



THE NIGHT RAIDS

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CHAPTER ONE

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The coast of East Anglia appeared below, a curving line of white surf glimpsed through the glass cockpit floor of the bomber. The pilot, Leutnant Helmut Bartel, imagined the Heinkel's moon shadow sliding over the beach, and the marshes, and then the wide fields that lay ahead. He tapped his compass, checking they were still on the correct bearing for their target, a railway bridge over a river just north of the medieval city of Cambridge. He used his glove to smooth away the ice which obscured the needle. Leaning back into his seat, he felt through the steering column the soft bump as the aircraft hit the warm air rising from the land below, slowly giving up

to the darkness the heat it had absorbed during a long summer's day.

It had been a dazzling day in Berlin. He'd spent the morning with his family on the beach at the lake. His eldest daughter, bouncing on her toes in front of the ice-cream seller's bicycle, could never keep the cone upright. The baby had slept on a rug, in the shade of a parasol. His wife had worn a daring new swimsuit. Back at their flat, after a meal, his friend and co-pilot Walther Schmidt had picked him up for the drive to the airfield, and Bartel had waved through the rear window, watching his family diminish, standing against a backdrop of suburban trees.

'*Es is Zeit,*' he said, shattering the memory, his voice relayed to the crew, the radio signal almost obscured by static.

Schmidt, who was also the bombardier, unbuckled himself from the co-pilot's seat and wriggled expertly to the floor of the cockpit, where he landed softly on his knees. He spread his body out on the plastic flexi-glass, the line of his spine absolutely central, his feet pointing back across the North Sea, to the Frisian Islands and Berlin, his head set directly towards Cambridge. In this position he was able to rest his skull in the niche provided, and use his right eye to look down through the bombsight. His hand crept over the instruments set in the fuselage, his fingers finally resting on the bomb bay trigger, and beside it, the thumb-switch for the reconnaissance camera.

Bartel, staring into the night, noted the smell rising from the navigator: cold sweat and fear, mixed with the wax he used to sweep back his hair. Schmidt had been his best man, and the picture at home in the hallway showed off his confident smile as he threw an arm round the groom's shoulders. They'd been in uniform then, the promised war a glittering adventure, just beyond reach.

He checked the fuel gauge, a procedure he repeated at least once a minute. The electronic dial indicated that the Heinkel had enough to

reach the target and return home. The thought of touchdown at the forest airfield at Waren, of walking to Schmidt's car after the debriefing, and simply being driven home, was so beguiling, so close, that Bartel felt his guts twist. He wondered, often, if this sudden unexpected urge to cry like a child marked him out as a potential coward.

He gripped the steering column and felt sweat trickle down his neck beneath his flying suit.

A burst of static rang in his headphones and he looked up to see the escort fighter tip its wings, and peel away to the north.

'Allein,' he told the crew. *We're on our own.*

He repeated himself twice, hoping to be heard above the roar of the twin exhausts, mounted just to the rear of the cockpit.

The night had been clear but now a great billowing ridge of cloud thudded against the aircraft, threatening to shake it out of the sky. They had been easy prey for British fighters, but now they were safe. Clouds had been forecast by Berlin, and clouds there were. The cheer from the crew was reedy but unmistakable. They had left the realm of the revealing moon.

Bartel took the aircraft above 18,000 feet to make sure they were firmly embedded in the high cumulus, but nevertheless there were intermittent glimpses of the land below, and so they saw towns twinkling faintly, despite the strictures of the blackout. Bartel smiled, because it meant there was a chance they were not expected, and that all attention had turned to the raids on the South Coast.

The Heinkel laboured onwards east. The crew was silent, but he knew they were all doing exactly the same thing: counting to themselves, recognising that as each mile went past they were, paradoxically, getting closer to home, or at least to a homecoming. All they had to do was destroy the bridge, then melt away, and fly back across what his father and grandfathers had all called the German Ocean.

This was not their first sortie. They had flown nuisance raids for a month, designed to harry the enemy and train the crew for the heroics to come. Morale had been poor because they felt themselves excluded from the great battles over the airfields of Kent and Sussex in which five hundred bombers, a thousand perhaps, rained destruction on the RAF below, clearing the path for an invasion by sea.

But Oberst Fritsch, the commander at Waren, had made it clear in his pre-flight briefing that this particular raid would write its own footnote in the history of this great war. Military intelligence had identified Bridge 1505 – a box-girder of steel – as a key link in the enemy's transport network. Destroy it, and the result would be chaos at a vital point in space and time. If the German landings came not on the South Coast but on the East Coast, the British would be unable to rush men and arms to repel the invaders.

‘Five miles to the target,’ said the navigator.

Bartel let the aircraft descend, and they quickly dropped below the clouds.

Even on such a dark night you could see below, strung across their path, a silver river. The old hands who'd flown in the Great War had said it was impossible to fly the bomber to its target without a clear sky and the moon. But Bartel and Schmidt had argued that the river would betray itself. And so it was.

Bartel noted the time. ‘Walther?’

‘Ready.’ Schmidt pressed his face into the Plexiglas sight and began to take pictures.

The altimeter ticked down from 19,000 feet.

