

**Southern Burma. 18 August 1939.**

Delirious, searching for his weapon, Hardin spits through a choking spasm. The bitterness of the monsoon is harrying his vision, the jungle a mass of swirling vegetation. And yet, at times, the driving rain and pulsing wind is a tolerable distraction from the wound in my thigh. Suddenly clear-eyed, catching rainwater in his mouth, he massages his humping tackle. There is little else to comfort his survival in the jungle of southern Burma—in the jungle of northern Malaya nothing at all.

Disoriented, laughing, then screaming at a young girl, twice and then again. He is jumping from the Shackleton into a thick mist, into the night, fighting his parachute's torn risers. Tonkin mercenaries are firing from every turn... or are they Chinese?

"Who are the sods chasing me?" Captain Hardin's mouth is as dry as burlap, and his tongue is swollen. "Where are my bloody boots?"

Then instantly he is at ease. The narrow trackway, the wooden cart, laying amongst a pile of straw-filled sacks, his chest rocking with the rhythm of the water buffalo's step—he tries to swallow. He laughs a cough. "Where the bloody hell am I going?"

Nearly naked, a native girl runs past his cart speaking broken English. "Wake up. Wake up."

Then again his team is ambushed. In Burma. Screams echoing in counterpoint with the gunfire's roar. Death's lingering smell wafting. The rot oozing from the jungle floor reeks with the bile of malaria and yellow jack fever.

Suddenly, silence snaps to. Captain Edward Hardin's chest twists into a knot, and his mind begins again—ratcheting through images—his lovely wife Katherine, his mother Mary, Willie Hockey, his special-ops teammates. He begs each to respond. Sir John Poston, Admiral Sinclair, and Uncle Dingo offer but muted echoes.

A picture of his grandfather spars gently with an echo of Katherine's laughter.

With the cadence of indifference, the sequence keeps on flashing on and off. Weapon, parachute, mercenaries, family, friends. Uncle Dingo and Katherine mostly.

Even Uncle, that Aussie swagman, seems happy.

As his mother Mary stands to, Hardin's world whirls into a black void.

**Tucking Mill, Cornwall, England. April 1924.**

At this time of year, the damp in Mary Hardin's two-room badger hole stained the small window next to her front door. Her only door. It kept raining. Spring had not come to Cornwall.

Even France had climate.

"I've a warm pasty for you, Edward." Mary set the pasty on her son's plate and poured him a glass of cold milk. "The last bit of beef and cabbage." Patting her twelve-year-old on the shoulder, she rubbed his back. Her son was getting too big for her small home.

"I'll let it cool a tic."

Mary wrapped a woolen scarf around her neck, put on her coat, and opened the door. "I'm off to clean the mine owner's home."

"I know, mum."

Sitting on the floor near the fireplace, Edward held a grainy photograph. "Is the soldier in this snap my grandfather?"

"Yes. He was twenty-four in that snap. Proud to be a faithful soldier. A foot in the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry. He died in 1902. In South Africa fighting the Boers."

Edward stood up and set the photo next to his cheek. "I'm going to be a soldier."

"Not today, you're not." Mary held the door open. "Practice your sums, Edward. If you know your sums, the mine owners will have a proper job for you."

"Go on mum. Off you go."

Mary Hardin longed for her earlier days in Portsmouth when she was a sprout. The clear air, the streets washed by channel rains, the blue hour between night and dawn. She missed her mother and her aunties most of all.

Mary's mother, a stout gentle soul, worked as a cutter in the Colour Loft of the Portsmouth Dockyard making flags, canvas overalls, and tool bags. Mary's father had worked as the porter for the dockyard, standing watch in the Porter's Lodge, marking the hours by ringing a bell four times per shift.

With hugs before bed, and stories of growing up in Chatham, and of her Aunt Ginny, Mary could still feel her mother's calloused hands, her fingertips. Aunt Ginny's as well.

Ginny hand-stitched ribbons for Mary's hair. Yellow mostly. Ginny worked in the Chatham Dockyard, spinning yarn in the quarter mile long Double Rope-House since the end of World War One. Ginny spun the shake-rag Mary used to call Edward's father for supper.

Riding her bicycle to work now, Mary thought the slag waste from the mine gave her town a depressingly gray tone, coating mortar and stone with a pollen that would color her son's future with enduring shame.

The mine owners are a bloody merciless lot, she thought.

Men working in the mine eventually came to naught. Stooped shouldered, they shuffled in lockstep along worn paths, their faces charred black, their salt misspent, their shift-mates, one as the next, trapped in pitiless work. Yet somehow grateful.

Richard Hardin, Mary's husband, was a miner. He liked his drink, and his prideful boast—South Crofty Tin Mine; the deepest black-tin mine in the world. Almost all the men of Tucking Mill worked a shift, some nearly a mile underground. Working in a tin mine or a coal mine, living in a badger hole or a two-room hovel, a miner no longer able to work would be pensioned into the South Crofty Tin Mine's workhouse.

Will my Richard ever get hold of tomorrow? Or next week? Mary wondered as she left the mine owner's home and walked to her second job, working as a barmaid.

From drink to drink, and song to song, Web's Public House lay in the fog of another sodden dusk. Six nights a week, leaving Sunday for the Lord, Mary would put on one of the three dresses she owned and ride her bicycle to her second job as a barmaid at Webb's Public House on the east end of Tucking Mill—not for the money, but to temper her husband's roaring with timely gestures of delight or disgust.

Setting religion aside, Mary entered the pub to the miner's singing and raising their pints. Several of the men waved, suggesting she join the chorus. Taking her station near the beer taps, she tied her apron strings, soaked several bar rags in hot water while measuring the condition of

the customers she could see.

With her coat and scarf hung on a peg between barrels of grog, Mary set to her evening chores. She was frightened. That morning, while she was cleaning his home, the mine owner had tried to molest her in the parlor of his home. When she confided in the Reverend Gosden, the vicar dismissed her with a shrug.

"Tired-looking sods, don't you agree?" Mary alerted with a frown at the comment. These well-dressed buggers leaning on the bar must be engineers, she thought.

"Not much leeway. Mankind's virtues cost more than five bob a week. No footrest in the Isles of Scilly for these lads. A dutiful future it is, Cornwall's Light Infantry or the mines. That's the meat of it. The Boers gave chuff to these lads at Kimberly and Ladysmith—Mafeking as well. Not a history to be hedged about." The larger man shrugged and emphasized his point by eating the smaller man's last chip. "Gold and diamonds cost a good deal more than money."

"Ah, too true, I suppose—sacrificed to stern duty and all that." The smaller man toasted his stout to the rhythmic song the miners were singing. "The Welsh go on and on until they drop, like gun horses, they are. They're a down-market lot, that's certain." Mary pushed a wet cloth near the smaller man's jacket and squeezed water under his elbow.

"Fair enough, I suppose. One does one's best." The strangers finished their pints and pushed their way to the door of the pub as the chorus gained ground.

Mary's gaze centered on the strangers, their hacking jackets rubbing against her natural grace. Angry, she kept wiping the bar, watching the men leave, and summing their comments with a sigh. Suddenly...her sarcasm freshened with disgust, Mary screamed down the bar, countering Richard's foolish grin and his humbly offended tenor voice.

Richard Hardin thrived as Tucking Mill's tinker, an itinerant mender at the service of any widow wanting a bit of repair, all in good fun, mind you—tending the business of the households in the town. To support his family, Richard worked the early shift in South Crofty, hiding from the clock while banging an unsupervised shovel on the floor of the tailings bay, or dressing gangue from the minerals tin and wolfram.

His charm made shift with a continual chatter, fostered by those unexpected resources of indignation. Being comically arrogant, Richard tried to fashion the fuss and the prudery of

Mary's Methodist minister—the reverend Gosden—into a song with his Welshman's tongue.

But the vicar wouldn't wear it.

A devout Methodist, Mary embraced Wesleyan teachings at a time when heresy was a remote favor. Mary and Edward spent their Sunday afternoons looking for God through a scattering of trees and reading the Bible at the Chynhale Wesleyan Sunday School.

At Mary's suggestion, to offset the devil's work, Richard became a loosely knit Freemason, attending meetings at the Freemasons Hall on Saint Nicholas Carriageway—a member of the 'One and All Lodge' No. 330. While his tinkering enjoyed a bit of respectability, he stuffed himself with certainty.

With his sponsoring lodge in Camborne, he wasn't regular enough to can much status. Proud to be a Third-Degree Mason, Richard presented his fidelity to anybody who would listen.

Nights found Richard at Webb's Public House, a fox cheering the hennery, his joy wrapped halfway around a pint. He played cards and sang with his mates, the lot toasting the doings of those salad days when young men could wrinkle a peach into a wagon rut.

After the cards were massed into a stack and the brown ale had its way, Richard would grab Mary's hand and dance her around the pub to the cheers of his mates.

Mary didn't mind the dance. She adored her stubby Welshman. She was a gentle soul, tall and lean, well set up, and titted-out, Mary's laugh could crumb a fresh biscuit. Laughing without warning, she spoke through a mischievous grin. Her pale-green eyes held a sparkle, and her plump cheeks held a glow whenever she wrapped her smile in one of the handwoven woolen scarves she cherished—the signature of Mary's dress and her profound belief in moderation.

She spent her house cleaning money ensuring Richard and Edward met each day with fresh, well-mended clothes. Tattered on all fours, her shake-rag's *wop* sounded at a low enough frequency to penetrate the tenor of Richard's tongue when she called him for dinner. His mates knew the sound and showed him the door at first *wop*.

Quite stout, he was a forcibly robust sort, prone to larceny and partial to cricket.

After Mary discovered Richard's gambling chits tucked under a candle base on the fireplace mantle, she wept. She and Edward were in for a scuddle. Richard gambled on cards or cricket, or any game at hand. He carried a copy of the *Wisden Cricketer* magazine in his lunch

pail. He bet on the Penzance cricket club whenever they had a match.

By June 1924, after years of wagers, Richard's hire-purchase debt owed to South Crofty Mine, Ltd., had invested his family with disgrace.

Richard Hardin could not live long enough to feed his family and pay his debt to the mine owners. As the debt grew more burdensome, his dreams slipped away. Passing the workhouse, the hollow expression of an old miner screamed at his way.

With fear running duty to its limit, he bagged his insufferable pride and asked his shift-mates for a loan. Without a ha'penny amongst them, every man suggested Edward lend a hand.

Richard was ashamed. To indenture his son would be unforgivable—a Welshman's dowry. Edward, a fair-sized lad for his twelve years, had a quick eye for mischief and precious little time for books—not hard to imagine, given his mother's quick smile and his father's galloping tendencies. The mine was a trap.

In the fall of 1924, Richard Hardin, the gambler, with nowhere to turn, signed a contract indenturing his son to general duties in the tin mine. Young Edward Hardin had become chattel—his labor assigned to South Crofty Mine, Ltd., until his family's debt was satisfied.

Arrested by the local warden, taken from his school, wide-eyed and silent, Edward's classmates sat glued to their chairs.

Mary's broken heart toiled as the joy in her son's face faded to a frown. Edward became boy with old eyes. His posture, his shoulders, gradually fell forward under the weight of the water he hauled to the down-shaft miners. He rarely saw his father, and when he did, his father shunned him with an "Off you go."

"Richard, can't you help our son?"

"Now, Mary. Edward has a knack for sums. He's better for the work."

"The truth's too much, is it? Forgive me, Richard. Edward and I have three jobs. It's time you work a second shift."

In the winter of 1924, to escape the shame of Mary's demand and her modest dreams, Richard Hardin left work, stumped off to the Royal Army Regimental Barracks at Shire Hall, and

within a matter of an hour enlisted in the 1<sup>st</sup> Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry.

