

CHAPTER ONE

Sunday 20 April 1941

Marc Kilgour had jumped out of aeroplanes, belted around the countryside on an old Triumph motorbike, shot a straw dummy through the heart with a sniper rifle, studied the correct procedure for attaching limpet mines to the hull of a boat, survived in the wild on berries and squirrel meat, stuffed dead rats with dynamite, swum freezing lakes and done physical jerks until he was as fast and strong as any thirteen-year-old was likely to get.

But training counts for nothing if you lose your head, and Marc felt uneasy squatting in the two-man canoe with damp trousers, an oar resting between his legs and Commander Charles Henderson seated behind.

It was near midnight on a moonless night – the only kind dark enough to infiltrate occupied France by boat.

The sea was calm, the air had bite and the blacked-out French coastline was a total mystery. They might have been fifty metres from shore, or a thousand.

They'd trained to drop into occupied France by parachute, but the RAF refused to spare prized bombers for espionage work. A fast torpedo boat for the long voyage down France's western coast would have been second best, but the Royal Navy was no more willing.

In the end they'd made the two-day journey from Porth Navas Creek in Cornwall aboard *Madeline*, an elderly French steam tug designed for harbour work rather than open sea. Their canoe was a leisure craft that had spent years hanging from the ceiling in a Cambridge junk shop, before being discovered by Henderson, who patched its cloth hull with fish-glue and pieces cut from a coal tarp.

The rest of their equipment was no better. The radio transmitter was an unreliable beast. Twice the weight of more recent sets, it left the canoe precariously low in the water and compromised the amount of equipment they could carry. Henderson had kicked up a stink, but Britain was fighting alone against a Nazi empire and CHERUB wasn't the only unit muddling through with scraps.

'Nerves holding out?' Henderson asked quietly, as his oar cut into a wave.

'Just about,' Marc said.

Henderson was the one thing that gave Marc confidence. He was a flawed human: drinker, womaniser, a short-tempered maverick who rubbed senior colleagues up the wrong way. But as some men turn genius when you give them a football, or set a maths problem, Henderson had a gift for espionage. He was completely ruthless, able to speak the five major European languages in a variety of accents, and had a magical ability to devise practical and sophisticated operations.

‘Are those young eyes seeing things I can’t?’ Henderson asked.

Marc squinted, but could barely see beyond the end of the boat. ‘What if the tide’s carrying us further out?’ he asked. ‘I mean, are you even rowing in the right direction? Shall I take a compass bearing?’

Henderson gave a restrained laugh. ‘You don’t have much faith in my nautical skills, do you? Listen to the gulls. Are they getting louder or quieter?’

‘Louder,’ Marc said, realising that the gulls lived in colonies onshore.

Marc felt foolish: he might have been blind in the dark, but Henderson had been using his other senses to navigate.

‘Clever old goat, aren’t you?’ Marc said cheekily.

A dark mass loomed beyond the bow. Marc thrust his oar out ahead of the canoe, then pushed hard against rocks jutting from the water. The boat tilted as its canvas

side-scraped barnacles. Henderson threw himself sideways to counterbalance, but with the canoe so heavy it wasn't enough to stop water spilling over the side.

Marc threw down his oar and reached around to grab an old paint tin used for bailing out. He'd been soaked down one side when the wave came in and the pool in the hull now topped his canvas plimsolls.

Directly behind, Henderson tried pushing the boat off the rocks with his oar. The back end drifted out, but the bow was impaled on something. Marc bailed speedily, but the water kept rising. As no more had come over the side it could only mean one thing.

'Hull's torn,' Marc said, alarmed, but still having the wits to keep his voice low.

Henderson stood up. As he jumped on to the rocks the back of the boat rose up. He'd hoped taking his weight out might save the canoe, but the shift of balance set all the water running towards Marc at the front. The heavy case with the radio inside whacked Marc's back as the Atlantic engulfed his legs.

As the bow dived, a sharpened metal prong shot through the breach in the hull. Marc clambered up the tilting boat as she hit sand a metre and a half below the surface. Shallow water meant land was close, but Marc's relief didn't last. As he kicked to stay afloat his foot snared a coil of barbed wire.

Marc squeezed his face, stifling a howl. Henderson

had pulled two floating suitcases and a backpack on to the rocks before realising his companion was in trouble. He recognised the metal spearing the upright canoe as the leg of a tank trap. These criss-crossed metal tripods were designed to prevent tanks and amphibious vehicles driving up beaches.

Their presence was mystifying: Henderson had targeted a landing beach with cliffs beyond the sand. Tanks didn't do cliffs, so either the Germans had installed tank traps for no reason or they'd come ashore in the wrong spot.

