curled his lip. ‘The Look, Duck and Vanish brigade. God help you if the Jerries ever come. And I’ll tell you what you can do with ‘em.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ Major Noakes rose to his feet.

‘You can shove ‘em where the sun don’t shine. *Sir!*’

‘Thank you very much for coming everybody. As you know, this is a six week course intended to give you a thorough grounding in first aid.’

‘Excuse me.’

‘Yes, what is it?’ asked the instructor, a man in his fifties with slicked-back hair. He wore a tight cardigan over his Saint John’s Ambulance uniform despite the warmth of the evening.

‘I thought it was just the one lesson.’

‘Sorry. I didn’t catch your name,’ he said.

‘Missus Thwaites,’ she announced. ‘Six weeks you say?’

‘First aid is a complicated subject, Missus Thwaites. It is not possible to absorb everything in one evening, I can assure you.’ He stepped back to the blackboard. ‘There is a lot to learn. In order to render first aid correctly, it will be necessary to have some knowledge of the structure of the body. During the coming weeks, you will learn the names and functions of those portions of the body which may be injured and require immediate treatment.’

‘I see,’ said Mrs Thwaites.

‘Will we get a badge or a certificate?’ asked a man at the back.

‘A certificate, yes.’ He studied his audience and swallowed hard. ‘During the initial part of the course, we will learn about the skeleton, the muscles, the heart and blood vessels. We will also look at the lungs and digestive system, including the kidneys.’

‘The kidneys?’ asked Mrs Thwaites.

‘Yes, the kidneys, situated in the loins.’

‘Oh, dear.’

‘These enable the body to discharge water and waste products.’

‘Oh, dear. I’m not sure I like the sound of that,’ she said.

‘Excuse me,’ asked the man at the back. ‘I thought it was all about bandaging people up and giving the kiss of life and so forth.’

‘Only in part,’ said the instructor. ‘We will come to that all in good time.’

‘All right. Carry on,’ said the man.’

‘Thank you. The kidneys discharge water and waste products. The fluid is called urine.’

‘Oh, dear,’ said Mrs Thwaites again. ‘I don’t want to listen to this sort of filth! Excuse me, dear,’ she said, pushing her way past Nell. ‘I think I shall try the WVS.’ With that she walked out of the hall.

‘Does anybody else have any second thoughts?’ asked the instructor. Nobody answered. ‘Because we don’t have a lot of time and I wish to press on.’

‘Yes, carry on. Carry on,’ said the man at the back. ‘We’re all ears.’

‘Thank you. Where was I?’

‘Urine,’ said Nell. ‘You were telling us about urine.’

‘Yes, as well as urine and kidneys we shall also be looking at the functions of the brain, the spinal cord, and the nerves.’

‘When you say “nerves”,’ said the man at the back. ‘Do you mean like hysteria and such?’

‘I mean the nerves that carry the signals around the body to the brain.’

‘Because,’ said the man. ‘I was wondering what to do if there were an air raid and people got hysterical, like.’

‘I shall come to that.’

‘Couldn’t you just tell us now?’ the man asked.

The instructor sighed deeply. When it came to dealing with the public he preferred not to talk to them. He would rather swath them in bandages. ‘Hysteria,’ he announced. ‘Or hysterical fits. These fits occur in young persons, particularly girls, in consequence of mental excitement.’

‘Sounds good,’ said the man. ‘Give ‘em a good slap, eh?’

‘No,’ insisted the instructor. ‘The symptoms can include frothing at the mouth, crying, screaming or purposeless laughter. There may also be rapid and jerky breathing, as well as grinding of teeth and clenching of the fists. The one thing worth noting is that the patient almost never hurts herself. She will most likely swoon, especially if there is a couch to hand.’

‘But don’t slap ‘em, eh?’

‘Actually, the best solution is to pour a bucket of cold water over the patient. This is usually effective.’

‘What if you don’t have a bucket of water?’

‘Look, if you want to learn anything you are going to have to be quiet and pay attention. I shall be taking questions at the end of each session.’

‘Do we get tea?’ asked the man. ‘At the end of each session?’

‘Yes, yes. You get tea.’ Now the instructor felt the first pangs of hysteria. ‘To continue,’ he said. ‘We shall also be learning how to render the patient safe and secure until such time as they can receive hospital care. The other prime role of the first-aider is in assessing the patients and to treat them based on the severity of their wounds.’

Nell’s eyes began to grow heavy and her mind was wandering. It had been Nigel’s idea that she studied first aid, so they could practice on each other. Now she was having second thoughts. Six weeks of this! For a conscientious objector, Nigel Travis seemed to be getting a lot out of this war. As well as his duties as local Scout master, he was secretary of the Parish Invasion Committee, and a dedicated fire-watcher. He was also a keen cyclist and treasurer of the East Sussex Day Association of the Cyclists’ Touring Club. He had won the title of Hard Rider of 1939 for the most miles covered.

But she was beginning to wonder what she saw in him. On the one hand, he was settled and financially secure. As a prodigious seed merchant, he had a lucrative business that involved little more than visiting farmers and ordering seeds from a catalogue, which gave him plenty of spare time. But he lacked something. He was fit and, in his own way, manly. But he lacked the spark. Barney Rapley, on the other hand, was manly in the most obvious of ways, but he lacked almost everything else. She thought of his enormous blacksmith's hands and how just one would almost cover a single one of her breasts. She squeezed her thighs tightly together at the thought. Barney Rapley with his rippling muscles, and he had just the right amount of hair on his chest. Nigel, conversely, had all his body hair on his back. She hated the way his white shirts clung to the damp hairs when he lent over the handlebars. Could she ever live with a man like that, his coarse hairs all over the bed sheets?

And now there was the war: a man's war at that, with little room or role for the women. But it was the women who suffered most. There were the old biddies in the bar, waiting, and drinking, for news of their sons and husbands. She wanted action not lectures on kidneys and urine. She could not even join up. There was a waiting list for every branch of the women's services. And, at the same time, it was the women who were being laid off, while the industries converted to the war effort. Everything seemed such a struggle. She could not even catch the bus into Hastings without having to press up against hoards of leering servicemen. Perhaps she should follow Mrs Thwaites and join the WVS. At least she could don a uniform.

'So at this stage,' said the instructor. 'I will need the assistance of someone from the audience. How about you, young lady?'

Nell looked up in surprise. 'Me?'

'Yes, you, love.'

'What would you like me to do?'

'Well, if you could come and lie down here on the floor. It's quite clean.'

Nell walked to the front of the hall and placed herself on the floor. She tugged at the hem of her skirt and kept her legs tightly together.

'Artificial respiration,' said the instructor. 'More commonly known as the kiss of life.'

'Can I have a go?' asked the man at the back.

**The Rectory, St. Stephen's Church, Whatlingbridge
Thursday 13 June 1940**

Major Noakes taped his water glass with a pen. 'Gentlemen, I hereby convene this meeting of the Parish Invasion Committee.'

'And I second it!' said Constable Timothy Giddings.

'On the agenda today is the question of civilian morale and how best to control the local population in the event of a Nazi incursion.'

'I would like to raise the issue of the church bells.' The Reverend Casper Goodwin spoke up.

'Is it on the agenda?' asked Major Noakes.

'I would like to place it on the agenda,' said the Reverend. 'I need an answer. I don't know what to do for the best.'

‘Perhaps,’ said Major Noakes. ‘If we have time for other business at the end of the meeting.’ He smiled broadly. ‘To continue, the general population, as we know, is not of the brightest. In many cases, we are dealing with some rather dull minds. Research has shown that three-quarters of the population left school before they were fifteen. Imagine that! And just under half don’t even know the name of their MP! And then there’s the women.’ He stopped and looked around the table; certain that he was on safe ground.

‘They take even less interest in the news, in politics, foreign affairs, abstractions, and future objectives. Not to put too fine a point on it, the average woman fills her head with thoughts of variety, money, bright colours and pleasant visual images.’

‘Here, here!’ said Constable Giddings.

‘On top of that,’ added Major Noakes. ‘Deeply engrained in Britain is a lack of anticipation or realisation about invasion or civil upset caused by war. And further, a native lack of imagination prevents most people from getting any idea of what civilian chaos can be like. And this, gentlemen, is the rub. We must find a method of getting through to the masses and to establish firmly in their heads clear cut points of view, as well as definite physical and mental preparations.’

‘Here, here!’ said Constable Giddings.

‘Cigarette, anybody?’ asked Major Noakes. He tapped a cork tip on the table. ‘I think it is fair to say that civilian morale may not in itself contribute largely to victory, but civilian morale in itself can, by Hitler’s new technique of air and word war, bring utter and even rapid defeat. This is putting it mildly.’

He lit his cigarette and look around for an ashtray. ‘Panic, or even simple negligence, in one street might literally set the whole village afire. For example, how many people take the ARP warden seriously?’ He turned to Nigel Travis, whose area of responsibility this broadly was.

‘Almost complete indifference, I’m afraid,’ said Nigel. ‘In about ninety-nine percent of cases people haven’t provided even basic fire fighting appliances.’ He shook his head. ‘In a nutshell, people do not want to be bothered or even disturbed, and in many cases they even resent one’s interference. Just this week I heard one woman say “Oh, this place is not going to be bombed.” I ask you!’

‘Sometimes I think we are fighting a losing battle here on the home front,’ groaned Major Noakes. ‘*Umm*, Reverend. Could I have an ashtray, please?’

‘The bells,’ answered the Reverend. ‘I do think it most important that we discuss the issue of the church bells.’

‘All in good time, Reverend. First we need to address the question of public apathy. It was you, yourself, who brought to our attention that only about a quarter of mothers in the village have registered their children for evacuation.’

‘And only a quarter have bothered to apply for new ration books,’ added Nigel.

‘So how do we build up public moral to one-hundred percent strength?’ asked Major Noakes. ‘Personally, I think we need a simple, single policy. But what is this policy to be?’

Nobody seemed to know.

‘Probably, it can only be formed in a coupling of the two ideas of victory and effort. If we fight and work and struggle hard enough we shall win; if we expend enough energy and initiative we cannot lose. Conversely, the expenditure of effort and hard work

is a contribution to victory. Endurance is a contribution to victory. There are no miracles. Efficiency and effort get results.'

'Very succinctly put,' said Constable Giddings, smiling.

Major Noakes looked across the table. 'Yes, Mister Travis, your thoughts please.'

'Thank you,' said Nigel. 'You all know my opinions about the war and how I believe we could have headed this conflict off at the pass, so to speak, long ago. But now we are involved, I feel that everyone should be made to feel that victory must come, and can only come, if he or she works harder, tries harder, and puts up with more.'

Nigel lent forward as he warmed to his subject. 'Propaganda is excellent for the factory workers or the farm workers. But not everyone can make more shells or aeroplanes. The housewife can't. The typist can't. Each must be given things to do, and made to want to do them utterly.'

'Yes, that's the sort of thing,' said Major Noakes.

'The housewife,' continued Nigel, 'must feel that in saving waste, in feeding her family well but carefully, in emptying her attic of inflammable things, in keeping buckets of sand and water, she is working for victory. The typist must feel the same if she attends first aid classes. It is necessary to keep continued watch over every section, age group and class and devise ways and means of bringing them into the material effort.'

'But the question is *how*.' Major Noakes nodded gravely.

'Well, if every person feels that every effort he or she makes and every suffering he or she undergoes, vividly helps forward victory, they will bother about ration cards, they will face the nuisance and pain of sending away their children; they will volunteer for services where they are needed; they will be at least part of the way to obeying instructions in the event of invasion or severe bombing.'

