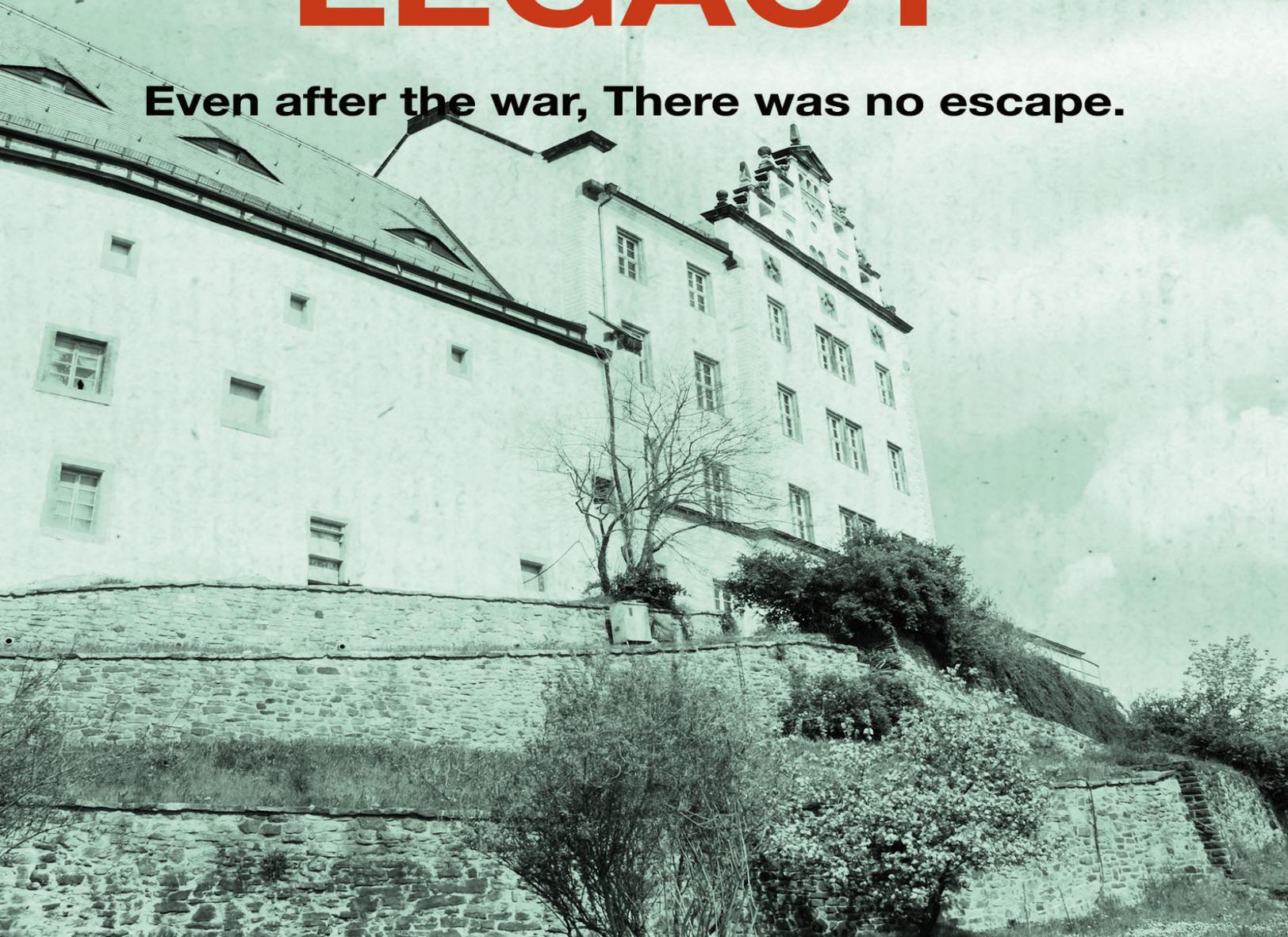


GUY WALTERS

THE COLDITZ LEGACY

Even after the war, There was no escape.



About the Book

Germany 1941. Two British officers, Hugh Hartley and Malcolm Royce, achieved what many believed to be impossible. They escaped from Oflag IVC, better known as Colditz Castle. But as they are about to cross the border into Switzerland, and within yards of reaching freedom, Royce is shot. He begs Hartley to go on and save himself. Wracked with guilt, Hartley leaves his friend behind.

