

*The*  
ANGEL  
*of*  
SOLANO

NORMAN HALL

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*In memory of*  
*Major Colin Kearthland-Mole*  
*12<sup>th</sup> January 1921 – 19<sup>th</sup> October 1997*



## CHAPTER 1

### West Berlin – August 1962

Harry stood at the open window, staring east over the expanse of barren land that separated the two halves of the city.

Even at 3 a.m. the night air was balmy and humid from the remnants of a scorching hot summer's day with, undoubtedly, another to follow. He'd fallen into bed naked as usual but had felt obliged to put on a pair of shorts before standing by the full-length window smoking his cigarette.

The glow from the street lamp three floors down was yellow and feeble and the street devoid of people or traffic, the absence of human activity at this time of night normal in a part of the city widely regarded as the front line. The silence was almost absolute, punctured only by the occasional and unintelligible shout in the distance and the random barking of a dog paying no heed to protocol.

Bisecting the gloom and darkness that pervaded both sides of the city, the two-hundred-metres-wide stretch of wasteland between the two concrete barriers was bathed in the glare of powerful floodlights emulating broad daylight at its edges, fading to a warm and incongruously sunny glow at its midpoint.

Harry took another long draw, held his breath for ten seconds to allow his lungs time to absorb the nicotine, then exhaled, blowing a dense cloud of noxious chemicals into the night air. The glow from his cigarette would be visible from the watchtowers situated at hundred-metre intervals in the centre of the strip but there was no danger. Not any more. He remembered a time when smoking openly and carelessly was to invite a bullet through the head, but this was no longer policy for the enemy, whoever they were, their restraint pragmatic, understood and reciprocated.

Nowadays, he could smoke with impunity; although he mused they were being told increasingly, it was bad in other ways. Now, apparently, it wasn't the stimulating and life-affirming exercise in social self-expression he'd always been led to believe, and if the newspaper adverts had been accurate, widely embraced by members of the medical profession. It had now become a lethal cocktail of poisonous carcinogens that would rapidly and inevitably result in death by a thousand illnesses.

He'd always smoked, as had everyone else he knew and it had done him no harm and anyway, how could anything that made him feel this good be so bad? One day in the future, perhaps, people would stop telling others what to do and how to live their lives. After all, wasn't that what they'd all been fighting for?

Petra had told him to stop, several times. She said he smelt like a kipper factory and chided him when alone or with friends, tediously reciting an infernal rhyme she knew would cause him maximum irritation.

*Tobacco is a filthy weed,  
That from the devil doth proceed.  
It drains your purse, it burns your clothes,  
And makes a chimney of your nose.*

He turned to look at her, lying naked, face down on top of the bed covers, arms and legs spread wide, fast asleep despite the heat, her long blonde hair trailing haphazardly across two pillows. She was probably right, and one day he would give it up. For her. But for now, he still needed it.

He watched her slow breathing and his heart filled with warmth and trepidation in equal measure. He still didn't know what she saw in him, this tortured, damaged chain-smoking automaton with his chronic depression, persistent anxiety, crushing self-doubt and multiple inadequacies, real and imagined, concealed within an impregnable shell of diffidence and dispassion.

Woefully mismatched would be his assessment, but he couldn't do without her and by all accounts, nor she him. He'd make an honest woman of her one day, God knows she'd asked him often enough, but he needed to be certain he had given her enough time to come to her senses, realise there were far better options out there. Others of her own age, who were more likely to make her happy, or at least happier than he ever could.

Under mild interrogation, he would have to confess his apparent ambivalence was more to do with a lack of self-worth than any feelings of consideration for the young woman whom he had loved and with whom he had lived for the last eighteen months. The fear of commitment, the antipathy towards stability and the constant urge to get away, to run away, was what drove him. That, and the suspicion that happiness was a cruel deceit, a precursor to disaster.

This was what challenged his thinking and dictated his behaviour, day and night, and to some extent why, as usual, he was awake at 3 a.m., knowing what the night held in store and fearful of what the day would bring.