'Yes, very clearly put,' nodded Major Noakes. 'My thoughts precisely. But how *are* we to achieve this?

'Posters,' suggested Nigel. 'I should like to propose myself as copywriter and designer. I have quite a few thoughts on the subject and, frankly, would like to put them into practice.'

'Slogans?' asked Major Noakes. 'Any suggestions?'

'Nothing firm at present,' said Nigel. 'But something along the lines of "Stop Slacking".'

'Pull your finger out,' suggested the constable.

'Wake up or smell the incendiaries!' offered Major Noakes. He smiled, pleased with himself. 'Well, if that is all for now, gentlemen, I feel that we have made great progress, so I shall adjourn this meeting.'

'The bells,' quickly added the Reverend Goodwin. '*The bells! The bells!*'

'Oh, if you insist.' A smile broke out across Major Noakes' face. 'I think we should let Charles Laughton here have his say! *Ha, ha, ha!*'

'The bells will be greatly missed by the people.' The Reverend Casper Goodwin stood at the top of the church tower and looked out across the village. He could smell rain. The baking days of early summer had given way to storm clouds and tension filled the air.

‘Well, I don’t see any other option,’ said Sparks. ‘What’s the alternative?’ he asked. ‘Can’t very well install special invasion sirens, can they? They have to use the church bells.’

‘Well, they installed air raid sirens.’ The Reverend sighed. ‘I don’t see why some other form of signal can’t be devised and adopted.’

‘It’s the cost,’ said Sparks. ‘Church bells don’t cost anything. They’re already in place.’

‘But I just don’t see how they will be effective. The church is just about the only public building not connected to the telephone system, so there is bound to be a delay in giving out the signal. And besides, it makes us a target. The Germans could legitimately argue that churches, as part of the early warning system, should be knocked out in the first wave.’

‘He’s got a point,’ put in Barney. He flicked his cigarette butt over the parapet and watched it tumble out of sight. ‘You might also say,’ he added. ‘That the church is already a legitimate target. I mean, we’re using it as a look-out point, ain’t we?’

‘Well, that’s another matter.’ The Reverend tightened his lips. ‘I tried to argue from the very beginning against using the church.’

‘It’s the highest point around,’ said Sparks. ‘You never really had a choice, did you?’

‘Nobody listens to me.’ Reverend Goodwin shook his head. ‘And if they knock the church out in the first wave, then bang goes your early warning system.’ He sighed deeply.

‘Well, they haven’t come yet. They had a prime chance after Dunkirk,’ huffed Ray Todd.

‘They’re too busy trying to take Paris. They’re saving us for later.’ Sparks nodded his head. ‘You’ll see.’

‘Do you seriously think Paris will fall?’ asked the Reverend.

‘They’re Frogs, ain’t they?’ Barney Rapley laughed. ‘It’ll be a push-over.’

‘Paris *will* fall.’ Now Sparks tighten his lips. ‘And that’ll be France’s lot.’

‘And then we’ll be on our own,’ added Ray. ‘And better off for it. It’ll only be us left. And it might bring things to a head, which would be good.’ He held out his hand, he could sense the rain.

‘Well, I hope you’re right,’ chuffed Barney. ‘I’ll be bloody sorry if they don’t come. We ain’t had a proper fight with Jerry yet.’

‘Well, it would be something to do.’ Ray felt the first drop.

‘If I thought it would quicken things up.’ Barney followed his cigarette butt with a globule of spit. ‘All this drivelling about, it’s enough to drive you crazy.’

‘Might cause a bit of excitement,’ added Ray. ‘Liven things up a bit.’

‘I must admit,’ said the Reverend. ‘Even I am starting to get a bit tired of all this waiting. Perhaps if they tried their luck, we would know where we stand.’

‘It would show what our blokes could do.’ Barney shouldered his broomstick and then jabbed it at the gathering clouds. ‘Let the buggers come! We’re show ‘em what’s what.’

‘*Mmm,*’ sighed Sparks.

'Here comes the rain.' Sweeney nodded to the sky.

'I don't feel anything,' said Linda.

'Any time now. Wait and see.'

'Perhaps we should be getting back.'

'We're all right under these trees.'

'What about lightening?' she asked. 'It's the worse place to be in a storm.'

Sweeney laughed. 'Look around you. These trees have been here as long as the village and they ain't been struck yet.'

'I love these trees,' sighed Linda. 'I should hate it if anything happened to them.' She looked through the leaves to the clouds above. 'I like the way they change with the seasons. You can always tell when spring's coming; and autumn. And I love acorns.' She smiled. 'Oak apples.'

'Shame you can't eat them.'

'You can make coffee with them.'

'Yeah. It's bloody horrible, though.'

'Do you think the Germans will come, then?' she asked suddenly.

'Yeah, probably. They won't have any choice, will they? Italy's involved now. Soon there'll only be us left.'

'Do you think Paris will fall?'

Sweeney did not bother to answer. He huffed instead.

'I'd love to see Paris,' she sighed. 'It sounds so romantic.'

'Yeah, and so would Hitler. I read that he wants to turn all of France into one big holiday destination for the Germans.'

'Oh, that's nice! I won't even be able to take a day trip, then.' She sighed and turned to Sweeney, smiling. 'We'll have to go somewhere else for our honeymoon.'

'Honeymoon?' he asked. She could see his mind working. 'We'll have to take our honeymoon here, in that case,' he smiled and lent closer, rubbing his smooth chin against her neck. 'We could have a rehearsal now, if you like.'

'Get off! Not here!' Linda stood up and peered into the sky. 'Anyway, I'm saving myself.'

The rain was starting to fall in heavy drops. She looked at Sweeney briefly and then started to run across the village green.

'Where you going?' he called.

'Home! My dad warned me about blokes like you.'

'Fat chance of any fires tonight,' laughed Nell.

Nigel stretched for his mackintosh and placed it around both their shoulders.

'This will clear the air.' Nell lent closer. 'It's been too hot.'

'Sultry,' corrected Nigel. 'Frankly, I love these nice warm nights.' He sucked in the warm evening air, heavy with ozone and the smell of rain on baked earth.

'Mmm,' she sighed.

They were silent for a while, each in their own thoughts. Nigel eventually spoke. 'I have to go for my medical on Saturday,' he told her.

‘What you going to do?’

‘What can I do?’ he asked. ‘They are hardly going to mark me down as unfit. I shall have to go to prison, I suppose.’

‘Oh, don’t be ridiculous. There’s plenty of things you could do. They don’t all have to involve killing people.’

‘But it’s not just the killing, is it? It’s the principle of the thing. I just can’t believe the whole pacifist movement has petered out like this. A few years ago, nobody could ever imagine another war.’

‘Hitler wasn’t over-running all Europe then, was he?’ Nell tilted her head and placed a tender hand on his cheek. ‘You know, Nigel, I used to agree with you. The Great War ruined so many families and lives. Another war seemed as likely as going to the moon.’

She took her hand away. It was slightly greasy and she wanted to wipe it on something. ‘But sometimes I wonder if it isn’t Nature’s way.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Well, how many people died in the Great War?’ she asked.

‘If you count the Empire, about nine-hundred-thousand,’ Nigel told her.

‘And then the Spanish flu came along and killed off forty million world-wide. It was like Nature saying the war kept the population down, but it wasn’t enough. “Here, have some flu!” There’s too many people in the world as it is.’

‘But if that were the case,’ he argued. ‘Why is there a population explosion now? Did you know that three-quarters of a million more boys have been born here than girls since the last war? That’s nature’s way.’

‘So maybe that’s it,’ said Nell. ‘Just like the farmers burning down the stubble to make way for the new.’

‘And we are the new.’ He looked her in the eyes. ‘Waiting for the scythe?’

‘We all live and die. It’s just a matter of when and how, that’s all.’

‘But what am I going to do?’ asked Nigel. ‘And what will happen here? What about my business, and the Scout troop? What about the Invasion Committee, and the fire-watching?’

‘Well, somebody else will have to do it all. No one’s irreplaceable. Not even you, Nigel.’

He studied the ground between his feet. ‘My appointment is at three. We could go and have a bite to eat afterwards. And we could go to the Roxy later, if you like.’

‘I’m busy,’ she told him. She looked away. ‘I think it’s going to stop soon.’

‘Busy? What do you mean?’

‘I’m going to the pictures with somebody else.’

‘Who?’

‘Never you mind. I’m a free agent. I can please myself.’

‘Not that bloody Rapley fellow!’ Nigel’s jaw hung open. ‘*Surely to God!*’

‘Maybe.’

‘But we are practically engaged!’

‘Well, where’s the ring, then?’



CHAPTER ONE - II

Crossed Keys Inn, Whatlingbridge
Friday 14 June 1940

‘Turn off, Nell!’

‘So, the Germans have entered Paris!’ Joan shook her head. ‘Who’d have thought it?’

‘It was on the cards. Give us another, Nell. And best make it a double.’ Dan slid forward his glass. ‘Now we’d better look out.’

‘It seems that nothing can stop Old Hitler.’ Joan looked at her empty glass. ‘I’ll have a gin, dear. And make it a double, too.’

‘Looks like his prophecies are coming true, then.’ Enid drained her stout. ‘Same for me, too, dear.’

‘Well, you’ve got to give him credit, ain’t you?’ Joan watched Nell pour her gin. She smacked her lips. ‘No flies on him.’

‘I blame the government,’ said Enid. ‘We weren’t prepared for this war. Too many *conchies* in positions of power. That’s the trouble. Take my old man. He said they never had the kit to deal with the Nazis. And those ruddy Froggies! He said they just threw their rifles away! Imagine that!’

‘And I bet they throw in the towel next.’ Joan sipped her gin. ‘And then what’s gonna happen?’

‘Dear, oh, dear!’ laughed Dan. ‘Talk about old women! It ain’t over yet, not by a long shot. You heard them on the wireless. We’ve crippled the *Scharnhorst* and we’re giving the *Ities* a good seeing to. And now we’re sending fresh troops back to France. It’s all happening.’

‘But if they ain’t got the kit,’ sneered Enid.

‘Well, they have now, haven’t they?’ insisted Dan. ‘They’ve learnt their lessons after Dunkirk. Intensive training, more guns, and we’ve got a grip on Hitler’s tactics now.’ He shook his head. ‘You old dears!’ He laughed.

‘Well, I don’t see how Hitler *can’t* invade us? Cheers, dear!’ Joan tapped glasses with Enid.

Now other regulars joined in. ‘He might have a jolly good try,’ said one.

‘He may attempt it, being his last straw,’ said another.

‘No,’ said yet another. ‘He’ll be a fool if he tries it.’

‘Well, if he does try it on,’ said Dan. ‘He won’t get very far.’

‘What? If he lands here, you mean?’ asked Enid.

‘They probably won’t even get ashore. They’ll be stopped in the middle of the sea.’

‘That’s right. He won’t get no further than the coast.’

‘Give me strength,’ thought Nell. She slipped through to the public bar, and then wished she hadn’t. ‘Out of the blooming frying pan,’ she thought.

‘I don’t mind if he does use gas,’ a stranger told George. ‘I don’t even have a gasmask. *Ha!* If there’s a wind blowing, you’ve only got to walk straight through it. Hold your breath and count to sixty.’

‘What d’you know about it, then?’ asked a soldier. His face was pockmarked with acne scars. ‘I bet you’ve never had so much as a whiff of gas.’ He curled his thin lips.

It was then that his mate, another private, nudged him in the side. ‘Here! Get a load of that,’ he whispered. He nodded towards Nell. ‘Bit of all right, eh?’