On January 27, 1925, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion of the regiment sailed from Gunwharf Quay next to the South Railway Jetty inside the wall of the Portsmouth Dockyard for Calcutta, India, to fight Indian insurgents.

Richard began in earnest, sending his pay home. But the money he sent home wasn't steady, and it wasn't enough. By June, after nine weeks of waiting for word, Mary assumed her Welshman was dead. Frightened, she began eating one meal a day at a small table in the storeroom of Web's Public House, wrapping the leftovers in her apron to help with Edward's dinner. She devoted the bulk of her wages to Edward, his meals and clothing.

Richard's mates lent a hand, bringing pasties to the mine for Edward.

Wiping the bar at Web's Public House, Mary set her teeth when a corporal from the Royal Army Regimental Barracks, looking a fraction of his age, entered the pub and presented her with a cable and stood at attention. Realizing the corporal was the message, Richard's mates stopped talking and crowded near the bar. Mary read the words aloud.

Richard R. Hardin, a Foot in the 1st Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry Regiment, died in an ambush while on patrol with a contingent from the Ceylon Planter's Rifles, near a remote outpost in the West Bengal region of India on 19 July 1925.

With her best ceremonial expression, she wrinkled the death notice into a ball and dropped it on the bar. "Shoveled into an early grave, was he? With a bunch of bloody farmers." The corporal picked up the cable, smoothed the edges, and quietly read it.

"What about his pay? Do you have his pay-book?"

"No, ma'am. His kit and pay-book have been shipped to unit headquarters from the front, mum." The corporal handed Mary a script. "You have a 30-pound death benefit your husband's unit will send, and whatever his pay-book indicates he is due."

Crying, Mary took the death notice and tucked it in the pocket of her apron. "Why couldn't you wait until the morning?"

"Orders, ma'am."

With tears at the ready, Mary put a log in the fireplace, and looked at her son's black fingernails. "Eat your cabbage, Edward."

"I'm turning into a cabbage."

A horse nickered. An army lorry had stopped in the lane in front of Mary's home. She opened the door as a trunk was being pulled from the lorry's bed, splashing into the muddy lane. Mary and Edward hauled the trunk into the house and set it near the fireplace.

"Do you want me to break the lock?"

Mary didn't answer. Edward took his father's ballpeen hammer and broke the lock and hasp. The trunk contained a never-worn spare uniform, an envelope containing Richard's paybook, and a sealed envelope.

"You know your sums, Edward. What does the paybook say we're due?"

Edward, surprised to find the paybook written in pencil, exclaimed, "43 pounds."

"Hide the paybook. We'll trick the blokes—say we didn't receive it."

"You'll have to present it to get paid."

"I'll wait until I get his death benefit. I can buy vegetables and meat on credit."

The news of Richard's death set its cap. Still in debt to the mine owners, Mary sat crying. With Edward carrying water in the mine and her husband's tenor voice howling with dust, his smile torn at its edge, her nightmare now complete. Her chest settled through a sigh as she opened the green envelope and read the dispatch—Richard's final words:

*msg: p5a. Dateline Simla, 27 February: Subject=Cornwall's movement to India.*

*My Dearest Mary,*

*I will love you always. I am dreadfully sorry for the burdens I have left you and Edward, and if I've made you cry. The Wesleyans will help you.*

*My lodge will help you. Please forgive me, Mary. I could not face the workhouse the mine owners had waiting for me.*

*A hug for Edward. Give his hair a toss.*

*Good-bye, Mary.*

*Love Always, Richard.*

With her heart holding sway, Mary's grief churned so. She became more frightened. Alone and impoverished, Mary read the dispatch again, realizing her stubby Welshman had abandoned his family—and Richard's note had been written shortly after he arrived in India.

For Mary, the next night meandered, dark and then darker.

By mid-afternoon, the word of Richard's death had run the whole of Tucking Mill, stirring a familiar wake of decaying leaves. Mary slapped Reverend Gosden when he tried to fondle her breast. He chastised himself with a smirk, derisively pestering her over the sins of alcohol and working in a public house.

Hours later, the majority owner of South Crofty Mine tried to massage Mary with a rush of old fondness, suggesting favors for the interest due.

Badgered and harassed by the sons of the mine owners, fighting became a passage for Edward as he walked to and from the mine. As summer became fall, Edward tired of the beatings the gang of young boys were giving him and turned to stalking his enemies—the lads his size first off. With mitts like single jacks and cat-quick feet, Edward nearly killed the first lad.

The bull ring, the hunt, and the complete destruction of his adversaries excited him. He thrashed them good.

Without remorse, the local ruffians turned on Mary, threatening to kill her if Edward didn't mend his ways. Mary was safe while working at Web's Public House. Richard's shift mates stood at hand. She was not safe while cleaning houses for the mine owners. At wits end, Mary posted Richard's ship dispatch to her cousin Karen, in Cardiff, Wales.

Days and weeks appeared without a word from Karen.

On the fourth Sunday Mary and Edward watched as Reverend Gosden argued with a stranger. The vicar looks frightened. The stranger was wearing a houndstooth hacking jacket, trousers fit for the rich, and highly polished leather boots. Repeatedly poking the reverend in the chest while pointing at Mary, the stranger was clearly angry.

Through the clouded glass of old sight, the craggy seams that framed the stranger's smile frightened Mary. He's an odd bit of work, that young man, she thought. Does he know who I am? Mary's chest ached. She held her breath, put her arm around Edward, and stepped into the churchyard.

He looks like the mason's carving at the entry to the nave—the vicar's green man. Standing near the entry to the churchyard, the stranger seemed to blend into the landscape. Stout, with a large nose, thick hands and hay-colored hair, his eyes sat watery-gray as though glazed stones on the bottom of a winter brook.

He's following me.

The stranger reached for Mary's elbow and drew her to a halt as she reached the gate to her front yard. "A minute of your time, Mary. I'm a traveler from Temple hamlet in the parish of Blisland, on Bodmin Moor, in Cornwall."

Stepping away, Mary stood erect. "What do you want?"

"I'm William Hockey, Willie if you like. I'm the Tyler of the Masonic lodge in Cardiff, Wales. I helped your cousin Karen with her difficulties some months back. She asked me to help you. I read Richard's final dispatch. Did it come in a green envelope?"

"And how would you be knowing that?"

"A guess. A green envelope means the dispatch wasn't censored by his unit." Not wanting to push a claim, Hockey smiled as he took a deep breath. "If you don't mind, Mary. I'd like to look in his kit that came from India."

Mary let her guard down as she ushered her son and the stranger into her home. Reluctantly she closed the door. Adding dry leaves to the coals in the fireplace followed by a handful of kindling, Edward looked over his shoulder with pride as the fire took hold.

Mary's heart shook with a quickening as the stranger's eyes iced over. Warming herself near the fire, she kneeled and reluctantly opened Richard's trunk. Her house grew suddenly cold as though the man had found satisfaction in her fear.

"Nothing wrong with the Welsh." Hockey talked as he rummaged through Richard's kit. "Make damned fine soldiers under white officers. That's the lot then, is it, Mary?" He turned a quick smile into an inquiry.

“Yes, that’s the whole of Richard’s life.” Timid, standing amid scraps of firewood, Mary checked a tear with her apron, and answered Hockey’s challenge.

“What’s that about the Welsh?”

Hockey drew the trunk near the fire. For a long while he knelt on a rush mat near the hearth, examining the stitching of the trunk’s lining. With the hiss of sap for a chorus, he extended his hand. “No offense, Mary. Welshmen are Taffy buggers to the lads in London. Barely fit for fodder. Thought London might have used his kit to send a bit of gold back. No sign of it.”

“There’s gold in the tailings at South Crofty,” Edward blurted. His dark brown eyes widened as if shocked by his voice. Mary squeezed his shoulder.

Hockey stepped to the fire and extended his hands. The window near the door reflected his image, and the oddments near the fireplace. He shrugged through a smile, seemingly dismissing the young man’s announcement. He touched Mary’s shoulder lightly. As though offering friendship, he gave Edward’s hair a possessive toss.

Alarmed, Mary bunched her apron tie in her hand, trying to hide her fright. This well-dressed stranger had acknowledged Richard’s request. His eyes seemed to search her being. The gift—he’s a Druid—he has the powers of divination. If so, he knows me better than I like.

Edward drew erect, smiled, and took hold of Hockey’s hand.

“I’ll drop ‘round, Mary. Cobwebs want removing.”

Censoring herself, not sure she wanted this man with his chilly, tranquil demeanor and gritty eyes in her home again, Mary mustered a smile.

“What are you going on about, then?”

“I need to get on. There’s a reverend needs putting right. Good-bye, Mary.”

One month later, on the first Sunday in November 1925, William Hockey visited Tucking Mill with a group of well-dressed men. Less than an hour later, after reading Richard’s dispatch, the men bade their good-byes. Hockey stopped in the doorway and stared at the fire. With a vacant pause, his eyes seemed hollow as he surveyed the room, landing on Richard’s trunk.

“Cobwebs want removing, Mary.”

The following day, the Masonic lodge in Cardiff, Wales, paid Mary's debt owed to South Crofty Mine, Ltd. Reminding the mine owners that South Crofty, the deepest mine in the world, produced black tin, wolfram, and minor amounts of arsenic. Wanting to arouse their fear, Hockey spoke to each mine owner of a conflict of loyalty and warned that one of the owner group would die in the mine if Mary Hardin was abused or mistreated by anyone.

The principal owner chose a measured personal apology as his response. Additionally, South Crofty would deliver a packet of food to Mary's home once a week.

The next day the Reverend Gosden walked into the garden of the cloister on the southern flank of the church and offered Mary a scuppered expression of nicely judged indifference.

"Look at you, Mary. Dolled up like a sore finger. I judge your work at Webb's Public House is preferable to being on the gate."

Reverend Gosden had received a donation from the lodge along with a warning to leave Mary and her son alone.

One of the ruffians who had berated Mary in front of young Edward fell off the windlass in the main shaft of South Crofty mine. His chest had been branded with an eight-pointed cross. Taking a full measure, the ghosts of religious retribution had rattled their chains. The mysterious death put Tucking Mill and the whole of Cornwall on edge.

Young Edward decided to bide his time before he settled with the second ruffian, Alfred Gosden, the vicar's son. When I'm grown, I'll beat him every Friday.

In the shadows of confinement, the attrition of despair weighed on Mary's soul. The pretend people, Mary's friends, and neighbors began greeting Mary and Edward with a whisper of fear and respect. From garrets and cellars the intonation was clear—being Mary Hardin's friend had become a necessity.

Days passed and weeks as well. An ominous silence grew into an array of gestures replacing the obligation of friendship with practiced avoidance. The isolation grew calmly, without hatred.

For the next three years, on the first Sunday in November, William Hockey came to visit Mary to pay his respects and refresh her neighbors' memories. In time Mary found Hockey

friendly but unsettling.

In the spring of 1929, an English gentleman came to Tucking Mill with Hockey.

“My, my, Willie, look what you brought to Tucking Mill?” Mary wiped her hands hurriedly and examined the detail of the Hockey’s elegant friend.

“Mary Hardin allow me to introduce Sir John Poston. Sir John’s a member of the Masonic Lodge in Cardiff, and a lifelong friend.”

Mary’s cheeks flushed as she clasped her hands in front of her. Sir John stood tall, and stately, sporting thick gray hair that sat atop an expression that seemed to expect surprise. As though moved by Mary’s modesty, he scanned the meager trappings around the room.

With expansive black eyes, he seemed to welcome Hockey's comment while evaluating its author and calculating its worth.

With a smile for Edward, Sir John warmed his backside by the fire. Issuing a long, relaxed sigh, as though setting his wealth aside, he laid his Harris-tweed jacket over the back of a chair, looked at his pocket watch, and took out his pipe.

