

CHAPTER ONE

Monday 5 June 1944

'Mondays have never liked me,' Paul Clarke said, trying to keep cheerful as his face creased with pain.

The fifteen-year-old had turned his ankle and skidded down an embankment. A khaki backpack cushioned the muddy slide, but he had dark streaks down his trousers and puddle water trickling into his boot.

'Nice slide?' Luc Mayefski asked, offering a hand as rain pelted their waxed jackets.

The teenagers' hands couldn't have been more different. Paul's slender fingers linked with a great ham fist, and even with 30 kilos of explosive in Paul's pack, Luc didn't strain as he tugged his skinny cohort out of the mud.

If it had just been the pair of them Luc would have

taken the piss out of Paul's tumble, but these trained members of Charles Henderson's Espionage Research Unit B (CHERUB) had to show a united front for the benefit of their inexperienced companions, Michel and Daniel.

Michel was an eighteen-year-old Maquis. Nine months' living in the woods had left him stringy, with wild hair and a wire tourniquet holding on the sole of his right boot. His brother Daniel was only eleven. Their father was a prisoner in Germany and their mother had vanished after being arrested by the Gestapo. Daniel had chosen to live on the run with his brother, rather than be dumped at an orphanage.

'Are your explosives OK?' Daniel asked, as Paul joined the brothers on a muddy track at the base of the wooded embankment.

'Plastic explosive is stable,' Paul explained, as he tested his ankle and decided he could walk off the pain. 'You can safely cut it, mould it. It wouldn't blow up if you hit it with a hammer.'

Luc checked his compass and led off, eyes squinting as the early sun shot between tree trunks. Even with the rain Luc was sweating and he liked the earthy forest smell and the little squelch each time his boot landed.

Paul and Michel were suffering after 15 kilometres under heavy packs, but Daniel had done them proud.

He'd walked all night, but refused to stop even when doubled up with a stitch.

Luc had been out this way on a recon trip two days earlier, and he turned off track at a point he'd marked by pushing two sticks into the soft ground.

'There's a good view down from this ridge,' Luc explained, as he led the way. 'But keep quiet. The sound carries across the valley and we're not far from the guard.'

'If there is one,' Paul added.

The undergrowth was dense and Michel lifted his brother over a fast stream carrying the overnight rain. As Daniel got set down, Paul was touched by the way Michel put an arm around his little brother's back and kissed his cheek.

'Proud of you,' Michel whispered.

Daniel smiled, then squirmed away, embarrassed, when he realised Paul was looking.

After a dozen more paces, Luc crouched and pushed branches aside. He'd opened a view over a ledge into a steep-walled valley cut into chalkstone. Water dripped off leaves on to Paul's neck as he peered at two sets of train tracks running along the valley's base. Sixty metres to his right, the tracks entered the mouth of a tunnel blasted through the steep hillside.

'You'd never be able to bomb this from the air,' Luc whispered, as he slid a pair of German Zeiss binoculars

from their case. After wiping condensation off the lenses, he raised them to his eyes and looked towards a wooden guard hut near the tunnel mouth. The magnified view showed no sign of life and a padlock on the door.

‘We’re in luck,’ Luc said.

The tunnel formed part of a main line running north from Paris, taking trains to Calais on the Channel coast, or forking east into Belgium and Germany. The Germans had built guard huts at the ends of hundreds of important bridges and tunnels, but only had enough manpower to staff a fraction of them.

‘Nice binoculars,’ Paul noted, as Luc passed them over. ‘Where’d you get them?’

‘Drunk Osttruppen¹,’ Luc explained. ‘They’d swap the uniform on their backs for a bottle of brandy.’

Paul backed away from the ledge as Luc glanced at his pocket watch. ‘If there’s a guard at the other end, we’ll sneak up and take him out from behind. Our target train is due to reach the tunnel at around seven a.m. That gives us half an hour to lay explosives along the tunnel and get in position, but with air raids and sabotage, there’s no guarantee that any train will run on time.

¹ Osttruppen – German soldiers recruited from occupied countries such as Russia, Ukraine and Poland. Most volunteered to avoid starvation in labour camps. Osttruppen were regarded as poor soldiers and were usually given lowly duties such as emptying latrines, burying bodies and working as servants to senior officers.

Especially one that's come all the way from Hanover.'

As Luc spoke, Paul slid canvas straps off his badly-chafed shoulders and moaned with relief as his pack settled in the undergrowth. An exploratory finger under the shirt collar came out bloody, but there was no time for first aid.