‘Yeah, I’d give her one!’ The soldier with the acne laughed and stared intently at Nell’s breasts.

‘The Jerries won’t use poison gas.’ George had his eyes on the soldiers as he spoke. ‘Things have moved on. It’s all *blitzkrieg* now, isn’t it?’

Nell pulled a pint of mild and made her way across the bar to the piano. ‘Here you go, Jimmy. Give us a tune will you? It’s all doom and gloom in here tonight. Let’s have something lively.’

‘Ta, love,’ smiled Jimmy. ‘*Old Bull and Bush?*’

‘Perfect,’ she smiled. She noticed Hooky standing beside the notice board. ‘Hello, Mister Hook. You on your own tonight? Where are the lads?’

‘Playing soldiers, that’s what.’

‘Somebody said you were going to join them.’

‘Yeah, right!’ Hooky raised his eyes to the heavens, and Nell walked back to the bar. She popped her head into the saloon and, seeing all was quiet, lent George a hand. She poured pints for the two soldiers.

‘Ere, love,’ said the one with the acne. ‘What time d’you get off?’

‘I don’t get off,’ she smiled.

‘Well, how about getting off with me, then?’ He turned and laughed to his mate.

‘I’m spoken for.’

‘I’ll wait for you outside,’ he told her.

‘You can wait as long as you like, love, I won’t be coming.’

‘You’ve got come-to-bed eyes,’ he told her. ‘Why don’t you say *yes?*’ He placed his hand over her’s and gave it a squeeze.

Nell tried to tug it free but the soldier would not let go.

‘I’ll have my hand back, thank you very much.’ She gave him a hard stare.

‘You can have it back later,’ he laughed. ‘When you come outside.’ He turned again to his mate and winked.

Nell tried to tug her hand free again. ‘Why don’t you crawl back under your rock?’ she told him.

‘What d’you say? *Bitch!*’ He tugged at her hand and pulled her across the counter. Nell only just managed to stay on her feet. She lifted her free hand and then brought it down hard on the side of his face. The bar fell instantly silent.

The soldier made to slap her back.

Nobody saw Hooky’s hand come up. He grabbed the soldier’s little finger in his fist. ‘Hold your horses, soldier-boy!’ He snarled. ‘I think you’d better apologise to the young lady.’

‘She slapped me first. *Oooch!*’

‘Say you’re sorry.’

‘Take a running jump!’

Hooky twisted the finger sharply and tears came to the man’s eyes.

‘Where are your manners?’ asked Hooky, his tone heavy with menace.

‘Why don’t you leave him alone, pop?’ asked the other soldier. ‘If you know what’s good for you. There’s two of us.’

Hooky laughed and turned to face the man with acne. The bar was so quiet that everybody heard the sharp crack of bone. The soldier looked as if he had been blanched in cold water. His face went instantly white.

‘*Let go. Let go!*’ he cried. ‘You’ve broken my bloody finger, you cu...’

Hooky gave the finger another twist. Only the skin kept it connected to the soldier’s hand.

‘Come on, sunshine,’ said Hooky. ‘Say sorry to the nice lady.’

‘All right, all right! Let go!’

‘Say *I am very sorry, miss.*’

‘*Oooch!* All right, all right! I’m very sorry, miss.’

‘Now say it like you mean it.’

‘I’m really sorry, Okay?’

‘We’re going outside now.’ Hooky smiled and turned to the other private. ‘You, too, kiddo.’

Hooky frog-marched the man straight through the blackout curtains. The other soldier followed reluctantly behind. He looked around the bar. Everyone was staring at him. From over in the corner, Jimmy struck up the opening bars of the *Funeral March* and people began to hum along.

‘You didn’t have to do that,’ Nell told Hooky when he eventually returned. ‘I can look after myself.’

‘Here,’ said George. He slid a pint of bitter across the counter. ‘On the house.’

‘I buy my own drinks.’

‘It’s on the house.’ George arched an eyebrow.

Hooky raised the glass and took a long sip.

‘Oh, your poor hands!’ exclaimed Nell. ‘They’re all raw and bleeding!’

‘Ain’t my blood,’ Hooky told her.

Village Green, Whatlingbridge
Saturday 15 June 1940

‘Well, I heard they’re not going to defend the Channel Islands,’ said Sweeney.

‘Give over!’ Simon laughed. ‘Course they bloody will!’

‘It was on the wireless this morning.’

‘You don’t want to believe everything you hear on the wireless.’ Simon studied the ground. ‘It’s all rot. It’s to get people worried and make them work harder. To make more guns and planes and things.’

‘Please yourself,’ shrugged Sweeney. ‘Come on, it’s your go.’

Simon knelt down and placed the large trolley marble in the crook of his index finger and thumb. He gave it a flick. ‘*Ha, ha!* Killed you! Killed you!’

Sweeney watched his own trolley roll out of the ring. ‘Lucky shot, that’s all.’

‘Hello, Sweeney,’ said Ellen.

‘What you doing?’ asked Elsie.

Sweeney stopped and looked up at the twins. ‘What’s it look like I’m doing?’ He laughed. ‘I’m playing cricket.’

‘That’s not cricket,’ said Ellen.

‘You can’t play cricket anymore,’ added Elsie. ‘They’re tearing up the grass.’

‘To stop Nazi aeroplanes landing,’ said Ellen.

‘Give over!’ laughed Sweeney. He stood up. ‘No one’s going to touch the cricket pitch!’

‘Actually, they are,’ announced Simon. ‘My dad ordered them to do it.’

‘*What?*’

‘It’s to stop Hitler,’ added Ellen.

‘Hitler’s a beast!’ put in Elsie. ‘Because he seems to like wars. He seems to like to see people being murdered.’

‘I think he’s nasty,’ added Ellen.

‘We both do.’

‘What do you know about it?’ asked Simon, sneering.

‘Actually, we know a lot about it,’ said Ellen.

‘War’s a waste of time. All your uncles and brothers are called up. Our dad was called up and he’s not come back yet.’

‘And he probably won’t,’ nodded Simon.

‘*You can’t say that!*’ shouted Ellen.

‘Knock it off,’ Sweeney told him. ‘Let’s call it quits. I’m off home. I’m starving.’

‘What? Going home for a pie, are you? Sweeney Todd!’

‘Don’t you ever get bored with the same old jokes?’ he asked.

‘You going to be a barber when you grow up?’ asked Simon, laughing.

‘Simple Simon,’ chanted Ellen.

‘Met a pie man!’

The twins dissolved in laughter. ‘Going to the fair!’

Simon gave Ellen a shove. She hovered uncertainly for a moment; her arms flaying wildly in the air like a windmill; and then she toppled backwards. At first she just sat there, a look of sad confusion on her face. And then, once she realised that she was sitting in a puddle, she suddenly burst into tears.

‘*Oy!*’ shouted Sweeney. ‘She’s just a kid. Leave her alone. Have a go at me, if you want to have a go at anyone.’

‘I just might.’

‘Oh, yeah! Go on. Try me!’

Simon began to shuffle around like a prize fighter, hopping from one foot to the other. Sweeney pressed his tongue into the side of his cheek and gave the twins a look. Then he lashed out, catching Simon squarely on the jaw.

‘What d’you do that for?’

‘You asked for it,’ Sweeney told him. ‘She’s only seven!’

‘I’m going to get you for that!’

‘Really?’ asked Sweeney. ‘You and whose army?’

‘I’ll tell my dad. And he *has* got an army.’

‘Don’t make me laugh. The LDV! The Look, Duck and Vanish brigade, more like.’

‘I’m telling my dad you said that!’

‘Please yourself.’

‘Cough!’ said the medical officer.

Nigel coughed.

‘All right. Put it away. Bend over.’

Nigel touched his toes.

‘*Mmm!*’ murmured the MO. ‘I shall need a comb if I’m to get a closer look. Up you get. Now face the front. Deep breath. Hold it in.’

Nigel held his breath. The MO adopted a quizzical expression. He moved the stethoscope to the left of Nigel’s chest and strained to listen. ‘I see,’ he said, none too sure.

Nigel continued to hold his breath.

‘*Mmm*, I see. I don’t like the sound of that,’ he announced. ‘Get your things and sit over there.’ He indicated a bench beside the wall. Two miserable specimens sat there, seemingly despondent.

‘Over there?’ asked Nigel. ‘*With them?*’

‘Yes, yes. I haven’t got all day.’

Nigel collected his clothes and sat down, wrapping his jacket around his shoulders.

‘It’s your lucky day, pal,’ one of the weeds told him.

‘How do you mean?’

‘Well, we’re rejects, ain’t we?’ He laughed. ‘You got to laugh, ain’t you?’

‘What’s so funny about it?’ asked Nigel. He was starting to feel worried.

‘Well, that’s it,’ said the other weed, leaning over. ‘They’re going to mark us down as unfit.’

‘That’s ridiculous!’ stuttered Nigel. He looked at both men; he could see their ribs clearly. ‘There is no way that I am unfit. There must be some kind of mistake.’

‘I bloomin’ hope not,’ said the first weed. ‘I’ve worked bloomin’ hard to get to this state!’

‘Me, too.’

Nigel slammed shut his jaw. He felt faint. This simply could not be happening. Stars swam before his eyes and put his head between his knees, taking a series of deep breaths.

‘That’s it, pal,’ said the first weed. ‘But don’t try it on too much. Be subtle!’

Nigel sat alone, staring at the menu. He took a deep breath and felt pain in his chest. He was light-headed and there was still the chance that he might faint. Perhaps, he wondered, had he worn his heart out with all the cycling? His mouth was dry and he could hear a ringing in his ears. He took another deep breath and tried to pinpoint the source of the pain.

‘Yes,’ said the Nippy.

‘A cup of tea, please.’

‘Is that all?’

‘Yes. Just the tea, thank you.’

She wrote down the order on a slip of paper and placed it on the table, and then and she went off to fetch the tea. When she returned, Nigel added: ‘And I would like a roll and butter as well, miss.’

She tightened her lips and took a deep breath, crossing out the total and adding a new one. She handed back the bill.

Nigel waited until she had finished. ‘And I’ll have a potato salad, please.’

The waitress altered the bill again, and readjusted the total.

‘And I’ll have an extra portion of butter.’

She gave him a long, cold, hard stare and then she tore up the old bill and started afresh.

Nigel waited until she was out of earshot and then he turned to the other customer at the table, a man in his late fifties with a bright yellow pullover.

‘I only did it to make her write it out again,’ he told him. ‘I never eat at Lyons, and anyway, I hate potato salad.’

The man gave him an odd look but said nothing. They sat in silence until the waitress returned.

‘And I would like some sauce, please,’ said Nigel.

She took a deep breath and spun on her heels.

‘I never eat sauce,’ Nigel told the man.

‘Then why harass the poor girl?’

Nigel took another deep breath and placed his hand over his heart. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘It’s just the way I feel.’

Whatlingbridge

Sunday 16 June 1940

‘Have another potato, Keith.’

‘Thank you, Missus T. Thank you very much.’ Sergeant Biddle leant across the table and helped himself. ‘Very nice spread,’ he said. ‘I can’t tell you what it means to be sitting down like this.’

‘You just make yourself at home,’ smiled Mrs Todd.

‘It’s great to have my feet under a nice kitchen table again.’ He pursed his lips. ‘I’ve been eating out of mess-tins since I don’t know when. And sometimes we didn’t even have them.’

‘Dunkirk, you mean?’ asked Ray.

‘Don’t get me started.’ The sergeant popped a slice of potato in his mouth. ‘Aye, it don’t bear thinking about. I just count my blessings.’