London, 1973. Thirty years later and Hartley is now a senior MI6 officer. When a shadowy contact tips him off that Royce may still be alive, and still being held in Colditz - now a lunatic asylum - Hartley is desperate to discover what really happened to his friend. He plans a perilous mission to break back into Colditz, but the truth he will find there will be more shocking than he could possibly have imagined.

About the Author

Guy Walters is the author of six books on the Second World War, including *Berlin Games*. A former journalist on *The Times*, he writes widely on historical topics for the national press. He lives in Wiltshire with his wife, the author Annabel Venning, and their two children.

For more information on Guy Walters and his books, visit his website at www.guywalters.com

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THE COLDITZ LEGACY

Guy Walters

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This book is for
ALICE

Prologue

East Germany, 1973

FRÄULEIN ERICA GARTNER threw her half-finished cigarette on to the damp cobbles, where it hissed briefly before expelling its last curl of smoke. The steepness of the hill meant that her lungs required air, and she regretted obeying the craving that had made her light up as she walked through the market square. She had done this climb five days a week for the past six years, and it had never got any easier. When the weather was very bad – which it often was – Fräulein Gartner found it hard to keep her balance, and on a few occasions she had slipped and dirtied her uniform. The ward sisters were always unsympathetic to her excuses, telling her she was clumsy, and nobody else seemed to fall over, did they?

This morning Fräulein Gartner knew she was going to slip. Last night's storm had made the cobbles particularly slippery, and the worn soles of her shoes afforded her almost no grip. She held her arms slightly away from her body in an effort to secure more balance, an act of gentle gymnastics that drew the smirking attention of a couple of overcoated men, who were watching her through two smeary holes they had wiped on their fugged-up windscreen.

Fräulein Gartner stopped when she saw them, her progress arrested by sudden panic. She knew who they were – not their names, of course – but where they were from. It wasn't always so easy to spot Stasi men, but sometimes secret policemen weren't so secret. Perhaps it was deliberate. Perhaps they wanted people to know they were being watched.

But who were they watching? Fräulein Gartner wondered. Was it her? No, not now, not after so long. That was all in the past: they had forgiven her, had told her that such 'political errors' were normal for a girl of her age. They had taken the radio, sent her a receipt for it, and that had been that. Yet what had they said to her back then? 'Fräulein Gartner, one day we may need you to perform a service for us, and we will expect you to do it.' She remembered the man who told her, a young captain - quite handsome, in fact - with hair slicked back like a movie star from the West, one of the stars she was supposed never to have heard of. He had seemed friendly, but there was a certainty in his voice, a directness of tone, reinforced by the exact way in which he kept his fingertips pressed firmly together. Was now the time, this Thursday morning, when they would finally call upon her?

Fräulein Gartner looked up at the car, partly expecting to see the face of the captain. The men were still staring at her, still smiling. What at? Was there something funny about her? Or something funny about what they were going to do to her? She imagined them getting out of the car, seizing her by the arms and hustling her into the back, there to be driven to Leipzig to face the same captain in the same interrogation room. Was that what they found so funny?

She continued walking, doing her best not to let her eyes flit towards the car as she edged closer. She sensed that the men were still smiling - was that a laugh? She concentrated on the cobbles. Just keep going, ignore them, don't lose grip.

Eventually, and without slipping, she made it past the car. She visibly relaxed, her shoulders dropping down. So they weren't looking for her, after all. Perhaps they just happened to be parked there for no reason, or maybe they were looking for someone else. Who? No one sprang to mind; she hadn't heard that anyone was in trouble.

She carried on up the hill and, slightly breathless, arrived at the main gate to the hospital. It was gloomy, she thought, this old castle, dirty, huge and cold. Hardly a place to make people feel better, more a place to shut them away and forget about them. There were lots here, mostly men who had lost their minds in the war and spent days gazing out of windows across the damp countryside.

She presented her pass at the little office under the first arch. It was Frau Munt this morning, the usual Glatt cigarette wedged between her yellow teeth, the office reeking of countless other Glatts.