He raised his cigarette hand up to his right shoulder and without thinking, rubbed the scar above his chest, a reflex action he carried out several times a day. Eighteen years on, it still caused him discomfort: tingling, tickling, throbbing, a constant reminder of the past, as if he needed for one minute any physical evidence of something that to this day continued to occupy his mind in every waking hour of his life. About time it healed, he thought.

The faint howl of a distant dog drew his attention back to the vista across the barren corridor between the concrete Wall on his, the western side of the city, and the barbed wire fence two hundred metres away. The "death strip".

Despite the euphoria of May 1945, the war had never really ended. No sooner had the conflict ceased and the celebrations subsided, another had been contrived to take its place. Former allies, united in a shared struggle against a common enemy and who once had greeted each other with

joy, clapped each other on the back and waved to the world in triumph at their wondrous achievement, were soon trading insults and accusations and taking up their respective positions on opposite sides of the power divide. The perpetual power struggle of mankind played out on a new board in a new game. The only difference was that now, for the time being at least, this war was cold and it was Harry's job to try to keep it that way.

He cupped what was left of his cigarette in his hand and put it to his lips for one last draw, and as he inhaled, as he relished the fragrance and his brain embraced the soporific effect of the drug and wound itself down, all hell broke loose.

A blinding shaft of light accompanied by a dull-sounding crump hit him with the intensity of a thousand white suns jolting him back to his senses. He dropped to the floor instinctively, closing his eyes a fraction too late to stop a swirling mass of kaleidoscopic imagery dancing across both retinas, expecting a hail of gunfire to strafe the window while realising at the same time that, whatever the reason for the sudden activity, it could have nothing to do with him. And he was right.

No sooner had the spotlight hit him, it swung away from his position and down onto the death strip. The room went dark again and he squinted to readjust his eyes to the contrast. He flicked his cigarette butt out of the window and crawled forward onto the narrow balcony, straining his still impaired vision to try to work out what was happening.

At the far side of the strip a group of dark figures – soldiers and dogs – lumbered into view, shouting and barking amidst the random crack of handguns and, fifty yards ahead of them, a single bulky figure, running, ducking and weaving, staggering its way towards him, halfway across the wasteland, illuminated clearly in the vector of two spotlights. A runner.

A single crack from a sniper rifle – the new Dragunov, Harry judged from his weapons training – echoed and reverberated in the night and he watched in horror as the



running figure threw both arms in the air, its body propelled forward in a wild leap like an acrobat in a macabre circus show. The body hit the ground heavily and bounced once before lying still.

“Harry? What is it?” Petra, suddenly awake, was sitting up and staring at him in shock and confusion.

“Get down!” he hissed at her, gesticulating with one hand. “It’s a runner, but I think they got him.”

“Oh God.”

But as he returned his attention to the death strip where the body lay inert, he saw it magically leap to its feet and resume its crazy trajectory towards the Wall.

“Wait! He’s up. My God, how come...?”

He watched transfixed, willing the figure on, and caught a glimpse of the dogs loose at the other end, bounding across the land, vaulting the concrete tank barriers set out across the mid-point, barking and slavering in pursuit of their prey. A bullet would surely be preferable, he thought, to being overpowered and savaged by a pack of Dobermanns. He guessed the sniper must have been caught off guard, assuming his work was done, but the figure had only gone another twenty yards when the Dragunov cracked again, and again, the figure flew forward.

“Shit. He’s down again. There’s no way he can take two bullets like that.”

“Harry! Come away from the window!” screamed Petra.

“They aren’t shooting at me.”

“Even so, please!”

“My God, he’s up again. Go on, man!” Harry shouted involuntarily into the void and waved a fist in the air. “Go on!” He felt Petra behind him, her arms clasped around his chest, her cheek on his back, the heat of her body pressing against him.

“Oh, no, it’s terrible. I can’t bear to watch.”

The sniper had stopped firing. The dogs were getting closer and would no doubt finish the job. Harry clenched both fists and his forearm muscles strained. He desperately

wanted to help but there was nothing he could do. The runner was only ten yards from the Wall and would, in an instant, be out of view but Harry knew there was no way to scale its smooth sides and the dogs would be on him within ten seconds.