‘So when *did* you get back?’ asked Sweeney.

‘The twenty-sixth of May.’ He nodded gravely.

‘Isn’t that when it started?’ asked Sweeney. ‘They didn’t call an end to the operation until June four.’ He eyed the last potato in the dish. ‘So you were one of the first off, then?’

‘Don’t talk with your mouth full,’ berated his mum.

‘Well, Sergeant Keith does.’

‘Well, you’re not a sergeant, are you?’ laughed his dad. ‘When you’re old enough, you can do as you please.’

‘I thought, it was...’

‘Excuse him, won’t you?’ said Mrs Todd. ‘He’s always full of questions.’

‘I don’t mind,’ said the sergeant. ‘He wants to hear about Dunkirk. I’ll tell him about Dunkirk.’ He looked gravely at Sweeney. ‘Don’t think any of us had it easy, lad. I spent I don’t know how many hours up to here in water.’ He tapped his top button. ‘Freezing cold water at that.’ He turned to Mrs Todd. ‘And I won’t tell you what was floating in that water.’

‘No, don’t,’ she said quickly. ‘I heard it was terrible. All those *Stuka* dive-bombers. It makes my blood run cold.’

‘Made my blood run cold, too, at times,’ he agreed. ‘But we got the Army back and that’s what counts.’ He smiled. ‘And with a meal like this, I’m ready to take on Hitler again.’

‘Did you see any Germans, then?’ asked Sweeney.

‘Did I see any Germans!’ Sergeant Biddle laughed. ‘Don’t make me laugh. You could see em when we lying there in the dunes.’

‘Really?’ asked Sweeney. ‘I thought they didn’t penetrate the defences until the morning of June four.’

‘Questions, questions, questions,’ sighed his mum. ‘You let the sergeant finish his dinner in peace.’

‘Oh, that’s all right, Missus T.’

‘Have the last potato if you want.’

‘Don’t mind if I do.’ He lent forward and helped himself. ‘And, I must say, this is a lovely rabbit. I won’t ask where you got it.’ He winked.

Mrs Todd lent across the table and lowered her voice. ‘Contacts,’ she also winked. ‘A friend of ours used to be gamekeeper up at the Hall, but he lost his job. That’s the war for you. Now he gives us a little something on the side now and then.’

‘*Helen*,’ warned Sweeney’s dad. ‘Less said the better.’

‘Oh, don’t you mind me. I’m partial to a bit of wild rabbit myself. Don’t do to ask questions, does it?’ He turned to look at Sweeney. ‘Did you know that rabbit has virtually no nutritional value?’

‘How d’you mean?’

‘There’s so little fat on rabbit that it don’t actually have any nutrients.’

‘Really?’ Sweeney examined the ceiling beams.

‘Back in the days of the pioneers in Canada, the trappers used to eat rabbit three or four times a day.’

‘Lucky them!’ laughed Mrs Todd.

‘Ah, but that’s just it, Missus T.’ Sergeant Biddle smiled. ‘It didn’t do ‘em no good, see?’ He paused to watch their faces. ‘In fact, they died of *mal-nu-trician*. Starved to death! Yeah! They could eat rabbit all day but it didn’t do ‘em any good. No nutrients.’

Mrs Todd looked at their plates. ‘Oh, I didn’t know that. I hope you’re not still hungry.’

‘No, no, no,’ he laughed. ‘I was just saying. This,’ he nodded to his empty plate. ‘This was feast after what I’ve been used to.’

‘So, what do signallers do, then?’ asked Sweeney suddenly.

‘What do they do?’ The sergeant looked taken aback. ‘We’re the eyes and the ears of the Army, that’s what. Communications! If it weren’t for the Signal Corp, you wouldn’t be able to do anything.’

‘Do you stand on a hill, then?’ asked Sweeney. ‘And wave flags?’

‘Listen to him!’ laughed the sergeant. ‘That went out with the ark! *Huh!* It’s all wireless technology now, lad. And it ain’t like the last war; trailing loads of wire all about. It’s wireless today; cutting edge technology.’

‘I see,’ said Sweeney.

‘And it ain’t just wireless. Signals encompasses all sorts now. Top secret stuff, too.’ He looked around the table knowingly. ‘That’s why I’m here, but you can’t draw me on that. No, *sir-ee*.’ He laughed. ‘Anyway, that’s enough about me. What are you going to do, young man, when your time comes?’

‘That depends if there’s a war on or not,’ mused Sweeney. ‘If the war’s still on, I want to go in the RAF.’

‘You’ve got to be clever to get in the RAF,’ said the sergeant.

‘*So?*’ Sweeney tilted his head. ‘I want to fly Spitfires.’

‘Then you’re need to study hard, my boy,’ put in his dad. He turned to Sergeant Biddle. ‘There’s no school now, you see. They closed them with the evacuations.’

‘Then you want to do some home study.’

‘That or get a job,’ put in his dad.

‘I could give you hand with your home work.’ Sergeant Biddle winked.

Sweeney needed to change the conversation. ‘I was thinking of keeping a diary,’ he told them.

‘What sort of diary?’ asked his mum. ‘You haven’t got any appointments.’

‘Not that sort of diary.’ Sweeney scowled. ‘A war diary! I could record what’s happening; what people think and feel about the war. Historians in the future could read it if they want to know what life was like now.’

‘I think that’s a jolly good idea,’ said the sergeant. ‘I’ll give you a hand.’

‘That or get a job,’ said his dad again. ‘Barney was saying only the other night how, what with all the LDV duties, how he needs someone to help out in the forge.’

‘Really?’ asked Sweeney.

‘Go see him, if you want. I told him you might.’

‘Come on,’ said Mrs Todd. ‘Sweeney, give me a hand clearing the table.’

Sweeney began to stack the plates. He lent forward for the gravy boat and felt a gentle tap behind. He straightened up quickly.

'You got a hole in your trousers,' Sergeant Biddle told him.

'Where?'

'Just here.' The sergeant tapped him again.

'How did that happen?' asked his mum.

'Search me,' said Sweeney.

'You're going to wear those trousers out before too long.' Mrs Todd bent down and looked at the seat of his pant. 'And you can't expect a new pair, not just yet.'

'Can't you patch them?' asked the sergeant.

She stopped and placed her hand to her chin. 'I don't think I've got anything suitable,' she said.

'Well,' smiled Sergeant Biddle. 'I've got a couple of red signal flags in my rucksack. You could use one of those. Why not?'

Mrs Todd laughed. 'Yes. Why not? Just the thing.'

'Mum!'

'Hark at him.' She laughed. 'You can't expect Saville Row. There's a war on!'

'I'm going to keep a diary,' said Sweeney.

'Yeah?' asked Linda. They sat on the cliffs at Fairlight looking out over the English Channel. The clouds sat low above the sea and a steady breeze rustled their hair. 'What kind of diary?'

'I thought it might be a good idea to keep a record of events. When we're old, it might be nice to look back at these times. It's history, isn't it?'

'It is, if the Nazis come,' she told him.

'I could ask people questions. What do they think about the war? About Churchill and Hitler and Mussolini?'

'All right,' said Linda. 'Ask me a question?'

'I haven't got anything to write on,' he told her.

'Well, just remember it.' She huffed. 'What are you like?'

'Okay, what is the greatest difference the war has made to you?'

'To me?' she mused. 'Well, to start with, I think it's a horrible idea. It disrupts everyone's lives; people have to go away in the Army and so on.'

'But it hasn't affected you that way, has it?'

'For me, no. The black out is not at all bad. I think it's rather fun going about in the dark.' She stopped there and smiled.

'That's it?' he asked.

'Well, what do you want? I think we're fighting for a good purpose. If Hitler got all of Europe, as he wants to, no one would be happy or have any peace. I think Hitler is a selfish old pig who only thinks of himself, and thinks he's marvellous and wants to boss everybody about and get the whole world for himself.'

'Thank you,' said Sweeney. 'I'll commit that to memory.'

'So, how you getting on with that sergeant?' she asked.

Sweeney let out a sigh. 'Did you know that rabbits don't have any nutritional value?'

'Pardon?'

'Did you know you can eat rabbits all day long and still starve to death?'

'Don't be daft! We eat them all the time. My dad's always bring them back.'

'Well, don't starve to death, will you.'

Linda huffed. 'They don't seem to do me any harm.' She puffed out her chest and looked down. 'Tell me,' she said. 'What's he like, this sergeant of yours?'

'He's a twat!' Sweeney curled his lip.

'Don't say *that*,' said Linda. 'You can't use *that* word.'

'Why not? What's wrong with it?'

'Do you know what it means?'

'Yeah.' He sounded less than certain.

'Where is it, then?'

'What do you mean, *where* is it?'

'Point to it, on me.' Linda lay back on the grass.

Suddenly the penny dropped. He placed a hand on her leg and worked it under her dress. Linda giggled.

'You're getting warm,' she said. 'Warmer.'

He slid his hand further up. Her skin felt remarkably smooth. There was nowhere on his body that felt like that.

'Scorching hot!' laughed Linda. She sat upright.

'Hang on,' said Sweeney. 'I barely touched it.'

'Let's see your hands,' she announced. 'You're not touching me with hands like that! Look at those filthy fingernails!'

'Well, what d'you want me to do?'

'Give them a good scrub when you get home. You're not touching me with hands like that!'

The news from France is very bad, and I grieve for the gallant French people who have fallen into this terrible misfortune. We have become the sole champions now in arms to defend the world cause. We shall defend our island, and with the British Empire around us, we shall fight on unconquerable until the curse of Hitler is lifted from the brows of men.

Winston Churchill, 17 June 1940

**The Forge, Whatlingbridge
Monday 17 June 1940**

'Thing is,' said Barney. 'You can't just learn from a book or anything. You have to look and learn.'

'So what are you doing now?' asked Sweeney.

‘I’m trying to fix the coupling on this old tedding machine. It belongs to a bloke from Sedlescombe but should be in a museum by rights. I need to weld these two bits together.’

‘Don’t you have an oxyacetylene torch?’

‘Give over!’ Barney laughed. ‘There’s little need for that. I use the old methods.’ He bent down in front of the forge and tended the fire. ‘For starters, we need to bring the fire up to welding heat. You can’t use a thermometer. You have to use your eye.’

He reached forward with the tongs and pulled out a lump of metal. It glowed an intense yellow and he examined it closely. ‘Any muck on the metal, which we call scale, can weaken the join once its welded so we have to keep the two halves as clean as a whistle. Mind yourself.’

Barney held the searing hot metal in the tongs and applied a wire brush with his free hand, working furiously away. ‘Stand back,’ he said, and then returned the metal to the fire. ‘Now we’ve got to be careful not to get it too hot, and here’s a little trick.’ He reached into his apron for a length of metal wire. Bending down, he touched it first to one piece of glowing metal and then to the next. ‘Now it’s sticking, see? And that means it’s just right.’

Barney moved rapidly. He placed both bits of metal on the anvil and applied a little flux. ‘It’s a kind of glassy sand,’ he explained. ‘Now, bring the two bits together as you want them and start to tap but gently, mind.’ The dark workshop rang with the blows of the hammer. ‘See, I’m squeezing out the flux and now I’m going put it back in the forge.’

‘Is that it?’ asked Sweeney.

‘No, it ain’t ready yet. We’ve got to get it back up to temperature. See the colour’s starting to change?’

Sweeney felt his face scorch as he lent around Barney’s broad back.

‘And out it comes again.’ Barney began to work at the weld with light blows. ‘Now it’s setting, see?’