‘Good morning,’ said Fräulein Gartner, and Frau Munt grunted, raising an indifferent eye to a pass that had been presented to her month after month, year after year.

‘Did you see the men in the car?’ Fräulein Gartner asked.

‘I did.’

‘Why are they here? Are they looking for someone?’

‘A new patient is coming,’ said Frau Munt. ‘From Berlin. Someone important, I hear. You’d do well to keep your nose down this morning.’

‘Who’s the patient?’

‘How the hell should I know?’ Frau Munt replied, and with that she stuck her fat head back into the pages of her thin magazine.

Fräulein Gartner put her pass back into her small handbag and walked into the main hospital courtyard. She strolled thoughtfully across it, ignoring the looming great centuries-old edifice that surrounded her. A new patient? From Berlin? She expected it was a senior official – they had a few in here, and the staff were threatened with imprisonment if they mentioned their presence.

She reached the bottom of a small spiral staircase and waited for the set of footsteps coming down to materialise into the figure of Dr Petersen.

‘Good morning, Fräulein Gartner!’

Dr Petersen was cheery and handsome, and she had a soft spot for him. It was pointless – the man was happily married with two teenage boys – but, still, she could not help it.

‘Good morning, Doctor,’ she replied, blushing.

‘Horrible morning.’

‘Yes, yes, it is.’

Petersen walked off into the courtyard, no doubt aware that her eyes were boring into his back. Fräulein Gartner let out a small, rueful sigh, and climbed the steps to the third floor. She stepped into a wide corridor, along which lay the entrances to eight wards.

The sister was walking towards her, anxiety on her face. ‘I want everything to be perfect today,’ she said. ‘We’ve got a new patient from Berlin.’

‘So I hear.’

The sister ignored her. ‘We’ve been told to take great care of him, and I’d like him to be your responsibility, Nurse Gartner.’

Fräulein Gartner nodded. She hated patients like this. She far preferred the anonymous men, those with no names. No one expected them to make any progress, but when they did it was always most satisfying. But with the important patients, there was always some pressure on for a result, even if everyone knew it was impossible.

‘When is he arriving, Sister?’

‘At twelve o’clock.’

Fräulein Gartner spent her morning on her usual duties, and even managed to make old Hirschfeld smile. She had told him a joke she had recently heard, and at first she thought he had not understood: his face remained set in its usual blankness. But then his eyes crinkled, and his lips turned upwards, and he smiled a great smile, albeit one with only a few teeth in it.

At five minutes to twelve, the sister bustled up and down the corridor ensuring that everything was indeed perfect, and told Nurse Gartner to stand by the new patient's bed. He was a little late, but when he appeared he was escorted by two armed guards, whose presence was unusual but not entirely unexpected. The patient looked like a nice man, Fräulein Gartner thought, although he had a haunted expression on his face - one that she had seen all too often.

'Nurse,' said the sister, 'this is Herr Knopf. He will be under your personal care from now on.'

'Hello, Herr Knopf,' said Fräulein Gartner, smiling.

Herr Knopf smiled back weakly. He was in his fifties, she thought, although a lot of his hair was missing. He walked with a slight stoop, and when he got into bed, it was clear that it was a relief to be off his feet. The two guards left the room, along with the sister, and Fräulein Gartner was alone with her new patient. This was strange, she thought. She had been told nothing about Herr Knopf, not even what was wrong with him. Who was he? she wondered. He looked too nice to be a politician or a member of the Stasi. She didn't want to ask, because he might still wield an immense amount of power, which he could use to have her dismissed or locked up for asking prying questions.

Even if she had wanted to question him, it would not have been possible: within a couple of minutes he had fallen asleep. He was almost like a little boy now that his face had lost the haunted look.

The sleep-talking started a few minutes later, accompanied by much tossing and turning. It began as an indistinct mumble, but soon developed into a shout. Fräulein Gartner did not understand the words because they were not German. What were they? French? English?

'Put me down! You go over - you go!'

Fräulein Gartner rushed to the bed and held him. She did not want to shake him awake because that might frighten him. She stroked his forehead, and uttered some comforting

phrases. The man's eyes snapped open, and he looked up at her quizzically. 'Where am I?' he asked in English.

'I'm sorry,' said Fräulein Gartner, 'I do not understand you. Can you speak German?'