But that concern was for later. Right now, Marc was stuck and kept himself afloat by locking his arms around the tank trap. In sheer frustration, he yanked his leg upwards, but the result was excruciating pain as a barb punched through his plimsoll into the top of his foot.

'For *Christ's* sake be gentle,' Henderson warned, as he knelt on the slippery rocks and leaned out. 'What if they're rigged?'

It hadn't occurred to Marc that the wire might be linked to an explosive. 'Eh?' he gasped. 'Do they do that?'

'Look on the bright side,' Henderson said. 'If you *have* snagged an anti-tank mine, neither of us will ever know much about it. Now pull your ankle up *gently*. High as you can without straining the wire.'

They'd expected wire, and Henderson had a pair of snips clipped to his belt, alongside his gun, holster and

torch. As Marc pulled his knee towards his chest, Henderson felt blindly underwater, running a hand down the boy's leg until he reached the wire, and cut one side.

Marc expected the wire to peel away, but with barbs stuck in his flesh Henderson had to cut the other side and bring him up with a short length of wire still embedded. Henderson dragged Marc on to a flattish section of rock. The boy lay on his elbows and took three gulps of air, before rolling on to his back and studying the length of wire, with two barbs in his ankle and one in the top of his foot.

'You weigh enough,' Henderson said breathlessly.

Marc went up on one knee, braced for pain and ripped out the wire. As blood pooled into his sock he put some weight down on his bad foot.

'Think it's up to much?' Henderson asked.

'Hurts, but I'll manage.'

Henderson began lifting the empty canoe clear of the tank trap. Simultaneously a wave swept over the rocks, floating one of the rescued suitcases. Marc scrambled on all fours, grabbing the case handle as it teetered, but when he looked back he realised that one case was already missing.

'Where's the transmitter?'

'Six feet under,' Henderson said.

'Is it worth pulling up?'

‘Not after a soaking,’ Henderson said, as he threw loose rocks into the back of the canoe. ‘I’ll weight the boat down. The Germans will spot her when the tide goes out, but we’ll be long gone, provided your leg holds out.’

The plan was to land on a lightly defended beach, bury the canoe and reclaim it for the return trip, but that wouldn’t be happening now.

‘Looks like these rocks form a natural jetty back to dry land,’ Henderson said, as he handed Marc the snips. ‘You start moving. Take one case and keep an eye out for more wires.’

Marc’s wounds were excruciating, but Instructor Takada had taught techniques for managing pain. People calmly endured surgery in the days before anaesthetic and what were a few gouges compared to that?

In places the barnacled rocks dipped below the water and Marc had to paddle, though never above his knee. He held the case in front of himself, because that would hit any coils of wire before his legs did.

When the rocks ended his plimsoll squelched into mushy sand. There was a chance of buried mines, but it was too dark to deal with them, so the only strategy was to hope for the best.

‘Keep low,’ Henderson warned, when he stepped up behind, carrying the backpack and the other suitcase.

A shelf in the beach offered limited cover and the pair

nestled down. Henderson took a moment to find a small pair of binoculars and used them to scan the landscape.

‘Anything?’ Marc asked.

‘Too bloody dark,’ Henderson said. ‘Though if we can’t see them, they can’t see us.’

The sea brought in a strong breeze, which rustled through reed beds beyond the sand. When the wind stopped, they heard noise coming from not far beyond. It was the sound of men in good spirits.

‘Shall we move?’ Marc asked impatiently.

Henderson traced the line of the horizon with his finger. ‘If they’ve put all those tank traps on the beach, there *has* to be defensive positions along there. I’m not moving until I know where they are.’

It made sense, but Marc was cold and bloody. After four minutes of fear and pain, he broke silence with a childish whine.

‘Come on, let’s go.’

Henderson looked cross. ‘It doesn’t get light for six hours, but sooner or later we’ll hear a door clank, or someone will step outside for a smoke. Until then . . .’

Henderson cut himself off because they’d been blessed with light. It came from a road beyond the reeds. The wavering front lamp of a bicycle was enough to make out silhouettes and, as Henderson had predicted, two pill-shaped bunkers bulged out of the reeds like frog’s eyeballs.

CHAPTER TWO

Shivering and sodden, the white sand stuck to their clothes in clumps and got in all the places you don't want it to. A cautious five-minute crawl over seventy metres of beach had brought Marc and Henderson to the edge of the reeds.

Higher ground had brought the roofline of a grand house into view. The people celebrating were German men, officers judging by their accents. Apparently they'd not only landed on the wrong beach, they had found the Nazi high-ups' back garden.

