

*Their 22nd mission was top secret and could change the course of the war in Europe.*

**Sugar Baby**  
By K.E. Pottie

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BOOK FIVE OF THE CODE NAME SERIES

# SUGAR BABY



K. E. Pottie

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Print ISBN: 978-1-959620-66-2

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-813-6

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

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Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Pottie, K.E.

Sugar Baby: Book Five of the Code Name Series by K.E.  
Pottie

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024918281

BookLocker.com, Inc.  
2024

First Edition

Cover Art by Gary Deslauriers

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## **Chapter 1:**

### **Mission #22 Present Day/1945**

*“Flying is hours and hours of boredom sprinkled with a few seconds of sheer terror.”*

—Gregory “Pappy,” Boyington, USMC

#### **September 1990.**

At seventy years old, John Matus felt age creep into his bones with each passing year. “You wake up one morning and something hurts for no particular reason!” he liked to say. But today, he was fulfilling a lifelong dream to learn how to fly an airplane—something he had wanted to do since the war ended in 1945. He awoke early that morning, had his coffee and eggs. He dressed in casual pants and shirt and headed off in his car to the local airport. He had read an advertisement for flight lessons and wanted to see if he could get into the program.

*Ah, here,* he thought.

He pulled his car into the airfield parking lot, just in front of the hangar.

John was to meet his flight instructor today. Climbing out of his car, he walked to the hangar in the middle of the airfield. Metal doors on the east side of the building housed a single-entry door. He surveyed the airfield. Approaching from one end, it is aligned at 170 degrees, and from the opposite end, it is aligned at 340 degrees—

170/340. He noted that the California wind, El Niño, was blowing in from the coast. The hot dry air blew the combed hair above his head in uneven tufts.

As he approached the hangar door, he read a sign that said, “Please check in at the tower before entering the hangar.”

John turned to surmise that the tower was at least a half mile away.

*Aw hell, he thought. Not walking all the way back!*

Instead, he pushed open the small entry door. The wind caught the door, pulling it from his grasp, and slapped it against the inside wall of the hangar. The resounding boom of metal on metal echoed throughout the empty hangar.

“Shut that damn door,” a man’s voice said from inside.

“Sorry,” John apologized, “Got away from me” as he grabbed the door and closed it shut, windblown dust engulfing him.

John brushed himself off and adjusted his eyes to the dim glow of the overhead lights in the hangar, a stark contrast from the bright day. He focused on a man in his late seventies, sitting at an old gray Army steel desk, wearing an old ball cap cocked to the right.

“Can I help you?” the man asked.

“My name is John Matus, I am here to take a flight lesson.”

“Pleasure to meet ya. I’m Robert Robertson, but my friends call me Robbie. To be honest, flying is for younger guys. Are you sure you’re up to this?”

“I guess we will find out,” John said.

“I’ll know when we get into the plane,” Robbie said.

“The sign on the door said check in with the tower first,” John said. “Do I need to do that?”

“Oh that,” Robbie said. “That’s just to keep the riff-raff out.”

“I see,” John said.

“You’re okay with me,” Robbie said. “Remind me of the guys I used to fly with back in the war.”

“So, when do we get started?” John asked.

“Have you ever flown?” Robbie asked.

“As a passenger, many years ago,” John said.

“That doesn’t count,” Robbie said. “Passenger in what?”

John’s thoughts drifted back to the war.

\*\*\*

## **January 22, 1945, Bungay Airfield, England.**

The Battle of the Bulge, also known as the Ardennes Counteroffensive, was the last major German offensive campaign on the Western Front during World War II and took place from December 16, 1944, to January 25, 1945.

The morning started off as usual for the crew of Sugar Baby. Wake up at 5 a.m., roll out of bed for a shower and a shave, and head to the mess hall for some chow. It was a typical breakfast that morning: biscuits and gravy, some runny eggs, and coffee that was way too strong. It left a bitter aftertaste in your mouth. Never had enough time to sit and enjoy a morning meal, but then again, who enjoyed this food anyway?

They scheduled the daily briefing for 7 a.m.

Since December 16, the briefing had been different. The Wehrmacht's code name for the offensive was *Unternehmen Wacht am Rhein* ("Operation Watch on the Rhine"), after the German patriotic hymn "*Die Wacht am Rhein*," a name that deceptively implied the Germans would adopt a defensive posture along the Western Front.

Briefing that day, as with most days, consisted of three parts: first, the pilots and copilots were addressed, followed by the entire crew, and then the radiomen and navigators were given their daily codes and frequencies.

"Gentlemen, I don't need to tell you the urgency of these missions," the flight commander said. "Our troops



are fighting hard to contain the bulge. We will pull extra missions to cripple the enemy's ability to re-supply."

A groan came from the collective group.

"Okay, knock it off, fellas," he said. "Let's get to today's briefing."

With a swift, practiced motion, he removed the sheet off the map. A collective gasp filled the room as the day's target was revealed. It was a strategic location, a key point in the enemy's defenses. The room fell silent, every eye fixated on the marked target, every mind processing the magnitude of the task at hand.

The commander cleared his throat, breaking the silence. He began to detail the plan of attack, his voice steady and confident. The room listened in rapt attention, each person understanding the importance of their role in the mission.

"The target is the oil center at Ruhland near Berlin," he said. "The secondary target is the Dresden marshaling yards."

The crews were silent. It would be a tough mission.

"Load will be four 250-pound general purpose bombs and two smoke bombs."

A murmur ran through the crews.

"Okay, you know what to do," the commander said. "Good luck, gentlemen."

After the briefing, the ground crew loaded one bomb that was larger than the crew had ever seen before. While the pilots conducted preflight checks, John, the radioman, tuned in to his frequencies for that day and conducted a test.

Keith, a side gunner on the plane, tapped the navigator Dave on the shoulder. He jerked his thumb back at the unusual bomb.

“Hey, Dave. What do you suppose that is?” Keith asked.

“How should I know?” Dave replied. “I’m just the navigator. How come you’re not checking your fifty cal?”

“Yeah, they don’t tell me nothing either,” he said.

Keith disappeared into the belly of the plane.

This same crew had flown together for twenty-one missions. Each time they went over enemy territory, they grew more and more anxious. The odds of making it to thirty missions and a chance to go home were slim. The 8th Army Air Corps had a seventy-five percent casualty rate.

Over the target, the thermals were buffeting the plane. When they saw the big puffy cumulus clouds, the pilots knew they would be in for a rough ride.

Griff had a hard time keeping a level altitude.

*Sugar Baby*

Today was no exception, but they maintained a place as Deputy Lead in formation. The grumblings of the crew grew as the thermals assaulted Sugar Baby.

“Hey, can we find a softer cloud?” Keith asked over the intercom. “My head’s banging against this damn bubble.”

Keith was the top ball gunner.

“I’ll put in a request for that,” Griff said. “Right after this mission.”

“Hang on fellas,” John said. “Group lead is on the squawk box.”

The Group Leader’s voice came over the radio.

“We overshot the primary target,” he said. “Turn to secondary.”

In front of the formation of bombers, a pattern of flak was forming.

*I can walk on it*, Griff thought.

