



OUT OF THE AZURE SEA

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Published by Atlantic Bridge Publishing

<http://www.atlanticbridge.net/publishing/azure.htm>

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Excerpt of three chapters

PART ONE 1945

CHAPTER ONE

The officer ignored the air raid siren as he stumbled through the darkened streets of rubble. Searchlights swung across the sky and the steady throb of Lancaster bombers were common. He grunted, pulled a tatty map from his pocket and tried to find a street sign. The splendid middle class boulevard that he remembered on his last visit had gone. Nothing remained, just bricks and holes in the ground. The whole city was obliterated in the relentless attacks by American bombers in the day and British at night.

April 1945 was not a good time to be a German.

"Aye you!" shouted a voice.

Falk stopped and looked up.

An air raid warden was waving at him. "Get to the shelter, you fool. They're hitting the docks again."

Falk cut across the road towards the man who lost his anger when he saw the officer's navy uniform and sigmas. "You're be lucky to have a U-boat to return to Kapitanleutnant," he said. "I'd say the mid-Atlantic is safer than here at the moment."

Falk pulled a photograph from his pocket and shoved it under the warden's nose. "This girl used to live within two blocks of here. Name's Kristin Dassler. Do you know if she's still around?"

The elderly man tipped the photograph sideways so the reflected light from a searchlight showed the image. "She a nurse?" he asked.

"Yes," Falk said. "Can you help?"

"Go to Shelter Sixty-three, Kapitanleutnant. If she's anywhere, that'll be the place, third intersection. It used to be the bus depot " He shrugged. "No promises, though. The hospital was hit last week. I heard..."

But Falk wasn't listening. "Thanks," he muttered and broke into a run.

The shelter was filled with humanity, mainly women and children but also with an increasing number of young men with wounds from slight abrasions to burn victims and amputees.

Kristin sighed. The morphine injection she'd given the soldier with horrendous burns was her last. Perhaps she shouldn't have wasted it on him but the pleading eyes had reminded her of Roland, her brother. The Eastern Front had crumbled and Roland had gone, as had everyone else in her family. A rumor that American tanks were sighted only fifteen kilometers away was, perhaps, good news. When they arrived the bombing would stop.

"Be careful," the young man whispered and reached for her hand. "A beautiful blonde like yourself..." He coughed and splattered blood into a filthy handkerchief. "I heard the colored battalion is more ruthless than the Russians. Head south to the British advance..."

"What's your name, sergeant?" Kristin said and wiped the youth's sweaty brow.

"Albert. I'm from Munich but I guess..." He smiled at the nurse and his hand went limp. Eyes glazed but the smile remain transfixed to the pale face.

The nurse reached up, closed the eyes and moved on. Even now, after all these months, death was not easy.

"Kristin!" The voice pierced the mumbles, moans and shouts of the shelter.

She turned and saw the officer standing in the dusty glare.

Oh, my God, it couldn't be. But it was...

"Falk," she screamed and ran, stumbling across the room.

She reached him and flung arms around his neck. Lips met and tears flowed. "I thought..." she wept. "Wasn't U-519 sunk in the North Sea?"

"Yes, My Darling," Falk replied and kissed her cold lips again. "But I wasn't aboard. My promotion came through." He smiled and fingered the s extra strip in his shoulder. "I'm the Kapitan on U-2072, one of our newer vessels. We were not allowed to contact anyone."

"But here!" Kristin gasped. "Why are you here?"

"To get you, My Darling. I had two hours to find you..." He glanced around at their unwanted audience "I've said enough. Come."

"But."

"Come, Kristin." Falk grabbed her hand in a vice grip.

"Go, my dear," said an elderly religious sister from behind them. "You can do no more here. This is your chance. I believe God brought Falk here today to find you."

Kristin turned and smiled at the elderly nun. "I'm not Catholic, Sister Maria," she whispered "But I guess you always knew that."

"Does it matter? Your heart is in the right place child. I thank you for your help over the last fifteen months but it is over. The Americans will be here by tomorrow but I also fear for young women like you. Go with your young man and God bless you."

The young blonde woman turned and towered over the frail sister she hugged. "I'll write," she cried. "You've been my only family since..." she couldn't form any more words.

"Go, child." Sister Maria looked across at Falk. "Argentina, is it Kapitanleutnant Friedrich?" she said.

"We don't know, Sister," the officer replied.

"So don't torpedo any allied ships. It is too late now."

Falk bent forward and kissed the old nun on the cheek. "Yes," he replied. "It is too late, now."

Kristin tucked her arm into his and they headed for the door. In the distance, the sound of explosions sounded across the docks. Luckily, U-2072 was waiting, fuelled and ready in a U-bunker, an impregnable fortress of concrete that no allied bombs could penetrate.