‘Yes, I see.’ Sweeney smiled.

‘But if the joint’s dirty, or you don’t bring it back properly up to heat again, it won’t hold and this here tedding machine will break away from the harness again.’

‘Can I have a go?’

‘Best to start you off with something simple. You know how to tend the fire now, so I’m gonna get you making some shoes.’

‘Shoes?’

‘Horse shoes. Can’t ever have enough. If I’ve ever got a light day on, I turn out horse shoes.’ He straighted up and look over to the clock on the wall. ‘Time for a bite soon,’ he announced.

‘I brought some sandwiches,’ said Sweeney.

Barney smiled. ‘Little Ellen and Elsie usually bring mine, now they ain’t at school. Fancy a beer?’

‘A beer?’ Sweeney’s eyes opened wide.

‘Got to have beer,’ explained Barney. ‘You sweat like a pig in here and if you don’t keep your fluids up, you get sick.’

‘Yeah, I’ll have a beer.’ Sweeney grinned. ‘I don’t want to get sick.’

'It ain't about getting drunk,' Barney explained. 'You sweat it all out.' He left the room and returned with a dark quart bottle. 'You've got quite a good sweat up.' He nodded to Sweeney's soaked shirt. 'How d'you feel? Not too tired?'

'No, no. I feel good.' Sweeney accepted the bottle. He resisted the urge to look over his shoulder before he took a swig.

'I think you're going to be all right,' Barney told him. 'You're a quick learner. Your dad said you would be.'

'Did he? He said that?'

Barney laughed and turned to the doorway. 'Hello, girls!'

'Hello Uncle Barney,' said Ellen.

'We've got you something,' added Elsie.

'What's in that basket, then?'

'There's some bread.'

'And some cheese.' Elsie looked to Sweeney. 'Are you drinking beer?' she asked.

'No, it's cold tea,' he told her.

'You're too young to drink,' Ellen told him.

'He's gonna be working with me now,' Barney told the twins. 'And he's got to keep his strength up. How's your mum?' he asked.

'Mum's all right.' Ellen spoke with tight lips.

'Still no word about your dad?' he asked.

They both shook their heads.

'He'll be all right,' Barney told them. 'Blokes are still getting back from Dunkirk, even now. Ain't that right?' he turned to Sweeney.

Sweeney was less than certain but he nodded his head.

'Tell your mum I'll come see her a bit later. I got something for her.'

Sweeney's arms were tingling with the exertion. He breathed in deeply as he strolled home and savoured the dull but satisfying ache all down his back. He imagined himself with bulging biceps. There would be no need to send off for the Dynamic Tension course. He could save his money. In his mind's eye, he adopted a typical Charles Atlas pose. Linda would be unable to resist.

'*Oy! You!* I want a word with you!'

Sweeney snapped out of his daydream. Constable Giddins cruised towards him on his bike. For a brief moment, the urge to run overwhelmed Sweeney. But he stopped and watched the chubby policeman pull up to the curb.

'Don't come the angelic with me, my lad,' said the policeman as he propped the bike against the curbstone. 'You know why I want you, don't you?'

Sweeney shook his head.

'I've had a report about you and young Master Noakes.' He looked Sweeney in the eyes for taletell signs of guilt. 'Yes,' he said. 'Now you know what I'm talking about, don't you?'

Sweeney continued to shake his head.

'Come here,' said the constable. He pointed to a spot on the ground inches from his own feet. 'Did you and young Noakes have a contretemp on Saturday? On the green?'

'No,' said Sweeney.

‘Well, I think you did. And Major Noakes is not best pleased. There’s too much loutish behaviour these days. You should be at school. All this running about is making you lot go wild.’

‘He was picking on the twins.’ Sweeney stood his ground. ‘He made little Ellen cry.’

‘Well, that’s not how I heard it. And it don’t do to go picking fights with the local magistrate’s boy, now does it?’

‘He started it.’

‘I don’t want to hear who started it. But I’m warning you, young man.’ He raised a finger to Sweeney’s face and gave it a wag.

‘He pushed her in a puddle.’

‘*Enough!*’ said the policeman. He raised his hand further and, with finger and thumb, gripped an unruly tuft of Sweeney’s hair. ‘Revolve,’ he said.

Sweeney sighed as he felt the hair tug away by the roots. Reluctantly but slowly he turned, twisting the hair tighter. ‘*Oooch!*’

Constable Giddins let go. ‘Look, you’re a good lad. I know that. And you’ve just started work at the forge, is that right?’

Sweeney nodded. ‘Started today.’

‘Well, you can do a lot worse than learn a trade. But you watch that Rapley. He’s got light fingers when it comes to the wildlife; other people’s wildlife. And he ain’t the only one.’

‘What am I suppose to do about it?’ asked Sweeney.

‘I’m not asking you to do anything. Just keep your nose clean, that’s all. And don’t go picking up any bad ways.’

Sweeney nodded.

‘Anyway,’ said the constable. ‘You can redeem yourself.’

‘How?’

‘There’s some leaflets coming on Wednesday. I’d like you to lend a hand delivering them.’

‘What kind of leaflets?’

‘Government leaflets, lad. Important government leaflets, with instructions on what to do if the Germans invade.’

‘Yeah, all right,’ said Sweeney. ‘It’ll have to be after work.’

‘After work’s fine.’

‘Do you think they’ll come?’ asked Sweeney.

‘Who knows what’ll happen next, lad. I, for one, don’t think they will but that don’t mean we shouldn’t be prepared. But now them French are calling for an armistice, who knows what. Either way, I don’t think the situation is as catastrophic as it seemed at first.’

‘Can I quote you on that?’ asked Sweeney.

‘Stand at *ease*.’ Captain Evans spun on his heels and gave Major Noakes a crisp salute.

‘Stand easy, men.’ Major Noakes looked with pride at the assembled company. He nodded approvingly. ‘I have two items of good news, men.’

‘Rifles?’

‘No, not rifles yet, Rapley.’ He smiled patiently. ‘As you know, this Wednesday evening has been set aside for the first of our inter-unit training exercises. I now have some of the details.’ He consulted a slip of paper. ‘This primarily will be an exercise in both orienteering and ambush.’ He paused, feeling a warm glow inside. He looked up and smiled, departing from his prepared speech.

‘I must say that you men have come on wonderfully since we joined together just over a month ago. And it is a testament to the men of Sussex to see so many who have gladly answered their country’s call.’ He swallowed, feeling a lump in his throat. ‘And I think it is fair to say that if Hitler should come, we will give him a good run for his money, eh?’

He nodded while the chatter died away. ‘But let us not get complacent,’ he warned. ‘We shall be up against some stiff opposition on Wednesday. A and C companies at Battle and Catsfield have been training hard, too. And their respective commanders have high hopes that they will come out on top.’

He smiled now. ‘Unofficially, of course, I have a little wager with my counterparts at Battle and Catsfield, and I know I can count on you.’ He looked again at the slip in his hand. ‘Exercise Cat! Curious name. I don’t know who thought of it.’ Here he stopped to smile. ‘So let’s see if we can’t be the cat’s whiskers, eh? *Ha, ha!*’

Major Noakes waited for the lighthearted approval to die down. ‘To that end, I shall be dividing the company into two fighting patrols. Captain Evans here will lead the first section and Watson will lead the other. I shall coordinate from company headquarters. I suggest that you ensure that you have some stout footwear and I would advise you to dress sensibly. The forecast is not too good. And make sure that you have something to eat beforehand. It will be a long night.’

Major Noakes hooked his thumbs into his belt. ‘And the other good news, as I am sure you will agree, is that we have just received this afternoon the first consignment of our uniforms.’

The men let out a loud cheer.

‘Captain Evans will act as quartermaster. When you fall out I want you to come and each collect an armband. How’s that, eh?’

Whatlingbridge

Wednesday 19 June 1940

‘What’s this, then?’

‘It’s a leaflet, Missus Saxby,’ said Sweeney. ‘Everyone’s getting them.’ He turned to walk back down the path.

‘What’s it about, then?’

Sweeney stopped and tapped the thin sheet in her hands. ‘It’s about what to do if the invader comes.’

‘Oh, we don’t need worry about that, do we?’ she asked. ‘We’ve got enough. I mean, we’ve got a pail of water handy. That’s all you can do and bandages and that.’

‘There’s a bit more to it than that,’ said Sweeney. ‘You’ll have to read it.’

‘What’s all this about, then?’ Her husband came to the door.

Sweeney explained again.

'It looks like a cheap advertisement.' The man huffed. 'Layout's no good, very cheap. And what we supposed to do with it?'

'Well, you read it.'

'I mean after. Look at the size of it. It's too large. We can't very well pin it up, can we? There's writing on both sides. You'd only see one side.'

'Perhaps you should just memorise it,' Sweeney suggested.

'Yes, I suppose. But I don't think they'll come. Our boys are too good for them. And if they do come, we'll get some sticks and beat them back.'

The man was still laughing when Sweeney opened the gate to the next cottage and stepped up the path. He had dozens more to deliver. He folded the next leaflet and tried to push it through the letterbox as quietly as he could.

Mr Saxby leaned over the fence. 'There's just one thing,' he said. 'It says here that we're expected to help in road blocks.' He scratched his head. 'Would we just have to bring out everything we could – tables, chairs, and things? Or what?' he asked. 'They say wire and things. Where do we get them from? We haven't been told about it, have we?'

Sweeney cringed as the cottage door opened.

'Hello! What's this, then?'

'It's a leaflet, Missus Fairbrother. I can't stop. I've still got loads to deliver.'

'This bit here,' said Mr Saxby. 'In part four where it says if a parachutist comes down near your home. It says he won't be feeling at all brave! How can they know that, then? And it says he won't know where his companions are. And we shouldn't give him any food or maps or anything.'

He turned to Mrs Fairbrother across the fence. 'It makes 'em look like they're friendly, timid sort of fellows, don't you think? If they behave in a different fashion, people who take this leaflet seriously are going to get a big surprise.'

'Let's have a look,' said Mrs Fairbrother. She unfolded her leaflet.

Don't give any German anything. She laughed. 'What about if he points a bayonet at you and says *or else*?'

'Good point,' agreed Mr Saxby. He turned and looked at Sweeney.

'I just deliver them,' he said. 'You want to sit down and study it. I must get on.'

'Thing is,' said Mr Saxby. 'The very things we prepare for, the Germans won't do. And it's not at all likely that parachuters will arrive in uniform, and probably they'd speak English very well. These Germans are very clever.'

'Good night,' called Sweeney over his shoulder. He was saving Linda's house until last.

'Well, she's not here,' said Mrs Hook. 'Just let me get my glasses. Come in Sweeney.' He stepped into the hall and prayed that Mr Hook was not at home. 'What have you got here, then?'

'It's a leaflet,' he explained. 'About what to do if the German come.'

'Oh, I can read this,' she announced. 'The print's too small.'

'Is she out, then?' he asked. 'I thought she was staying in to wash her hair.'

'No, love. She washes her hair on Sundays, when she has her bath. She's gone to the pictures in Battle.'

'On her own?'

'No, some nice young chap took her. Very smartly dressed, lad.'

‘Sod this for a game of soldiers,’ groaned Ray. ‘I reckon we’re lost.’

‘We’re not bloody lost.’ Watson’s gritted teeth flashed in the moonlight. He stopped to look around and sighed. ‘Park yourselves down here, lads.’ He scratched his head.

‘All right to have a fag?’ asked Barney.

‘No smoking!’ The sergeant sat heavily on the wet grass. ‘You don’t know who’s watching.’