Behind the reinforced steel bulkhead at Bartel's back the bombs stood in two lines, cones upwards, held fast in place by iron clamps.

Bartel struggled with the controls: he felt sluggish, and when he tried to think, logical progressions escaped him.

He forced himself to concentrate on reading out their height.

At 10,000 feet he banked, turning the bomber south, so that they could track the shining water.

He braced himself against the pilot's seat and heaved up the bomb-door lever. The noise doubled. The urge to override Schmidt's trigger, and let the bombs fall now, so that they could turn home, was almost intolerable.

Bartel could see the river's mirror below, briefly holding in its surface a black silhouette of the Heinkel.

They'd expected anti-aircraft fire, but there was none.

'Five thousand feet,' said Bartel.

'Target in sight,' said Schmidt.

Bartel heard the bomb clamps spring and turning, saw the first shell slip away. The bombardiers at Waren had written in chalk on its side: *Erste Stoppe Cambridge!*

'She's gone,' said Schmidt.

Two more shells followed.

The river sped by below them, and then in an instant the target flashed past – a metal bridge, with its double line of tracks, then a series of narrow workers' streets, a gasometer and the rail yards.

Bartel checked the chronometer, which had been set to Greenwich Mean Time, and read 10 p.m.

The first of the falling shells had twisted in the air, the cone coming down, the fins taking control, reaching terminal velocity within a handful of seconds, which is when the screaming began.

CHAPTER TWO

Detective Inspector Eden Brooke sat at a trestle table in the public bar of the Wellington Arms, contemplating a pint of Ridley's Best Bitter. The pub lay in the maze of streets known as the Kite, a working-class district within a parallelogram of down-at-heel shop-lined roads, sandwiched between Parker's Piece, Cambridge's great park – an army encampment since the outbreak of war – and the distant expanse of the rail yards, which stretched north into the Fens along the river.

The Wellington Arms, at the corner of dead-end Earl Street, was packed with soldiers, most of whom were bivouacked in bell

tents on the nearby park. The manic buzz of conversation, the raucous laughter, spoke of anxiety and excitement in the face of the news of war; Dunkirk had gone, Paris had fallen, and now air battles raged over the Home Counties, and everyone talked of the imminent threat of invasion. No day passed without hysterical 'sightings' of German parachutists, reports of shadowy fifth columnists sabotaging the war effort from within, or radio reports of spies spotted landing on the South Coast, or – worse – the East.

The sense of danger found its physical expression in the gas masks on every table, hanging from chair backs or flung over coat hooks, within reach should the dreaded attacks materialise.

Edmund Grandcourt, Brooke's batman during a very different kind of war, was at the crowded bar getting his beer. In Palestine during the 'last lot', Brooke had relied on his stoic common sense. After the war Brooke had pulled strings to secure him a position in the university's engineering department, in charge of stores. Diligent, honest, organised, an encyclopaedia of everyday knowledge, he'd thrived. Most nights, when the sirens wailed, Grandcourt was on duty as a voluntary warden at one of the public air raid shelters on the park. But tonight there had been no siren, the first such reprieve since an attack earlier that summer which had left nine dead and a terraced street reduced to rubble. No more bombs had fallen since, but the sirens had sounded nonetheless, sending the city's weary residents below ground, or out into backyards and gardens to the damp delights of Anderson shelters and the horrors of the chemical toilet.

But not, it seemed, tonight. The clouds, masking a bomber's moon, promised a brief return to a normal life.

Since Brooke's return to Civvy Street he'd often relied on Grandcourt when a case proved intractable. The Borough, the city's miniature police force, had just two inspectors, while its

rank-and-file had been sorely depleted by the demands of war. Retired officers had been drafted back onto the streets, but the Borough's ability to preserve law and order was often stretched to the limit, if not beyond.

Grandcourt's other priceless asset, besides his common sense, was that he could be found at night. Brooke treasured the company of nighthawks. In the desert he'd been captured by the Ottoman Turks: staked out in the sun by day, interrogated before the silvered lamp by night. His eyes, damaged, had never recovered. He wore tinted glasses of various hues to alleviate the pain of photophobia – an extreme sensitivity to light. They ranged from jet black – for direct sunlight – to a calming brown-yellow, although here, in the dim, smoky bar, he'd abandoned even these, so that for a few moments he could let his blue eyes enjoy the world in true colour.

Brooke took off his hat and rested it on the tabletop, pushing thick black hair back from a high pale forehead. Since he'd come home, and joined the Borough – when it was clear his injuries made further study for his degree impossible – he'd built up a network of such nighthawks dotted across the city, individuals who had to work after dark, or who shunned the light, or simply thrived when the rest of the busy world slept. Brooke's damaged eyes were the outward sign of his injuries. The inward sign was acute insomnia. So the night, and the people of the night, had become his half-lit world.

Grandcourt came back with the beer. He'd not been able to wait and so his moustache was decorated with suds.

'So what's this, sir?' Grandcourt was almost part of the family, familiar with Claire and the children, but the 'sir' never faltered, although its note of deference had faded over the years.