After unbuckling the pack, Paul took out two grubby cloth sacks. They seemed to be half full of potatoes, but the uneven lumps were plastic explosive, linked with detonator cord like a string of giant Christmas lights.

Paul looked at Michel. 'Remember what Henderson said. The weakest part of the tunnel is around the mouth, so pack plenty around there.'

As Luc and Michel each grabbed one of Paul's sacks and slung it over their shoulders alongside their own heavy packs, Paul looked at Daniel and tried to sound upbeat. 'Ready to hike?'

The brothers quickly hugged, then Luc gave Daniel his binoculars before leading Michel along the side of the valley.

'You break those and I'll break you,' Luc warned.

As there was no guard, Luc and Michel faced an easy journey down to the tunnel mouth using uneven steps carved into the chalkstone. When they reached the mouth, their task was to unravel the chains of explosive along the tunnel's 300-metre length and retreat to a safe distance, ready to trigger them.

Meantime, Paul and Daniel had to find a vantage point atop the forested hill through which the tunnel cut. Once in position, they had to identify their target: a 600-metre-long cargo train carrying twenty Tiger II tanks, dozens of 88-mm artillery guns and enough spare parts and ammunition to keep the 108th Heavy Panzer Battalion functioning for several weeks.

Since handing over the explosives, the weight of Paul's pack had dropped from 30 kilos to less than four. The bread, cheese and apples that had spent the night at the bottom were squashed, but the two lads scoffed eagerly and shared a canteen of milk as they followed a track to the top of the hill.

Two trains steamed south through the tunnel as they walked and Paul was glad to be up here in fresh air, rather than laying explosives along the dank, soot-filled tunnel.

'Hope they're OK,' Daniel said warily, as he eyed plumes of smoke billowing from either end of the tunnel.

'You have to keep low and put a wet cloth over your face,' Paul said. 'It's not fun, but they'll survive.'

Daniel stopped worrying when he found a bend in the narrow footpath, and spotted another marker from Luc's recon trip. The dense forest made trainspotting hopeless from ground level, but Luc said he'd climbed to a position where he could see trains approaching along several kilometres of snaking track.

The eleven-year-old wasn't just along for the ride. Growing up in Paris, Daniel had earned a reputation as a daredevil, clambering over rooftops, diving off bridges and breaking both arms when he'd leapt between two balconies for a dare. After joining the Maquis in the woods north of Paris, Daniel made a name for himself as a forest lookout, able to climb branches too slim to hold an adult's weight.

'I'll have to lose all this gear,' Daniel said. 'Put it in your pack in case we need to make a quick getaway.'

Paul didn't like taking orders from an eleven-year-old, but Daniel was a good kid and he watched the youngster pull off his boots and strip down to a stocky frame, clad in grotty vest and undershorts. Regular climbing had toughened Daniel's skin and he looked more ape than human as he launched himself into the branches with Luc's binoculars swinging from his neck.

'Careful,' Paul warned, as Daniel vanished into the leafy canopy, becoming nothing but rustling sounds and occasional shifts in the early sunlight.

Paul burrowed down his pack and found the phosphorous grenade he'd use to warn Luc and Michel when they spotted their target. Twenty metres up, Daniel swung his leg over a fork, clamped the thick branch between his thighs and wiped a palm smeared in bird crap down the front of his vest.

‘Slippery, but the view’s great,’ Daniel said, happy with himself as he stared over the treetops at fields, villages and a clear view of the railway tracks approaching both ends of the tunnel. ‘Why don’t you hop up and join me?’

CHAPTER TWO

Edith Mercier looked uncomfortable as she lugged a wicker basket along Beauvais' Rue Desgroux. The rain had stopped, but the slim fifteen-year-old trod cautiously because the cobbles were still damp. She'd passed a postman and a few folks heading to work, but this municipal district would stay quiet for another hour.

Allied bombs had demolished shops and houses behind the Rue Desgroux and opened deep cracks in the façade of the town's main administrative office. Behind stacked sandbags and a side wall braced with wooden props, staff inside the offices continued with duties, ranging from civil weddings to issuing bicycle licences.

The upper floor was used by the city's German

administrators, so the building warranted a rain-soaked swastika pennant and a single German guard out front. Edith quickly glanced at this guard before taking a long step and deliberately losing her balance. Her basket spilled, sending onions bobbling in all directions, and she howled to make sure that her 'accident' wasn't missed.