The Type XXI was the most advanced submarine of the time. Unfortunately time had run out for the Kriegsmarine and only a handful of the hundreds in various stages of construction were commissioned. Seventy six meters long and displacing one thousand, eight hundred tonnes, the vessel could reach seventeen knots beneath the surface, stay there eleven days and travel eighteen thousand kilometers without refueling.

Their last journey was to be one way and under orders of the highest echelon of the Third Reich, secret even to Falk. All he knew was that the torpedoes, save two, were removed and replaced with high priority cargo. Orders were to sail at nineteen hundred hours and it would be a one way journey.

That was when Falk requested permission to take his fiancée on the journey and, surprisingly, his request was allowed. As well, Lieutenant Thilo Diers, his first officer was allowed to bring his wife aboard.

Kristin had not met Petra Diers, a woman in her mid twenties, and smiled shyly when they were introduced. Eyes of the crew followed their every step as they descended the ladder from the conning tower and squeezed through the passageway. Falk had warned her old superstitions about having females aboard sent the crew rumbling but nobody would dare voice their opinions orally.

And this was so. No doubt, if they were not the women of the two senior officers aboard, catcalls and innuendoes would have followed them. As it was, the cold stares unnerved Kristin. The Erster Wachoffizier showed them two bunks in the officers' quarters by and left them to unpack.

"How did Kapitanleutnant Friedrich manage it?" Petra whispered. "I didn't even know Thilo was transferred to the U-2072, let alone being back here in Germany."

"I've no idea," Kristin replied. "I was told unofficially that Falk was killed when the U-519 went down." She flushed. "I didn't expect notification from the authorities."

"You wouldn't have been told, anyhow," Petra said. "Communication has broken down. Rumors are that Berlin has fallen, the Fuehrer has been executed and the Russians are moving east to grab as much of our land as they can before the Americans arrive."

"Well it won't affect us," Kristin said. "The Americans are here now. Their tanks are on the outskirts of the city."

Petra paled. "So soon," she whispered.

They turned when a petty officer coughed to announce his presence. "The Kapitan invites both you ladies to the conning tower," he said. "We're leaving port within the quarter hour."

"Thank you Bootsmaat," Kristin said and glanced back to meet Petra's eyes. Her first impression of her companion was that of friendliness. Someone of her own age and gender helped to overcome the claustrophobia she was already feeling. Diesel smells inundated everything and already the vibrating engines made her queasy. The thought of days beneath the surface was almost too much... until she remembered the alternative back in the bombed out city.

Kristin lay on the top bunk and tried to overcome nausea. It was the fourth day since their departure and the first time they had surfaced somewhere in the Atlantic. It was late, close to midnight, and the U-boat was rolling and pitching in the waves. She rolled towards the wall and wondered whether another dash to the toilet along the corridor was expedient.

She heard footsteps. Petra must be back. Goodness, that girl must have a cast iron stomach. The movement didn't affect her.

"Say one word and it will be your last," a male voice said.

A hand grabbed her by the throat and she felt a something sharp against her back. She turned and caught the glimpse of a man in a Balaclava. Only eyes stared at her and a thin mouth grinned. In seconds the grip on her was tight as she was pulled off the bunk, yanked up from the floor where she crashed and shoved against the bulkhead. The force was so great she almost blacked out.

The hand on her throat didn't slacken but the other was inside her blouse. There was no pretence. The man was there for one purpose and Kristin realized what it was.

The body leaned against her and she could feel the tight male organ against her. My God, he was nude down there and already thrusting against her skirt.

She jerked up, managed to wriggle her neck from the hand and screamed.

"Bitch," the man growled and slapped her across the face. Her head crashed back against a pipe.

The pain! Her teeth had cut her bottom lip and mouth filled with blood.

The hand tightened on her neck and she realized a knife was on her throat. The bearded face was next to hers, kissing her. She tried to thrust her face aside but received another slap for her effort.

There was a tearing screech and her blouse disappeared. A hand squeezed a nipple.

"You know what I want," the man hissed. "Cooperate and it'll be over soon. Don't and..." he sniggered. "I take you anyway."

She was slung on the lower bunk and the vile creature tugged her panties down. A hand was undoing her brassiere. She could hear him panting and smell perspiration. Oh hell, her garment was gone and groping fingers squeezed her body so hard she wanted to scream in agony, but couldn't.

She couldn't breath.

"That's a girl," the aroused man muttered and moved up over her.

Kristin was terrified and her body reacted. She froze and a spasm of pain shot through

her lower body. The fingers fondling her vagina must have realized she was dry and shaking in terror but the man merely laughed and used both hands to pull her knees apart.

Kristin kicked, hit the man in the groin and screamed. She had no control. Hysterical screams echoed through the tiny cabin.