The man blinked a few times, then nodded.

'Where am I?' he asked in German.

'You're in hospital,' she said. 'It's all right. Everything's all right.'

'Which hospital?'

'Why does it matter?'

'Which hospital?'

'Well, it's called Colditz.'

At that, the colour drained from Herr Knopf's face.

Chapter One

April 1941

HUGH HARTLEY GLANCED at his watch. Quarter to eleven. They would be here soon. A few thousand German troops were somewhere over there, just a few miles to the north, accompanied by God knew how many planes and tanks. How long would it take them? A few hours? A day? The Germans didn't keep a timetable, but they might as well have done. So far they had steamed through Greece in a matter of weeks, passing effortlessly through towns and villages. Some said they were unstoppable, a view to which Hartley secretly subscribed but never voiced, certainly not in front of the men.

The men. They were working hard and quickly, the underside of the bridge now bearing at least a dozen charges. That would stop them, thought Hartley, at least for a while. So far they hadn't fired a shot, let alone seen a German, but to blow up this bridge would make them feel as if they were getting their own back, especially after yesterday's Stuka attack. Some of the men bore wounds from the rocks that had been chipped up by the plane's machine-gun fire. A bandage wrapped round Corporal Stephenson's head revealed that he had been the worst hit, closely followed by Sergeant Franklin, whose upper arm was still oozing red and yellow. It was remarkable that nobody had been directly hit, torn to pieces, like some of the olive trees under which they had hidden.

Hartley's only casualty was his sunglasses, which had been crushed as he landed in a ditch. It was not for some ten minutes after the Stuka had departed that he had felt the jabbing pain in his left side - the sharp shards of lens

piercing through shirt and skin. He had looked down, seen the blood, assumed for a panicky moment that he had been hit, then had pincered out a twisted mass of Christmas present from Sarah. He had thrown them back into the ditch, vowing that he would never tell her what had happened. 'Pinched in Athens,' he would say, 'some bloody urchin.'

'How are we doing, S'arnt Franklin?'

'Nearly there, sir.'

'How soon is "nearly"?''

Franklin shrugged his shoulders. 'Five minutes, sir, maybe ten.'

'Make it five,' said Hartley.

'Sir.'

Hartley squinted up into the blue, expecting to see another Stuka. The attack had unnerved him, its full enormity only now dawning on him. A man he had never met had tried to kill him yesterday. Yes, yes, he knew that that was what this was all about, what all his training had taught him, but there it was: a feeling of total dread. It was hard not showing it to the men, who were presumably trying to cope in the same way he was. Some had made light of it, even joked about it as they crammed into the one lorry that hadn't been hit, but no one had slept well last night. Young Private Bell had had a nightmare and had woken up screaming. Franklin had calmed him down in his brutal fashion, saying that if Private Bell didn't shut it right now, Franklin would stick his fist in his gob. That had done the trick, Hartley recalled.

Hartley estimated that the bridge had a hundred-foot span. A murky river flowed a couple of hundred feet below in no hurry to get to the sea. The banks were steep, and it would be impossible for the Germans to get their armour across with the bridge demolished. They would have to take a thirty-mile detour up and down the valley just to get back to the point where Hartley was standing. That should delay

them by at least a day - or longer, if any of the infantry units managed to hold them up. There were some New Zealanders around here somewhere, good sorts, tough. Who knows? Perhaps they might finally stop them.

Another glance at the watch. Coming up for ten to. This was taking far too long. Hartley strode over to the side of the bridge. The men were busying themselves beneath it, attaching the detonator cord between the charges. They were doing a good job, had placed the explosives exactly where Hartley had told them - on the cross struts where the damage would be greatest: he had heard too many stories of the Germans repairing bridges in a few hours. Well, that wasn't going to happen with this one. They were going to blow the whole bloody thing into the sky. What was more, watching it would be fun.

'This is looking good, S'arnt Franklin.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Franklin, who was scrabbling up the slope with the detonator cable wrapped round a wooden reel.

Hartley leant down, held out his hand and heaved him up the last few feet.

'Thank you, sir.'

Hartley studied Franklin's arm. The bandage was disconcertingly filthy. Hartley had told Franklin that he didn't have to perform gymnastics under the bridge, but Franklin had insisted that he did his bit, as Hartley had known he would.