Sir John engaged Edward with predictions for the Penzance cricket club’s season. After lighting his pipe with an ember from the fireplace, he complimented Mary on the comfort of her home and suggested he needed a cook on staff in London who practiced the Welsh custom of cooking with saffron.

Mary was embarrassed. Her modest home and her son’s coarse appearance were faults she could not mend. Ashamed, as if the tatters at the edge of her tablecloth were her own, Mary pressed her apron against her thighs with her palms.

Cornish pies sat ranked, cooling on the hob. A pitcher of cold milk stood nearby. “We’ve pasty for our supper.”

“Your home smells wonderful, Mary.” Sir John sat to the table.

“The smells have nowhere to go,” Edward happily declared.

After dinner Sir John offered Edward a working apprenticeship with Poston and Sons, Ltd., not in London but in a leased warehouse on the docks of New York City. Tired of the mines, Edward accepted the offer with a dance around the table. Realizing his mother would be alone he stopped rejoicing, lowered his eyes, and cocked his head.

"I can't leave. I've my mum to look after."

Mary nodded ruefully but didn't speak. With tears streaming down her cheeks she gave her son a hug. At last—Edward would be free of the mines. "It's time you left your father's life behind, Edward." She gave his black, curly hair a toss.

Sir John moved to the fireplace and began to fill his pipe. "Will you come to Saint Albans, Mary? To help on staff?"

She drew up in hardened reproof and nearly hollered. "Why would I? Tucking Mill is better now. It's the home I know. I grew old here." Angry that Hockey didn't come to her defense, she raised her chin. "Willie has the gift. He knows you scare me. You've no reason to come to such a poor village, waving your pipe about." Mary's chin quivered as she wiped the tears on her cheeks with her apron. A part of her wished this London swell had never come. He knocked his pipe on the inner wall of the fireplace.

"Why did you come?" she asked, sweeping pipe tobacco into the fire.

Shrugging into his jacket, Sir John seemed contrite. "Willie's been boasting about Edward for quite some time. I had to see for myself. And my company has been shipping black tin from the South Crofty mine for decades. Wolfram as well." He extended his hands toward the fire, then he stood more erect. "I've been paying the Crown's seven percent coinage dues on South Crofty's smelted tin for a good many years."

"I see. So, you know these mine owners." Taking a deep breath, Mary pressed a fist against the tabletop. "You paid our debt?" Sir John nodded. She moved a pot from the fireplace. "I've been grateful these many years, but we would have managed." Her hands shook as she cleared a dish from the table.

Mary caught Hockey's arm as he passed through the door and whispered, "Willie, please watch over my son—his father sold him like he was a jar of stout."

There had been a time, three or four years ago, when Edward had given up. He tried to look out sharp for his mother, but it seemed the town enjoyed her despair—her dependence on William Hockey. Suggesting reasons why he came around at odd hours.

At age seventeen, standing at six foot plus one, with shoulders as wide as an ax handle,

and fists wider than mallet heads, Edward bid good-bye to his mother with a warm, tender embrace. He promised to write and send for her by year's end. A tear blessed his eye.

Afoot, he set out for London looking for Poston and Sons, Ltd., a midsized international shipping company situated amid the Surrey Commercial Docks on the east end of London, near Rotherhithe, on the south side of the River Thames.

All wool and a yard wide, mad keen to astonish, packing an indefinably foolish expression, Edward mounted the stair to Poston and Sons, Ltd. Taken for a pretend person by the secretary, he was directed to a wooden chair in the foyer, and told to wait until Sir John returned from an appointment. A fan massaged the hot air. Trying to stifle a yawn, Edward was barely up to scratch when Sir John entered the foyer.

An hour later, holding a finger to the light, his voice rising, Sir John shook Edward's hand. "You must not break faith with those who die, Edward—especially your father. He did his best."

In return for his conditional support, Sir John made demands of his young charge: become a devout Freemason and send money home on a regular schedule.

After a thorough hashing of the dangers of the world, including the pitfalls of New York's streets and prostitution, Sir John gave Edward a fitting of new clothes, a Union Steamship Company second-class ticket to New York, and a bundle with three packets—each containing five hundred American dollars.

Edward thought, this money will dry the dampness of Tucking Mill. Yet his father's betrayal lay amid the odors of the mine, clinging to his trust. "I'll not sell my son as property," he whispered to himself.

With a sense of pride, Edward ran his hand across the top of a cigar box perched in the spill of Sir John's desk lamp. The oaken box braced an inlay, a ruby-red, eight-pointed cross. Nodding his recognition, something breaking from the past, he tucked the money packets into the hidden waist pockets of his trousers.

Willie Hockey has a cross tattooed on his forearm, he thought. Same color. The thug who fell off the windlass in South Crofty was branded with a cross.

Standing now by the door, Sir John put a hand lightly on Edward's shoulder. "You will be

required to join the Longshoreman's Union, in New York, Edward. I suggest you learn how to button that lip of yours. That or become a pugilist.”

Edward admired the young women of London. The gamers admired his shock of curly black hair, laughing as they teased his mischievous smile. Being free of the cast of down-shaft mining, his day was happily his own.

On August 4, 1929, with their agreement signed in contract form, Edward set sail for America on the British ocean liner *Aquitania*, with twenty-one dollars.

Amid the excitement and confusion common on the docks of New York City, Edward found loyalty led to argument and nationality led to trust. Tough and stubborn, he stood the morning shape-up for his union with primary-school zeal. He made shift on the dock next to the livery at 17 Battery Place, saving money and searching for a wife.

Late one afternoon a cable from Hockey arrived that left Edward unstrung. His mother had been assaulted by two men in the keg locker of Webb's Public House. One of the men was the vicar's son, Alfred Gosden. After a few minutes, an hour at most, he read the first part of the cable again with a mounting sense of rage.

His words seemed to melt together. “I've money enough. I should have sent for mum months ago.” Edward wiped the tear coursing his right cheek.

Drawn damp in the mire, William Hockey's not-so-discreet inquiries into the assault revealed the dead man found in South Crofty mine was one of Mary's assailants. Did Willie carve a cross in the man's chest? Edward wondered. My mum might think so.

As though an insistent question, Edward whispered, “Willie's cable doesn't seem urgent. He's escorted mum from Tucking Mill. She has her treasures, her woolen scarves and her shake rag, and he promised to look after her to help the family of a fellow mason.”

Edward had matured into a robust, byproduct of pasty pies, horse barns, and stern religious discipline, with a flair for boxing—his hands as leaden as the head of a double-jack. His corner man's ringside chant didn't need a drum: “Can the bluster, Eddie, and start the dance.”

His minister agreed. The vicar coached boxing at the local YMCA.

Being the first of the Hardin clan to graduate from any school, Edward became a steward in the local longshoreman's union. In 1931, on his nineteenth birthday, one year after graduating from PS 33, he received a cable from Sir John Poston.

Edward

I have arranged a working scholarship for you to pay for your attendance at the Royal Military College, Woolwich, in southeast London.

The college is called The Shop, because the first building at the college is a converted workshop of the old Woolwich Arsenal. It's England's foremost military college. The college was established to train artillery and engineer officers."

I suggest you become an engineer.

John Poston

Shunned by his upper-crust classmates at the Royal Military College, Woolwich, Edward joined a local gun club that offered archery lessons. Shooting targets mounted on hay bales with a bow seemed to temper his frustration.

In June 1935, Lieutenant Edward Hardin graduated from Woolwich as a Royal Army engineer officer, his English sufferable, mixed with an occasional American syntax.

Passing out without honors earned him an adverse posting—the central vehicle-storage facility, part of the Royal Army Ordinance Center near Ashchurch, England.

**Royal Army Ordinance Center. Ashchurch, England. 8 October 1935. 0830 Hours, GMT.**

Convinced the ordinance-center posting adversely marked his career, Lieutenant Hardin decided to match the mark by devoting himself to becoming a damned poor military excuse.

Bolstered by Sir John's recommendation to the Masonic lodge, he met with Masonic guides for three months of study. Testing with zeal, he received acceptance as a First-Degree Mason. Study and further testing followed by oath taking—vowing to protect the women and

families of other Masons—he was elevated to a Third-Degree Mason.

Fellow Masons sprang from hiding, the butcher on the town square, a solicitor, the ordinance-center commander, and the lead engineer for the Cornish Main Line of the Bodmin and Wenford Railway.

Corporal Akens, his newly assigned signals sergeant, handed Edward the phone. “It’s a Sir John Poston on the line.” Hardin frowned a little.

“Hello, Sir.”

“Congratulations, Edward. Your father was a Third-Degree Mason. I’m sending your father’s trunk to you. It contains the remnants of his service in India.”

“Sir, my father didn’t care about being a Mason. He was a tinker and a gambler. The debt he shoveled onto his family—my mum and me, brought years of hardship. My mum’s still being shoveled about, insulted. Never to be free of the shame.”

“Hockey will ensure Mary is safe.”

Edward had heard enough. “He’s either her signpost, or her problem. But he’s not both.” It could only have been an instant later that he heard Sir Poston ring off.

Activities in and around Ashchurch rubbed along at a lumbering pace, unchallenged by the prospects of war in Europe. As the center’s junior training officer, Hardin challenged his boredom by engaging all gears simultaneously, promoting confusion while watching the base commander measure the folly a vehicle-storage depot could sustain.

Nothing challenged Edward’s quick wit. Deciding almost all British officers were tea-minded and serious in their need for decorum and discipline; he began misinforming them at every tick of the clock. These officers, in Edward’s opinion, needed more black coffee.

He spiced drills in crating and uncrating an artillery piece and loading and unloading a railcar with regulations designed to frustrate any off-wheel who happened by, while, at the same time, stimulating all worn bearings to maintain a spirited gait. Hardin scheduled inspections for the hour after tea to ensure dimness could set its cap.

Bored with the pace of British army life, he decided to resign his commission after he served his hitch and return to New York.

The letters he received from William Hockey, the Tyler of the Masonic Lodge in Cardiff, Wales, although welcome, increasingly packed an impatient tone.

Lieutenant Edward Hardin,

I am distressed by reports of you putting about like a young disappointment. If you intend to represent Free Masonry in any capacity, anywhere in the world, or prosper with the help of myself or Sir John Poston, I suggest you stop acting like the captain's bit and have a go at perfection.

It's the Tarpeian Rock from where all failures are thrown to their doom.

Caveo Dominus,

William Hockey

Stretching, and yawning a second time, Hardin dumped his coffee in a slit trench. "The captain's bit. Caveo Dominus—beware the master. I should have stayed in New York." Nearly spitting the words, his face creased into a brace, and he tossed Hockey's letter in the waste bin.

"That iron-gray old bastard couldn't melt enough wax to touch up the youngest peach in Piccadilly."

"Pardon me, sir?" Corporal Akens asked.

Surprised to find the man standing next to him, Hardin smiled. "Nothing, Corporal." Then he grabbed his gym kit and left the hangar for a morning jog.

The narrow roads around Ashchurch wove over the low-rolling countryside through canyons of hay and stonework, each turn giving way to the next. His favorite route crossed the Tirl Brook, circled Dowty's Engineering Works, and crossed the Tirl Bridge near the town square. Abreast of Cowfield Mill, he realized his pace had reached its highest mark.

Alert to any challenge, as he tried to gain ground on a bicycle, his shoes met the roadway with a scuffing *thump*. Pushing his stride, he came to a stop to catch his breath. Suddenly the bicycle he was chasing swerved to avoid an oncoming motorcycle, careened off the road, and smashed headlong into a ditch. A girl flew over the bicycle's handlebar, over the ditch, and landed in a stack of hay.

Hardin sprinted to the scene and vaulted over the ditch—instantly helpless. The girl had recovered nicely and stood smiling, her sweater holding sway and her hair strewn with straw. Looking every bit a member of the Fraser Clan, she radiated the soft beauty of the West Highlands. Bunching and fluffing her ginger-red hair to shake out the straw, she flashed her apple-green eyes and stole a glance, and playfully returned his gaze. Her smile and the geometry of her equipment started Edward's tackle to whirling.