An explosion, so loud the young woman was momentarily deafened echoed. The vile creature over her moaned and toppled sideways. The pressure of his body disappeared. She felt wet. Oh hell her torn blouse and upper torso was covered in blood.

Somebody had shot the rapist.

"You're fine now, Kristin," said a sobbing Petra. "The bastard won't hurt either of us again."

Kristin looked up. Petra stood wide eyed staring at her with a Luger still held with both hands. The man lay crumpled on the floor.

"It's the same one," Petra said in a strange ultra-calm voice.

Kristin sat up and tried to gain her composure. Suddenly, there were people everywhere. Orders were shouted and a blanket tucked around her.

"The Kapitan is coming," a kind male voice said.

Kristin nodded and vomited. A bucket was there and a cool damp cloth wiped across her forehead.

Falk arrived.

Everyone, except Petra who appeared as distressed as herself, stood to attention.

"He's dead, Kapitan," a voice said. "Bullet up through the neck."

Falk looked white with fury. He yanked the Balaclava off the corpse and glared at the face. "Zentralgast Schultz," he said in a monotone. He turned. "Signal full turnout, Wachoffizier. I want every crewmember at full evacuation battle stations within two minutes. Understood?"

"Yes, Sir," The watch officer saluted, reached for a wall button and a siren sounded thought out the submarine. "Now here this! Now hear this!" the watch officer spoke in clipped German. "Full alert. Evacuation battle stations."

Falk Friedrich placed an arm around Kristin but his eyes were on the sobbing Petra.

"Thank you, Petra," he said, "The man deserved to die. Don't let it lie on your conscience."

"There are others," Petra sobbed.

Kristin stared at her companion. "You mean he did this to you..."

"Three did," the woman sobbed. "Yesterday in the torpedo room. I was too ashamed to tell anyone."

"Who are they?" The captain's voice was no more than a whisper but so stern Kristin glanced at him in alarm.

"Schultz here was the brazen one. The other two... I don't know," Petra sobbed. "They held my head down as they did it."

"We'll find out," the captain said.

He turned to Kristin and held her for a moment. "Nobody will ever do it to you again, My Sweet," he said. "That's a promise."

"He didn't," Kristin replied. "Petra was in time."

"Good."

He smiled grimly and left the cabin.

"Zentralgast Schultz has been killed." Friedrich's voice echoed throughout the ship. "There will be no funeral service. The two other men responsible for the attack on Mrs. Diers yesterday have fifteen minutes to be in my cabin. Failure to appear will be regarded as direct disobeying an order under battle conditions."

"What does that mean?" Kristin whispered.

"They'll be shot for cowardliness," Petra replied offhandedly.

"And if they own up?"

Petra shrugged. "Who knows. They'll probably be shot anyway."

Kristin paled. This was the ruthless submarine commander she didn't know, not the Falk Friedrich she'd fallen in love with before the war when they were at university together.

One pale and insignificant looking youth arrived at Falk's cabin. He stood at rigid attention as the submarine captain and the first officer questioned them.

"It was consensual," he blurted. "Petra encouraged me...."

"Liar," hissed Lieutenant Thilo Diers. He stepped forward with his fists clenched but was restrained by Friedrich.

"I'll check," he said.

Petra arrived and flushed when she saw the youth. "It wasn't Johan," she said. "He didn't attack me." She repeated her account of the attack while the accused stood in silence and her husband glowered. Only her quivering lips and eyes portrayed an inner fear.

"Go, please," the captain said to her when she had finished. He also turned to his first officer. "I wish you to leave, too lieutenant," he added.

Diers almost gritted his teeth but saluted without a word and left.

"Now, your version MatrosengeFreiter Schiaak..." The youth, barely out of his teens blinked back tears and stared straight at the wall.

"It's as Frau Diers said. I didn't attack her, Sir," he said.

"Then why are you here?"

The boy's chin quivered and he almost fell. Only with extreme discipline did he steady himself and maintain his attention stance.

"At ease," the captain said quietly and turned to a guard at the door. "I wish to speak to this man alone. Please wait outside."

"She came onto me, Sir," Schiaak said. "Two days ago and we..." He flushed.

"You had intercourse with her?"

"No Sir. We didn't go that far."

"Explain," the captain spat.

The explanation by the young man was plausible and probably the truth. The woman, in the young man's story, encouraged him but it had not progressed beyond some light petting. However, the youth's story to the crew grew.

"So you told your companions, Frau Diers was an easy lay."

The youth nodded,

"Speak MatrosengeFreiter Schiaak," the captain ordered.

"It was just a joke, Sir. A prank, like we did in the training U-Flottille. We always exaggerated this sort of stuff"

"So the word went through the seamen's quarters that Frau Diers was a loose woman."

"Yes Sir."