As they approached the flak barrier, Griff saw the Group Leader’s B-24 get hit, shearing off six feet of the right wing. The plane shuddered from the impact that nearly inverted it, but the pilot corrected the sudden change and leveled the plane.

The Group Lead’s plane lost significant altitude as parts of the wing flew back towards Sugar Baby; Griff took evasive maneuvers to avoid the debris. A call came in from the lead plane announcing they were leaving the

formation to head back home, which now meant they were the flight lead in Sugar Baby.

The lead B-24 on a mission was never pleasant news, and the bomber crews dreaded being designated as one. Everyone knew the enemy targeted the lead plane to disrupt the formation.

As the lead ship pulled to the left, it descended in altitude to avoid the formation and let it pass. Scattered radio communications wished them good luck and godspeed back home.

In good humor, a few even said, "Save a shot for me at the bar."

The chances of a damaged plane making it back were slim.

As they approached the target, the thermals got worse; air currents buffeted the plane. It was becoming difficult to keep a sighting by the bombardier on target. Worst case, drop the bombs and hope to hit a military target.

The air calmed, allowing the bombardier to concentrate on the approaching target.

It was at that precise moment that hell broke loose. Sugar baby flew into flak. Great black puffs covered the sky surrounding the plane. One burst took out the number two engine. Sparks and flame engulfed the shredded engine. A fine mist of fuel streamed from the back of the wing.

“Carmen, feather number two,” Griff said.

Griff pressed the intercom button on his headset, just around his neck.

“Roger, John, cut the gas to number two,” he said. “We are losing fuel.”

John and Roger tugged at the fuel cut off handle, but the handle didn’t budge.

“Pull!” John said.

“It won’t come around,” Roger said. “What do we do?”

John approached his radio station, grabbing a wrench from a tool bag by his chair. He gave the handle a good whack.

“Try it now,” he said.

Roger gave the handle a hard pull, and it came around to the closed position.

“Okay, she’s closed,” John said on the intercom.

“Expert job, fellas,” Griff said. “The fuel leak has stopped.”

Griff stared at the fuel gauge. They had lost a third of the plane’s fuel.

“What do you think?” he asked Carmen. “Keep flying, or head back?”

“Tough call,” Carmen said. “If we finish the mission, we won’t make it back to our lines. We don’t have enough fuel.”

“Yeah, but we might get jumped by fighters if we turn tail,” Griff said. “If we dump the bombs on the target, we might have enough fuel to make it to France.”

“Your call boss,” Carmen said. “Either way is a chance.”

Griff considered making the bomb run, but with Carmen’s point on fuel, he took a chance on a run to friendly lines.

A second flak burst exploded on the left side of Sugar Baby.

“Damage?” Griff said on the intercom.

“We just lost hydraulics,” Roger said. “We’re covered in fluid back here!”

The controls stiffened.

“Well, that seals it,” Griff said to Carmen. “Help me get her to France.”

Griff made the painful decision to announce to the squadron and his crew they were leaving formation and dropped five hundred feet in altitude. Griff, with the help of Carmen, guided the plane into a left turn to maximize the engine power of the side with two good engines.

“Good luck, fellas,” came over the radio several times.

“Thanks,” Griff replied. “Give ’em hell. See ya back at the pub!”

The number two engine was out of commission. At least the integrity of the engine mounts remained.

If they had lost that engine, they would have bailed out.

Often, an angry civilian crowd would kill downed crews out of revenge. A bomber crew’s best hope was to escape back to allied lines rather than be captured by the Wehrmacht, or Luftwaffe.

The flight back was nerve-wracking. The navigator and radioman cut the fuel to the number two engine and lost too much fuel to make it to England.

Griff called back to the navigator to figure out what the best and safest emergency landing sites were in France. The navigator concluded the remaining fuel would get them to friendly lines, a mere two-hour flight time away at the current rate and speed.

“We need to lighten the load to save fuel,” Colin said. “Do I drop that bomb now?”

“Negative,” Griff said, “We bring that back to base.”

The chatter over the intercom was all at once.

“How we going to land with that bomb onboard?” John asked.

“We need to lighten the load, Griff,” Dave said. “We’ll come in too hot and heavy.”

“Okay, knock it off,” Griff said. “I have orders to bring that back if we didn’t drop it. Toss out anything that’s not ammo or bolted down. We just might have enough fuel to make to our lines before the fuel runs out.”

“What about the fifties?” Keith said.

“Keep those,” Griff replied.

The crew tossed everything they didn’t need out the open bomb bay doors. John even threw out his prized tool bag.

“Gonna miss my tools,” he said to Roger. “Might need those.”

The plane was hard to control, but Griff and Carmen took turns and sometimes both had the controls. Griff was asking for course corrections to avoid enemy cities, airfields, and flak batteries.

An hour into the flight, the navigator announced a course correction to turn left at zero-four-five degrees, but he had meant to say right.

The error was obvious when they cruised over Stuttgart at ten thousand feet. They were losing altitude and were in the kill range of the flak batteries. The fire from the batteries below was immediate. Griff took the controls and began evasive maneuvers to avoid the flak by watching the pattern ahead of them.

He kept one step ahead of the anti-aircraft gunners below, but several close hits left holes in the B-24’s fuselage. No injuries among the crew, but the lower ball



gunner had a close call when a piece of shrapnel came through the bubble to imbed itself inches from his head.

After several terrifying minutes, they made it out of the flak barrier with only minor damage.

“As they say, flying combat missions are long moments of boredom, punctuated by sheer moments of terror,” Griff said.

“Damn right,” Carmen said.

A common tactic used by the Luftwaffe was to attack allied bombers after they exited a flak barrier.

On the horizon, a silhouette of a single fighter appeared to the left side of the plane, closing in fast. Griff’s voice crackled on the plane’s intercom.

“Incoming fighter two-seven-zero degrees!” he yelled in the intercom.

The gunner on the port side, and the ball gunners yanked by the handle and charged the fifty-caliber machine guns to meet the oncoming fighter and just as Griff was to give the order to fire, a voice came over the radio.

“Heavy, this is Thunderbolt 7. Do you need an escort?”

Fingers eased up on the triggers.

*Close one*, Griff thought.

“Roger that Thunderbolt 7,” Griff said. “We need help in getting this bird down.”

“I am headed to a forward base in Nancy,” the pilot said. “The First Division just captured a kraut airbase. Follow me.”

“Lead the way,” Griff said.

“Enemy mechanized forces are in the area,” the pilot said. “We’ve been hitting the krauts all day. You need to drop your altitude closer to the ground to avoid enemy fire.”

“Roger that Thunderbolt 7,” Griff said. “Carmen, help me get her to five hundred feet.”

“Flaps coming down,” Carmen said.

He pulled the lever, but the flaps stayed rigid. Carmen observed that both wings had taken damage. The flaps jammed in the in-flight position.

“Griff, the flaps are damaged,” Carmen said. “What do we do? We need those to land this crate.”

“Do we still have those extra parachutes in the back?”

“Yeah, gotcha,” Carmen said. “We only talked about that in the classroom. Do you think it works?”

“What choice do we have?” Griff asked. “Go back and supervise the guys. I got the controls for now.”

“Call me if you need help,” Carmen said. “Be right back.”

Carmen had the parachutes rigged up in no time.

“Were ready,” Carmen said. “John and Roger will deploy the chutes when you give the go.”