'How's your arm?'

Franklin briefly inspected it. 'It'll be all right, sir.'

'Not if you don't get it dressed it won't,' said Hartley. 'Get Miller to look at it after we've done this.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good. I don't want you getting back to Derbyshire minus an arm.'

Franklin smiled. 'No, sir. My wife would be most unhappy.'

Hartley smiled back, allowing himself a second's thought about Sarah. He snapped himself out of it. 'Anyway, are we ready?' he asked.

'Yes, sir. Here's the cable.'

Hartley took it, then stepped backwards, feeding it out slowly from the reel. He was tempted to run with it, but he knew that that might nick the cable and cause it to fail. As it was, half of this bloody equipment was unreliable, no doubt stored in some damp quartermaster's stores in Croydon for the best part of ten years, then several weeks in a boat, a few months in a store outside Alexandria, more weeks in a boat, then rattled in a lorry along the worst roads the Greeks could offer.

The men, who looked in no better condition, now joined Franklin on the road. They were tired and their ten young faces had aged over the past few weeks. The rest of Hartley's unit, another twenty men, had been sent south to act as infantrymen rather than as sappers. Hartley had protested, but Major George had said it wasn't his decision, and that as far as he could work out it was nobody's decision, but there it was, Captain, so just get on with it, would you?

'Come on, get over here!' Hartley shouted, waving the men towards him.

'Quickly!' yelled Franklin.

The men ran, clearly having to coax their reluctant legs into action.

Hartley stopped unwinding the cable after fifty yards.

'Right,' he said, to no one in particular. 'This should do. Who's got the plunger?'

'Here, sir,' said Bell, passing him the small charger.

Hartley looked at the battered black box with disdain. The chances of it working were slim. With his pocket knife, he stripped away some of the cable's covering to reveal two strands of copper wire, which he now attached to the two terminals on the charger. Franklin watched him, the

occasional bead of sweat dropping off his nose. Hartley had no problem with the sergeant's close attention - after all, the man was a far better engineer than he was.

'That look good to you, S'arnt?'

'Dandy, sir.'

Dandy? It was as if they were building a train set, thought Hartley. 'Well, the proof of the pudding is in the exploding.' He turned to the men. 'All right, we're live.'

The men crouched down. There was no doubting that all of them were gaining boyish excitement from this. Who wouldn't?

Hartley lifted the plunger. Please let the buggering thing work.

He pressed it down firmly and steeled himself for the explosion.

Nothing.

'Shit!' said Hartley.

He lifted up the plunger and brought it down again. 'Come on! What's wrong with this bloody thing?'

Franklin wiped his nose. 'Dirt, sir?'

'Your guess is as good as mine.'

Hartley pressed the plunger up and down several more times, his temper rising with the tempo. Don't lose your rag, he told himself. You know it'll work eventually. 'All right, Franklin, we'll have to take it apart. You do that while I check the charges and the cord. The men can stay put.'

'Sir!'

Hartley passed the plunger to Franklin and walked slowly along the length of the white cable. This was infuriating. Because of some ropy piece of kit, the Germans were going to have a *laissez-passer* across the river. For the want of a nail . . . Hartley studied the cable with care, brushing aside the occasional stone with the toe of his boot. It looked fine. The problem had to be with the damn plunger. He reached the bridge and half slid, half walked down the bank to the

bridge's supports. Once again, as far as Hartley could tell, the cable was intact. It had to be the plunger.

Bent double, fingertips pressed to the ground so that he kept his balance, Hartley made his way back up the bank. Franklin was being assisted by Corporal Stephenson, both men kneeling over the dismembered plunger, a selection of tools on the ground beside them.

'Any joy?'

Franklin turned his head as Hartley approached him. He was smiling, thank God. 'Just a loose wire, sir. There's tons of dust and all sorts of crap in here. We're just giving it a clean, and then—'

'Good!' Hartley interrupted. 'But you don't have to make it spotless.'

'Yes, sir.'