The captain glowered at the youngster. He was sure bullying tactics in the men's quarters forced Schiaak to come forward. The real culprits hadn't confessed.

"We knew Mrs. Diers was about to be attacked," Schiaak said. "Then bets went around on who would be the first to do it with Fraulein Dassler."

"Names," spat the captain

"I can't, Sir," the boy whispered.

"You are under orders, MatrosengeFreiter. "

"Can't, Sir," the terrified boy said. "They'll kill me. There's nothing to lose. The war's lost. There will be no authority soon and if I tell, I will not survive..." He hesitated. "Accidents can happen so easily, Sir."

"Very well. All privileges are suspended for ten days; you will do double duty and receive half rations during that time. You can go Schiaak."

"Go, Sir?"

"You heard."

"Yes Sir," Schiaak gulped, saluted and disappeared.

Within half an hour, the men responsible for the attack on Petra were arrested. Officers merely had to see who sidled up to Schiaak when the news spread around that he'd been set free. The pair were well known for their bullying tactics and Kapitanleutnant Falk Friedrich showed no mercy.

After a brief court martial the next evening when U-2072 was again on the surface, the pair were declared guilty, taken to the foredeck and summarily executed by a three-man firing squad. Afterwards, their bodies were tossed overboard and the assembled crew dismissed.

Kristin never heard what was said to Petra but an hour later the woman appeared in their cabin. The swollen cheek and blackened eyes, though, showed of a not too pleasant encounter with her husband.

"Bastard," was all she said when Kristin tried to commiserate with her.

Afterwards, the two women were treated with cold respect. They knew they were safe but the environment was tense. Gradually, though, other events superseded talk about the attacks. The war news was grim and the dank interior of the submarine didn't help. Fresh food was replaced by the tinned variety and even freshly baked bread grew fungus within hours. Almost in defiance of her situation, Kristin managed to overcome her seasickness and used her nursing skill to help less fortunate crewmembers.

For another ten days, the U-2072 traveled southwest with all daytime travel beneath the surface. The nights on the surface became hot and above relentless enemy craft were heard everywhere. Enigma coded signals abruptly stopped and replaced by open-air information calling on all U-boats to break off hostilities and immediately return to their home base.

Falk though, ignored the message and ordered they continue west. The only change was his order to cease all outward radio messages and all unessential radio equipment was shut down.

"We're totally alone, gentlemen," he said to his officers. "Germany is about to capitulate so there is no home to return to. It has been a valiant effort but, in the end, the enemy was too strong. Soon, I shall tell you our designation and you'll be allowed to decide on your own future." He grinned. "I doubt if there will be any salary or back pay arriving for any of us."

CHAPTER TWO

The U-2072 sailed southwest of the Azores without seeing another craft. They were away from the main convoy routes and Falk revealed their destination was the West Indies where supplies and fuel were available. From there, they would follow the South American coast to Argentina where a sympathetic government would grant them all political asylum.

"Our cargo will be unloaded in Buenos Aires and deposited in an account ready for our leaders and the new arising."

Kristin stared at the man. "Haven't you had enough?" she whispered.

Falk turned to her. "The Americans will not stop and let the Soviets take Berlin, my sweet," he said. "They will advance and the war will continue. Within three years the Soviets will be on their knees, the Americans will be battle weary. The Fourth Reich will rise just as we did in 1935." His eyes turned hard. "Out Japanese allies are fortunate their homeland is an island. Nobody will ever conquer them."

Kristin sucked on a bottom lip. "If you believe all that, Falk you are a fool," she finally said. "You did not have to live in our firebombed cities, did you? We caused it, Falk, not the

Americans, British or Russians. Because of a failed ideology lead by fanatics..."

The room hushed and the officers stared in amazement at the angry women. No man on board would dare speak in such a manner.

"You are overwrought, Kristin," Falk replied. "You will have riches you never dreamed of in Argentina. We shall..."

"Oh grow up," Kristin retorted. "The war is lost. We are on our knees and starving. Half of Germany, if not all, will be become slaves of the communists. For God's sake, grow up."

She swung around and headed through the curtain that served as a door.

"Let her go," Friedrich said as a guard stepped forward. "She is a victim of the bombing and doesn't know what she's saying."

"And you do?" said the only other person on the U-boat who dared speak against the Kapitanleutnant. It was Petra. "It is you, my soon to be refugee on the run, who doesn't know what the real world is about to become. As Kristin said, our country is gone. Within a month there will be no Germany, let alone a Third Reich." She turned to look at her husband. "If you follow this man, Thilo, our marriage is over. Understand!"

"It's been over for months, Petra," the first officer whispered. "I never should have brought you aboard."

"But you did, Thilo," Petra replied with bitterness in her voice and eyes brimming with tears. She turned back to the captain. "If you want a new life, Kapitanleutnant Falk Friedrich, take note of Kristin's words. Nobody else here will advise you. They're too scared."