Struck dumb, Edward's mind rattled with his nerves.

"Try to stop fidgeting, sergeant, and lend me your hand." She tilted her head, seemingly amused by the lack of composure of her boyish admirer, her eyes showing a trace of delight.

"Lieutenant Edward Hardin at the charge, my lady. Sword in hand." Embarrassed by his impish chat-up line, he extended a hand to the young woman, his thoughts nudging his smile.

This doll's a beauty. All decked out in her straw-covered togs.

"Do stop staring at me like a startled cow." Her smile filled with mischief, she watched him lift her bicycle from the ditch, pointing a finger as she went on. "Is gawking a temporary affliction for you Yanks, or do you regularly loll about, lusting in silence?"

The girl's forward nature had Edward off his game. Racking his inventory for any line he could use, even the words he thought of kept fumbling about. There had been girls and adventures of sorts. None of these torn pages more than half helped him know what to say.

Taking deep breaths, the joy of the encounter began warming a deeply felt emotion.

A truck motored by, and a whistle played the air. Edward matched the whistle note for note. With enthusiasm tacking under a full sail, his cleverness dismayed, he admired the first thing that caught his eye, the girl's natural beauty, her natural endowments.

With a half-amused way of talking, his grin tried to slur his words. Wanting to buzz on, he blurted, "I'm glad you landed on your keister. Look at the mess you made of that haystack."

Blushing, her eyes quick to laughter, she raised her chin. "Ah, wheel, it's a grand, soft day." Not waiting for a response, she burst on. "My name is Katherine Burnside. I teach at the primary school in Ashchurch. If you wish to visit, come by the school next Tuesday afternoon. Good-bye, Lieutenant Hardin."

Decked for the Christmas season, they married in the Church of Saint Nicholas and settled into Katherine's flat overlooking the Tirlle Brook, near the Ashchurch town square. Bored with jogging, Edward started boxing as an undercard in the Saturday night smokers on the base. Durable, punching above his weight, he took a pounding.

He enjoyed fighting.

Making love with Katherine fired his enthusiasm, rushing home to lose himself in her beauty. As the weather turned cold, they would meet in the pub below their flat for a glass of wine, before mounting the stairs and laughing as they made love again and again.

Life is good, he thought, watching Katherine sleep, listening to her laughter.. We'll have lots of children and live in the country. I'll muster out of the army and work as an engineer. Katherine can teach school if she likes or concentrate on being England's best mum.

"Akens, tell me about your signals school at Catterick Camp, in North Yorkshire."

"The basic course is nine weeks. Mostly classroom stuff. Last winter."

"Is there an advance course?"

"Yes. For special service blokes."

Corporal Akens had a wool scarf wrapped twice around his neck, winter flight gloves to prevent having to type, and boots corralling a kerosene heater under the front lip of his chair.

"Today's mighty cold, Lieutenant."

Hardin raised his cup. "You're right, Sparky. Battalion operations declared February '36 the coldest on record in England."

"Sir, let's close shop and be off to the pub."

"We're off for the day."

In early March, sitting in their flat overlooking the town square, Katherine handed Edward a cable from Sir John Poston. The union steward who had befriended Edward, had been killed in a crane accident on the New York docks. Several crates of machine parts from Poston and Sons, Ltd.'s, Bayonne warehouse had burst open spewing packets of opium onto the quay.

The shipment was the third cargo the company had transported for Bosch America, a

large German subsidiary financed by Enskilda Bank, in Stockholm. If any of the financial giants associated with Bosch decided Poston and Sons, Ltd. was smuggling drugs, bankruptcy would be Sir John's end.

Sir John accepted the news with anger touched with suspicion. Measuring the weight of varying probabilities, and the mounting criminal activity in Bayonne, France and on the New York docks, he sent Hockey to New York to investigate and informed Lloyd's of London.

For Hockey, only time and place were accidents. The union steward's death was not an outlier. The steward was a target. Willie found himself convinced by the obvious: the Corsican stamps stenciled on the broken crates.

Sir John,

The crane operator who mishandled the crates was found dead, floating in New York's East River. Dockers claim he was paid to drop the cargo. Be alert. Dockers think contraband is being shipped regularly in your cargoes.

I believe Poston and Sons is being set up to divert attention from a smuggling operation in southern France. Run out of Lyon or Marseille.

Caveo Dominus,

Willie

For Edward, the news of the union steward's death lay sequestered, distant in time, obscure. The cause seemed plausible: a crane accident—thick ice and an overloaded boom. That opium was found in Sir John's cargo was puzzling.

Setting the cable aside, he searched the confines of his father's trunk, inch by inch. He drew his hand over the emblem of the 1<sup>st</sup> Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry Regiment. With a welling sense of self, he started reading Willie's files—Tucking Mill; South Crofty mine owners; Reverend Gosden; Alfred Gosden; Mary Hardin; Richard Hardin; Gordon Dewar.

What am I looking for?

Opening his father's Masonic bible, he found a sheet of yellowed paper. On it, a drawing of an eight-pointed cross. The left arm of the cross bore the name Alfred Gosden. The right arm

bore the words *The Lady of Wisdom*. Who was the artist?

Why is Willie looking for Alfred Gosden? What else has the vicar's boy done? Edward extended his hands toward the fire. Someday I'll find the sin-shifter's son. God won't help him.

Katherine rubbed Edward's shoulders to ease his mood, to draw him from the past, to draw him to her breast. He accepted her gesture, his expression the true reflection of her own. They decided to focus on her teaching post and his job offer from Dowty's Engineering Works.

That and sleep themselves happy.

**Ashchurch, England. Royal Army Ordinance Center. Central Vehicle Storage  
Headquarters, 12 March 1939. 1645 Hours, Greenwich Mean Time, GMT.**

Hardin laughed at the orders promoting him to captain. Hockey wrote a letter fobbing the honor as "gating a layabout in Ashchurch," rather than sodding a better man with the post. Edward dismissed the old man's sarcasm and threw the letter in the waste bin.

A week of gales had filled the slit trenches near the gun storage hangar to the brim. Gusts of wind blew water onto Hardin's desk. Chilled to his core, sporting a naturally shriveled bag, he wiped the desk with a towel before posting the weekly training schedule. Word-for-word—he used the schedule twice for the Artillery Gun Assembly Point.

Glancing across the tarmac, he spotted, Akens, the signals corporal, sprinting toward the hangar. Water splashed from the corporal's boots as he leaped through the open bay.

"Captain Hardin!" The corporal's face was bound in unctuous gravity. Shifting his feet, his eyes moistened. "Sir!" A rain-sodden overcoat pulled at his slight frame. He turned away as he handed his captain an envelope stamped "Most Immediate."

"What is it, Corporal?" Hardin hesitated for an instant before opening the note. The notification had been written hurriedly.

"No officer would use the blower, sir." Rain brought a long stroke of cloud, a soaking drawn across the air strip. "And the red caps aren't worth a shilling. Those self-righteous

scuffers, claimed they weren't couriers."

Captain Hardin,

1620 Hours.

Your wife has gone missing.

She was riding her bicycle near Aldershot. An auto fled the scene and was found some miles away, smashed into a stone fence. The driver was shot through the head.

A foot from the 1<sup>st</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, the Queen's Own Cameroon Highlanders witnessed the abduction. He's given a statement.

So far, your wife hasn't been admitted to the local hospital. She was taken from the scene in an army ambulance. Royal Army red caps and the local constables are searching for the ambulance.

We collected her belongings from her room at the Spread Eagle Hotel in Liphook and left them with her landlord.

Sergeant C.

"You're dismissed, Corporal." Hardin, the large, strapping, thick-chested Welshman, sat into the remnants of a tragic circumstance, looking, unseeing. God's a frightful bastard, he thought. My West Highland lass. I'll keep looking for her smile.

Standing in the mouth of the empty maintenance bay, Hardin stared across the vehicle park. At first glance, he found the acres of close-knit grass seemed to ease into the cloudy horizon.

"I'm sorry, Katherine. I hope we can find you and make you better."

Crying, a gust of rain hit his face. "What in hell do I do now?" He kept walking, heading for the bakery on the Ashchurch town square for coffee and a pastry. It was a special time of day—the time to meet Katherine at the bakery on the town square.

Angry. He was nearly running. Screaming into the wind. "Is there a reason for all this shit? I've come from the tin mines. My family comes from the fens of Wales. We escaped the workhouse, and my mother can't find peace."

And now his Katherine was missing—abducted outside of Bordon Camp near Aldershot.

Tragedy must have a limit, he thought. Water that's run by and all. Mixing British and American axioms of rage and retribution, he was reluctant to respond to inquiries. With a heart full of hell, he reached for the blower and rang the ordinance-center switchboard for a patch-through to Sir John Poston's London home.

After tapping the phone rest several times, badgering one operator after another, and finally the switchboard supervisor, Hardin heard the phone line ring clear. "Poston residence." The butler's voice packed a frosty sort of gravel.

"May I speak with Sir John Poston, please?"

"One moment, sir."

"My God, Edward! I've been expecting your call. I am worried about Katherine. Hockey rang me, muttering quiet warnings about circumstance."

With a clipped, refined insolence in his voice, Hardin asked, "Sir John, is her disappearance tied to the tin mines of Cornwall?"

The brittle spike of his voice brought silence. "I'm sorry, Edward. What did you say?" Sir John's tone cast a hint of disbelief.

Slightly the worse for drink, Hardin asked, "Was Katherine murdered?"

Again, the line was silent. "I shouldn't think so, Edward. Katherine's a schoolteacher. Hockey will put the shingles in place. If we're fetched up against old bones, we'll know soon enough." Sir John's tone drew a legible note of caution.

"Katherine was pregnant."

"One of God's ruddy little games I suppose.," Sir John exhaled a deep, exaggerated breath. "Do carry on, will you, Edward?"

"Ruddy little games? Damn Poston. Is that all you can say?"

As if there was much more, Sir John cleared his throat. "Willie's looking for Katherine through a storm of deceit, mixed with odd doings." Catching his wind, he went on. "I lost a son many years ago, now. I do apologize if I seem callous."

Exasperated, wiping away the tears, his throat full, Edward could barely speak. "My billet here at Ashbrook ends next month. We were looking forward to my transfer to the RAF base at Mildenhall. If Katherine's not found soon, I won't be able to assist the authorities."

"Might be best all 'round. You'll have to eat what's on your plate eventually."

Hearing that, Edward hesitated, considering the problems before him. "I think I'm going to chuck." His staccato marking how drawn his face had become.

"Back-chat aside, that might help."

"Any luck locating my mum?"

"She's living in a village near Newcastle. Willie's gone there, and all. We've let Mary have her way, Edward." Sir John seemed to stifle a cough. "Fear runs in circles tossing bits to the side. Your mother's finally returning my calls. We talked yesterday. I'll stay in touch with her."

"Forgive me, sir. I've been limping along expecting to see Katherine. The way things have gone, if she's not found soon, I'll have to leave Ashchurch." Edward's frustration had put on weight. "Can you arrange a posting overseas, to New South Wales or Malaya? Singapore? Anywhere out of England?"

At first there was no reply. Then the rustle of paper. "Those postings tend to be in the back of nowhere, Edward." And after a series of coughs, "I'll make some inquiries. But you're far from qualified for special operations."

"I've heard units are siding up for bush-ranging in Burma and Southeast Asia."

"I believe that's Force 136, Group *A* and *B*—elite provisional units as yet unsanctioned—all hush-hush, mind you. The Interservice Research Bureau is proposing a Group *A* and *B* as part of a provisional executive, the Special Operations Executive, SOE. Yes, that's it."