This limited knowledge raised more questions. Were there men in the pill-boxes less than ten metres ahead of them? Could they walk on to the road where they saw occasional traffic, or were they behind the fences of a secure compound? And if they made it out of here alive,

where the hell were they and how far from where they were supposed to land?

The squat concrete pill-box was the first problem. These circular boxes were a standard design, made from bomb-proof concrete, with an armoured door at the rear and a long open slot facing out to sea, through which mortars and machine-gun fire could be directed across the entire beach.

Henderson crept forward, while Marc stayed back with the luggage. It was impossible to move silently through reeds but the breeze and squawking gulls gave cover. Then came the first gunshot.

White birds crowed before launching into the air. Henderson assumed either he or Marc had been spotted and grabbed his pistol from its holster.

He looked up, but there was no sign of anything happening in the pill-box and no sound of men advancing through into the reeds, though Marc was spooked and crawled up frantically behind him.

‘Where did that come from?’ Marc asked.

Henderson gave a *don't know* gesture, then jolted again at a shotgun blast aimed high into the sky.

‘Can't shoot for shit!’ a German shouted drunkenly.

‘In this dark,’ the shooter said defensively. ‘How can I see?’

With that, more pistol shots fired into the dunes, sending up plumes of sand and seabirds. This time the

shotgun was more accurate and the Germans cheered as a gull fell out of the sky.

‘Give me a blast,’ another German shouted.

‘Piss off, it’s my turn!’ another howled childishly.
‘Do we have more shotguns?’

There were four or five men in the group. All drunk, all loud. Marc and Henderson couldn’t see them because of the reeds, but the tone of the man who now took the shotgun indicated seniority.

‘I’ll show you proper Prussian shooting!’ the officer shouted. ‘Get some birds up!’

More pistol shots fired into the dunes, more frightened birds shot into the air and the muzzle of a shotgun lit up. But no birds were harmed and the officers began convulsing with laughter.

‘He dropped the gun!’ a youngster howled. ‘He’s so drunk he can’t even hold the gun!’

‘How dare you,’ the German with the gun roared. ‘I am your commanding officer. Do you want to spend next week painting decks with a toothbrush?’

To emphasise his point, the officer shot again.

Henderson and Marc buried their heads as the back door of the pill-box swung open less than three metres ahead. A fat, woolly chest staggered out. Its owner was barefoot and held up his trousers with one hand.

‘Will you shit-for-brains keep your noise down? It’s

getting so you can't grope a Frenchwoman in peace around here.'

A shout came back across the dunes. 'Captain Gerhardt, I had no idea your mother was in town!'

'You want me to come over there?' Gerhardt bellowed, but he turned back towards the pill-box. His heart was set on sex rather than violence.

The shooting game had run out of steam and one of the officers shouted, 'More drink!' to cheers from colleagues, who followed him to the house.

Captain Gerhardt seemed pleased with himself as he turned back towards the girl in the pill-box. 'Now, let's sort you out, eh?'

Henderson had decided to sneak up and knock Gerhardt out before he locked himself back inside the pill-box. A German uniform would be a useful disguise, even one that was too big for him.

But before Henderson made his move, a wine bottle shattered over Gerhardt's head. It had been swung by a petite French girl, who now stood in the doorway holding the neck of the shattered bottle. Unfortunately the blow had little effect on Gerhardt, who threw himself into a whale-like laugh.

'You'll get a good spanking for that,' he growled happily.

As Gerhardt forced the girl back inside. Henderson landed a knockout blow with the edge of his pistol. The girl screamed as Gerhardt toppled sideways. Henderson

turned back to Marc and spoke in English. 'Get our luggage in and shut the door.'

The pill-box was lit with a single, tiny gas lantern. The floor was scattered with clothes and wine bottles. The terrified girl was a teenager, half dressed and shorter than Marc. She scooped up her dress before Henderson put a hand behind her neck and spun her body around to face the wall.

'Do *not* look at me,' Henderson warned, speaking in French now, but adding an over-the-top English accent. 'If you can identify me I'll have to kill you.'

Gerhardt was unconscious, but he was a big beast. Henderson didn't want him getting up, so he reached into a small pocket hidden behind his trouser belt and removed a deadly cyanide pill.

Pinching the nose forced Gerhardt's mouth open. Henderson caught a blast of foul breath as he crumbled the pill on to the German's tongue and clamped his jaw shut.

After a moment the hairy body began a series of violent convulsions. As Henderson stepped away, he saw the girl move slightly and shoved her face back against the wall.