She wiped her eyes, turned and followed Kristin towards the rear of the vessel.

Both senior officers stood without a sound and watched the empty companionway. Their eyes caught but no words were spoken. Expressions were undecipherable.

Petra caught up to Kristin at the rear of the U-2072 and slid a hand around her shoulders. "He'll come to realize," she said.

"No," replied Kristin. "It's too late. He will not change, Petra. None of them will change."

They looked ahead and saw daylight. The rear hatch was open and several crewmembers were hauling an inflated rubber life raft outside. A row of box shaped canvas bags leaned against the bulkhead. Two men were maneuvering one and it looked heavy.

"What are they?" Petra asked. "Blocks of concrete."

A petty officer with a radio operator's insignia on his sleeve looked up. Kristin remembered his name was Bern Munkelt.

"Our cargo is gold, Ma'am. That's our mission..." He hesitated as if he'd already said too much and glanced at the floor.

"So why the life raft, Funkmaat Munkelt?" Kristin added.

"Orders," the petty officer continued. He may have said more but, at that moment a siren sounded throughout the submarine. Even louder was the deafening roar of a high-powered aircraft engine directly above them.

Kristin glanced through the opened hatch in alarm. A black fighter-bomber flashed past her vision. In that second, she saw large white stars on their fuselage and spouting machine gun tracer bullets.

The screams began!

In what may have been one of the last actions of the war in the Atlantic, two United States Navy Avenger dive bombers swooped in on the U-2072. While one strafed the conning tower, the second circled in low. Two cylinders dropped into the ocean from beneath its wings, bounced off the ocean's surface and headed for the U-boat.

Within seconds the front of the submarine blew apart. The crew there never stood a chance. Those not killed instantly by the explosion, were incinerated by the resulting flames or

asphyxiated as all oxygen was sucked away. Luckily for some, the second torpedo missed the rear of the U-boat and exploded in front of the craft.

It was over in seconds. The airplanes did not return but vanished as quickly as they arrived. But the damage was done. Two thirds of the vessel was covered in bellowing smoke and flames tore through the interior like a blast furnace.

One crewman managed to screw a bulkhead door shut and save those at the rear.

"Help me!" screamed the petty officer and Kristin realized he was trying to drag the life raft up through the hatch. She could hear cries of agony and moans but there seemed to be nobody else around. Already smoke was pouring in through a ventilation duct.

"Shut the hatch," she screamed. "When we dive...."

"No," Bern replied. "It's too late."

Petra appeared, her face covered in blood. She grabbed one side of the rubber raft and helped to lift.

"Come on!" she screamed at Kristin.

How they did it, Kristin never really knew, but she found herself on the deck while the life raft bounced on the water a few meters below. Already a man was in it. He shouted and gestured at her. She gulped and spun around.

The U-boat behind was a sheet of flames and bellowing black smoke. Explosions continued and, even as she watched, a loud crack sent her ears buzzing as a massive piece of debris shot into the air. Blistering heat enveloped them. The U-boat was already tipping forward so steeply Kristin almost lost balance. She grabbed the steel decking and jumped into the ocean. Water hit her and the noise above became muffled.

God the water was slimy... and stinky. Oil! Oil everywhere.... and sludgy gunk.

She broke surface and thrashed out. She could swim a little but... A hand reached down, grabbed her and she was half dragged, half lifted onto the bobbing life raft.

The petty officer pulled Petra aboard while two other crewmen held a rope dangling over the rear. With great difficulty they managed to climb aboard and sat down with their arms around each other for mutual support. Kristin flicked hair from her eyes and stared at one of the men. It was Johan Schiaak. His left arm held Petra in a vice like grip while the other gripped the tiller. Next to Kristin, another crewman, unknown to her, gripped a rope looped around the life raft with both hands and stared, anxiously at the petty officer who had also climbed aboard.

"Get further back," Bern yelled to the women "Werner, get paddling. Understand?"

Kristin looked around, found a paddle and grabbed it. Petra grabbed another and they both began paddling.

"We can't stop," screamed the petty officer. "If we aren't away, we'll be sucked down when the U-boat sinks."

His voice was interrupted by a jarring crunch as the life raft bashed into the side of the hull and everybody pitched sideways. A cross-wave caught them and helped achieve what they wanted. It carried the life raft away from the hull.

"Paddle!" screamed Bern as a following wave made the life raft tip like a cork. Water crashed over everyone. They were lifted to the crest of a wave. There was a violent shudder and everything plunged into a trough at the speed of an express train. Kristin crashed into Petra before being flung back again. She found a rope and just clung on.