A roar of an engine and swinging headlights appeared in the empty street below. An open-topped Land Rover carrying four uniformed military police screeched to a halt and the two MPs perched on the back leapt out onto the road, one of them carrying a coiled rope knotted at two-foot intervals. His partner looped the other end over a tow bar on the back of the vehicle before he threw the rope in a lazy arc over the twelve-foot Wall. Both men took up position with their backs to the Wall, one shouting something unintelligible, the words drowned out by the revving engine.

An arm went up, was held for a few seconds and then brought swiftly down. The vehicle spun its tires, its nose lifting momentarily off the ground as it jerked into life, engine roaring, dragging the knotted rope back over the Wall.

Harry watched in astonishment as the end of the rope suddenly appeared over the rounded top of the Wall with the runner attached to its end. The figure released his grip in mid-air and, with arms and legs cartwheeling manically, sailed over the Wall, landing with a hideous thud and a shriek of agony on the road below.

“Holy shit! The guy just flew over the bloody Wall! There are MPs down there trying to pick him up but it looks like he’s injured himself.”

“He’s alive?” said Petra, daring to peer around Harry’s shoulder to catch a glimpse of the scene below.

“It’s not possible. Two bullets in the back and a twenty-foot drop onto hard cobbles. If he’s not dead he’s Superman.”

Petra kept her body concealed behind Harry, suddenly aware she was naked in front of a full-length window and they both watched in fascination as the MPs roughly hauled

the semi-conscious body into the back of the Land Rover, stowed the rope and took off at speed.

“Unbelievable!” said Harry, rubbing his jaw with his left hand, his heart beating furiously. He reached behind him and put an arm around Petra’s shoulder. They could still hear the Dobermanns barking on the other side of the Wall, accompanied by a few shouts in German and, in an instant, the dogs fell silent, apart from the odd whimper: the sound of failure. The floodlights went out abruptly and the strip fell back into relative darkness. He turned to her and as she gripped him tightly, he kissed her head. She was shaking.

“What kind of world is this we live in?” she said softly.

“The same as we ever did.”

“But when will it end? How long before we see how wrong we all are?”

“I don’t know.”

“Sometimes I want to get away, Harry. Away from all of this. There has to be something better.”

“This is your home.”

“And I hate it. What kind of a home is this? For anyone? We had hopes for the future. Hopes that the dark days were gone. But now I can only see hatred and misery.”

Harry sighed deeply. He had never heard Petra say anything so pessimistic, so fatalistic. He needed her optimism. Her grounded reality. It was only too easy for him to succumb, to acquiesce in the despondency of his life. It provided him the excuse he needed, to be who he was. But she’d been a beacon of hope and in truth it was what kept him going when, in other circumstances, he might either have ended it, or turned to something darker, submitting to the will of his demons, justification for his own torment. If Petra were to believe herself lost, then surely he would too.

“C’mon. Back to bed.”

He picked her up in his arms and carried her to the bed, laid her down and she pulled a single cotton sheet over herself. He reached for another cigarette from the bedside table.

“Please don’t.”

He sighed again, put the packet down and got under the sheet beside her. She snuggled up closely and he inhaled her scent.

“I love you, Harry Male,” she whispered quietly as she dropped off to sleep.

Harry didn’t respond. He didn’t think he needed to. She knew he loved her. How could he not? She was twenty-eight and he, forty-two. Any man would give his right arm to have someone so beautiful in his bed, in his house, in his life. But he was a man of few words, the fewer the better, he always said. Words mean nothing. Actions speak louder, so when you need words, make them count.

He stared at the ceiling, craving nicotine, and thought again about the runner. Wondered whether he was on a slab somewhere or if, by some miracle, he was drinking hot tea and whisky, exchanging jokes with a bunch of squaddies. He would try to find out tomorrow, but for now, he was left with his thoughts and waited for sleep either to release him or cast him back into the past.