Closing in on the emergency field in Nancy France, they noticed the runway was a very short one—a fighter base. Smoke from fires obscured the airfield—pockmarked with shell holes, most likely from the battle the day before to take the airfield.

“We have the parachutes,” Carmen said. “Look how short the runway is.”

“Let’s hope the parachutes slow us down before we hit that tree line at the end of the runway,” Griff said.

Griff dropped the plane down to five hundred feet as to not present an easy target to the enemy.

They were faced with an all or nothing situation and felt scared. Without flaps, they would come in hot and heavy. Many crews did not make it in similar circumstances.

The P-47 Thunderbolt pilot informed them he was flying cover until they got down on the ground. He told them to hurry because his fuel leak was limiting his time in the air.

Sugar Baby was coming in at 170 knots. That was way too fast to make a safe landing on this field. Griff dropped to one hundred feet. The controls shook as they descended. It took the strength of both pilots to keep the plane upright.

“Deploy those parachutes now!” he said over the intercom.

The entire plane jerked back. With the nose of the plane pointing upwards, they lost control of the landing. Carmen and Griff pushed the controls forward to level out the fuselage.

As they touched down, the plane bounced on the pockmarked runway. The parachutes were working, slowing Sugar Baby. They stopped in time before they hit the tree line ahead. Everyone on the plane cheered as they skidded to a stop, the left landing gear collapsing from the rough terrain.

The crew dismounted from Sugar Bay, inspecting the damage.

“I don’t know about you guys, but I stopped counting the holes from the flak at fifty,” Dave said.

“One hundred,” Keith shot back.

“I don’t know how she made it,” Roger said.

“She may be ugly, but she a tough bird,” John said.

“She may be tough, but she’s done,” Griff said, coming out of the plane.

“Why’s that Griff?” Keith asked.

“The hydraulics have been shot up, and we have completed work on the number two engine,” he replied.

“How are we getting back to the base?” Roger asked, walking up to the group.

“I don’t know, but that officer coming towards us will know,” Griff said.

The Army captain in charge of defending the airfield asked for the pilot.

After a few minutes of discussion, Griff turned to the waiting crew.

“What’s up with Griff?” Dave asked.

“Maybe we’re being drafted into the infantry,” Colin said.

“God, I hope not,” John said.

“The good news is we are getting out of here in the morning,” Griff said.

“What’s the bad news?” the copilot Carmen asked.

“We are going by Deuce,” he said, referring to the Army’s version of the two-and one-half ton truck used to transport men and equipment.

A collective groan came from the crew.

“Rather walk out?” Griff asked.

“Flying out would be my first choice,” Keith said.

“That would take too long to fix, and we don’t have the parts, the tools, or the mechanics to fix her,” he replied.

“Damn it. She was one of the best birds in the group,” John said. “Never had a single problem with the radio.”

“Let’s hope we don’t get Ronnie when we get back,” Carmen said. “I flew that one more than once, what a dump.”

“Okay, fellas. Knock it off,” Griff said. “The captain told me that this sector has changed hands with the enemy several times in the past few weeks. We can’t stay here. We will be transported to a town called Vittel, west of here, in the morning.”

“Then what?” Roger asked.

“He told me we might fly out of Vittel to Paris, but the airfield took damage recently, and he wasn’t sure it was operational yet.”

“Now that’s the ticket!” Dave said.

“Think we can get some passes in Paris?” Keith asked.

“Easy now,” Griff said. “One step at a time.”

A .50-caliber machine gun on the left flank of the defensive position opened fire, its rat-tat-tat echoed over the airfield.

In the distance German soldiers, led by a Panther tank, advanced on the Americans.

The Panther fired its 75mm cannon at the .50-caliber position.

*Sugar Baby*

The high caliber round whistled overhead, exploding in a berm fifty feet from the foxhole.

“Take cover!” the infantry commander shouted.

“What do we do?” Colin asked.

“Get back in the plane,” Griff said. “We have the .50-cal’s. Keith, get in the top. Steve, side-gun facing the krauts. The rest of you take cover over that ridgeline behind the airfield.”

Keith and Steve scrambled aboard Sugar Baby.

Sugar Baby’s .50-caliber machine guns sprayed the battlefield in front of the American positions, suppressing the German soldiers as they attempted to breach the defensive lines.

Bullets from small arms fire ricocheted off of the plane. The major attack was against the infantry lines, far enough away not to draw the major thrust of the Wehrmacht attack.

Regardless, the ground shook around the plane; shrapnel from the plane’s fuselage ricocheted into the trees.

An American anti-tank gun fired on the Panther from its flank, knocking it out.

A P-47 Thunderbolt made several passes at the approaching enemy, killing dozens.

After the remaining enemy combatants retreated, the infantry company commander came over to talk with Griff once he had checked on his men.

“Thanks for the help,” he said. “You had them suppressed.”

“No thanks necessary,” Griff said. “Shame we didn’t do more.”

“Hey, I’ll make ya a deal,” the captain said. “For that ride back to HQ, can we keep your fifties?”

“Sure thing,” Griff said. “We can’t take them with us. Might as well put them to good use.”

“Just the same, I wanted to ask,” the captain said. “The truck will be here as soon as the driver refuels.”

“May I speak with you in private?” Griff asked.

The captain motioned with his head toward his foxhole.

“Why the discretion?” he asked.

“What I am about to tell you is top-secret. HQ will put me in front of a firing squad for telling you this, but considering the circumstances, I have no choice,” Griff said.

“Okay, understood,” the captain said. “What’s the deal?”

“We have a special bomb aboard the plane. I need to get off and return to our lines.”



“What kind of bomb?” the captain asked.

“One that will change the war,” Griff said. “A bomb powerful enough to destroy a city.”

“As in a city block?” the captain asked.

“No, as in a city,” Griff replied.

“You’re joking,” the captain said. After seeing the look on Griff’s face, he said, “You’re not.”

“I need help to get it back to the rear,” Griff replied. “Do you have a five-ton vehicle we can use?”

“I do,” the captain said. “When you take that thing back to where it’s going, send my truck back.”

“Sure thing,” Griff said.

“Deal,” the captain said. “So, how are you getting that off the plane?”

“Do you have any sturdy rope?” Griff asked.

“I do,” the captain said. “When the driver gets here, it’s in the five ton.”

Griff addressed the crew.

“Gather around fellas, we have a job to do,” Griff said.

“More krauts to shoot?” Keith asked.

“No, that bomb in the plane needs to come with us back to the rear.”

“Why?” Colin asked. “It’s just a bomb, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, just a bomb,” Carmen said. “But a prototype that we can’t let the enemy have.”

“Will that thing blow up in our faces?” Colin asked. “We don’t have the equipment to dismount it.”

“We’ll make do,” Griff said.

An hour later, a sergeant drove up in a five ton with rope in the back.

The crew rigged up a hoist from parts and placed the bomb on the spent parachutes from the landing. They secured the bomb using the remaining rope provided.

“Let’s go, boys!” Griff said to the crew.

The crew mounted the back of the truck. Carmen got behind the wheel. Griff rode shotgun. Once Carmen was sure everyone was onboard, he shoved the truck into gear and jammed his foot on the gas pedal, lurching the truck forward.