"Grab the tiller!" Bern screamed and someone managed to grasp the swinging wooden arm and hold it. Another wave broke over them and they were immersed in greasy water. It continued past and again their life raft rode the crest.

When the castaways began to orientate themselves they saw that the U-boat was over a hundred meters away. Flames engulfed it from end to end and the stench of burning oil and smoke filled their nostrils. Another explosion rent the air and the U-2072 swung up. A wave blocked their view but the noises continued, explosions, whistles and an occasional human

scream. More water poured over them. Kristin's eyes stung and her whole body ached but she held on. All she could see was Petra's oil covered face sticking out above the orange life jacket. She glanced down and saw she, too, wore one. Funny, she couldn't remember when she'd put it on.

"Johan! Where's Johan?" Petra shouted

"Here," replied a faint voice.

Kristin turned and saw the boy lying on the floor of the life raft. His hair was plastered down in dirty brown ringlets and clothes soaked in oil. "That last wave," he muttered. "I slipped and crushed my ribs a bit but I'm okay."

He grabbed the side and pulled herself up. However, his gritting teeth showed he was in pain. Petra helped him into a sitting position.

Kristin frowned but her attention was diverted. Without any forewarning the whole sky lit up. A terrible thunder almost shattered their eardrums followed by a groaning noise. Heated air buffeted them before everything disappeared behind another rolling wave.

"It's gone!" said Bern.

The others turned and stared, transfixed. Where the U-2072 had been was only a circle of white bubbles. Another wave blocked their view and by the time it had surged by, the ocean was empty.

"We didn't have time to get any of the gold containers?" Bern muttered.

Kristin looked into his eyes. "I have a funny feeling we'd rather have fresh water before too long."

"You're right," the petty officer replied and broke into a grin. "It could have been fun, though."

The following hours were a reoccurring nightmare. Wave after wave crashed around them. A surge would rush forward; they'd be lifted almost vertically and shot forward in a violent shudder to crash into the next trough. One rogue wave hit from the side and almost capsized their life raft. It was only by sheer luck that they tipped back at the last second.

Hands stung and blisters appeared. Complete exhaustion caused limbs and muscles to stiffen and Petra had a violent attack of stomach cramp. All sense of time was lost and just an occasional instruction or brief encouragement was spoken. Finally, after hours of torment, the waves became less mountainous and changed to rolling swirls that the life-raft rode without having to be constantly controlled.

The five survivors found they could remain awake no longer and drifted into an exhausted sleep. The life raft that saved their lives was low in the water but remained afloat throughout that terrible day.

Kristin awoke to find the western horizon glowing red and it was cooler. She stood up on the shaky floor to relieve cramped limbs.

"Werner isn't too good," said Bern.

Kristin glanced along to see the petty officer moving a hand pump up and down and water squirting over the side. She turned the other way. Petra was sound asleep under some canvas that covered the rear of the life raft. Beside her, Werner lay with pale eyes staring up. He tried to speak and immediately burst in a coughing spasm.

"There's water in that can," said Bern. "Be careful. We don't have much."

Johan found the can, unscrewed the top and poured a small amount into a tin mug. He moved Werner's head to his lap and held the mug up to the pale lips.

Werner sipped the fresh water and lay back again with his eyes on the petty officer. "I'm sorry, Bern," he whispered with a choking gasp. "I've let you down." He gave a stifled moan and appeared to be having trouble breathing. "My chest hurts. It really hurts."

Johan nodded miserably and sat by Petra to stare out at the sea. The sun had sunk over

the horizon the red sky had changed to a dull blue. The ocean was gray but even more noticeable was the emptiness. There was nothing around, no land or ships, not even smoke on the horizon.

Kristin glanced up at Bern who nodded.

"Were on our own, Kristin," he said quietly, "but we're alive. I'm sorry, but I doubt if Kapitanleutnant Friedrich or Leutnant Diers made it."

"So be it," Petra whispered. "It's quite a twist of fate, isn't it?"

Kristin smiled for the first time. Her companion's eyes were on Johan Schiaak. Perhaps Petra's encounter with the young man was more than raw sex.

By morning the waves had flattened, clouds gone and the temperature soared. The first thing Kristin noticed was the missing sailor.

"Werner died during the night," Bern said. "Perhaps it was best. I know he had internal injuries."

"So you just tipped him overboard?" Kristin said in an angry voice. For some reason she remembered how Falk treated the man who had attacked her.

"No," said Bern softly. "We held a short service. Werner was a strong Lutheran. He would have wanted it that way." He coughed. "I didn't want to wake you."

"You should have," Kristin said. Her voice softened. "But thank you for your consideration and for doing that for Werner. It shows we are not all barbarians, after all."

"Most of us never were, Kristin," Bern said. "We were merely sailors doing our duty, like yourself. You're a nurse, I believe."