But as ever, and prompted by the drama outside his window, the memory came flooding back, replaying the same events time and again, always with the same conclusion – that being, there was no conclusion at all. An endless loop in which he played out each step, knowing full well how it would end, but hoping perhaps to see something new, something seminal, something that finally might give closure. The darkness and silence of the night slowly enveloped Harry Male and left him alone with his demons.

## CHAPTER 2

### Italy – March 1944

Dawn was breaking as the convoy of trucks and armoured vehicles crossed the pontoon bridge over the Ambrone River, twenty miles due south of the ancient town of Montellano. Hundreds of bedraggled troops of various nationalities trudged wearily back the way they had come two days earlier, their hard-fought gains squandered in half the time and their strength further depleted. The Allied push for Rome had been halted yet again.

German panzer divisions still occupied the high ground and, despite their overwhelming superiority in firepower and personnel, the Allied armies had failed to break through the extensive fortifications, and when they did, often succumbed to counter-attack. The mountainous terrain not only constituted a natural barrier for the invading forces, it afforded the enemy a natural observation post from which to monitor the advance of the Allies from the south and to direct artillery fire with uncanny accuracy.

Second Lieutenant Harry Male, twenty-four, winced in the chill wind of the winter's morning, pulled his greatcoat collar up around his neck and turned to check on his platoon, whose members followed dutifully behind. They were down to sixteen now, having lost Forbes and Alcott in yesterday's ignominious retreat from the village. His men were subdued and demoralised and would remain that way for a day or so until thrown into action again, when they could vent their anger and possibly exact some revenge on their enemy.

Harry's men knew exactly what lay in store and were battle hardened enough to know it wouldn't be easy. The same thing all over again. He had instructions to brief them once they'd reached their makeshift garrison at Moscusio, by which time the aerial bombardment of Montellano would be

well underway. The ancient town stood in the way of the Allied push towards Rome and had so far proven to be impregnable, each assault by ground forces repulsed with ease, such that the military high command had determined Montellano would be completely destroyed from the air.

“Come on, chaps,” said Harry, “another couple of miles and there’ll be hot tea, bacon sarnies and most important of all, clean socks.”

“It’s not me socks I’m worried about, sir,” offered Sergeant Bill Fraser, twice Harry’s age and veteran of Ypres.

“Thank you, Sergeant, we don’t need to know about the state of your nether regions.”

“Hey, Sarge,” piped up Corporal Joe Fleming, “maybe you should march at the back. Me and the boys are finding it a bit whiffy back here.”

“Shut it, Fleming.”

“Told you it was horse that geezer was flogging. And it was well dead.” Corporal Fleming laughed at his own joke and one or two of the others joined in, which only encouraged him to continue. “I reckon it’d been dead a month. Weren’t no rump steak, that’s for sure.”

“I ain’t telling you again, Corporal.”

But Fleming fancied himself as the joker in the platoon and he was on a roll.

“Every time you fart, the rest of us duck thinking it’s another one of them Stukas comin’ over.”

Fraser stopped abruptly and turned to confront his junior NCO, but he was interrupted by a familiar whistling noise that grew rapidly to a crescendo and they all looked to the sky. There was a whoosh over their heads.

“Down!” shouted Harry and the entire platoon dropped to the ground like synchronised acrobats. The shell landed with a deafening explosion in the field fifty yards behind them, throwing up a plume of grass, soil and stones that slowly fell back to earth, pummelling their backs and helmets like giant hailstones. They lay still for a second expecting another, but as was often the case, it was a random attack.

“Bloody hell, that was a close one,” grunted Fraser, but to his intense frustration, Fleming, face down in the dirt, was still chuckling.

“Blimey, Sarge. That was a ripper!” Some of the others chuckled with him.

“Enough, Corporal,” barked Harry, getting to his feet, though he too thought it was funny. “C’mon, let’s get going before the bastards get their eye in.”

They trudged on and Harry noticed a church a half-mile distant, its steeple standing tall and proud amidst the devastated olive groves and vines that surrounded it. He wondered fleetingly whether God was choosy about which house of worship took a hit from one of his creation’s creations, but dismissed it as pure luck. He had no time for religious mumbo-jumbo; you just had to look around to see how pointless it all was, how deluded his followers were.