"If it's unsanctioned, what kind of squaddie are they looking for?"

"Fugitives, I suppose. Irreverence might be required. Admiral Sinclair, the head of Special Intelligence Service, SIS, may be of assistance. Perhaps Sir Nigel Stuart—I know both men."

"Thank you, sir. I'll look forward to your call."

"A warning. Sir Nigel Stuart is an enigma. Complicated. Desperately loyal to the crown. He grinds his enemies to dust. If he sponsors you, you'll be on a tight wire."

"Fair enough."

"I judge Force 136 is a rough posting, Edward. You'll have to do a stint at the RAF Central Landing School at Ringway, near Manchester, first off, followed by a stint in the colonies

at Fort Benning, Georgia. Panama as well. If you pass muster, you'll be off to New South Wales."

Hesitantly, Edward came plain. "I need to leave Ashchurch. The coppers often scoff at my grief." He knew the time had come to move on. His Katherine was missing and many in the constabulary believed she was dead. Even the cobbles in the Ashchurch town square brought memories of his Highland Lassie.

"Mind you, Captain Hardin. This provisional executive, the SOE, has been boiling in the bowels—the 'Hole' below Whitehall for months—a merger between the War Office and the Ministry of Economic Warfare. The PM's not amused."

Wondering what Sir John was trying to tell him this time, with a huff, Edward put in: "Chamberlain's a flowering nitwit. The bugger doesn't give a jot about squaddies like me. While SIS is addling on about the idea of war, an expedited posting should get their bags off."

Sir John knew this too. "Attentive idiocy can blossom in the brightest wards. Sick-making. Well beyond accountability. Today, however, these habits will help your cause."

Edward paused, considering his plan for getting out of Ashchurch. "Yes, I know. One is keeping my mouth shut. The other, keep my head down."

"Quite right!"

Looking across the air strip the evening light shone like watered whiskey. "Sir John, give my regards to Hockey. Let him know I'm no longer the captain's bit."

"Yes, of course. I'll tell him just that. Willie's filled with the souls of Celts come and gone. Indifferent to the values of this world, he's not of our time, Edward. He has the power of prophecy. He always seems to be watching from the side."

"Well, that should settle it, I suppose."

"Willie's on to Newcastle. I asked him to visit your mother to bring her this news and see to her needs."

"Check on her, sir—just check."

"Mary's fine, Edward. Your mother resolutely refuses my invitations to come to London. She's a sentimental woman. She will be well cared for. Willie will see to that." A door knocker sounded, followed by a commotion in the background on Poston's end of the phone.

"Excuse the fuss, Edward. The ice delivery came to the wrong entrance."

"Give my regards to your sons."

"Yes, I will. They're nearly thirty years old and well on their way. We've been following your progress. Look after yourself, Edward. Do carry on, will you?"

"I didn't get to say goodbye."

Sir John Poston rang off. Edward held the receiver waiting for more words. Retracing the years, the months, the days, he thought of their moments of joy; of Katherine's mischievous grin and their first straw-strewn encounter—the happiness she found each morning, the Ashchurch town square, the bakery.

The image of her smile swept through the hangar, raced along the duckboards, and dwindled to a flutter, playing out the door into the rain.

Gale-force winds and rain pounded the French coast. Alone on an isolated quay in Bayonne, France, Sir John set a torch under his arm, and started as he had before—inspecting a shipment of machine parts bound for Rotterdam. The instant the clipboard holding his papers shattered, and the corner of the packing crate near his face blew into pieces, he heard the shots.

Sir John dove for cover as the sniper fired three more quick shots. The first round tugged at the shoulder of his overcoat and a second round burned his right side. Out of the line of fire, he scrambled along the front apron and into the adjoining go-down.

"Damn, it is a rough enough time I've had of it."

When the dawning came upon him Sir John woke with a start. A docker was shaking his foot. Fighting leery optics, he eased out of the tunnel of truck tires where he had spent the night.

The right side of his shirt was caked with dried blood. As he arched his back, a shivering pain shot through his chest. I must have a cracked rib, he thought. After following the docker to a wharf shack near the end of the pier, accepting a cup of coffee, he eased onto a wooden stool.

"Shall I call the *gendarmes, monsieur*?" the docker asked, offering Poston a pastry from his lunch pail.

Accepting the pasty, Poston set his feet. "No, monsieur. There's not much a gendarme can do. A pry-bar to open the rest of my crates would be helpful."

Poston left the comfort of the warm shack, pry-bar in hand. Examining the damaged crate, he found packets of opium salted throughout the machine parts. Putting a packet in a canvass sack, he opened the rest of the crates. Every crate contained opium. The packets had common Asian markings. The Corsican syndicate headquartered in Corsica and Marseille controlled the smuggling in southern France.

Certain the sniper had meant to kill him; he warned his family with a phone call—alter your daily routines. Within the week, he received a telegram from Willie:

Sir John,

The foot from the Queen's Own Cameroon Highlanders who witnessed Katherine's abduction has gone missing. If their weaving ropes from the sand of Givemor Cove, they've gone Bodman.

Caveo Dominus,

Willie

With a war brewing in Europe, in order to put the world right, we may have to stop shipping through Bayonne, Poston thought. The Nazis and the Japanese are driving up the cost of shipping throughout the world. Raw silk and pot ash are at a premium.

And Edward has lost his lovely wife. It's no wonder he's gone bush-ranging—if nothing else but to test his chances.

### **Candle Creek, New South Wales. Two Months Ago. 15 June 1939.**

The enlisted men's bar at the upper reaches of Candle Creek lay in shambles thanks to the commandos selected for the Special Operations Executive, Provisional, Force 136 Group B, Team 7. The roustabouts had just completed sixteen weeks of training, bush ranging for hundreds of miles, living on short rations, honing their movement and communication skills for Operation Snow White, a deep-penetration mission into northern Tonkin near the Chinese border.

Captain Edward Hardin stood at a brace before the camp commander, waiting to hear the

disciplinary charges against his team members. Stating their case, he put in, "Sir, these month-long training cycles, parachute and bush ranging, have convinced the lads they're bullet proof. Combined with their twenty-odd years made almost all of their abilities a retched mess, including their penchant for drink and whores."

"What do you suggest, Captain Hardin?"

"Put the tent back up. Dock my paybook. Dying will be easy for the lads where Team 7's off to. On the back side of Burma."

Laying in the shade of a coolabah tree, near the verge of a dirt airstrip, on a plateau above Cattage Point at the mouth of Cowan and Candle Creek, drinking a last round of gunfire, tea mixed with rum, the commandos laughed and joked as they waited for an extraction aircraft.

Cocksure lads they were, plucked from the ranks of the 1<sup>st</sup> Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry—one of Mother's finest fighting units. Trained in the school for bloody mayhem, in the jungles of Panama and the outback and waters of New South Wales—considered the best guerrilla fighters in the world. The lads who volunteered to scour the jungles of hell.

There is an instinct born of training, of understanding. But, to trust this instinct, a squaddie must have a gift that goes beyond learning. To a man, members of Team 7 had the gift.

Captain Edward Hardin, code-sign "Doc," was their team leader. Sporting a hangover that made his hair hurt, he gathered his team around a small fire. "Snow White's definitely a long-range mission. If all goes well, we should be in and out in five weeks. We run through Laos and Thailand down into southern Burma and onto the Malay Peninsula."

"Snow White's a halfpenny whore," Linc Jensen shouted. None of the commandos liked the operational code-signs MI6 had selected—strictly bollocks was Sleepy's charge.

"A bit like you then, eh Jensen?" Hardin pointed at his signals sergeant.

"Ah, but it's grand tits she has." Only Sleepy seemed to relax much, but everything came easy for him.

Hardin laughed. "The drop has been changed to 2200 hours, a night jump into northern Tonkin. Mission change: we no longer secure a weapons drop for the communist guerillas. We snatch Burma's Catholic Bishop being held near the Chinese border. This could get sticky. These guerrillas are being supplied by countries around the world to fight the Japanese in Southeast

Asia. Including the Yanks.”

“We’ll drop like bloody sandbags,” Wingrove chirped.

“Cods and sods, that’s us.” Hardin lit a fag.

“Bloody hell,” Jensen chopped in. “A night jump on the tail of the monsoon. We’re going to be hanging in the bloody trees, with manky bastards shooting at us.”

“Good chance ’a that.” Hardin agreed. “Spicy, that’s Snow White—a tart. One of Mother’s creations.” With the wind freshening, Hardin kicked Bashful’s boot to wake him.

“Within a mile of our objective the Viet Minh have an emergency landing strip. Six hundred meters of knee-high grass southeast of the prison compound.

“West is the bishop’s name. He’s a Yank. According to Dewar, he works the Vatican’s black-market in Indo-China—trading rubber, tin, and opium on behalf of the Vatican’s Prefecture of Extraordinary Affairs. West was recruited in ‘37 by MI6, Section D, to trade for the Household—the Windsors. As double blind.

“The Queen Mother’s crowd, MI6 and the lot, want this priest alive and back in England.”

Sleepy came awake with his spaniel eyes afire and a robust chest rattle. “Only one reason Mother would want that papist alive. The bugger’s got his hands on some intel MI6 wants to slide under the rose. Incriminating bits that can tickle the Queen’s buttons.”

“In full cry, who cares?” Hardin searched the confines of his shadow. Why was a priest in northern Tonkin? “Let’s hope he’s on church parade and ripe to be plucked.”

“The priest will stay alive if he can keep our pace.” Jensen, code-sign Grumpy, minced in, he alone prompting a wicked parting. “What gets on my tit is we’ve gone from living on the dragon’s lip, hunting Japs, gathering intel, to being browned off by a bunch of staff weans.”

“Boredom takes courage.” Acknowledging Jensen without lending him credit, Hardin shred his cigarette. “Phase Two: we escort the bishop to Haiphong’s British passport office.”

Pacing, Jensen stood-to and kicked his rucksack. “How fat is this bastard?”

“I don’t know. He’ll have to fry his own lard.”

“Odds are, this one’ll be skinny by the time we reach Burma,” Wingrove chimed while scratching his arse.

“Raised in a giggle house, eh, Wingrove. You're bloody Dopey, that's flat.” Jensen laughed, finishing his gunfire. “It's the Welsh fiddle, that itch you're scratching?”

Ignoring Wingrove, Hardin offered Jensen another shot of rum. “Phase Three: we infiltrate through Laos and Thailand into southern Burma gathering information on Japanese activity in the region.

“Last phase: we rendezvous with Captain Baxter Corcoran's steamer near Ross Island in the Mergui Archipelago for extraction. Uncle Dingo has been about everywhere in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea where his boat could go. He'll make the rally.

“Grumpy will set the pace.” Hardin picked a small twig out of the fire and lit the corner of his mission briefing notes. “If I don't survive this show, Jensen's in charge.”

“If the priest slows us down, I say we shoot the derby bastard and rattle his beads,” Jensen declared. “The silk crowd won't know.”

“They won't care, either.” Hardin shook his head. “Fat or thin, we're not shooting a Yank.” Certain and hard are these bushrangers of SOE Team 7. Keeping Jensen or any of the others in harness will be like keeping a badger at bay.

“My eye's at the back site, Doc.” Linc Jensen, code-sign Grumpy, gave his balls a boost, soliciting the approval of the rest of his mates.

Robin Wingrove held a bewildered expression, as if pondering Jensen's last remark. He was code-sign Dopey. He spent most of his day with his face bound in secret, parsing words for their hidden meaning. Tall and lanky, with crystal blue eyes and a pointed jaw, he carried a spoon and fork in this breast pocket of his battle dress, as if a ration was closer than the next second.

Living on the verge of boredom, Wingrove's eyes had a crisp bounce. From man to man, or tree to tree. Truck to truck, or plane to plane. With 10/15 vision in each eye, he could find the details common to game trails. Any trail. Robin was Snow White's point man.