‘Let’s look at that map.’ Sparks sidled up to the sergeant and studied the chart.

‘Well, I reckon we’re here.’ Watson stabbed a stubby finger over in a corner. ‘Just coming up to Broad Oak.’

‘And that would put the next checkpoint over here,’ said Sparks. ‘In that field.’

‘Yeah, that’s it.’ The sergeant sighed again. ‘Not as easy as it looks, is it?’

‘So where are the other blokes, then?’ asked Barney. ‘I’d have thought we’d have run into them by now.’

‘Keep your bloody voice down, will you?’ Watson chewed his lip. ‘They could be anywhere, lying in wait for us.’

‘Come on,’ Ray rose to his feet. ‘Let’s press on.’

‘Let’s see if we can find them first.’ Barney got to his feet and gripped his broomstick in both hands. ‘I vote we tie ‘em to a tree, if we catch those bastards from Battle. Cocky sods, all their parading up and down the high street.’

‘*Shush!*’ hissed Sparks. ‘I think I hear something.’ He cocked his ear into the night and held his breath.

‘I don’t hear nothing.’ Watson shook his head.

Sparks motioned with his hand, urging the section close up against the hedgerow. ‘Hear that?’

Barney and Ray nodded.

‘Grab some earth,’ Sparks whispered. He grabbed a handful and rolled the wet mud into a ball. ‘Pretend it’s grenades.’ They all listened in silence.

‘You sure you’re holding the map up the right way, sir?’ asked Corporal Fuller.

‘Of course, I am sure.’ Captain Evans raised his hand and called a halt. ‘If that last checkpoint is here,’ he jabbed at the map with Corporal Fuller peering over his shoulder. ‘And we have to get to this grid reference here...’ He let his sentence trail away.

‘Then we should be going that way, sir,’ smiled Fuller. ‘Towards Crowhurst.’

‘Really?’ asked the captain. ‘*Oy!*’ he called suddenly. ‘Stop mucking about! Who threw that?’

A shower of mud came flying over the hedgerow, pelting the captain’s fighting patrol.

‘You’re all dead!’ laughed Sparks, peering over the hedge. ‘Oh!’ he exclaimed.

‘Captain Evans, sir. We thought you were that lot from Battle.’

‘For Christ sake’s man! Look at my bloody jacket. What are you playing at?’

‘Grenades, sir,’ explained Watson, sheepishly.

‘Did you hear Winnie last night?’ asked Nell.

‘I can’t take him seriously,’ said Nigel. ‘He always reminds me of Toad of Toad Hall.’

‘He has such a way with words,’ she marvelled. ‘The Battle of France is over and the Battle of Britain is about to begin. Makes you feel that history’s in the making.’

‘I just can’t believe they made him Prime Minister, not when they could have picked Halifax. Now, there’s a man with a head on his shoulders. A pragmatist through and through.’

‘Not that old chestnut again,’ groaned Nell. ‘He’d have sold us down the river. You heard Churchill. If we don’t stand up to Hitler, we’ll sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age.’

‘It’s all rhetoric! For God’s sake.’ The moon sank behind a heavy curtain of cloud and he had to peer closer to see Nell’s face. ‘Give us kiss.’ He pursed his lips.

‘D’you hear something?’ she asked, pushing him away.

‘No.’ Nigel shook his head.

‘Listen!’ She put her hand to her ear. ‘Can’t you hear them?’

‘No.’

‘It might be parachutists,’ she whispered.

‘On a night like this? Don’t be daft?’

‘You must hear them!’

‘I can hear something, now you mention it. Perhaps it’s a horse.’

Nell grabbed Nigel by the shoulder and pulled him down.

‘Aren’t those sandbags over there?’ asked Captain Evans.

‘Looks like it, sir,’ said Corporal Fuller. ‘Isn’t that one of the fire-watching points?’

‘Well, if it is, then we are on the right track.’ The captain strained to see in the dark. ‘Then company HQ if off that way.’

‘Not that way, then, sir?’ Fuller pointed off in the opposite direction.

‘*Bang! Bang!*’ Nigel popped his head over the sandbags. ‘You’re all dead!’

‘What the blazes!’ Captain Evans clutched a hand to his heart. ‘For God’s sake, man! You scared the living daylight out of me. Is that you Nigel?’

‘Hello, Martin.’ Nigel and Nell stood up.

‘You can’t go ambushing my patrol like that. I thought you were a pacifist!’

‘What are you up to?’ asked Nigel. ‘Out for a stroll?’

‘You could say that.’ Captain Evans shook his head. ‘We’re out on an ambush patrol.’

‘Well, got you good and proper then,’ smiled Nigel.

Major Noakes looked at his watch. ‘Oh-one-hundred-hours-forty-five,’ he announced. ‘Good going section leader. Did you find all the checkpoints?’

‘Every one of them, sir,’ smiled Watson. He handed across a signed card.

‘And did you run into anyone?’ asked Major Noakes.

‘No, sir,’ the sergeant shook his head. ‘But they didn’t find us either, sir.’

‘Well, jolly good.’ He placed a hand to his chin. ‘I thought Captain Evans would have been back first.’

‘We bumped into him about an hour ago,’ smiled Barney. ‘Gave him one heck of a shock, sir.’

‘Oh,’ he said, creasing his brow. ‘Anyway, ah, well done. Well done, indeed. I had better report my first patrol back.’

Major Noakes strolled up to his house, the company HQ, and found the umpire, an elderly major in an over-tight vintage staff officer’s tunic. He sat in the living room supping brandy. ‘First patrol back, all present and correct.’

‘Jolly good,’ said the major. ‘Best make that telephone call in that case. Don’t forget,’ he said. ‘Prefix anything you say with the words *Exercise Cat*. There’re a few other ops on tonight.’ He handed across a slip of paper. ‘Here’s the number.’

Major Noakes walked to the telephone in the hallway and picked up the receiver. He dialled three numbers and waited.

‘This line’s dead,’ he called.

‘Probably busy. Keep trying.’

Major Noakes tried three more times and eventually heard a ringing tone.

‘Hello?’ said a small voice at the other end.

‘Exercise cat, exercise cat,’ said Major Noakes.

‘What?’

‘Exercise cat, exercise cat,’ repeated Major Noakes.

‘What the bloody ‘ell d’ye mean by fetchin’ me out o’ bed and tellin’ me what to do?’ asked a strange voice.

‘I beg your pardon?’ Major Noakes held the receiver away from his ear.

‘I ain’t got no perishin’ cat, and if I ‘ad, I ain’t exercisin’ it at two o’clock of a Thursday mornin’ to please you nor nobody. You buzz off!’

‘Is that Hastings two-four-nine?’ asked Major Noakes. But the line was dead.



CHAPTER ONE - III

We are a solid and united nation which would rather go down to ruin than admit the domination of the Nazis. We know that they are even now completing their preparations for an attempt to invade this country. At any moment that invasion may be launched by sea and air. If he did try to invade this country, we will fight him until he is utterly destroyed. And if he is driven to evacuate, as we had to evacuate from France, there will be no friendly fleet waiting for him, there will be nothing waiting for him off the beaches of England but death and disaster.

*Neville Chamberlain, Lord President of the Privy Council
29 June 1940*

**Whatlingbridge
Saturday 29 June 1940**

‘Here you go! A nice cup of tea.’

‘Ta very much.’ Sergeant Keith helped himself to three spoonfuls of sugar.

‘Where’s young Sweeney this morning?’

‘He’s working.’ She smiled. ‘He seems to really like it.’

‘And Ray?’ he asked. ‘He working, too?’

‘No,’ said Mrs Todd. ‘He’s out on patrol again.’

‘They keep him busy, don’t they?’

‘Can you wonder?’ she asked. ‘It’s all starting to get to me now. But you mustn’t grumble, must you?’

‘It’s all right to have a grumble, now and then,’ he told her. He sipped his tea.

‘Gets it off your chest. But how d’you mean?’

‘Well,’ she said. She left the sink and came and sat with him at the table. ‘It’s the suspense of waiting that gets me. You don’t know what’s going happen next, do you?’

‘Don’t you worry, Missus T.’ The sergeant smiled and heaped in another spoonful. ‘You’re in safe hands here. Ray’s in the LDV and I’ve got my rifle with me. We’ve been told to carry ‘em at all times.’

‘Well, I don’t know if that’s a good thing or a bad thing.’ She shook her head.

‘Are they going to come? That’s the question.’ She sipped her own tea and licked her lips. ‘I wonder sometimes if I shouldn’t send Sweeney away.’

‘Send him away?’

‘But then I think I might never see him again, especially if they send him abroad.’

‘Oh, I wouldn’t do that,’ he warned. ‘Oh, no! He’s turning into a fine, strapping lad. And working in that forge,’ he paused. ‘Well, it’s doing him no end of good.’

'I don't even know whether to apply for a shelter or not, or whether I've left it too late.' She looked across the table. Her lips were pursed tightly and then she smiled thinly. 'It's nice having someone to talk to.'

'That's what families are for, eh?' He winked.

'And then I think I should do something.'

'You've got plenty to do, as it is. Do what exactly?'

'Well, I don't know whether I ought to join the WVS, or the ARP. And then I think I've got my duty to the home first.'

'You just stay as you are,' he told her.

'Oh, I didn't tell you,' she said. Mrs Todd lent across the table and dropped her voice. 'Those poor Rapley twins!'

'Those little girls?' He creased his brow. 'What about them?'

'Well, you know their poor dad's being missing since May?'

'The brother of that chap at the forge, where young Sweeney's working?'

'Yes.' She chewed her lip. 'Well, they finally got the telegram.'

'Oh, no!'

'Missing, presumed killed.'

'It could just be the confusion,' he said. He shook his head. 'He's only presumed, not confirmed.'

'Even so.'

'Wait a while. That's my advice. Let the Red Cross sort it out. He's probably sitting comfy in a German camp somewhere.' He tried to smile. 'Best not jump to any conclusions.'

'What with the French giving in, and now the Nazis marching straight into the Channel Islands. No attempt to defend them! It makes you wonder what'll happen here.'

'They won't even get ashore.'

'And then there's all them politicians on the wireless talking about fighting to the last ditch and making every home a fortress. It makes you feel we're in retreat.'

'No it doesn't.'

'It gets me just here.' Mrs Todd patted her breast. 'It makes you ache inside. It makes you want to do something.'

'Here you go,' smiled Nell. 'Two pints of best.'

'Ta, love.'

'You on your holidays?' she asked.

'Holidays!' The man laughed and nudged his friend at the bar. 'Listen to her!'

'What then?' she asked.

'Working, love. That's what. War work.'

'Oh, well, I won't ask then.'

'Ask as much as you like. It ain't no secret. It's not the sort of thing you can hide.'

'We're building bunkers and digging defences,' the man's friend told her.

'Round here?'

'One great big defence line.'

'Well, I never.' She turned aside. 'Excuse me.'

'Same again, please Nell.'

Nell pulled the pump and Hooky watched the foam spill over her hand.

'Thank you, bye-the-way,' she smiled.

'Did you like them?' he asked.

'Oh, they were lovely,' she smiled. 'We did them with some bacon. It makes me hungry just thinking about them.'

'Well, there's more where they came from.' He sipped his beer. 'I'll come and see you tomorrow, early.'

'Hey,' she lowered her voice. 'You see those chaps there? Down the end of the bar? Well, there here to dig defences. Pill boxes and things.'

'Really?'

'There might be some work in it for you. Lay of the land and so forth.'

'Really?' Hooky picked his glass off the counter. 'I might just have a chat.'