Franklin continued to busy himself with the plunger. Hartley allowed himself another look at his watch. It was precisely eleven o'clock. So far, this had taken just over an hour - far too long. Many of the men were smoking, chatting idly in the sun. He knew he should be making them clean the lorry, but they deserved the break: they had worked hard. Was he too soft on them? Perhaps. Some of his fellow officers were real martinets. Hartley always suspected that the strictest were in some way the weakest, those whose authority came from the pips on their shoulders and not from within. It was hard, near impossible, to find the right balance.

Hartley did not hear the car immediately. He should have done, because the air was still and the sound was out of place.

'Sir!'

Hartley heard Franklin's shout at the same time as he heard the vehicle. With his left hand, he unbuttoned his holster hurriedly, and with the right he withdrew his revolver, all the time keeping his gaze fixed on the road on the other side of the bridge. 'Get back!' he shouted.

Hartley did not turn to check that his order was obeyed: he knew his men would need little encouragement to find whatever cover was available.

He pointed the revolver down the length of the bridge, listening to the increasing volume of the engine. It sounded close, very close, just round the bend before the bridge. The engine was screaming for its driver to change up a gear. Who the hell could it be? A German reconnaissance unit? No, they wouldn't be making so much noise.

Hartley noticed that the gun was shaking in his hand as he eased off the safety catch. His legs were weak, almost ready to buckle. This is pathetic, he told himself, but he couldn't control his muscles. He had to keep composed, not give in to his body, which was telling him to flee, to duck down the bank next to the bridge and hide.

The vehicle came into view, a trail of thick, sandy dust chasing behind it. Hartley's right index finger tightened over the trigger. As it started to cross the bridge, he could see the make of vehicle clearly - it was a jeep, a bloody jeep. Nevertheless, he kept his revolver pointing towards it, aiming at the driver's side of the windscreen. It could easily be a trap, some sort of German trick. The driver must be able to see him, he thought, so why the hell wasn't he slowing down?

Even if Hartley fired, he knew that his chance of hitting the driver was slight. He just had to hope the driver saw him and the gun, then slowed down. The jeep was now halfway across the bridge, with only fifty yards to go. Should he fire? What if it was a British soldier? Hartley strained his eyes to see the man through the windscreen, but the reflection made it opaque. The jeep roared on, engine still complaining. He had to fire: there was no choice. Whoever was driving it, enemy or not, was trouble.

Hartley took a brief aim at the left of the windscreen and squeezed the trigger. The revolver kicked up in his clenched hands, and the windscreen shattered. The driver was visible

now - he was wearing a British uniform. Hartley could just about make out the wide-eyed, frantic look on his face. Suddenly, the jeep slowed violently, then swerved, crashing into the side of the bridge. Hartley held his breath as he watched it splinter through the flimsy wooden barrier.

'Oh, God,' he exhaled.

The jeep halted, its front wheels hanging over the side of the bridge. The driver was thrust forward, face and chest smashed into the steering-wheel. Hartley ran forward, pistol still at the ready. He could see that the man was a captain, but what was more important was his precarious position. He was motionless, his head lying drunkenly over the rim of the wheel.

Hartley shoved his revolver back into its holster. He ran round the jeep and attempted to open the driver's door, but it was wedged shut. He leant over the door and grabbed the man by the back of his tunic, pulling him as gently as he could. The man collapsed into the seat, his thin face a mass of cuts and bruises. A small amount of blood trickled from his mouth. Surely he hadn't killed him?

'Can you hear me?' Hartley shouted.

There was no reply.

Hartley looked back down the bridge towards the men. 'Miller!' he yelled.

The officer came to about fifteen minutes later. Corporal Miller told Hartley that, apart from the cuts, he was suffering from no more than some bad bruising on his chest. The bleeding had been caused by the loss of a tooth. His tunic was spotted with blood.

'Aha!' exclaimed Hartley. 'Here he comes!'

The man's eyes opened slowly and adjusted to the midday light.

Although he was relieved that the soldier was still alive, Hartley was furious with him. What the hell had he thought he was playing at, driving like that? He must be unhinged.

Or scared. Then there was the small matter of the bridge, which still needed to be destroyed.

‘Can you hear me?’

The man opened his mouth a little. ‘Yes,’ he croaked.

‘What’s your name?’

The man paused.

‘Your *name*,’ Hartley insisted.

‘Royce,’ said the man. ‘Malcolm Royce.’

‘Can you prove it?’

The man reached inside his tunic, but the movement caused him pain.