Dudley Sutton was eight-months married, couldn't stop smiling, and talked to a tattered picture of his bride—my saucy girl. Over chipmunk pouches in his cheeks the play of the muscles in his face showed a gleeful mind. Frame by frame. He was code-sign Happy. Sutton, a

harry prat, was an inch short of six feet with a square jaw, and a neck that was part of his shoulders.

Without his glasses his eyes became confused, as if they enjoyed their competition. Dudley Sutton had toiled slowly into his duties as the team's medic, giving a series of shots to each man, along with Atabrine antimalarial tablets. He knew Atabrine was poisonous. That it caused night tremors, insomnia, and sweating fits. But the drug was better than malaria, so he couldn't tell his team mates why they were getting skittish.

Nathan Everett was code-sign Bashful because he didn't know the meaning of the word.. Remote and detached, he was dribbling to be at the Japs. Bashful was constantly fingering the locking ring on his bayonet. That and his ball sack. Barely over five foot and six, he liked to stand somewhat removed from the team. Bashful had a presence, a knowing. He seemed to feel his surroundings, its trees and vines, its topography, its creatures. And he was dangerous. Sporting square, powerful hands, Everett would fight at the drop of a hat. Often for reasons no one else could fathom.

Rory Campbell, code-sign Sneezy, had a log for a mustache. A man badgered by hay fever and loud nasal exchanges, Sneezy packed rag to extract the bush oysters from his log, and a muffler to deaden the noise. Antsy, Campbell could not stand still, his shadow so often confused, he ate lunch when it disappeared. Hyper-alert, muffler in hand, his parting words for a mate, "Look out sharp for yourself." Linc Jensen's response, "Bugger off, fuck-stick."

The medics at Candle Creek assured him the muffler was useless. The training center phycologists praised adrenaline as the human body's natural antihistamine, confident that Campbell would not sneeze under stress. Rory was the team's boobytrap expert.

At twenty-six years of age, obviously too old to muster an oak-hard stiffy, Harlin Rogers was code-sign Pops. With hair that ringed his head like a wreath, and cheeks that nearly covered his eyes, he packed an indefinably foolish expression. And, being hung like a battery mule, Rogers liked to show off his cock when he took a pee. He'd laugh while enjoying a good shake,

claiming, "A good looking head doesn't come with hair on it."

At five feet plus ten Rogers was rake-handle skinny. He needed a rucksack to cast a shadow, and his chin stuck out like a traffic arrow. His mother was from Nepal, and he liked the picture of her holding a bolo next to his father's neck. "I come from a long line of Gurkhas."

Rogers was the team's demolition expert.

Emrick Blaney was code-sign Sleepy. Physiologically scuppered, he only slept in short intervals—any commando unit's asset. His favorite phrase, "Up ya get." He could pull night outpost duty without impacting his ability to function during daylight hours. Looking a fraction of his nineteen years, he was in first rate condition and eager to let chaos have its way.

With his large dark eyes cloudy and his rusty colored hair in knots, the booze bogies Blaney experienced after the team trashed the bar at Candle Creek, kept traipsing through his large chest and shivering his bowels. Emrick was the team's sniper.

Linc Jensen was Grumpy. An all-England football legend who never smiled, with thighs bigger than Sleepy's chest, he could run for days without rest. Jensen was born ornery. He liked to argue with his superiors. Any subject would do. As Team 7's wireless-radio operator he prompted uncertainty, saying anything to anyone over the radio net.

His most valued radio procedure; he had mastered the art of "listening out", and never transmitting a response.

For Captain Edward Hardin, Jensen was the perfect signals sergeant. He sensed Hardin's changing moods, Hardin's frustration with boot-polishers, and was eager to tell them to bugger off. Or piss off. Or any number of declarations designed to end a radio transmission.

With every sense alert, Captain Hardin knew Sergeant Linc Jensen was not fully invested in the mission. Grumpy had withdrawn into the hard-eyed shadows of clipped speech, where casual moments seemed a crap shoot.

Hardin was the Doctor—Doc. Team 7's team leader.

"Sutton's not going to get laid for months," Rogers chimed. "He's packing a pair of her nickers so he can sniff her trail."

“He’s not like you, Rogers. Too old and slow to get it up.” Jensen laughed as he opened his rucksack. “Hell, Rogers, your hand has even worn out its blisters.”

“You’re definitely a grumpy bugger, Jensen.” Everett prompted a facetious glare.

“Doc. Where’s our airplane?” Wingrove asked.

“Well Dopey, you’ll know where it is when it lands.”

Hardin finished his gunfire and looked at each face. “Your identity discs only have your code-signs. Code-signs only after we exit the aircraft over Tonkin.”

Edward Hardin, a large, square-built Welshman, had a hard, sure way about him. He moved like a woodsman; with an assurance few could muster. Months of brutal training and the jungle had carved away thoughts of empathy and left hard thoughts of vengeance, leaving a warrior’s spirit even a jungle could not defeat.

The men of Team 7 were bush-rangers, cast by the casual way they wore their day—laughing and jaw-jacking as if it weren't raining. Taking the odds, many, if not all of the team would die during Operation Snow White.

In the summer of 1939, in Southeast Asia, a long-range penetration mission might last a lifetime and be shorter than a rainy day.

They had been in the air for hours when Hardin nudged Jensen’s arm. Hardin set his jaw. To hell with it, he thought. “Jensen, what the hell are you on about?”

“I’ve a grim feeling, Doc. A bit packed up. Early graves and all. MI6 has us dancing on a tightrope while they marinate rose petals for the Queen Mother.” The rasping intensity of Jensen’s voice set sail. “We didn’t bring any shovels.”

“Bloody hell, Grumpy. Get a grip. Grave digging, is that what you’re on about?”

Jumping into a thick mist at night was like jumping into a well. Team 7 exited the aircraft in less than ten seconds. With Hardin’s right boot flashing a small green light at five second intervals, the other seven team members, slipped their chutes into an eighty-meter cluster.

The drop zone turned out to be a plateau covered with knee-high grass. The Viet Minh landing strip was empty. No structures, no broken grass, no sign that anyone or anything had crossed the plateau for weeks. Moving through a heavy ground mist before first light, with the

whisper of wet knee-high grass across their canvas boots, the team went to ground.

A man screamed. Then came a short burst of an automatic weapon.

"Doc, Sneezzy hasn't made a sound since he hit the ground," Jensen said.

"Adrenaline. He's scared. From here each step is a crap shoot—waiting for an echo."

The gray light of dawn cast the prison compound in silhouette. Sleepy set the sight of his Springfield sniper rifle on the communist guerilla who was pointing his instructions.

"I got the blighter wagging his tongue in my scope hairs, Doc." Sleepy began taking slow deep breaths, waiting for orders.

"He'll be a memory soon enough."

"Doc. I don't see any perimeter wire. The wankers are just scratching about. They don't know we're here."

"I don't hear any birds." Hardin kept scanning the compound. "No automatic fire, lads."

Team 7 crawled through the tall grass until Doc and Sleepy lay sixty meters of the first hut. Waiting while Sleepy acquired his target again, Hardin moved the balance of the team into an arc. Whispering, "Find a target," he got the nod from Grumpy, gave Sleepy a nod and the plateau turned into a roar. Team 7 hit eleven guerrillas in the first volley and killed eight more guerrillas as they ran through the compound.

Standing in the confusion of twisted shapes, Hardin set fire to a cigarette. "Look for anything we can use. We're in a rush. There's bound to be more guerillas nearby." The guerilla commander, the man Sleepy shot first, had a hole right between his running lights.

"Cocksure you are, Sleepy. Nice shooting."

"Bit of a lark, really. Got one more on the hop. Blew up his pump."

"Scan the jungle beyond that last hut."

As the team swept the compound, removing the bolts from the enemy's weapons, they found the bishop's head inside a hut, mounted on a bamboo spike, dripping fluids.

"Ruthless, bloody bastards." Bashful set to his kit, crossing himself. Raising his chin, he caught Hardin. "There's a young tosser watching the village. Just inside that tree line, right side, sixty meters north."

"Keep a sight on him."

To increase the rush, Hardin barked, "Spread out and set up a perimeter. Sleepy, Dopey, see if you can find ammunition we can use. And water."

Moments later Happy found the remains of the bishop's body. A brace of shakes crimped his strained voice. "Holy hell. God's pissy with his favors." The bishop had been dragged some thirty meters from a hut, split shoulder to crotch and thrown on a mammoth bed of fire ants, rosary, and all. "The bugger was sawn off before losing his head."

Jensen moved to Happy's side, annoyed by the man's embalmed face. "On the razzle, are you, Happy? Fondle your bloody beads. Four Hale Marys, and whatever else you piffle-shits drag around. Shift your arse and keep away from me."

Alone, picking the bishop's rosary out of the ant heap, Jensen spotted a leather pouch tucked under a pile of shattered bamboo. On guard, he washed blood off the pouch with the water in his canteen and examined the wax-covered brass seal.

Bingo, this is the pouch Sir Lewis Poston ordered me to find—at all cost.

To a man, the commandos wanted answers. Why did this bishop have a pouch bearing the seal of England's royal family? Was he England's own or our enemy?

With no answer and an old French map, the short result of the firefight left the team in the back of nowhere, checked by close country, with limited ammunition, and a need to clear northern Tonkin as fast as possible.

Grateful he didn't need to bury a team member, Hardin began walking. "Dopey, you and Bashful look to our flanks. We're running southwest. Sneezzy, you're the trailer. Set a booby trap across our backtrail, one hundred meters out."

Hardin half closed his eyes. "Why are we here?" The team had been lucky. "Catholics are well hated. Represent all that's evil in this patch of woods."

Dopey scoffed. "Any woods, I'd say."

Withdrawing across a grass covered knoll, the team stopped in a saddle one hundred meters southeast of the prison compound. Standing in a seam of thick vegetation Hardin searched the charred compound, hut by hut. Tendrils of smoke drifted through the canopy, muted by a cornflower-blue sky.

Laying belly down in a thirty-meter perimeter, the team fell into a scripted silence.

Hardin studied the team's backtrail leading from the compound. The vegetation near his head hung still in the hot, lifeless air. With a long glass he brought the compound into focus. The dead guerrillas lay like heavy stones. Fire ants. The rats and wild dogs would come by midday.

"Grumpy. Give me an all-good. Weapons, ammo, water, leeches."

After tying off the bottom of his pant legs, Hardin drank the last of his water. The roar of their small arms still echoed. But a medley of doubt was swelling in volume.

"We're all-good, Doc." Jensen gave Hardin a thumbs-up.

Not a man one could easily ignore, Jensen had not engaged the enemy during the raid on the compound. Linc did not fire a shot. Hardin knew men who were slow to muster and others who found fear debilitating. Hardin had no such fearful inhibitions. Casting a questioning eye to the jungle bordering the drop zone, Hardin pushed a finger and thumb on his left hand against his eyes. Jensen's actions were out of character.

What are the odds that Jensen is a bin-pusher for the admiral?

The next day, with a sunrise like a straight rainbow, Hardin measured the tree shadows, ensuring they lanced the grass to his hard right. Satisfied he was facing south, he set the team's initial pace running out of northern Tonkin.

Near midday, Jensen grabbed Hardin's arm. "Some jackass wants to talk, Doc."

Fumbling with the radio handset, Hardin took the radio and walked twenty meters into the jungle. After hearing the authentication code, *tightrope*, Team 7 was directed to proceed to Haiphong and rendezvous with three MI6 operatives.

Jensen watched suspiciously, peering into the jungle. His eyes carried a rimy cast. Jensen fell in beside Hardin, away from the team. "Doc, we've got damn little time to get to Burma and rally out of this shit. If that transmission was relayed by the Yanks, they may be trying to delay our trek overland and cut us off."