The young woman raised her eyes and smiled. "Yes. I had to help somehow."

Even before she opened her eyes, Kristin knew something was wrong. It was so hot perspiration rolled down her back and her damp clothes clung to her. A deep throbbing seemed to start at the back of her eyes and pass right down her throat to a heaving stomach. She coughed. Acid built in her mouth and she was forced to wedge her eyelids open. She moved and gasped as her skin protested. It was as if hot sandpaper dragged across her limbs.

The world was a blur of spinning gray. God, she felt terrible. But someone was there. A cold mug was pressed to her lips and water trickled into her mouth. It tasted so cool.

"Take it slowly," a male voice said and an arm held her. "Just sip."

Was it Falk? She squinted and attempted to focus. Gradually the spinning stopped and visions appeared. Water...choppy water was everywhere. So it wasn't just herself who was spinning, they all were. She shut her eyes and lapsed in to a fretful sleep.

The next time she woke it was dark and a cool breeze buffeted her face. Above, a million stars twinkled. Her world wasn't spinning and the migraine she vaguely remembered was gone. Her stomach rumbled and she felt so hungry...but otherwise almost normal. Sure, her clothes felt like cardboard and shoulders stung. She sat up and brushed fingers through her long blonde hair. God it felt all knotted and scraggly. Why hadn't the alarm rung? She was sure it must be her week of night duty, the graveyard shift they called it at the hospital.

The hospital! There was no hospital. She remembered the evacuation, looking at the sky and wondering why the Lancasters were back. There was nothing left to bomb. Surely the hospital wasn't the target.

She jerked and woke up, wide awake... not the semi-delirious state she'd been in since...when? The arm was around her but the man was asleep. His head tilted back and deep rumbled snores gurgled from his throat. But it wasn't Falk and Kristin realized she was relieved. She stared around and saw the silhouettes of two others at the far end of the life raft. They were tucked in each other's arms.

Of course...

Memories flooded back and she remembered everything. The man held a damp cloth to her forehead and talked to her. He sang old songs, not the propaganda songs of the war but those from high school days some that had even been banned...

"Kristin, you're awake?" Bern jerked up and smiled. "Oh, hell. Petra said you were breathing better but I didn't believe her." Tears flooded the petty officer's eyes. "Stupid man," he chastised himself and wiped them with a crumpled handkerchief. "The great master race isn't so marvelous now, is it?"

"No," said Kristin, "but the man before me is." She smiled. "You looked after me, didn't you?"

"Yeah. Petra handed you over to my care when Johan took ill."

"And how is he?"

Bern shrugged. "I would have said better than yourself but in the last few moments... " His voice trailed off and he looked at Kristin. He appeared different. The whiskery face had become almost a beard; his cheeks were sunburned cheeks and lips chapped.

Kristin giggled.

"Is something wrong?"

"Nothing really. A few years back when they were still available I saw an American movie about a shipwreck. The main actor was on a lifeboat for weeks with these women. Even after all that time their clothes were crisp and clean, they had makeup on and he hadn't even developed a five o'clock shadow."

"...And no doubt rescued the poor helpless heroine from the clutches of a ruthless villain."

"He did," Kristin said. "I remember gripping the edge of the theater seat and swooning over the guy. Real life isn't so easy, is it?"

"No, it isn't." Bern stopped and glanced up.

Petra appeared and hugged her close. "Oh, Kristin," she whispered. "We were so worried..."

She also looked sunburned and had had chapped lips. Her face, though, appeared surprisingly fresh. Of course, the swollen cheeks and black eye from that last encounter with her husband had gone.

"How long has it been?"

"Almost a week since the U-boat sunk. You were in a comma for five days," Bern replied. "Johan's been out for about three."

"Thank you both," Kristin said.

"Thank Bern," Petra replied. "He never gave up. I was sure you'd never make it but he refused to let you die."

The petty officer flushed, "Well, the Kapitanleutnant's fiancée..." he replied with enforced casualness.

"I guess," Kristin whispered. "He was really just an student friend and I never really knew him that well, especially in the war years. I saw him once every three months, if I was lucky. I think he was a dream I clung to, almost like that actor in the old movie I told you about. She hesitated. "He changed so much..."

"We all changed," Bern said.

"Yes, but we didn't all lose our humanity." Kristin reached up, placed an arm around the unkempt hair and kissed Bern softly on the lips. "Thanks for your care," she said. "I remember bits of the last few days and every time you were there with me."

Bern smiled and just held her close.

Out over the ocean, the dawn sky glowed red and darkness faded to reveal a line of clouds on the opposite horizon.

Petra turned and gasped. "Land!" she cried "I'm sure it's land."