“Easy now, Carmen,” Colin said. “We did enough flying for today!”

Carmen maneuvered the five ton down the dirt road, heading west.

They passed an armor platoon of five of M-4 Sherman tanks, the commanders waving to the crew.

“Looks like those krauts are in for a nasty surprise when those Shermans arrive,” Carmen said.

“Gonna eat some lead,” John said.

The crew had a laugh over that one. They all started joking and horsing around when they came upon a gruesome sight.

The truck slowed down through the wreckage of German tanks and an assortment of mechanized vehicles along the roadside. The advancing Allies decimated them. Bodies of dead German soldiers lay where they died. The twisted, broken bodies reminded them of the price of war.

“I never thought I’d see this up close and personal,” John said.

“Me either,” Dave said. “Hits you in the gut.”

“They’re just Nazi bastards,” Roger said. “They deserved what they got.”

“Look at them,” Carmen said, “Just kids. They didn’t deserve this.”

No one said a word after that as the truck passed through the carnage of battle. After about forty-five minutes of bouncing around in the back of the truck, they arrived in Vittel.

“Ow, my aching back,” Dave said. “Hey Carmen, did you hit all the potholes on the way here on purpose?”

“Yeah, I knew you flyboys would want the genuine McCoy experience,” Carmen said, climbing down from the driver’s seat.

“Hey Griff, next time can we get a horse and carriage?” John asked.

“Funny guys,” Griff said. “You should all be thankful we got this truck.”

They spotted a group of general purpose tents in a field, next to a bombed-out town.

“Everyone off,” Griff ordered.

The crew dismounted, hands raised to help each other off, carefully avoiding the bomb.

“Okay, boys, I will check in with HQ here,” Griff said.

Griff walked through the fields to the tent. A guard greeted them.

He scanned Griff up and down, a puzzled look on his face.

“Where did you fly boys come from?” he asked.

“That’s Lieutenant, soldier!” Griff snapped.

“Sir, sorry!” The soldier said.

“That’s okay, kid. Not my best day,” Griff said. “Is the commanding officer of this unit inside?”

“Yes sir,” the private said. “Follow me, I’ll introduce you, Lieutenant?”

“Griffiths,” he replied. “We are from the 446th bomb group.”

Griff turned to his crew.

“Stay here and take a knee, while I go talk to the CO,” Griff said. “Smoke ‘em if ya got ‘em.”

The men spread out in a semi-circle and sat in the soft grass. A few lit-up cigarettes.

“John, how can you smoke those?” Dave asked. “Gonna kill you someday.”

“It’s this or the krauts,” he replied. “Either way, I’m dead. Might as well do it myself.”

Inside the tent, the private introduced Griff and his crew to a lieutenant colonel, studying a map.

“I don’t see bomber crews that often in the middle of France,” the lieutenant colonel said. He walked over and shook Griff’s hand.

“They shot us up on a mission over Germany, but we landed at an airfield about twenty clicks east of here,” Griff said.

“Yeah, the airfield at Nancy,” the lieutenant colonel said. “Sent a platoon of Shermans to reinforce the position. I can put you guys up in a house that the krauts used when they occupied the area.”

“I appreciate any help we can get, sir,” Griff said.

“You can arrange transportation to Paris from the airfield, about five clicks to the north,” the lieutenant colonel said. “From Paris, you will get a flight back to your base.”

“Sir, we need to keep the truck and get a special bomb we loaded on it to that airfield up north,” Griff said.

“I need all the vehicles I can muster for a push east, Lieutenant,” he said. “What’s so special about this bomb?”

Griff explained why.

The lieutenant colonel was not amused.

“Get that thing away from my unit, Lieutenant,” he said.

“It is not armed, sir,” Griff said.

“Fine,” the lieutenant colonel said. “I will post a guard on it for you.”

“That would be great, sir,” Griff said. “Can I radio back to our unit? I need to report in.”

“Commo to the rear has been out for several days,” the lieutenant colonel said. “We think German troops posing as GIs may have cut the lines back to HQ. Best I can do is send a courier, but since you are headed up to the airfield anyway, you’ll just have to be your own messenger.”

“Understood, sir,” Griff said. “If it’s okay with you, I’d like to get my crew cleaned up. It’s been a long day.”

The lieutenant colonel turned to one of his clerks sitting across from him at a makeshift desk.

“Private, get the lieutenant and his crew to the bunkhouse and get them some grub.”

“Yes, sir,” he replied. “Lieutenant, have your men follow me.”

Outside, Griff roused the crew.

“Mount up, fellas. I got us a bed for the night.”

“What? No ride this time?” Keith asked.

“Two,” Griff said, pointing to Keith’s boots. “You’re wearing them.”

The crew received K-rations, which contained coffee, cigarettes, and food.

“And here’s the reason I joined the Air Corps,” Colin said, holding up a K-ration.

“Yeah, never thought I’d say I miss the mess hall back on base,” John said.

“Just be glad you got that,” Griff said. “Now, eat up. Get some rest. We will move out tomorrow.”

With a guard posted near the truck, the crew could rest.

Most of the crew retired to bed early that night, except for the pilots Griff and Carmen. They brought two chairs from the kitchen to the porch outside.

“Hey, be right back,” Carmen said. “I found something in the cellar that it might interest you.”

When he returned, Carmen presented an ancient-looking bottle and glasses to Griff.

“I found this bottle of medicine,” Carmen said.

“Found, eh?” Griff said. “More like absconded.”

“Found? Absconded? What’s the diff?” Carmen said.  
“Want some or not?”

“Pass it over,” Griff said.

Carmen filled the glasses to the brim and handed Griff one.

“Helluva a day,” Griff said, taking a long sip, wincing on the taste.

“Where did you get this rot gut?” he asked.

“Found it in the cellar behind some rock.”

“How in the world did you know to look behind a rock?”

“My grandfather did that all the time,” Carmen said.  
“Wine, grappa, he did it all.”

“Think someone was trying to hide this one because it was so bad?” Griff asked.

Carmen replied. “Might as well choke it down. Looks like the infantry already drank all the quality stuff.”

“More likely the French are hiding it,” Griff said.

The two sat in silence as the night sky in the west lit up with flashes of light. Faint explosions echoed across the reddened sky.

“We need to get that bomb back ASAP,” Carmen said.



“I agree,” Griff said. “With the fluidity of the lines, we can’t afford to let the krauts get the bomb.”

“Tomorrow then,” Carmen said.

“First thing,” Griff said.

They both raised glasses and clinked them together, downing the foul liquid in one gulp.

“My God. That’s horrible,” Griff said.

Inside the bunkhouse, Dave woke up John.

“Heidy, I foundz a bottle of wine,” he whispered in John’s ear.

John rubbed his eyes, staring at Dave.

“Looks like you drank it all already,” John said.

“Der’s more where dis one came from,” Dave slurred. “Want some?”

“Buddy, you better get to bed,” John said. “If Griff finds out you’re drunk, there will be hell to pay.”

“Ok, shhhh,” Dave said, dropping the bottle with a clunk on the floor.

Groans from the other crew, and a few.

“Hey, I’m trying to sleep here.”

John pushed the empty bottle of wine under his bunk, lest Griff see it. Dave crawled into his bunk after a few attempts.