"Why would the Yanks do that? We've nothing they want. They're all one to me."

Jensen jerked Hardin's arm and spun him face to face. "Bollocks, Captain. Think about where we are. That priest was a Yank. He's in three pieces. Those MI6'ers in Haiphong are gunslingers, not staff infants."

Indignant, Hardin marshaled a scrap of corrosive laughter. "Stand easy Sergeant Jensen. Grumpy needs to amount to himself. He's the Team's second." Blinking as he changed focus, Hardin checked the breech of his Mark MK1 submachinegun.

Adding a gram of garlic, Hardin took off his bush hat. "Backchat or gospel, Jensen, no Yank's going to soak our powder."

Hardin handed Jensen the radio handset. "When we reach the resupply grid, do a recon on our backtrail before you contact that radio relay and sort out their last transmission."

"Where will you be?"

"I'm going to limit the doings of these three MI6 contractors. If they are the wild cards you claim, the team needs to know."

Hardin returned to the perimeter to brief his mates. "Our current status puts us on mission. We're short of ammunition and rations. To get extracted on schedule we'll need to run through Thailand and beyond.

"Even you, Sleepy."

The commandos laughed—except Grumpy. He looked tense. When Hardin spoke again, Grumpy stiffened. "We run as a team to our resupply location. After our traps are packed, half the team will run to Haiphong with me to meet up with three MI6 mercenaries working for our Special Intelligence Service."

"Do any of these mercenaries have a name?" Bashful asked.

"Our old friend Lucien is team leader."

Grumpy stood with his hands on his hips. "Butchery aside, Captain. If that Frenchman's involved, you better meet him alone. Without the team. Mercenaries working in this region, smuggle drugs and work both sides of the wire."

"Fair dinkum. You have the team until I get back." With a nod from Jensen, Hardin drove on. "Mark this grid coordinate for the resupply cashe on your maps. We have a three-day window to put on flesh and get refit."

The sky was turning gray in the east as the team approached the first clatter of huts on the outskirts of Haiphong. Hardin set the team in a dense patch of vegetation and left his rucksack. An old woman led Grumpy to one of the huts and then ambled away.

Hardin found Mother's MI6 mercenaries drinking Three Feathers Whiskey to a chorus of sarcasm at a sidewalk stall in Haiphong, laughing through a cloud of beaten French tobacco. Lucien, a self-proclaimed parachute master, insisted Hardin meet them again after dark at the Red Mill, a restaurant in Saigon.

Leenstra, a Dutchman with a somewhat craggy countenance, rose and slapped him on the shoulder. Recognizing Hardin's Hart MK1 submachine gun, he opened his rucksack and handed Hardin a 32-round ammo box loaded with 9x19mm parabellum cartridges.

Hardin, with his eyes centering on Lucien, took a chair from an adjoining table and sat apart from the three strangers. "Thanks for the ammunition."

Leenstra adjusted his bush hat. "That ammo box is the short result of a contact with Jap pricklers in northern Tonkin. Running from our drop zone in the back of nowhere."

Noting their weapons, Hardin remembered the French army had purchased several hundred Thompsons from Birmingham Small Arms, a company headquartered in Small Heath, England. Then decided not to buy the gun for general issue and had shipped the weapons to Annan, in Indo China to arm the Vietnamese supporting French rule.

Lucien, Leenstra, and a German named Steiner, were wearing weathered French jungle fatigues, driving a British Bedford K-series lorry, and carrying a ten-dollar BSA 1926-9mm French Thompson tethered to loosely arranged combat webbing.

Smoking expensive cigars, drinking expensive whiskey, they must have plenty of money. They're back-shooters. Never at odds with their kills.

When Team 7 had received mission briefings at Camp Z, in Broken Bay, New South Wales, Lucien had been the subject of a situational brief-up, typifying the for-hire slags fighting for Ho Chi Minh. Leenstra's picture also on display.

Piecing bits of their conversation together over a beer, Hardin learned the three had recently jumped into southern China with thousands of weapons and tons of ammunition to help the communists fight the Japanese, their mission paid for by the Americans.

Hardin studied their expressions, their humor—their stories bouncing from pussy to killing with equal enthusiasm. Although they looked comically different, a cryptic fire flickered

in their eyes, as if they loved the adventure, and something else. The killing.

“Let's drink to our next mission: bush ranging from here to Burma,” Lucien announced.

“That's a long haul. Are you running over ground?” Hardin asked.

“Not initially,” Steiner declared, his English somewhat metallic.

“Night jumps can be tricky.” Hardin cocked his head.

“In the dark all cats are gray, *mon ami*.” Lucien's counsel came with a nod from Steiner.

Lucien probably didn't know his picture was posted on the ready board at the SOE Training Base in Broken Bay, New South Wales—next to Leenstra's. Branded as players in Southeast Asia's drug trade, transporting drugs through Malaya's Neck for more than a decade.

“If you're one of the cats, your mission must be a secret.” Hardin set his eyes to a crease.

“You're our mission, *mon ami*.” Lucien nudged Hardin's foot and flashed a joking grin.

Then he pointed at Leenstra and Steiner. “My friends are the best trackers in the world.”

“I'll bet they couldn't find their ass if they had a rope tied to it.” When Leenstra burst out of his chair, Hardin held up a hand and laughed. Then asked, “Why has Steiner memorized the tread-pattern on the bottom of my boot?”

Lucien invited Leenstra to sit, then said, “Uncivilized Krauts have nasty habits. We're being paid to find Jap pricklers along the coast of Burma and northern Malaya.”

After ordering another round of beer, Steiner invited Hardin to join their table, all the while measuring the heft of Hardin's weapon. Stupid Kraut's an anxious bastard, Hardin thought. He's looking for a reason to kill me—a clue, the heft of my rucksack. Hardin set his feet outside his chair legs, and laid his weapon across his knees, pointed at Lucien's crotch. This meeting was an MI6 ambush. Lucien's handlers were expecting the whole of Team 7.

Deciding to shoot Lucien first, then Steiner, Hardin set his right foot near the back of his chair. “Nazis do have nasty habits.”

Toasting his beer, Leenstra laughed a nervous cough, then spoke with boyish pride of Tonkin's Vietnamese communists, of playing hide-and-seek with Jap patrols, and of leveraging one employer against another.

Lucien abruptly asked about the condition of Team 7. Hardin's jaw tightened as he set his finger through the trigger guard.. “Why do you want to know?”

“You’ll never reach Malaya, mon ami.”

“Is that where I’m off to?”

At the man’s challenge, Hardin felt his rage surging, wanting to lay a horizontal butt stroke on the bastard’s jaw. “Frenchman, I’m not your bloody friend.”

The game’s plain enough now, he thought. He poured his beer on a potted palm and set the glass on the table. How do they know Team 7’s heading for Malaya?

Shaking hands with the three mercenaries while they were still sober enough to trail him, Hardin left Haiphong on foot running northwest for three hundred meters before turning west southwest. Choosing a route through a series of small villages, he checked his back trail at odd intervals. Deciding he wasn't being followed, he rallied with the team.

Why did Mother order me to meet with Lucien? Is he working for MI6? Why are they hunting my team? Do they know the location of our extraction point?

Team 7 left their resupply location long after dark of the second day, heading southwest. On the third day out, Linc Jensen disclosed his separate intel mission and gave Hardin the sealed pouch—with a warning. “There’s a spy in MI6, London.”

“A spy. Is that what they call you, Grumpy?”

“I’m just part of the main, really.”

With a sideward glance and a thin, cryptic smile, Linc Jensen leaned his head to the right. “Captain! Doc! You and I volunteered for this long-range mission. And we’ve ended up in a gum tree. On paper we’re left to run the whole of Southeast Asia looking for Jap pricklers.”

“Then what’s with the pouch?” Jensen looked away. “You’ve no bloody idea, do you?”

Linc Jensen’s eyes came to a sudden judgement. “I’m your signals sergeant, Captain. The rest you don't need to know.”

There are no beginnings like the dawns that come to a jungle teaming with life, nor are there colors anywhere to match the vibrant greens and browns of a distant hill. The mist and the smell of the expectant rain, the vegetation yawning as it dries out—and still, it holds death so close, always ready, waiting.

For the next eight days, Hardin pushed the team south and east, spotting and killing a six-man Japanese patrol. Then came nine quiet days to the coast of Burma, turning south onto the Malay Peninsula. There had been the usual stops, to barter for food from the locals to dry socks and massage feet, to clean weapons and repair uniforms.

A grass-covered hill bulked before them now, and by midday lay behind them. At point, descending its western slope, Hardin slowly went to ground. With the team dispersed in a small perimeter, Hardin and Jensen searched the matted grass near the wood line.

“Doc, I found the remains of a shredded fag. The bits of paper were dry.”

“How many men?”

“Over twenty. Enough to make a weasel think twice.”

“A platoon of Jap pricklers?”

“Not likely, that. We’re in the middle of nowhere.”

“Move the team into that wood line. Set up a laager. No fires. No cooking.”

Of the five escape routes, out of Southeast Asia, Ratline 4-Charlie ran through forgiving terrain—the caches well stocked, the bridges well-tended. These too were anomalies. The caches were too well stocked. The guides spoke French.

The commandos had been warned—the smugglers spoke French.

4-Charlie’s regularity had drawn the team into a trance, into a loping, rhythmic pace. Burma’s section of the ratline followed a track worn bare by animals that used the terrain for ease of movement to hunt their prey. Men new to the jungle found no track.

For Team 7, the track may as well have been paved with stones.

Three days later, hampered by the rains and winds of a tailing monsoon, Hardin skipped a step when he saw a broken vine. Dismissing the anomaly, he kept his pace. After running for nearly thirty hours without a break, fatigue had set in. The team was bunching up. Not keeping proper intervals. He stopped the team and signaled for them to separate.

Hardin’s eyes ranged to the end of the trail, where the trail seemed to turn left. He sank into a squat, watching heat waves rise from the jungle floor. For hours now, something had not

felt right. Wetting his lips, Hardin studied Jensen's face. Deciding something but saying nothing.

Hardin studied Jensen more carefully. "I don't hear any birds."

"Aye. And the temperature has hit bottom." His voice sounding a damp beckoning, Jensen stood and nudged Hardin's shoulder. "Pick up your rucksack, Doc. We've a boat to catch."

With that, the team's pace quickened and became uncommonly decisive.

Suddenly Grumpy, the second in line, the slack man, shouldered Hardin forward off the trail. Falling through a tangle of vines, Hardin heard the team open fire with their Bren guns, screaming as they were shot to pieces in the kill zone of the ambush.

Wounded, unnerved, unable to defend himself, he surveyed the slaughter. Sweating, he tried to slow his heart rate. His heart kept pounding. Heavy beats drumming pain through his thigh.

As team leader, Hardin always ran at point. Team 7 had moved with a tactual, ranging cadence, each man assuming a contrived solitude, the lot ignoring nagging bits of recognition—a broken vine, a frayed large leaf.

Slammed from behind by Jensen, as a bullet tore a trough across the front of Hardin's right thigh, and three solids cut through his rucksack, momentum and a thumping slice of luck sent him rolling off the trail into a dense hollow, out of notice. He crept to the edge of the trail, to a vantage where he could cover the kill-zone and held himself still.

Hardin counted the mercenaries—twenty-six—all harvesting the slaughter, emptying rucksacks. If I fire, I might hit three of the bastards, Hardin thought. Need to save one round for myself. If they bunch together, I could kill a few more.

These bastards are well trained. Odds are Lucien supplied their weapons.

Bashful's boots were blown off with his feet still in his boots. The high keen of his scream had been lost in the roaring drum of weapons tearing apart his mates. He cried for his mum and his God until he bled out—the echoes made wage with the remnants of chance.

