

CHAPTER TWO

Egypt

4th July 1942

‘Bugger me, I’m parched!’ Private Raymond Coulson of the 7th Armoured Division spoke aloud and to no one in particular as he threw his dusty bedroll onto the ground and dropped his pack beside it. Unscrewing the top of his water bottle, he drank heartily to clear the cloying dust from his throat, enjoying the sound of the water glugging from the constricted opening. At that moment, it tasted better than a pint of the elderflowery Hopcroft & Norris IPA in the Red Lion.

Driving a Humber Mk II armoured car across a scorching desert was hot and dusty work. His clothes were damp and in places stained white with sweated salt; his neck and forearms burned pink from the sun and his eyes dry from staring into the heat haze. They were peeled raw from trying to detect Rommel’s Afrika Korps, whom they knew was lying dangerously close, coiled like so many angry cobras in the sand and ready to spring and bite in their desire to halt the allied push west towards distant Tobruk.

Coulson and his crewmates had just finished lashing up a makeshift canopy of sun-bleached canvas to one side of their vehicle and were now selecting a billet spot for the night. The others had chosen to bed down beneath the awning in what would be a crowded huddle, but Coulson needed more room.

Squeezed into the pint-sized vehicle all day, smelling the sweat and fear of the crew, their arms and legs continually pressed close to each other’s with no room to stretch or change position, he now needed space to breathe freely. He wanted to lie on his back and stare at the stars during the bitterly-cold desert night, and to feel his body cool after roasting in that Tommy-cooker of a Humber and gratefully drink in the fresh air, seeking to eradicate the constant stink of exhaust fumes, cordite, sweat and motor oil.

Loosening his blouson jacket, he flopped onto the bedroll to remove his boots. Stuffing his noxious socks into the boot openings to prevent scorpions from climbing inside, he wriggled his toes and already felt more comfortable. He pulled a packet of Camel cigarettes from his top pocket, extracted one and rested it on his cracked lips. Catching the eye of ‘Boulder’ Baker leaning against a stack of water cans, he raised the packet in a gesture of silent invitation. Boulder grinned and Coulson expertly flipped the cigarette across the divide in a spinning, catherine-wheel flight.

He lit his own cigarette and lay down, preparing for a few minutes of luxury with his legs stretched out fully for the first time that day. He

wriggled his back, trying to get comfortable, but then sat up, patting the bedroll and feeling for the lump jabbing into his spine. Stones were always the impediment to a good night's sleep when off the deeper and softer dunes. The land near El Alamein was relatively flat, and the sand only partially masked the rocky terrain below. This made it easier for their vehicles to traverse, but was a right pain in the backside when bedding down. He noted the many stones on either side of his bedroll and decided against trying another spot; instead, he knelt down and peeled the top corner back to reach underneath and explore with his fingers.

He was surprised at the neat and regular shape he encountered and the sharply-defined corner standing proud of the sand. Clearly, this was not a stone. Peering around the bedroll he saw a small ornamental box poking out of the sand at an acute angle. He immediately felt a tingle of anticipation. Palming it in one of his big hands, he made a play of throwing some distance away the two flat stones in between which the box had been trapped, and then patted his mattress flat.

After checking that no one had noticed his discovery he lay down again, but this time on his side and with his back to the Humber and his crewmates. He placed the little box close to his body and opened the lid. He dragged heavily on his cigarette to mask the involuntary inhalation of breath he was forced to take. The Cobra's Eye sprang alive as the evening sun filled it with light for the first time since Anoukh El Ali had inadvertently dropped it over half a century ago. Coulson stared in wonderment at the yellow fire inside the perfectly-cut diamond, marvelling at how it appeared almost alive as he slowly turned the ring in his fingers, making the stone glint and sparkle. He knew nothing of gemstones, but he knew quality and beauty when he saw it. This was special. It was almost bewitching.

This was a ring any woman would love to wear, and now he, Private Ray Coulson, a garage mechanic from a small market town in Northamptonshire, was going to be the man who gave this to his darling Betty Boo. It would make a perfect engagement ring, and he felt a rush of excitement course through his veins as he imagined Betty's face when she saw it. If he could just get through this next campaign and ship home on leave... Somehow, they had to avoid those deadly long-range 88mm guns all the Tommies feared. He closed his eyes and offered a silent prayer.

He swiftly kissed the cold stone, thanking the Lord for this extraordinary piece of good fortune then closed his fist, hiding it from view. Hauling his pack towards him with his free hand and puffing on the fag wedged between his cracked lips, he stuffed the empty box into the bottom and rummaged about until he located his emergency sewing kit.

As the red ball of the sun slipped towards the distant sea and sent impossibly long shadows reaching across the undulating desert, burnishing the outline of a wrecked locomotive and a line of damaged railway wagons in a siding beside the distant station, Coulson carefully sewed the precious ring into the bottom of one of the pocket liners of his shorts, answering the curious enquiry from Bounder that he was 'just mending a hole'. It would be safe from loss or detection, and yet would remain with him at all times. If the Humber took a hit and they had to bale out, his pack might be lost or burnt, and they often shed their jackets and undershirts in the terrible heat of the day, tying them onto the outside of the turret, but assuming he could stay alive, he would always be in his trusty, if rather voluminous, army-issue shorts.