*He's gonna be hurting in the morning,* John thought.

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Back in London, Major Smythe reported to the director's office of MI-6.

"They left the formation and headed into France. That was the last word we received," he said.

"We should get word out to our agents in the field," the director said. "Send a coded message out."

"Sir," Smythe replied. "I have a concern about that method of communication, given the discovery of double agents in the field."

"You mean our recent discovery of double agents in our organization?" the director asked.

"The weapon they carried could change the course of the war, should the enemy get their hands on it," Smythe said.

"What do you suggest, then?" the director asked.

"I purpose we send in our team of agents to find the plane," Smythe said.

"What about the crew?" the director asked.

"We find the plane, we find the crew," Smythe said. "Alive."

"Regardless, if they are dead or alive, find that weapon," the director said.

“Right. Then I am a go to send in our agents?” Smythe asked.

“Yes,” the director replied.

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The next morning, Griff awoke to find the HQ unit was moving out.

Vehicles started up and shouts of commands in the distance, Keith opened the barracks door to see the convoy. Griff and Carmen were standing outside the door.

“Looks like they are abandoning us,” Keith said.

A sergeant from the back of the convoy ran over to them.

“Orders to head out, sir,” he said.

“Orders?” Griff asked.

“The 4th Armor Division blew open a gap in the kraut lines, right into Bastogne,” the sergeant said. “Division has ordered a push east.”

“Good luck, Sarge,” Griff said.

“You too, sir,” the sergeant replied.

“Are the guys up yet?” Griff asked Keith, not bothering to turn around.

“Still racked out,” Keith said. He didn’t want to mention they had been drinking the night prior.

“Get ‘em up,” Griff said.

## **Chapter 2: Charlène and Jean – Present Day**

Jack and Emily had just left the Black Dawn debriefing at headquarters in Virginia. At the back of the mansion was the garden area. The scent of fall was in the air and leaves were falling at a constant rate. The air was crisp with a bit of a chill.

“Winter’s coming,” Jack remarked.

“I like winter,” Emily said. “It renews the old.”

“You like the cold?” Jack said. “I’d rather be basking in the warm summer sun.”

Both had been trying to delay the inevitable with their flip conversation. Charlène was gone, passed away before they were back from Greece.

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On that day...

“Jean, promise me you will retire from this awful business,” Charlène said.

“I will—someday,” Jean said. “These children that are in charge need my help.”

Charlène gripped his hand.

“They will continue to grow, with or without you,” she said. “My time is near, and I want you to promise me you will enjoy retirement.”

Jean's eyes welled up in tears. Charlène pulled him close, hugging him tightly.

*"Vous devez continuer,"* she whispered in his ear.

Her body went limp as she softly settled into the bed. The once tortured little girl, who grew up to be part of a powerful intelligence community, passed.

Jean cried out for the woman he had loved for afar all these years, sobbing uncontrollably.

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"I hate funerals," Jack said. "I've been to too many in our family."

"I know what you mean," Emily said. "My parents were the hardest."

"I know the feeling," Jack said. "I miss dad every day."

"He was quite the guy," Emily said.

"As was your dad," Jack said. "I only knew him for a short time, but he left quite an impression on me."

"Surviving thirty missions over Germany and France in a B-24 was quite an accomplishment," Emily said.

"It's a shame I could discuss those missions with him in more detail," Jack said.

"He never talked his time in the war," Emily said.

"Very few of that generation talked about the war," Jack said. "My dad is a prime example."

“He never discussed it with me,” Emily said.

“Back in those days, they kept a logbook,” Jack said. “Did he have one?”

“No,” Emily said. “But I do recall that he mentioned once about a mission that went bad over Germany, and they crash landed in France. He said that the logbook was on the plane, and they couldn’t recover it.”

“Shame,” Jack said.

Jean appeared in the doorway leading to the garden.

“The priest is here. We are ready,” he said.

The weight of the moment settled heavily on Jack and Emily as they made their way back into the house, each step seeming to echo with a somber finality. Emily’s fingers intertwined with Jack’s, seeking comfort in the shared touch, a silent strength as they crossed the threshold into the large den.

This room, a sanctuary of cherished memories, had been Charlène’s favorite—a place where laughter had once filled the air with the warmth of the crackling fireplace. Now, it stood in silent homage to her, the air thick with the scent of oak and the faintest hint of her preferred lavender perfume lingering like a whisper.

In the center of the room, upon a grand pedestal, lay Charlène’s coffin. It was a masterpiece of craftsmanship, the heavy oak adorned with intricate carvings that spoke of her elegance and the life she had lived. The wood gleamed with a deep, rich sheen as it reflected the soft

light that filtered through the curtains, casting patterns upon the floor.

The coffin's design was timeless: the ornate details etched into its surface told a story of love and legacy. It was more than an ultimate resting place; it was a tribute, a vessel to carry forward the memory of a woman whose spirit had touched the lives of all who knew her.

Jack and Emily approached, their movements reverent, as they stood before the coffin. In the room's quiet, surrounded by the tangible reminders of Charlène's presence, they allowed themselves a moment to reflect, to honor her, and to say their silent goodbyes. "She's looks at peace," Emily whispered to Jack.

He gripped her hand tighter.

They occupied seats on the right side of the room, where fold out chairs were set up.

The Catholic Priest stood to the left of the coffin, standing behind a pedestal.

After the priest left, Emily gave Jean a comforting embrace, as the loss still devastated Jean.

"She loved you," Emily remarked.

"I know," Jean said. "As I loved her."

Jack was silent, he could never deal with the sadness that funerals brought. He simply reached out and shook Jean's hand.



“Thank you,” Jean said. “Charlène was very fond of both of you. She called you, *her kids*.”

“I know Nik would have wanted to be here,” Emily said.

“He would have come, but he has just reunited with his family,” Jean said. “I told him Charlène would have understood.”

“I am sure he is just as devastated,” Emily said.

“As are we all,” Jean replied.

They made small talk for a few minutes, and Jean excused himself, kneeling at Charlène’s coffin.

“We should let him be alone with her,” Jack said.

Emily just nodded in response.

The couple went back to the mansion, retiring to the drawing room, where a fire was smoldering.

Jack stoked the fire, adding a few split logs, quickly setting them ablaze.

They sat in two chairs facing the fireplace. Quietly, they each reminisced about Charlène. Their grief was palatable in the room when Jean entered.

“I see you have the fire going again,” Jean said, trying to make small talk.

“There was a chill in the room,” Jack replied. “I thought it would be nice to warm the room up a bit.”

The mansion stood as a testament to a bygone era, its grandeur undiminished by time. Even in the height of summer, when the sun blazed in the sky and the air outside was thick with heat, the interior of the stately home remained cool. The massive stonework that formed its foundation was not just the bedrock of the structure but also the keeper of temperatures past. It absorbed the chill of the winter and held it close, releasing it slowly throughout the year.

Despite the installation of modern heating systems, an attempt to bring warmth to the sprawling corridors and high-ceilinged rooms, the Victorian building resisted. The radiators hummed with effort, yet the thick walls and ornate stone carvings that adorned the mansion's interior swallowed their warmth up.