Happy was propped against a rock and his midsection beaten with bamboo rods until his stomach sack spewed from his mouth. A moaning roar rumbled in his chest. He frantically

pushed at his stomach sack and clawed at his throat.

Grumpy was strapped forward against a tree and sodomized with the barrel of a rifle until his entrails hung down into the leech-infested mud.

Dopey was strapped backwards against a tree. Yelling as his throat was slit open; his yells became hollow as his tongue was pulled out through the front of his neck. Dopey was dead before the mercenaries cut off his cock and muzzled it into his mouth with an empty rice sock.

Sleepy and Sneezzy were hit so many times, Hardin saw solids explode threw their bodies as they turned and fell. Solids dragging bits of flesh and uniform threads. Excited, the mercenaries started counting the holes as they secured the squaddie's weapons and rucksacks. And then laughed as they cut off their right thumbs.

Sweating, breathing through clinched teeth, Hardin's finger began vibrating against the trigger guard. Moving his eyes constantly to keep from staring at one target, he realized more and more of the mercenaries had filtered away from the kill-zone.

The bastards are lighting a bloody cooking fire. Stench and all, they're going to sit in this shit to eat and divvy the team's kits. Bully beef will give 'em the hab-dabs.

They're too big to be Burmese. Cambodian. Not Tonkin.

The muscular expression on the largest mercenary did not change as he walked through the carnage shouting orders. He stood for an instant just inches from Hardin's left arm looking up and down the trail. Suddenly he hollered a mouthful of vowels, pointed at Sneezzy's bullet-riddled body, laughed, walked down the trail, and urinated in the commando's face.

Damn, that was close.

The mercenaries began shouldering their rucksacks.

Afraid to move, Hardin set his head on his hand and wiped the sweat from around his eyes. Slowly he placed his right hand over his leg wound to stem the bleeding. Not knowing the direction they would choose, Hardin slid down a short incline away from the trail.

With a confusion of retreating sounds, the mercenaries began ranging north.

Keeping to the darkness away from the trail, Hardin moved to where he could scan the kill zone through a slit in the foliage. Climbing out of the hollow was risky. He waited for several minutes, listening. As the silence gained ground, he grasped a vine, tested it, and carefully lifted

himself onto the trail.

“Those rotten bastards,” he whispered, his first utterance in over an hour. His canvas water carrier was shredded.

After drinking the remaining water, Hardin hobbled toward his dead mates, whispering a pledge, watching for movement. Holding to the weak-stemmed vines bordering the trail, with a Royal Welsh Fusilier's trench knife in his left hand, Hardin moved closer to the bodies.

The scene was a mud-laced bit of hell...dying the way of it.

Hardin took his time. His eyes strayed up the trail. Bits of flesh hung in the vines. A thin tendril of smoke flowed from the mercenary's cooking fire into the canopy. Catching his breath, he took off his bush hat and ran his fingers through his hair, then cupped his hand over his mouth, grappling with the smell.

It's down to me, then.

Alone in the glow of twilight, huddled under a shroud of shame, he inspected his mates—the slaughter was a message for his experience. Feverish, his breath came in spurts. Only now did Hardin realize his mates, these strangers, all looked alike.

This... This jungle carnage was the wicked swarming, a brutal testament. Memories of their laughing, of trashing the club at Candle Creek, of parachute training at Ringway, flicked in and out of his thoughts.

Determined to defend their honor, Hardin whispered his devotion through a crack in his mouth. Instantly the interlude fell away—self-hatred took its place. He was exhausted. The many weeks of endless watchfulness, of continual awareness had taken its toll. Under the compost Hardin found his prison, one of enduring loneliness.

Swarms of black flies gathered in pools of blood.

Sheltered from the mess by the rags of Happy's shirt, Hardin punctured Happy's stomach sack, spewing fluids into the man's screaming eyes. Hardin stumbled backward, catching his balance. An indifferent rain accentuated the reality of dying in the jungle.

All but Linc Jensen were dead. His pulse barely showed cause.

“You're in a bad way, Grumpy.” Jensen's body stiffened when Hardin pinned him against the tree and cut him loose. His legs folded into a heap. Hardin cradled Jensen's chest and

rummaged in his kit for a rubber-encased *L* pill.

"No worries, cobber." Jensen squeezed Hardin's hand.

"Dyin's easy, Doc."

"We were done up, Linc. Stitched. Betrayed." Jensen's eyes opened with a flutter. He looked from side to side as if his mind was photographing each image.

"Make the rally, Doc. For the lads." Jensen's hand fell to the ground.

"I owe 'em that." Holding the suicide pill to the light, wondering why he hadn't died with his mates, Hardin thought of Baxter Corcoran—how Uncle Dingo had fought to survive after being pulled from the waters of Refuse Bay.

"You saved my life, Grumpy."

Hanging a thread of saliva, cinching his brow, Jensen's eyes dilated to a distant focus. "Aye, that, Doc. You were in my way."

Shaking off an anxious grin, Hardin checked north down the trail. Adjusting Jensen's head, he stuck the *L* pill into Jensen's mouth. "Bite down, Grumpy. Give it up as a bad job." Hardin forced Jensen's teeth together. Mustering the remnants of a sigh, Linc Jensen died, his expression driven 'round the bend where his vitals lay piled.

Hardin's rage warped into vacant despair, and his guilt ran to carelessness. Linc Jensen, his mate, died in the stench of his bowels, while the roar of the ambush rang a vicious note and ended before its knell found an echo.

My mates have gone west.

Once stripped of their kits and weapons, each man's right thumb had been severed. The bloody bastards are counting thumbs. The ambush was planned. Somehow, a desk-mucker will find out one of the team escaped.

Examining the bodies of his mates, smothered by the stench of their bowels, he whispered, "So, this is what death will be."

Then, in a moment of twilight's calm, he began allaying sorrows and sorting consoles. Hardin nodded in recognition; his throat full. He tried to remember the smell of fresh bread and burnt sugar wafting in the air near the bakery on the Ashchurch main square.

"Will I ever see my Katherine again?"

Lying in a hollow thirty meters from the kill zone, near the end of his tether, Hardin lost consciousness. A dark cast had enveloped the jungle by the time he woke.

Urgency kicked its way through his mind. He cut the identity disc from Jensen's waistband. Fumbling his trench knife, his smatchet, into the mud as he tried to hurry, he wiped the leaf-shaped blade on Jensen's pant, and then tied his identity disc inside the lace of Jensen's boot.

As darkness gathered around the bodies, a rain squall crabbed along the top of the canopy. With water dripping from his bush hat, Hardin presented his weapon to his mates at port arms.

With a voice stiff in his throat, firing on every other cylinder, he whispered. "Since you blokes aren't going to speak to me, I'm going to get cracking. I'll make the rally. You can fit that in. Me and Uncle Dingo. He's a good mate. Full on, if you lads muster those Muslim virgins that Swagman bragged about, leave a trail of breadcrumbs. Coming down from the end of that fable, the Abigail's are either in hell or in Piccadilly."

The confluence of fear and time pushed Hardin to move, to gain distance from the ambush site. Twilight had but minutes of life. Wild dogs would be on the hunt within the hour.

"I'll kill the bastard who betrayed us, Grumpy. Take good care, mate."

Hardin propped Jensen's boot in the mud. The vulcanized fiber identity disc was hidden below the knot in the boot lace. "Those Muslim virgins might be a good turn, Grumpy—might get a bloke like me interested in religion again."

Jensen was a mess.

Dark brown rats scurried from the trees, forming wads, racing around the east side of the kill zone. Hardin remembered the team's briefing in Candle Creek: Mountain Giant Sunda Rats.

Hardin winced as he pulled himself up, accepting a painful sense of resolve. He wanted to shoot the rats scavenging the area around the cooking fire. A well-fed rat sat sniffing the air, staring at him. Gradually the chorus of rats took up station. A perfect perimeter.

Hoping the remnants of the *L* pill would poison the rats, he muttered, "I'll look for you in Piccadilly, Grumpy." Reluctant to leave, Hardin wanted to bury the bodies. Standing cocked

legged, without an entrenching tool, he spit instead. "Good-bye lads."

Sweating profusely, limping across the trail, his leg wouldn't support his weight. He stared at the pure, vicious green of an impenetrable jungle. To move he needed to find a navigable route tracing the topography and favoring his wounded leg.

Packing three days of water—less with the water he needed to clean his wound—his rations would last five days.

His can of M&B 693 sulfa powder had been shot to pieces. Salvaging what he could, he filled the wound with the light tan powder and wrapped a battle dressing around his thigh. The round had torn a thin layer of the large muscle on the front of his thigh. Gradually letting his weight settle, he hobbled away.

His boots touched the ground with a whisper and a thump.

Blood quickly soaked the battle dressing, saturating his pant leg. Packing his rucksack on his left shoulder and carrying his weapon in his left hand, his right hand was free to carry a stave. Jumping the bags, the first steps were pure hell.

He needed to find water.

Hardin hobbled through a small grass clearing tap-dragging his right boot—his tracks rife with broken vegetation. The draw spilled out into a wide, flat table of knee-high grass bordered on three sides by thick, single canopy jungle. Before entering the clearing, he stopped and searched the tree line on the far side and each flank.

Listening for several minutes, he knew twilight would come with a rush, sucking the light off the jungle floor, leaving less than twenty minutes to find a badger hole with water and lay up.

A man's hard to track if he's not moving.

As he started again, a fine brush of rain swept through the grass. Ranging with hesitant steps, rescuing his stave from the damp soil, he moved with caution. On the far side of the clearing he climbed to the top of a small ridge and stopped to search his back trail.

Detecting movement, he froze. Brief, as though two shadows had changed places, he swore it was real. He swore it was a girl. Then nothing. Just the raw demands of fear.

Cool air flowed in a river up a narrow draw. The floor of the jungle was growing quite dark. Day's end would bring a chorus of ambient noise too loud for a man to detect the

anomalies. Twilight was a time for predators, the wrong time for a man to be wounded, and casting off the smell of fear and blood.

Days ago, just after his team was ambushed, automatic weapons fire had lanced the canopy above his head. Wounded, he changed direction and hobbled until the pain ripped at his stride. Gasping, stumbling, he fell against a rock. Hardin lowered his head to shield his face, breathing with his mouth open. A tumult set to his mind with a clatter of blurred pictures.

Wind-whipped rain rattled off his head. He fell again, pulled off balance when his staff penetrated a bog. Covered with rot, he pushed himself to firm ground, then stood up.

“Bastards are hunting me.”

At twilight Hardin crawled into a cavern behind a jumble of vine-covered boulders. A small, clear pool of water sat atop a gravel bottom. After drinking until his thirst was satisfied he closed his eyes. Mosquitoes pushed the foliage aside and swarmed down on his face to have a slap. It's always a bunch of pregnant females, he mused, their wingbeats in full stretch as the day wore out and he lost consciousness.

Lips swollen and coffin faced; Hardin woke with a jerk. For a moment his focus seemed to pinwheel. The glare of the tropical sun was parsing the canopy. Listening for movement, for vegetation being brushed aside, he set his shoulders against the base of a tree and waited. Feeling flimsy, he took a strip of his shirt and tied it around his upper thigh to help staunch the flow of fluid from his leg wound. His rucksack was a sodden mess.

His essentials were dry—cigarettes and matches.

Satisfied he was alone, he used his last bit of plastique explosive to heat a cup of tea, took his last salt tablet and lit a cigarette. During the next hour he barely stumbled on, pausing in the shelter of a tree from time to time to search his backtrail.

Later, after drinking from a stream, he picked his way at a faster pace. The game trail he found drew him into a corral of sorts. Tangled in a patch of interwoven vines he fell on his face. Try as he might, with his hands under his chest, he rocked backwards onto his knees, but he did not have the strength to stand. How long he lay in the compost he did not know.

Waking, he found that his shivering had settled his face into the mud.