Brooke had placed a small bottle on the table. It was made of

clear glass, with a stone stopper held in place by a brass lever. The liquid inside was a subtle colour, a pale blue, an echo of Brooke's unshielded eyes.

'Go ahead,' he said, as Grandcourt manipulated the bottle, testing the release on the stopper. 'It's not a precious object. It's what's inside that's got me foxed. I came across it in the river.'

'Swimming, sir?'

Swimming, and particularly the full extension of the legs, had been part of his life since he'd been treated at a sanatorium in Scarborough after his ordeal in the desert. His Turkish captors had shot him twice in the left knee, hoping that he'd die where they had left him, at their camp near an oasis, just east of Gaza. Despite torture, he'd failed to tell them of General Allenby's plans for the forthcoming battle. When the fighting started and it was clear they'd been duped, they had turned angry and scared, a combination that had resulted in their attempt at vengeance. Claire, a nurse on his ward in the sanatorium, had supervised his first attempts to loosen the damaged knee in the basement pool, and later in the lake, which ran away from the old hospital. Swimming had become part of his life, especially at night.

Grandcourt produced a clean linen handkerchief to uncork the bottle, took a sniff and sat back, repeating the exercise several times, as if gauging a fine wine. He used his cuff to clean a metal ashtray into which he poured some of the mysterious liquid. He lit his pipe and dropped the match, still alight, in the dish. The flame leapt, the combustion almost complete in the instant, so that all that was left was a drifting cloud of thin vapour.

It reminded Brooke of the ceremonial lighting of the Christmas pudding.

'Where did you say you found it?' asked Grandcourt.

That evening at sunset Brooke had slipped into the water at

his secret place, beyond a locked door where his old college kept its punts, and he'd swum against the current up into the languid channels on Coe Fen. The heat of the day had still been oppressive, and in retrospect he should have heeded the warning smell as he reached the deep pool beside the corn mill at Newnham, a spot overlooked by a riverside inn.

'One minute I was in cool, still water and then I heard it – a distinct *pop!* like a gas-ring lighting. Then I saw the fire burning on the surface. A blue flame, almost a film, just a shimmer, beautiful actually, like a layer of icy fire.'

Grandcourt raised his eyebrows at the poetry and took a fresh gulp of India Pale Ale.

'It was moving,' continued Brooke, leaning forward, dropping his voice. A group in the corner had started singing show songs and the decibel level of conversation had risen to counteract the racket.

'The edge of it, where the flame was, came right for me. So I went under and looked up, through the fire, at the sky. That's a sight. I could see the burning line moving over the surface. Walking pace, or cycling maybe. A few seconds and it was past. So I came up and got out quick on the bank by the inn.

'There was a couple there, on the grass, on a picnic rug. They looked a bit shocked. The young man admitted he'd just finished a cigarette and had thrown his stub in the water. So that's what did it.'

Brooke took an inch off his beer.

'It's petrol, surely?' he asked, resetting his pint on a dirty mat.

Grandcourt was examining the colour again. 'Maybe. But it smells odd, and looks odd. Petrol on the coupons is colourless. Extra fuel – for business, farmers and that – that's red. Rust red. Nothing like this.'

‘Can you ask about?’

‘I can try, sir.’ Grandcourt lit his pipe and was promptly obscured by smoke. His position in the department of engineering gave him access to considerable expertise – and a wide network of ‘oppos’ – his opposite numbers – in other disciplines. The deployment of so-called forensic science was currently the domain of Scotland Yard, and the Borough’s methods were largely old-fashioned, but Grandcourt gave Brooke access to the university’s collective scientific brain. It was a priceless asset.

A radio on the bar suddenly filled the room with the sound of the time pips: it was ten o’clock precisely.

The silence in the pub was church-like, as everyone braced for the worst. Brooke wondered whether Churchill’s broadcast of the previous week, in which he’d lauded the Spitfires and the Hurricanes, had hit the right note. It certainly sounded confident, assured. He’d listened to it in this very bar and in the silent beat after the final words a collective breath had been taken, before they’d all cheered.

The news broadcaster’s voice hit a similar upbeat note.

A man in the corner, filing a pipe, looked up at the radio.

‘The War Cabinet has just issued a short statement. Late last night upwards of one hundred bombers of the RAF conducted a successful raid on Berlin, dropping high explosives. The target was the German capital’s Tempelhof Airport. There were no British casualties . . .’

The cheer drowned the rest out. Brooke kept to his seat, wondering if it was wise for the RAF to bomb their capital, when the defence of their own was problematic. Grandcourt, seated too, nonetheless raised two small clenched fists beside his ears and grinned widely.

The cheers faded, but the radio was left on, playing a big band

number, possibly in the hope of drowning out the chorus in the corner.

Despite the barroom clatter, Brooke's ears registered a minute compression, a sense in which the air in the bar thickened slightly in those final seconds. The shell fell unseen through the night sky above the Kite, hurtling towards its point of impact. It was only in the final second that Brooke detected the high-pitched scream; a second in which he could think but not move, his blood still. Grandcourt had heard it too, possibly a beat before Brooke, and his mouth hung open, his pipe in his hand, his eyes lifted to the ceiling.