There was a certain dampness to the air, a persistent presence that clung to the antique tapestries and the rich, dark wood of the furniture. It was as if the mansion itself was alive, breathing in the moist earthiness of the surrounding grounds and exhaling a perpetual mist that settled in every nook and cranny.

Visitors often remarked upon entering how the chill of the place seeped into their bones, a stark contrast to the opulence that surrounded them. It was a reminder that some things, like the legacy of the Victorian era, are impervious to passaging time and the advancements of technology. The mansion, with its cool, damp embrace, stood proudly as a sentinel of history, whispering tales of the past to those who walked its silent halls.

Now, with Charlène gone, everyone felt its icy grip on their souls.

Jack got up and brought in a similar chair from the dining room and offered it to Jean.

“*Merci*,” Jean said, settling in the chair close to the fireplace.

“I could use a drink,” Emily said.

“As I,” Jean said.

Jack rose from his seat, the leather of the chair sighing softly as he moved. He crossed the room with a purposeful stride, each step a quiet echo on the polished wooden floor. Reaching the cabinet, he pulled open the doors with a gentle creak, revealing an array of crystal glasses that sparkled under the room’s ambient light.

The shelf behind the glasses held a lineup of bottles of aged alcohol with each one representing a silent sentinel of time and tradition. The labels spoke of distilleries, long-standing, of spirits that had matured in the quiet darkness of cellars and vaults. There were single malts with the peaty essence of the Scottish Highlands, cognacs that carried the warmth of the French sun in their amber depths, and bourbons that held the bold spirit of American heritage.

Jack’s hand hovered over the selection, his fingers tracing the contours of the bottles as he made his choice. With a reverence reserved for rituals of remembrance, he selected a bottle whose vintage was as rich as the memories it evoked. He poured the liquid slowly, the

sound a gentle susurrantion that filled the silence of the room.

The crystal glasses caught the light as he filled them, the alcohol's deep color winking with a promise of shared stories and toasts to the past. Jack carried the glasses back, offering one to Emily with a nod—a silent invitation to remember, to celebrate, and to honor the life that had brought them all together. “What would you like?” Jack asked.

“Brandy for me, Jack,” Emily replied.

“There is a bottle of *eau de vie* in the back of the other bottles,” Jean said. “There is no label on it. I will have a glass of that.”

Jack poured Emily's brandy in one of the crystal glasses, handing her the drink.

“Thank you, Jack,” Emily said.

“Sure,” he replied.

Pushing back the bottles in front, Jack found an ancient bottle with no label.

“Found it,” he said.

After carefully removing the cork, which partially came apart, he gave the glass to Jean. Jack poured himself some bourbon and sat down in his chair.

“To Charlène,” Jack toasted, raising his glass.

“Charlène,” they both replied.

The trio took a few moments to sip their drinks in the quiet room, punctuated by the crackling of the wood fire. After a few minutes, Jack broke the silence.

“Jean, that was an ancient bottle I poured your drink from,” Jack said. “That must have some history to it.”

“It does,” Jean said. “Charlène made that bottle of eau de vie when we were young spies. We agreed to not drink it until one of us had passed. In our business, neither of us expected to live this long. When I am gone, I request you do the same for me.”

“It would be an honor,” Emily said. “May I try it?”

Jean handed her his glass, and Emily gently sipped the fruity drink.

“It’s delicious,” Emily said.

“She was quite talented with food and drink,” Jean said. “Her passion and desire was to become a *chef de cuisine* and run a staff.”

“That is a different path altogether,” Emily said. “How did she get in this business?”

“That is a long story,” Jean said.

“We have the time to listen,” Jack said.

“It was just after the war,” Jean said. “Charlène was living here in the mansion with her aunt and uncle when I came to visit on a business matter.”

Jean took them back to 1955. He wove a tale of mystery and intrigue:

*“My name is Jean,” he said to the maid, who answered the door. “I am here to see the master of the house presenting his card.”*

*“You are expected,” the maid said, leading him to the drawing room, where a fire smoldered in the fireplace.*

*“Please have a seat. I will let him know you have arrived,” the maid said.*

*“Thank you,” he said, positioning himself in the chair, quietly observing the flames as they licked around the charred logs.*

*After a few moments, Charlène entered the room.*

*“Oh, my apologies,” Charlène said. “I assumed the room was empty.”*

*Charlène’s beauty momentarily took aback Jean. Her dark curly hair fell loosely about her shoulders. He couldn’t help but stare. They were about the same age, as far as he could surmise.*

*“You are her to see my uncle? Yes?” she asked.*

*Awkwardly, he stood up.*

*“Forgive my manners,” Jean said. “Yes, I have some business to discuss with your father.”*

*“Uncle,” Charlène repeated.*

*“Oui,” Jean replied nervously, falling back to his French.*

*“Ah, you are French?” Charlène asked. “What is your name?”*

*“Jean Aubrac,” he said. “A pleasure to meet you.”*

*“Charlène,” she replied.*

Jack interrupted the story.

“How old were you two?” Jack asked.

“I was born in the village of Saint-Quentin in the year of our Lord 1935 to Danielle and René Aubrac,” Jean said. “During the war, the Germans killed my parents for collaborating with the partisans. When I met Charlène, we were both twenty years old.”

“Were you with MI-6 then?” Emily asked.

“I was, but Charlène was not,” Jean said. “Unbeknownst to her, her uncle was starting up Department 7 at this very location. I was here as a new agent to coordinate our efforts during the cold war.”

“What inspired you to join an intelligence agency?” Jack asked.

Jean continued;

*Frequently, my parents, René and Danielle, had gone out with local partisan groups, sometimes headed up by Henri Gibert—other times by a woman named Madeleine.*

*The day when the Germans rounded up the villagers in the town square would forever be etched in their memories. The soldiers' boots echoed on the cobblestones, their faces stern and unyielding as they demanded answers about the derailed supply train.*

*Despite the heavy presence of les bosch, a silent pact of solidarity bound the villagers. They exchanged glances, a silent language of resistance, as each person stood firm in their denial. But the Germans were relentless, their patience wearing thin with each passing "accident" that hindered their war efforts.*

*The Gestapo's arrival was a dark omen. Their reputation for ruthlessness preceded them, and a shiver ran down the spines of the bravest souls. The interrogations were harsh, conducted behind the closed doors of the commandeered town hall. Screams sometimes pierced the night, a haunting reminder of the price of defiance.*

*René and Danielle, known for their subtle acts of rebellion, felt the weight of suspicion on their shoulders. The Gestapo's eyes seemed to bore into their very souls, searching for a crack in their armor. The interrogators questioned them, dissecting every word for truth or treachery. Yet they stood united, their stories unwavering and rehearsed to perfection.*

*Whispers of a traitor among them circulated a seed of distrust planted by the enemy. René and Danielle could only speculate, their minds racing with*



*possibilities. Who had broken under the pressure? Who had betrayed them to the Gestapo?*

*As the days turned into weeks, some villagers disappeared without a trace, their absence a grim reminder of the stakes at play. René and Danielle held onto each other, their resolve strengthened by the love they shared and the hope for a free future. But the Gestapo cast an enormous shadow, constantly threatening to return until they satisfied their need for answers.*

“That must have been terrifying to them,” Emily said.