‘All right,’ said Hartley. ‘I’ll get it.’

Hartley unbuttoned the tunic, reached inside and pulled out a brown leather wallet. He flicked it open, and got out the man’s identity card. Hartley frowned. Although the name and face matched, the man shouldn’t have been carrying the card so near to the front line – it carried far too much information. He replaced it. There was a photograph of a woman in a WRNS uniform in the wallet too, and he took it out. She was stunning, he thought.

‘Who’s this?’

‘Jackie. My sister.’

Hartley had expected it to be a sweetheart. ‘Nice-looking, if I may say so.’

Royce’s face did not register.

‘Where’re you and she from?’ asked Hartley.

‘Near Gillingham.’

‘Which one?’

Royce didn’t pause. ‘Dorset, of course.’

Hartley slipped the photograph back into the wallet. If the man was a spy, he was well trained.

‘You got an identity disc?’

Royce lifted a hand to his neck and tugged at a black leather bootlace. Hartley pulled out a small metal disc. Once more, Royce’s identity was confirmed, and that he was

blood group O. There were many more questions he wanted to ask, but this was not the time.

He stood up. 'Get him in the back of the lorry, would you, Miller?'

'Sir.'

Hartley walked over to where Franklin and Stephenson were waiting with the plunger.

'All right, S'arnt?'

'I think so, sir.'

'Good. Let's get a move on.'

Once more, Hartley informed the men that they were live. Franklin passed the plunger to Hartley.

'No, Sergeant, why don't you do it? You could do with a present to make up for your arm.'

Franklin grinned. 'You sure, sir?'

'No. But do it now before I change my mind.'

Franklin lifted the plunger's handle. 'Apologies to all those fine Greeks who built this bridge,' he said, then slammed down the handle.

There was a pause, and then an almighty blast filled the air. The bridge leapt a few feet, causing the jeep to dislodge and fall. The ground shook and, with a grinding sound, the bridge collapsed, replacing itself with a thick cloud of dust and debris. The men cheered. They deserved it, thought Hartley, after all they'd done.

But now it was time to go and find the next valley, the next bridge. He would talk to the new arrival in the lorry.

It was clear that every jolt caused Royce immense pain, despite Miller's dispensation of two large aspirins. Nevertheless, Hartley was determined to find out what had caused him to be driving so insanely fast in a jeep on his own.

'So, what happened, Royce?'

The two men sat in the lorry's cab. Private Bell was driving them down a succession of ludicrously sharp bends, on one

side of which there were nearly sheer drops of a few hundred feet. Hartley had found that the best way to deal with any sort of incipient acrophobia was simply to look straight ahead.

Royce didn't reply.

'Come on, man,' said Hartley, 'don't tell me you've got amnesia.'

'I wish I had,' said Royce.

'Go on.'

'They were all killed.'

'Who?'

'My men. All of them.'

'How?'

Hartley turned to look at Royce: his face was expressionless.

'Two bloody great tanks. We were in a church and they destroyed it. Collapsed on top of us.'

'Jeeesus!' Bell exclaimed.

'Quiet, Private!' snapped Hartley.

Bell cleared his throat. 'Sorry, sir.'

'So how did you get out?'

Royce's eyes were glassy, moist. 'I was taking a leak. I didn't think it was right to pee in a church.'

Hartley nodded. 'I see. So, you decided to go outside even though there were tanks about?'

'I didn't know about the bloody tanks! For God's sake, man, what are you accusing me of?'

'Nothing. And, for heaven's sake, calm down, will you? It just seems an odd thing to do.'

'There's nothing *odd*, Captain Hartley, about not wishing to urinate in a church.'

'No, but there's something odd about abandoning your men.'

'I did not abandon my men! How dare you suggest—'

'I'm not suggesting anything,' Hartley interrupted. 'All I'm saying is that it looks strange.'

He sighed. There were too many parts of Royce's story that didn't make sense. Why was he the only survivor? Which men had been in the church? How had he got hold of the jeep? Royce was evidently one of two things: a spy or a coward. If he was a spy, he was both a very bad one and a very good one. Bad, because his story was atrociously fabricated, and good, because he was quickly able to say which county his Gillingham was in. But a spy would have gone into the field with a better cover story than the one he had, thought Hartley. No, he was clearly a coward, a deserter, perhaps. Maybe his unit was still engaging the Germans, and Royce had snapped, found a vehicle and driven away. The man was a deserter, and Hartley would hand him over to the first red-cap he could find. But God knew when that would be. Until then, it was best to keep the man calm, unsuspecting.