She'd hoped the guard would rush to her aid. But the young soldier had arranged sandbags into a kind of lounge and had the air of someone who'd only get up if a bomb went off, or a senior officer threatened a court martial for lying down on the job.

Edith steamed. She'd practised realistic falls back in the woods and the slippery cobbles should have made her stunt believable.

'Oh, my back,' she moaned. 'Can you give me a hand?'

Edith's summer dress was getting soaked and the young German still wasn't taking the bait. She righted the basket and started crawling around, picking up the onions. She went for the onions nearest the sandbag wall and growled at the guard.

'What a gentleman you are!'

The guard raised one eyebrow sarcastically as he rested a small book in his lap. He was handsome, no older than twenty. Edith found this odd because the German army sent young men to fight, and left older

ones playing night watchmen in small French towns. But as the man leaned out of shadow, his horribly scarred cheek emerged, followed by a knotted sleeve where his left arm ended in a stump.

The German gave a sly smile, then spoke slow but accurate French. 'What if mademoiselle is a resistance spy sent to distract me?' he asked. 'What if one of your onions explodes when I pick it up?'

'Do I look like someone with explosive onions?' Edith replied, hands on hips as she scowled over the sandbags.

'How should I know what a spy looks like?'

It didn't matter how Edith distracted the German and, while he hadn't offered to help, a night alone on guard duty had bored him enough to crave conversation.

'What happened to your arm?' Edith asked.

'The war happened,' he said grumpily.

'Could have worked that one out,' Edith said. 'Don't you like talking about it?'

'Saw plenty come off worse,' the guard said. 'And I can't hold a rifle, so I can't go anywhere there's bullets flying.'

As he said this, the guard finally stepped out from behind the sandbags. He kicked an onion backwards with his heel, let it roll up the front of his other boot and skilfully flipped it into the air. A clumsy one-handed catch spoiled the stunt, but it still made Edith smile.

'You play football?' she asked.

‘I was apprenticed to a factory team, before I ran off to join the army.’

‘You volunteered?’ Edith asked.

The German shrugged and gestured towards his stump. ‘Not my greatest decision, but they would have conscripted me within a year anyway.’

*

As the guard focused on his trick with the onion, CHERUB agent PT Bivott shot out of a doorway 20 metres away. The eighteen-year-old had dark, slicked back hair and a frame that had bulked up in the two years since he’d stopped growing taller.

PT was trailed by a middle-aged teacher named Jean Leclerc. The pair kept low as they ran 10 metres over cobbles, then cut down four stone steps into a passageway where the administrative building adjoined a disused fire station.

After doing their best not to crunch rubble and broken glass, they came to a peeling blue door at the end. Their key was a handmade copy and it took rattling and hand strength to turn, but Edith was still speaking to the one-armed German as they ducked to safety through the low entrance and breathed mildew and rodent piss in the admin building’s basement.

Flipping the light switch did nothing, but Jean had a battery-powered torch to guide them over mounds of rubbish and cleaning gear. They turned into a gloomy

hallway running beneath a stage, and looked through metal grilles into a 200-seat hall.

‘Married my second wife in there,’ Jean whispered.

A door took them out beneath a staircase, then past the brass rails and oil paintings into the building’s deserted foyer.

PT led the way up two thickly carpeted flights through the gloomy light created by the boarded-up stained glass on the landing. They ignored the German commander’s double-doored office and cut into a long corridor with offices off either side.

‘She told me it’s F, halfway down on our left,’ Jean said.

The door of Room F was already ajar and as PT stepped in, a movement made him jolt.

‘Shit,’ PT blurted, taking a step back and ripping a silenced pistol out of its holster. When there was no further movement, he jumped into the room, sweeping the weapon from side to side.

PT had just about convinced himself that he was imagining things when a vast ginger cat belted out of the gap between two filing cabinets. It brushed PT’s trousers and shot out into the hallway.

‘Judging by the rat shit downstairs, I’d bet that moggy eats better than we do,’ Jean said, shaking his head with relief.

As the cat sloped off, PT holstered his gun and opened

the middle of three desk drawers. He picked out two vellum folders and a pair of keys dropped out from between them.

‘Looks like your friend has done us proud,’ PT said.

Jean nodded. ‘I’ve known this woman thirty years. Taught all of her sons.’

The cat stared from the top of the grand staircase as they crossed the hallway into Office 2B. This was a larger space, with five desks, a wooden counter and a waiting area lined with unmatched chairs.

A noticeboard above the chairs had the latest German regulations covering curfew times, penalties for spitting in the street and a reminder that anyone failing to report resistance or Maquis activity faced the death penalty.