“It was,” Jean said. They realized they were running out of time, and made preparations to leave for southern France, possibly to cross into Spain, to save our family. They were in contact with the Maquis partisan leader Madeleine, planning out a route of safe houses, supplies, and transportation to get them to the border. A few days before their departure, the Gestapo caught up with my parents. I never saw them again.”

*The urgency of their situation was a silent force, propelling Jean’s parents to make hasty preparations for their escape. The whispers of war had grown into a cacophony that threatened to engulf their lives. They knew they had to leave for southern France, hoping to cross into the relative safety of Spain.*

*They held secret meetings with Madeleine, the revered Maquis partisan leader, whose name was spoken with reverence under the cover of night. She was the lifeline for many, a beacon of hope in the darkest of*

times. Together, they mapped out a clandestine network of safe houses, each one a haven for those fleeing the oppression.

They gathered supplies—rationed food, forged papers, and the few belongings they could carry without drawing suspicion. They arranged transportation, using a series of unassuming vehicles that would blend into the rural landscape. Each driver was a trusted ally against the common enemy.

The days leading up to their planned departure were fraught with tension. Every knock on the door, every unfamiliar face, could be the harbinger of their doom. Jean's parents moved through their daily routines with a practiced normalcy, all the while their hearts raced with the fear of discovery.

Then, just as freedom seemed within their grasp, the Gestapo descended like birds of prey. It was swift and without mercy. The Gestapo took Jean's parents, leaving a gaping hole in the fabric of his world. The last memories he had of them were a flurry of whispered goodbyes and tearful promises of reunion.

They left Jean behind, and the weight of their sacrifice became a heavy mantle on his young shoulders. He clung to the hope that they had somehow eluded their captors, that they were out there, somewhere, fighting for a future where their family could be whole once more. But as the days turned into weeks, and weeks into months, the silence became an answer of its own. Jean never saw his parents again.

“How awful for you to experience that,” Emily said. “How did you escape the Gestapo?”

“I hid in the woods,” Jean said. “When I felt the coast was clear, I made my way to my aunt’s house, Liliane Aubrac. But not before I put flame to our house.”

“May I ask why?” Jack said.

The flames flickered in Jean’s eyes, casting a warm yet haunting light that seemed to reach deep into his soul.

“I felt that if I burned everything,” he murmured, his voice barely above the crackling of the fire, “I could prevent the Gestapo from finding evidence against my parents, and they would be released.”

It was a desperate act, born out of love and fear. Jean had gathered every document, every photograph, and every piece of correspondence that could link his parents to the resistance. The papers had seemed almost alive, whispering secrets of clandestine meetings and covert operations as he fed them to the hungry flames.

As the fire consumed the evidence, Jean’s heart was a tumult of emotions. Hope warred with despair, courage with terror. The smoke rose in thick plumes, carrying away the tangible memories of his parents’ brave defiance. He watched until the last ember died, leaving nothing but ashes and the bitter taste of loss.

In the silence that followed, Jean had allowed himself to believe his sacrifice would make a difference—that by erasing the traces of their involvement, he could rewrite the ending of their story. But the days turned into weeks,

and there was no word of their release. The empty chairs at the dinner table served as a stark reminder of the Gestapo's unforgiving nature.

Now, years later, the memory of that night was as vivid as ever. The fire before him seemed to echo the one from his past, a bridge across time that connected the young man he had been with the seasoned veteran he had become. The act of burning everything had been his final, futile attempt to protect his parents—a testament to the lengths to which love and desperation could drive a person.

Jean's gaze lingered on the flames, the past and present blurring together. The fire had taken much from him, but it had also forged him in its crucible, shaping him into the man who would stop at nothing to honor the legacy of those he had lost.

"I am sorry for your loss," Emily said. "And at such a young age."

"Tante Liliane raised me as her own," Jean said. "When she died of complications from Typhoid fever, I was a teenager. At that point, my family members took turns caring for me until I went to engineering school.

"I had graduated and got a job working in an agency within French intelligence. Eventually, they asked me to become an agent based on my skills. During the cold war, while hunting down Communist spies, I met your father, Jack. We worked together to capture a clever Russian agent," Jean said.

Jack's words hung in the air, a mixture of curiosity and a newfound understanding of the man he knew as his father. "A story I never heard," he whispered. "Someday you will have to tell me."

Jean's gaze lingered on the dancing flames, reflecting on the years that had shaped him into the man he was today. Emily's question pulled him back, a gentle nudge towards the past he seldom spoke of. "What did you do with the French intelligence?" she asked, her voice steady yet filled with empathy.

Jean took a deep breath, the memories flooding back as he spoke.

"For years, I showed no mercy to the former Nazis I hunted, avenging my parents' death repeatedly," he replied, his voice a low rumble of contained emotion. Each word was a testament to the relentless pursuit of justice—or was it vengeance that had consumed him?

Emily reached out, her touch a silent comfort. "That cannot heal," she said, her eyes meeting his. "But I understand why you did that." There was no judgment in her voice, only the profound recognition of the pain that had driven him.

Jack, who had been listening intently, found a reflection of his own father in Jean's tale. "Like Dad," he mused, the words a bridge between generations of men shaped by the crucible of war and the aftermath that followed.

In the shared silence that followed, each lost in their own thoughts, the fire continued to crackle—a quiet reminder of passing time and the stories that were yet to be told.

The bitterness that had taken root in Jean’s heart was a constant companion, a reminder of the losses and betrayals of a war that had taken so much from him. But fate, it seemed, had a twist in store for him. In 1960, on a nondescript street in Budapest, he saw her—Charlène. She was no longer the girl he remembered; she had the same fierce determination in her eyes that had drawn him to her all those years ago.

Charlène had defied expectations, including her father’s, to join the very organization he had founded. Her experiences during the tumultuous days of 1944 in France had shaped her—hardened her resolve. Despite her father’s initial objections, her adamant stance won out. She was ready to fight the shadows that still loomed over Europe.

Jack listened intently as Jean recounted the mission that had brought them back together. “I was to be her guide,” Jean continued, “and her mentor on her first foray behind the Iron Curtain. Our aim was clear: to gather intelligence on a diplomat suspected of funneling secrets to the Kremlin.”

The mission was fraught with danger, the streets of Budapest a maze of shadows and whispers. But as they worked together, the old bond between them reignited. They moved through the city with a shared purpose,

evading the watchful eyes of the secret police, gathering the pieces of a puzzle that could shift the balance of power.

“We have been together ever since,” Jean said, a softness in his voice that belied the steel in his spine.

The mission had been a success, but more than that, it had been a beginning. Amid cold war intrigue, Jean and Charlène found something worth more than any intelligence report: each other. Their partnership, born in the crucible of war and solidified in the shadows of espionage, had endured. It was a testament to their resilience, to the enduring power of love amidst the ruins of conflict.

“An amazing life dedicated to removing evil from this world,” Emily said.

“A very tough one,” Jean said.

“What do you mean?” Jack asked.

“We decided never to marry,” Jean said. “We could not take the chance that one of us would compromise our mission if we had to save a loved one over what needed to be completed.”

“Jack and I have been able to balance that,” Emily said.

“You have,” Jean said. “You both have a symbiotic connection, like Charlène and I had.”

“So why not get married?” Emily asked. “It is obvious you both loved each other.”