The road curved to the right and they came to a lop-sided road sign that forlornly announced their arrival in Solano. Harry remembered passing through a couple of days ago, noting at the time there were few buildings or features to suggest it had a population of any size or that it was indeed a village at all. But his attention was drawn to a commotion up ahead where a small group of soldiers appeared to be in heated debate.

An elderly man in saggy black cord trousers, crumpled brown jacket and waistcoat, cloth cap gripped in both hands, was gesticulating and jabbering incoherently in Italian at the men and they were doing their level best to ignore him. He seemed particularly agitated with one of them, who lifted his arm as if to swat him away like a fly, before another interjected and pushed the old boy to the ground. Harry frowned and broke into a run.

“Oi!” he shouted and the soldiers turned to look back at him in disdain. He reached them in seconds. There were four of them and they looked surly and disinterested, bodies slouching, weight on one leg, defiant. “Who’s in command

here?" The silence betrayed a semblance of guilt. "Well? Speak up!"

"No one. He's dead," said the largest of the four, a tall, thickset private with three days' stubble, insubordination clearly on display.

"Stand to attention!" Harry barked and the four soldiers snapped out of their torpor as his own platoon caught up behind him. He took a step towards the large one.

"What's your name, Private?"

"Dawson, sir."

"Okay, Dawson, what's going on here?"

"Crazy old Eyetie," said Dawson, gesturing to the prostrate figure. "Been pissing us off."

The man tried to get up but was clearly having difficulty, panting and mumbling incoherently in Italian.

"Sergeant. Help the gentleman."

"Yes, sir!"

Fraser knelt down and put a hand under the old boy's arm and lifted him to his feet. He resumed his animated babbling.

*"Signore, signore, per favore aiutatemi... per favore."*

"*Momento, signore,*" said Harry in his best Italian, holding a palm up at the man, who was now hopping from one foot to another, still wringing his cap. Another whistle, another whoosh. "Down!"

The ground shook as the shell hit, this time in the field to their left and when Harry lifted his head, he saw all the men flat out except for the old boy, who was still on his feet, seemingly unperturbed by the explosion, still agitated and pleading.

*"Per favore aiutatemi..."*

Harry got up and brushed some mud from his coat.

"Dawson!"

"Yes, sir."

*"Signore, per favore..."*

"*Momento!*" shouted Harry at the man in irritation. "Take your men off. At the double. I'll talk to you later."

"Yes, sir!"



Both he and Dawson knew this was an idle threat. There was little or no chance of them meeting up again but it wasn't the time or place for any dressing-down and the incident would be forgotten in no time. Dawson and his colleagues didn't hesitate, turning on their heels and jogging away, one hand instinctively on helmet, rifles drooping. The man grabbed Harry's arm.

*"Signore, per favore..."*

Fraser stepped in, raising the butt of his rifle. "Oi! Let go of the officer, you grubby old wop." The man flinched, cowed in fear.

"Sergeant! That's enough!" shouted Harry, increasingly frustrated. Fraser lowered his rifle and the man looked back at Harry. His eyes were bloodshot and tearful, his lips quivering and his body shaking in desperation, but for what, Harry could only guess. He'd learned all his Italian from the last three months in Sicily and it still amounted to little more than a couple of pleasantries and the ability to order two beers. He rustled up enough to ask him what the problem was.

*"Cosa c'è?"*

*"Mia figlia sta molto male."*

Harry shook his head. He had no idea what the man was saying and realised they were not going to have a sensible conversation in Italian. Harry looked the old boy up and down. He was probably only in his late fifties, but the terrors and hardships of the last four of years of war had clearly taken their toll.

"Wilkins!"

"Yes, sir!" Private Marco Wilkins, nineteen, pushed his way forward. Yorkshire dad, Italian mum.

"What's this man saying?"

"He says his daughter's ill, sir."

"What does he mean, ill?"

Wilkins translated and the man responded anxiously.

*"Sta per avere un bambino."*

"She's having a baby, sir."

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