'I'd like to ask just one more question, if I may.'

Royce folded his arms. 'What?' he asked irritably.

'Why didn't you stop?'

'Stop where?'

'On the bridge. You must have seen my revolver.'

'I was panicking. I just wanted to get away from what I'd seen.'

Hartley nodded, but if Royce had looked into his eyes, he would have seen that he was unconvinced. Hartley played along with it. 'It must have been terrifying.'

'It was,' said Royce.

Had this been a different sort of conversation, a jocular exchange, Hartley would have waved his hand across Royce's face to snap him out of the stare. Whatever Royce was looking at, it wasn't the road.

'Are we stopping for lunch, sir?' It was Private Bell.

'Why? Do you know somewhere nice around here?' asked Hartley.

'A lovely little place called the White Hart,' said Bell. 'It's just a couple of miles down the road.'

‘Good beer?’

‘Ruddles, I hear.’

Hartley chuckled, and noticed that Royce’s face was not registering even a hint of amusement. Sod him, frankly. ‘All right, Bell, let’s find some cover and have a brew.’

Bell beamed. ‘Thank you, sir.’

Hartley turned to Royce. ‘I don’t suppose you brought any food with you?’

‘Er . . . no. I’m afraid not.’

There was a surprise, thought Hartley. The sooner they got rid of him, the better.

It was clear that the men didn’t care for Royce – and not only because his presence lightened their bowls a little. It was his attitude. Hartley heard the odd ‘la-di-da’ and ‘Who the hell does he think he is?’ as they ate a quick lunch in the shade of some pine trees. Royce made no effort to talk to them, and his expression was of either contempt, or distance, or a mixture of both. He offered no thanks when Barnes gave him a spare mug, neither did he acknowledge the soup that filled it. He sat on a rock a little apart from the men, and Hartley was in no mood to join him. Instead, he sat next to Franklin. ‘What do you think of our new arrival, then, Franklin?’

Franklin finished chewing some stale bread. ‘You want my honest opinion, Captain?’

‘Yes.’

Franklin drew breath. ‘I think he’s a prick.’

Somewhere in the regulations, Hartley knew there was something about not allowing men to speak disrespectfully of officers.

‘Well, that’s certainly honest. Why?’

‘Because he’s a bloody coward.’

Hartley swigged some soup. He could only agree, but he thought it best not to share this. ‘Maybe, Franklin. Or he’s in shock.’

'I don't care. Shocked or not, he's still a coward.'

Hartley drained the soup. Whatever it was, it had tasted almost pleasant. He looked up through the thickness of the pine trees, the occasional gems of sunlight forming a kaleidoscopic pattern. The trees reminded him of the rushed honeymoon he and Sarah had had in Scotland last summer. They had lain under some pines, thinking it a romantic spot, only to find that their exposed legs and arms acted as bait for the midges.

'If only we'd blown the bridge a few minutes before,' said Franklin, 'he wouldn't be here.'

Briefly Hartley recalled his shot at the jeep. He was pleased - not smug - that he had done it. He had been nervous, all right, but he had stayed in control. He felt far better than he had after the Stuka. How would he have felt if he had killed Royce? Nothing? The man was a danger to his men and, like any good officer, it was his duty to protect them. If Royce had died, Hartley hazarded that he would even have been pleased. Was that awful? Sarah would say it was, but he wasn't sure she would be right.

'I want you to make sure that the men afford him the proper respect,' said Hartley.

Franklin looked at him over the rim of his mug. His eyes told Hartley that Franklin knew his captain was only going through the motions. 'Of course, sir.'

'Good. Coward or no coward, he's still an officer.'

'Yes, sir.'

Hartley stood up. 'Tell the men we're off in five minutes. I don't fancy another Stuka having us for lunch.'

'Kalamata, that's where we're off to.'

'Where's that, then, Captain?'

'About as far south as we can go.'

'And what happens there?' asked Franklin.

'We're to wait.'

'For what?'