“Marriage is not a prerequisite for love,” Jean said. “We were together. That’s all that mattered.”

Sensing Jean was getting upset, Emily shifted back to Jean’s story.

“So what happened with Charlène’s uncle that day?” Emily asked.

“I was sitting there, after Charlène excused herself, just staring into the fire.”

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The room brimmed with quiet anticipation as the two men settled into the comfort of the leather chairs, the warmth from the fire casting a soft glow on their faces. David Shemesh, with his impeccable suit and measured demeanor, exuded an air of authority that belied his cordiality. Jean, known as Agent Aubrac in circles where such titles mattered, maintained a composed exterior, though his mind raced with possibilities.

David swirled the brandy in his decanter, the amber liquid catching the light as he spoke. “Agent Aubrac, the situation is delicate, and the stakes are high,” he began, his voice low and even. “Our agencies have been working independently towards a common goal, but it’s become clear that a joint operation is our best course of action.”

Jean nodded, taking a small sip of the brandy, its warmth spreading through him. “I understand.



Collaboration in times like these can make all the difference,” he replied, his gaze never leaving David’s.

“We have been monitoring the diplomat. You will follow,” David said, placing his glass down and leaning closer. We suspect that he is the linchpin in a network that has been providing information to the Kremlin. We have chosen you for this task because of your expertise in covert surveillance and intelligence gathering.”

Jean considered this, the weight of the mission settling upon him. “And the coordinated effort?” he inquired, his voice steady.

David’s eyes held a glint of resolve as he answered, “We have assets in place across Hungary. You’ll be the spearhead, Agent Aubrac. Your actions will pave the way for a series of maneuvers that, if successful, could turn the tide in our favor.”

The fire crackled, a sudden flare casting dramatic shadows across the room. Jean felt the gravity of the moment, realizing the path ahead was fraught with danger, yet necessary to take. He raised his glass to David in a silent toast to the mission that lay before them—to the unspoken bond between allies in a hidden war.

As the brandy warmed his throat, Jean’s thoughts drifted to Charlène and the life they had built amidst the chaos. He knew every step he took was not just for his country, but for their future. With a last glance at the dancing flames, he steeled himself for the journey ahead, knowing the fire within him burned just as fiercely as the one before him.

The sudden, sharp crackle of the wood fire jolted Jean from his reverie. The flames, with their hypnotic dance, had held him captive in a trance of memories and what-ifs. But now, the sound of the firewood splitting under the heat, the sparks flying like fleeting stars, anchored him firmly in the here and now.

He shifted in his chair; the leather creaking softly under his weight and took a deep breath. The rich, earthy scent of burning oak filled the room, mingling with the faint notes of the brandy in his hand, creating a comforting aroma. The warmth from the hearth brushed against his face, a stark contrast to the chill that had settled in his bones.

Jean's eyes, once lost in the past, refocused on the man across from him. The fire's glow outlined David Shemesh's silhouette, giving him an almost ethereal quality. The gravity of their conversation lingered in the air—a tangible presence that filled the space between them.

The fire continued to pop and hiss, a reminder of time passing, of moments slipping away. Jean knew with each second the world outside this room continued to turn, oblivious to the decisions being made within these walls—decisions that could change the course of history that could alter lives, including his own.

With a last glance at the flames, Jean set his glass down on the side table, the clink of crystal against wood cutting through the silence. He rose from his seat, the resolve in his movements clear. There was work to be

done, a mission to prepare for, and no amount of fire-gazing would change that.

“Let’s continue,” Jean said, his voice steady and sure. The fire had brought him back, but it was the future that called to him now—a future where freedom was more than just a whispered dream.

“From that point on, I trained and went on joint operations with Department 7,” he said. “Over time, Charlène and I grew closer, and eventually went on a mission together,” Jean said.

“Interesting story,” Emily said. “Did that conversation with Mr. Shemesh lead to the mission in Budapest?”

“Oui,” Jean said. “Did Charlène mention that mission to you?”

Emily said, “She mentioned that you were wounded.”

“I was,” Jean said. “It was no big deal.”

“Not what I heard,” Jack said. “She said you saved the day, even with being shot.”

“We do what have to, Jack,” Jean said. “I was glad we both made it out alive.”

Later, Jean went to visit Charlène.

Jean’s heart was heavy as he walked the familiar path to Charlène’s last resting place. The air was thick with the scent of freshly cut grass and the somber fragrance of lilies that adorned nearby graves. The sky above was a

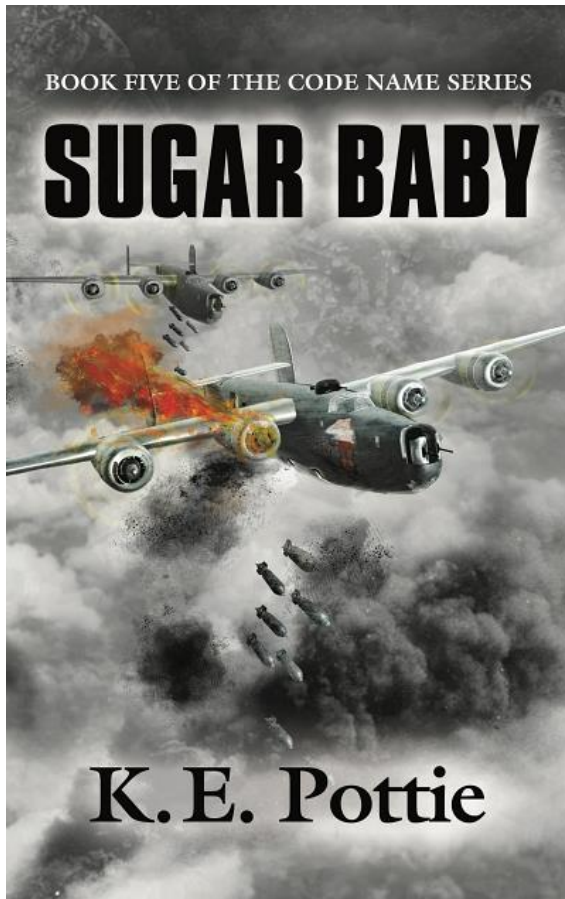
tapestry of gray, the clouds hanging low as if in mourning themselves.

He knelt beside the tombstone, the cool touch of the marble contrasting with the warmth of the tears that blurred his vision. “I miss you,” he whispered, his voice barely more than a breath against the silence of the cemetery.

The sudden boom that echoed through the hills was jarring, a stark violation of the solemn peace. Jean’s eyes widened in shock, a gasp caught in his throat as he looked down to see the stark crimson that now marred his shirt. It spread quickly, too quickly, a vivid stain against the white fabric.

His knees buckled, and as he fell, the world seemed to slow. He could see the droplets of his blood as they fell, dark red against the gray of the stone. They splashed onto Charlène’s tombstone, the indentations of her name catching the scarlet tide, as if she were claiming his life’s essence for herself.

Jean’s body lay still, the grass beneath him soaking up the last of what he had to give. Above, the clouds began to weep, a gentle rain washing over the scene, mingling with the blood and tears, as if the heavens themselves mourned the tragic end of a man who had only sought a moment with his lost love.



*Their 22nd mission was top secret and could change the course of the war in Europe.*

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