'Do you *really* want to die young?' he asked.

Marc threw the backpack through the doorway before pulling the metal door shut and sliding the bolt. He could barely see his hand in front of his face.

‘Not one word,’ Henderson told Marc, jamming two fingers down the dying German’s throat.

His gag reflex was still active and red-wine-coloured vomit shot up Henderson’s arm before spattering the floor. Henderson tried not to breathe as he rolled the big German on to his chest and carefully positioned his face in the vile-smelling pool. It was an unpleasant business, but Gerhardt now looked like a man who’d passed out drunk and choked on his own sick. It was unlikely that any doctor would investigate further.

‘Gather up the Captain’s things and check his documents,’ Henderson told Marc. ‘Take his jacket and nothing else. It can’t look like he’s been robbed.’

‘Is he dead?’ the girl asked, as Henderson stepped up behind her.

‘Very much so,’ Henderson said, keeping his tone friendly, but deliberately breathing down her bare back. She was more likely to be honest if she was intimidated.

The girl tipped her head back and sobbed.

‘I’m going to ask questions,’ Henderson said, piling on the English accent. ‘I’ll start with a simple one, your name?’

‘Delphine.’

‘Delphine, that’s nice. Now where am I?’

Delphine seemed confused. ‘How can you not know?’

Henderson jabbed a finger between Delphine’s shoulder blades as Marc read Gerhardt’s identity document.

‘You *don’t* ask questions. You answer them, and quickly.’

‘We’re at Lamor Plage,’ Delphine said, and then with a touch of sarcasm, ‘Do you know where *that* is?’

*Kapitan Maximillian Gerhardt, Kriegsmarine*¹, *Underseaboat Section*, Marc read to himself. *Commissioned 1932*. There were photos, hard to make out in the gloom: a wife, a child sitting cross-legged with the family dog. The final picture was in colour and showed forty-eight men on the deck of a U-boat, with a pennant marked U27 and Gerhardt at the centre of it all.

Marc smiled. If they were shot dead now, they had at least accomplished something by blundering in and murdering a U-boat captain. Henderson was also satisfied: Lamor Plage was less than two kilometres from their intended landing beach and closer to their target. It was all good, provided they could make it out of here alive.

‘What’s the house?’ Henderson said. ‘What’s it used for?’

‘It was the beach house of Madame Richard. She cleared off before the invasion and now it’s quarters for senior naval officers.’

‘And what brings you here?’

‘It’s a party for the Führer’s birthday.’

¹ Kriegsmarine – the official name of the German Navy during the Nazi era.

‘Is that today?’ Henderson laughed. ‘Sorry, Adolf, I forgot to mail your card! So tell me, Delphine, do you enjoy sleeping with Germans?’

‘My mother hates me coming here, but there’s good food and they’ve always been very correct. At least until tonight when that great pig dragged me away and ripped my dress off.’

Marc studied Delphine as he brushed sand off his clothes. She had muddy feet and scratches up her legs where she’d been dragged through the reeds. She was clearly telling the truth, or something close to it.

‘Do you know this area well?’ Henderson asked.

‘A little,’ Delphine said. ‘I live in Lorient. Twenty minutes’ walk from here.’

‘Is there a security perimeter around the house?’

‘There’s no gate,’ Delphine said. ‘But there’s a checkpoint up where you turn off the main coast road.’

‘How far away is that?’

‘Two or three hundred metres.’

‘And between here and Lorient, how many checkpoints?’

‘On every road into the city, all around near the submarine base. Snap checkpoints can go up anywhere at any time, but not usually after curfew.’

‘Thank you,’ Henderson said. ‘That’s useful to know.’

‘Are you a British agent?’ Delphine asked. ‘Because

you need to be careful. I don't mean to be rude, but your accent is a terrible giveaway.'

Marc stifled a laugh.

'I'll let my wife do the talking then,' Henderson said, hoping to throw Delphine even further off the scent by implying that Marc – who she'd barely seen in the darkness – was a woman rather than a boy. 'Now I'm *sure* you're trustworthy, maybe you're grateful that I saved you from that big hairy Kraut, but you *were* out here partying with the enemy. You might run back to the house screaming blue murder the second I'm out of the door. So I'm rather afraid we're going to have to give you a little pill.'

'Please,' Delphine sobbed, as she writhed desperately. 'I don't want to die. I might even be able to help you.'

Henderson laughed. 'Not one of the deadly ones, sweetie! It'll just put you under for three or four hours. Bit of a nasty headache when you come around. If the Germans ask, tell them you passed out drunk and can't remember a thing.'