PT made a dramatic slide over the polished counter, while Jean took the trouble to lift a flap and step through. They both had the same destination, a huge black and gold safe built into a wall at the far side of the room.

The two keys fitted into slots 3 metres apart. They had to be turned simultaneously, which made it impossible for a single key holder to steal its contents. After some fuss over which key went on which side, Jean began a count.

‘One, two . . .’

They turned on three. There was a clank as a bolt dropped and the squeal of hinges that needed oiling. The safe was tall and shallow, with shelves designed to

hold documents such as blank identity cards, curfew passes and birth certificates. All of these held some value, but for the Maquis the most precious were the small, lime-coloured ration cards which were required to buy any kind of food.

Jean's informant had not only secured copies of the two safe keys, she'd also told them that the fortnightly ration card delivery had arrived the previous afternoon.

'Beautiful,' PT said, kissing one stack of cards before scooping mounds of them into a leather satchel.

As PT picked smaller quantities of less valuable documents, Jean moved between desks stealing the rubber stamps, embossers and wax seals needed to validate their stash of blank documents.

'Nearly there,' Jean said, dropping assorted stamps into his backpack. 'I'm looking for a bottle of the radium ink they use on identity cards.'

PT closed the safe and slid back over the counter. He hadn't buckled his satchel properly and a few purple tobacco-ration cards trailed behind him. As he crouched to pick them up there was a gunshot.

Jean's neck snapped towards the sound. PT leaned cautiously into the hallway and saw the huge cat belting towards him with half its innards hanging out. The jumpy marksman who'd shot it was coming around the top of the stairs, dressed in a navy jacket and dented French soldier's helmet.

‘Milice²,’ PT shouted, as the agonised cat tripped over its own intestines. ‘I thought you trusted this woman.’

Their planned exit was via a ladder lowered out of a window in the ladies’ toilet. But if they’d been betrayed, would the ladder be there?

PT decided that attack was the best form of defence and took aim at the man coming around the stairs. He couldn’t tell where his bullet struck, but it knocked the man backwards and grunts and shouts came up as his body fell on to men further down the steps.

Jean now reached the office door. The balding teacher held a service revolver from the last war in hand as he gave PT a bag filled with stamps and ink pads.

‘You’re younger and faster,’ Jean said. ‘You run, I’ll cover.’

Jean covered with wild shots as PT sprinted down the hallway to the ladies’ toilet. He booted the toilet door, half expecting someone to burst out of a stall. But the only sound was a drizzling tap and the long ladder was where he’d been told to expect it.

‘We’re OK,’ PT shouted, as he opened a boarded sash window.

² Milice – A police organisation set up by the Germans in 1943. Miliciens were all Frenchmen. They were notoriously brutal and specialised in operations that regular French police were reluctant to undertake, especially hunting down Jews, communists and members of the resistance.

Edith was down below in the rubble and she'd swapped her basket of onions for a compact STEN machine gun.

'Who's shooting?' she shouted up, as PT went for the ladder.

'Jean, let's go!' PT shouted. 'It's clear out back.'

PT almost threw the ladder out and Edith kicked rubble out of the way to allow it to stand level.

'Jean,' PT shouted again, as he lobbed the satchels and bag out the window and swung a leg on to the ladder.

PT hurried down, half expecting never to see Jean again, but the elderly teacher put his boot on to the window ledge and caught him up by sliding down the outside of the ladder.

'Shot two of the buggers,' Jean said.

Edith knocked the ladder away to stop anyone else getting down, while PT and Jean grabbed the bags of loot and set off across shattered bricks and roof tiles. As Edith turned she noticed a figure taking aim out of a first-floor window and opened up with the STEN. It wasn't an accurate weapon, but the shooter ducked out of the hail of bullets for long enough to let the trio clear the open rubble and get behind the chimney breast of a bombed-out house.

From here they clambered through the roofless shell of a cobbler's shop and began sprinting down a curving road between houses.

'I thought you'd known her for thirty years,' PT said breathlessly.

They'd reached a point where the alleyway met one of the main routes out of town. There was no sign of any Milice following as PT stretched over a low garden wall and lifted the first of three getaway bikes.

'Someone might have betrayed us, but not her,' Jean replied, as he straddled a bike. 'If they'd known about the ladder they'd have ambushed us out back.'

'Well *someone* certainly told them we were coming,' Edith said as PT handed her the second bike. 'And when I find out who, they'll be sorry.'