Hooky was deep in thought when he stepped into the high street but he saw movement out of the corner of his eye and turned sharply.

'Oy! I want a word with you.' Constable Giddins jumped off his bicycle and held the handlebars. 'I've been looking for you.'

'Have you?' Hooky curled his lip. 'Well, I'm not hard to find.'

'Actually, you are.' The constable rested a thumb in his top pocket. 'But I saw you the other night.'

'And?'

'And I wondered what business you had up at the Hall, now you don't work there.'

'And?'

'And I've got my eye on you. That's what. There's Canadians up there now, as you know. And the Hall and the grounds are their responsibility.'

Hooky made to step away. 'Well, thanks for keeping me abreast of events. I'll be on my way.'

'Not so fast.' The constable rested his bike against a lamppost and unbuckled his saddlebag. 'I've got something for you.' He handed Hooky an envelope. 'Here you go.'

'What this then? Party invitation?'

'No, it's a summons and it's been served now.'

'Summons for what?' Hooky's eyes narrowed to slits.

'A summons to the magistrate's court. Grievous Bodily Harm.'

'For what?'

'I think you know what.' The constable raised his bushy eyebrows. 'And two young soldiers know what, too.'

'Isn't that the young chap who took your girl out?' asked Barney.

Sweeney did not want to talk about it.

'Why ain't you in the Scouts, then?' asked Barney. 'He looks very smart.'

'Don't ask.'

They stood in the doorway of the forge, taking a breather from the heat. Simon slipped off his bike and propped it against a lamppost across the street.

'You ought to sabotage his bike,' suggested Barney.

'That is so childish.'

'You could undo the nuts on the front wheel. That'd give him a shock!' He laughed and tapped his apron pocket. 'Cigarette?'

'I don't smoke,' Sweeney reminded him.

'Well, you're going to start sooner or later. Why wait?'

'I don't want to stunt my growth.'

'Please yourself.' He lit his cigarette. 'So?' he asked. 'You still seeing her, or is he in there now?'

Sweeney really did not want to talk about it. 'No, I'm seeing her. I'm still seeing her.'

'Women,' sighed Barney. 'You never know what to make of 'em, do you? Take last weekend, for example. I took Nell to the pictures in Saint Leonard's. There's some nice girls in Saint Leonard's; nice blondes, too. But that's not my point. All these bloody soldiers, they're like flies round honey. You can't turn your back for a minute. I went to go get her some chocolates and when I came back she was chatting away, as happy as you please, with some Canadian lieutenant.'

'That's the war for you.' Sweeney sighed. He looked at Simon's bike.

'It's the uniforms,' said Barney. 'That's probably why your lass went all weak at the knees for that chap.'

'A Scout uniform?'

'Uniform's a uniform. Same difference.' He huffed. 'Things might be better when we get our LDV uniforms, but I'm getting fed up waiting. That's the trouble with this war.'

'What?'

'Too much bloody waiting.' Barney flicked his cigarette-butt into the street. 'Go on,' he said. 'Go knobble his bike.'

'Hello!' thought Hooky. He peered into the spring trap; he was in search of larger game than rabbits. But clamped between the vicious metal jaws was a rabbit; and not the sort of rabbit he ever expected to catch. One eye was missing and white stuffing had burst from the pink felt coat. 'Someone's having a joke with me,' he thought.

He pulled the stiff jaws apart with a crack, and stood upright. And then his heart missed a beat.

From out of the undergrowth rose three men. Their faces were blacked with burnt cork and they were camouflaged from head to toe in oak leaves and dried grass. They made barely a noise until he heard the metallic double snap of a rifle-bolt. Hooky held his breath.

One of the men stepped forward carefully. He levelled his rifle at Hooky's midriff. 'Red handed,' he hissed. 'And talking of hands, put yours where I can see them.'

Hooky brought his hands up to shoulder height. The two other men stepped forward, their rifles pointing at his chest.

‘What have we got here, then?’ the first man drawled. Hooky could just make out his sergeant’s stripes and a dark blue patch on his sleeve. ‘Got ourselves a poacher, I’d say.’ The sergeant spat out of the side of his mouth. ‘*Papers!*’

Hooky shook his head and looked the man hard in the eyes.

‘Come on!’ He shouted now. ‘Let’s see your identity card.’

Hooky patted his pockets. ‘I must have left it at home.’

‘*Hands!*’ The sergeant gestured with his rifle.

Hooky put them back up. ‘You out on exercises, lads?’ he asked pleasantly.

‘*Oy!*’ The sergeant barked. ‘We ask the god-damn questions.’

‘You don’t want to be leaving things like this lying about.’ Hooky cast his eyes back down to the spring trap. ‘These things are dangerous.’

‘Tell me about it,’ growled the sergeant.

‘Anyone out for a stroll,’ smiled Hooky. ‘Well, they might step into it.’

‘I think we got a joker here, sarn’t.’ One of the other men stepped closer and gave Hooky a vicious jab with the muzzle.

‘*Hands!*’ hissed the sergeant again. Hooky lifted them back and brought his feet apart for better balance.

The sergeant gestured again with the rifle. ‘I want you to step in it.’

‘Pardon?’ Hooky was smiling broadly.

The sergeant spoke slowly, deep with menace. ‘I said *step in it!*’

‘What? Put my foot in there?’ Hooky smiled. ‘No, I don’t think so.’

‘Oh, you don’t think so, do you?’ The sergeant took a step closer. ‘Well, I’ll tell you what. Either you stick your damn foot in that trap or I’m just gonna have to shoot you. *Huh!*’

‘Shoot me? Why would you do that?’

‘*Jesus H. Christ!*’ snapped the sergeant. ‘You expect us to believe you’re out for a nice midnight stroll, eh?’

‘No, I was looking for truffles.’

‘I’ll give you truffles. Go on!’ He gestured again. ‘Stick your god-damn foot in it!’

‘No,’ said Hooky flatly. ‘I think you should just go ahead and shoot me.’

‘Let me shoot him, sarn’t.’

‘Don’t think we ain’t in our rights,’ sneered the sergeant. ‘You’re trespassing on military property.’

‘Really?’ Hooky smiled. ‘Surely this is common land.’

‘Let me shoot him, sarn’t. Please.’

‘No, I want the pleasure of that.’ The sergeant stood close to Hooky now. ‘One of my boys stepped in that bastard thing this afternoon. I bet you can imagine what it looked like, can’t you?’

Hooky shook his head.

‘Like it had been chewed off by a bear, that’s what. *Man!* That poor boy’ll be lucky to ever walk again.’ He jabbed at Hooky with his rifle. ‘And now I want you to get a taste of your own...’

He did not get to finish the sentence.

Neither of the three men saw Hooky’s hand come up. He gripped the rifle barrel and jerked it violently off to the side. The rifle exploded and the discharge was deafening.

The sergeant then felt the butt slam back - hard into the centre of his chest. For him, the lights suddenly went out.

The rifle-butt then came crashing down into the next man, catching him viciously in the neck. Hooky heard the third soldier cock his rifle as he spun around to face him.

The first two had been easy. The third man was child's play.

Hooky parried the rifle aside and swiftly jabbed the barrel of his own borrowed weapon straight into the man's throat. There came the sharp crack of bone as either his neck or jaw snapped.

Hooky paused to catch his breath. He sucked in air through his nostrils and savoured the damp, woody smell of his forest. He missed his job. He gave each of the prostrate men a good kick in turn. And then he bent down and, one by one, he went meticulously through their pockets.

Whatlingbridge
Sunday 30 June 1940

'I think war's a lot of silly nonsense,' said Kevin, aged nine. 'I've never taken much interest in it.' He watched as Sweeney made notes in an exercise book. 'Hitler's something of a madman. Actually, he wants to grab all the other countries. I definitely think we will win the war, and then the Germans deserve to be punished.'

He scratched his head. 'They should be kept down, obviously, but not treated badly. They should be taught not to be so vicious, and more loving to other countries. How's that?'

'Hang on,' said Sweeney. He scribbled to catch up. 'That's great,' he said. 'Just what I want.'

'Is this going to be published in the newspapers?' asked Sarah, aged eleven. 'It doesn't seem like war, does it?' she asked. 'I mean, where is the war? Are they fighting it out to sea?'

Sweeney licked his pencil and turned a new page.

'What I'd like 'em to do,' she continued. 'Is go over Germany and make a big hole in Hitler's head with a bomb.'

'No, what they want to do,' said Kevin, 'is capture Hitler. Then the best death for him would be dreadful torture. The best way to make him die would be to put him in plaster of paris, and make him suffer such agony that he would be glad to be got out of it.'

'Yeah,' chorused Sarah.

'His hair would be set alight and his moustache would be singed off his face.' Kevin laughed. 'They should pull all his skin off and then tear him to pieces with pliers.'

'And so should Mussolini and Mosley, Goering, Goebbels, Ribbentrop, and Himmler.'

'Hang on! Slow up,' groaned Sweeney. 'How do you spell *moustache*?'

'Heavens! You boys are keen,' Nell laughed as she pulled back the front door.

'We got a serious thirst to deal with, ma'am.'

‘Oh, it’s you again,’ she smiled.

‘Did you enjoy the picture?’ asked a young Canadian lieutenant. ‘I’d already seen it,’ he told her.

‘I just go for the newsreels,’ said Nell. She stepped behind the bar. ‘What can I get you?’

The lieutenant curled up his nose. ‘I’d like a beer but don’t you have any cold ones?’

‘I don’t normally get complaints.’

‘No, I bet you don’t.’ He stood there smiling.

‘So what’s it to be? There’s others want serving.’

‘I’ll have a Guinness.’

‘Guinness is good for you,’ she told him. Nell poured the first half of the pint. ‘I’ll have to let it settle. I’ll be back.’

‘Don’t be long.’

Dan caught her eye. ‘Make it a double, will you, Nell?’

‘You look like you haven’t been to bed,’ she told him. ‘You should see the bags under your eyes!’

‘Well, I haven’t been to bed.’ He picked up the glass and knocked it straight back.

‘Another?’

Dan nodded. ‘We heard gunshots up at the Hall and thought the bloody Germans had landed. Old Noakes had us running around like headless chickens all night.’

‘And had they?’ Nell turned to pour another from the optics and nodded to the next customer in line.

‘No,’ said Dan. ‘But there’s talk of the fifth column getting in there.’

‘Get away!’ Nell broke into a smile.

‘No, really. Three of their blokes got bushwhacked! They’re in hospital, and they’re still waiting for them to wake up.’

‘Heavens!’ Nell rung up the till. ‘It’s all happening, isn’t it?’

In time, she returned to the young Canadian officer and topped off his pint.

He leant across the counter and looked down. ‘Say, can you put a little shamrock on the top?’

‘There ain’t no call for that round here.’ She gave him a stern look. ‘In fact, we don’t sell much Guinness.’

He took a sip. ‘I’m not surprised. It’s a bit bitter!’

‘You should try the bitter, then.’ Nell felt she was smiling too much.

‘There’s not a lot to do round here,’ said the officer. ‘Is there?’

‘Depends what you’re looking for. There’s the church, Saint Stephens. You could do some brass rubbing.’

‘Rubbing! Yeah, I like the sound of that.’

‘You could go for a nice country walk.’

‘Better if it were a sunny day.’

‘Ordinarily,’ she said, resting her elbows on the bar. ‘I might suggest you poke your head through the railing up at Watlyn Hall, but you probably know all about it.’

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘I’m living there. *Man!* That place is old.’

‘Elizabethan,’ she told him. ‘Full of history.’

‘Are there any ghosts?’

‘No, just spooky-looking characters.’ She lent closer. ‘Here!’ she said in a low voice. ‘I heard there was some trouble up there last night.’

He shook his head. ‘Nothing we can’t handle.’

‘Fifth column, I heard.’

‘Fifth column! *My fanny!*’ he laughed. ‘No. Someone a bit closer to home. Or so I hear.’

‘Oh, hello,’ said Linda casually. ‘We were just off to Fairlight. Want to join us?’

Sweeney thrust his hands in his pockets. He shook his head. ‘I’m busy.’

‘Busy making pies?’ asked Simon.

‘Yeah,’ said Sweeney. ‘I’m making pies. Mud pies.’

‘You gonna be a barber when you grow up?’ Simon grinned.

Sweeney turned to Linda. She was wearing her flimsy blue summer dress. It was starting to give at the seams. He swallowed. ‘Fairlight? Why don’t you push laughing boy here over the edge and do us all a favour?’

‘Oh, you are so childish!’ Linda huffed and gripped the handlebars of her bike tightly. Sweeney could clearly see the outline of her thigh as she lifted her foot to the pedal.

‘That’s a nasty scuff you’ve got on your chin,’ he called out to Simon as they rode off. ‘What d’you do?’ he sneered. ‘Fall off your bike?’

‘Yes.’ Simon turned to look round; his brows creased tight. ‘Yes. How did you know that?’

Sweeney jumped down from the tree. ‘That should do it,’ he thought. He looked back up at the aerial and then drove a small metal spike into the ground. Sparks had shown him how to construct the crystal wireless set, and it was his pride and joy. He sat down on the grass and inserted the tiny earpiece. The set hissed in his ear. Sweeney heard the far-off strain of an organ, some more static, and then the muffled sound of the BBC Home Service.

‘...recorded earlier this morning somewhere off the English south coast. Here is our correspondent, Charles Gardner.’

Sweeney tweaked. Suddenly the quality was amazing.

‘There they are! My goodness! My goodness! I count one, two, three, four, five, six German dive-bombers; they’re Stukas all right. Here we go. There’s one going straight down on its target now. Oh, there goes his bomb! This is a very tense moment, ladies and gentlemen. There goes the bomb; and he missed! I see about ten ships in the convoy and they haven’t hit a single one yet.’

Sweeney held his breath. If only the war would last. He so wanted to fly Spitfires.

‘You can probably hear our anti-aircraft defences going at them now. Oh, dear! That was close! And here come the British fighters. Oh, look at them! Here they come! You will have to excuse me ladies and gentlemen. It’s not easy working out what’s going

on. They've broken formation. You can hear the guns going like anything now! Yes, yes! Here comes a Spitfire. It's right on the tail of the Stuka. Oh! Dear! He's coming down. He's coming straight down!

Sweeney wondered why they never mentioned the Boulton Paul Defiant any more. They had heard of little else during the time of Dunkirk. Now it was all Spitfires and Hurricanes. Only a few weeks ago, the BBC had been singing the praises of the new twin-seat fighter. The Defiants were shooting down *Messerschmitts* a dozen at a time with no loss to themselves. He would have to ask around. The commentary suddenly became clouded in static. He tweaked some more.

'Hark at those machine-guns going! There are three of our Spitfires now and they are on the tail of what I think must be Messerschmitts. Oh, boy! This is wonderful. They are marvellous things! I don't think I've ever seen anything so amazing as this! The RAF boys really have these Germans taped! Go on, George! Go on! He must be in his sights now. I think that Messerschmitt is in trouble now. Oh, look at him go! He's trying to weave out of the way. Yes, yes! He's heading away now. You can hear the guns going like anything! He's had enough now. The German is turning away. And I think it's safe to say that that Messerschmitt will be crashing on the French coast all right.'

Sweeney breathed a sigh of relief. He wished Linda were here to share it with him. Frustration was boiling up inside. They were probably watching the show live at this very moment. *God!* He hated that smarmy git Simon. An image flashed before his eyes. He could see himself in RAF blue with wings over his breast pocket and his top button left undone, the mark of the fighter pilot. He wished he were sitting at Fairlight, watching the show and not perched under a tree seven miles inland. In the last few days, the Germans had launched their attacks on the coastal convoys and dog-fights were taking place thousands of feet up in the air. Even now, Sweeney could make out half-a-dozen vapour trails high above.

'That was a change to our published programme. In a few minutes we have another edition of The Children's Hour but first the news in Welsh.'

Sweeney lay back on the grass and listened to the strange guttural sounds in his ear. They were probably holding hands. Maybe he even had his hand on her thigh, working it slowly up inside her dress. He clenched his fists. If he lived to be as old as twenty, Sweeney would never be able to fathom women. Everything had been going swimmingly and then she started giving him the cold shoulder. According to Barney, she was only trying to get his attention. Sweeney curled his lip. She had that already. Perhaps he should ignore her, or buy her some chocolates.

And then he froze. In one ear he could hear the Welsh newsreader saying the words *Sudan-Eritrea*. In the other ear he heard the throaty roar of a Merlin engine. Sweeney sat bolt-upright. He scanned the sky. The engine spluttered in and out. The pilot was in trouble. Sweeney jumped to his feet, and the thread-thin wire to his earpiece snapped. He did not even notice.

Sweeney was on his feet. He jumped high in the air, his arms flapping like a jack-in-the-box. The Spitfire came soaring up from behind the hill. A thin white cloud Sweeney knew to be glycol coolant poured from the starboard vent. And then the fighter was directly overhead. Sweeney cupped his hands to his eyes. One underside wing was painted white, the other black. He could see every rivet. He spun around and watched the

Spitfire struggle for altitude. Sweeney winced as it nearly clipped the trees on the edge of woods. And then it was gone.

Sweeney gulped in air. His mouth was dry. 'Wait 'till I tell Linda,' he thought. And then he thought: 'Oh, *bugger!*'

**The Rectory, St. Stephen's Church, Whatlingbridge
Wednesday 10 July 1940**

'More tea, Missus Fairbrother?'

'Oh, I don't mind if I do. This is a lovely cup. Thank you, Missus Goodwin.'

'Enjoy it while you can,' smiled the Reverend's wife. 'Two ounces each a week! I don't know how we are going to manage if they cut the ration any further.'

'We can't do without our tea, can we?' Mrs Fairbrother sipped from the china cup.

'I'll try and bring some next week.' Mrs Saxby placed her spoon back in the saucer. 'Otherwise, what's going to happen to our little gatherings?' she asked.

'Cordial,' Mrs Goodwin sighed.

'Wouldn't be the same though, would it?'

The ladies shook their heads.

'You just don't know what's going to happen next, do you?' sighed Mrs Fairbrother. 'There's a report in the papers that Germany says we won't hold out for longer than four weeks and that he is going to land twenty-five divisions. How can he do that?'

'How many in a division? That's what I want to know,' said Mrs Goodwin. 'They never say, do they?'

'We should have gone right at them in the first week.' Mrs Saxby sipped her tea cautiously. 'They asked for the war.'

'Well, if he's going to start, let him start.' Mrs Fairbrother helped herself to a biscuit. 'Did you make these?' she asked.

Mrs Goodwin shook her head. 'They are from the shop. I think they could be a little fresher.'

'But why can't we accept peace terms?' Mrs Fairbrother wanted to know. 'What is the good of carrying on?'

'I don't know what's going to happen. We can't do anything without a proper expeditionary force.' Mrs Saxby sighed. 'I think I'm starting to reach the disinterested stage.'

'I still think the war should be stopped.' Mrs Fairbrother worked her tongue inside her mouth. The biscuits were stale. 'Why fight on? In the end we will only have to talk, won't we?'

'I think it's dangerous to say that now,' warned Mrs Goodwin. 'Did you hear Mister Bevin the other day? He said we should never use the expression *If we win*. That's the sort of thing the fifth column are spreading around.'

'They fined somebody for careless talk yesterday,' nodded Mrs Fairbrother. 'And it was only something he said as a joke. It's the fascists, that's what. We either have to have a pacifist Chamberlain or a fascist Churchill. Why not Mosley and have done with it?'

‘It’s very depressing.’ Mrs Saxby placed her biscuit back in the saucer. ‘The more I read my papers, the more depressed I get. If we win this war, it’ll be a miracle.’

‘The only plus, as far as I can see,’ put in Mrs Goodwin. ‘Is that we are gaining greater industrial efficiency. Unemployment is down now.’

‘And now they want to evacuate all the children from the coast,’ Mrs Saxby chewed her lip. ‘Hastings, Bexhill, Rye. We’re be next. You’ll see.’

‘And now Mister Bevin wants the married women to work in factories. I ask you! It’s not as if we don’t have enough to do already, is it?’

‘I think he only wants volunteers for a couple of days a week.’ Mrs Goodwin lifted the teapot lid and peered inside. ‘To give the men a rest.’

‘It’s us that needs the rest!’ laughed Mrs Saxby.

‘Hello,’ said Ray. ‘I think our luck might be in.’ He nodded to the farm up ahead. ‘I think we might be able to wrangle some tea out of this bloke.’

‘Do you know him, then?’ asked Sparks.

‘Yeah, he took a load of timber off me last month. Nice bloke.’

‘Well, I’ll tell you what,’ huffed Barney. ‘All this patrolling don’t ‘alf give you a thirst.’

‘Hello!’ called Ray. He waved as he walked up the path. ‘Looks as if its going to clear up, after all,’ he called.

‘I thought it was going to rain for forty days,’ smiled the farmer. ‘It started so.’

‘Oh, no,’ hissed Barney. ‘He’s not one of those bible-bashers, is he?’

Ray ignored him.

‘It looked as if it’d never stop.’ The farmer tossed the last sack from his barn onto a cart and walked up to the lads.

‘Had to stop,’ smiled Ray. ‘Must be fine for Hitler.’

‘Oh, yes. He’s coming tonight, isn’t he?’ The farmer searched under his smock for his pipe. ‘That’s what they said in the paper this morning.’

‘It says in the *Mirror* he never came on the tenth because there wasn’t a full moon.’ Sparks chuffed. ‘Silly ass! There’s only one moon the world over, and he should have known when.’

‘Ah, but what’ll happen if there’s a full moon *and* it rains?’ asked Barney.

‘That’d just be too bad for Old Hitler.’ The farmer sucked his pipe and tapped it against the gate. ‘I’ll have some hot tea ready for him, I will – and not to drink, neither.’

‘Tea,’ sighed Barney. ‘Ah, that sounds like a nice idea.’

‘You out on patrol, lads?’ asked the farmer.

‘Aye,’ smiled Sparks. He stopped and cocked his ear. Three Spitfires in close formation appeared from behind the trees and buzzed at speed over the field. He felt the sound reverberate through his chest.

‘Nought can beat these, can they?’ The farmer looked up. ‘Tough little things they are.’

‘Yes, marvellous little planes,’ agreed Sparks.

‘Don’t they shift?’ marvelled Ray. ‘You feel a bit safer with them overhead, don’t you?’

'I think they're going to the coast to give it to Hitler.' The farmer put his pipe back in his pocket. 'There's a great battle going on there, eighty bombers in one place and seventy in the other. They didn't say much over the wireless at dinner time, but it was going on then. Two brought down, they said, but there weren't any particulars come through yet.'

'Well,' mused Sparks. 'They don't tell you all about it in any case, do they?'

'No, but maybe it's best they don't.' The farmer lifted his hat as he looked into the distance, and scratched his scalp. 'They're lovely little machines, aren't they? They'll give it to Hitler, you be sure.'

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