CHAPTER THREE

The island rose out of the ocean, green and comforting like a squat triangle. To the west the beach was hidden by outer waves that crashed against an off shore reef. Above the surf, rolling hills rose to a low summit. There they dropped in a vertical bluff into a lagoon. The whole island would have been about five kilometers in length and probably half as wide.

"We need to try and find a gap in the reef," Bern shouted above the roar of tumbling waves. "Try to paddle across..."

The two women nodded and made a frantic effort to move the life raft. Waves grew and they were being tossed up and down in the swells and troughs.

"We can't!" Petra shouted.

"True," Bern replied. "Turn towards the shore. We'll ride a wave in and hope it carries us over the reef."

Kristin was on her knees with her paddle vertical as she attempted to move them around. Behind, a wave built up until it towered over their heads. They were caught, lifted and propelled forward.

Bern shouted but his words were unheard as they continued to rise. My God, the wave was cresting over.

It broke!

The blue water became raging froth. Kristin felt herself lifted. She could see only white surf but beneath the surface the current wasn't so strong. White water turned to green. Her left leg bumped something and a wrenching pain shot through her body. She was disorientated but appeared to be upside down.

She held her breath and kicked. Damn clothes clung to her. She kicked again and saw lighter water above. The surface! With her lungs stinging she broke through and gasped air. In front, a gigantic wave was about to crash over her. Kristin let herself drop and the breaker disappeared. She was again in relatively quiet water where she could control her movements.

But this was only for a second. The next wave crashed over her, she was picked up and dumped down with a thump that drove air from her lungs. Water replaced it and her lungs sent out a spasm of pain. This was worse than when they escaped from the U-boat.

Her head broke the surface again, she spat out water and found, though she couldn't touch the bottom, everything was calm and she could tread water easily.

Kristin gazed around. She was in rolling calm water. They were inside the reef.

"Over dere, lady," a voice called. "You're fine."

Relief was replaced by anxiety. The words were not in German but English, a language she'd learnt at grammar school and university. She had not, though, used it for years. Another shock greeted her as she turned.

A man in a canoe holding a pole out to her was tall, slim as the pole and dressed only in swimming trunks. This wasn't so unusual. What was different was that the man's skin was black. She had never seen a black man before. Big brown eyes stared at her.

"Do you speak English, baby?" he said.

"A little," Kristin gasped. Even though her knowledge of English was quite good, the man's accent was difficult to understand.

"Dat's good. Grab the pole. Hurry... one of your friends is having difficulty."

Seconds later she had her arm over the side of the canoe. She gasped and began to breathe fresh air again.

It was Johan in difficulty. He was awake, almost too awake. He thrashed around in a state of panic. The black man maneuvered the boat with skill and skimmed in beside Johan. He

bent down and hauled the gasping sailor aboard with one mighty heave.

An arm grabbed Kristin and Petra's face appeared centimeters away. Eyes linked on hers. Kristin reached out and held the warm slippery body until her friend managed to grip the side.

"Where's Bern?" Kristin shouted.

"Here!" Bern had an arm over the other side of the canoe and was grinning at her.

"Hang on, baby," the black man called. "I don't think your friends understand."

Kristin stared around. "He's speaking English," she said. "Do any of you understand?"

"Oh shit," Petra replied. "Only from high school."

"Some," Bern said.

"German?" the man interrupted and Kristin felt apprehensive. The tone, though, was matter of fact but not antagonistic.

"Yes," she replied.

The man shrugged and broke into a smile. His teeth looked pearly white against his dark lips. "I fought you guys in France," he said, "but it's almost over now, baby."

"Call me Kristin."

"Hello Kristin. My name's Danardo, Danardo Rolle."

"Thank you, Danardo. How did you get here to...err... rescue us?" She spoke hesitant English as she searched her mind for the correct word.

"I was fishin' in de lagoon and saw de raft. You did a bo-bo tryn' to cross de reef here."

Kristin frowned. Trying to translate English after all these years was difficult but Danardo's accent made it almost impossible.

"He said he was fishing and we were foolish trying to cross the reef here," Bern said in German.

"Okay," Kristin replied with a laugh. "You understand English better than me."

"Well, West Indian English. We used to monitor their broadcasts. They're pretty casual and often we learned things about convoys the BBC or Americans clamped a censorship on."

"Sneaky," Kristin said, turned to Danardo and switched to English. "We're on a British island, I guess."

"True, true. De Little Toe Cay is de place. Only me and the little 'oman. We don't have many visitor this far out." He shrugged. "I'll get you ashore. You look all in."

Danardo paddled the canoe into a tiny jetty of Little Toe Island. Silver sands backed by pine trees curled around the lagoon. A path led up to a square shaped sandstone cottage with a steep-pitched roof. Around it, a long square fishing net hug out to dry and several cows roamed around the scorched grass.

A woman appeared and watched silently as Danardo approached with the castaways. Kristin tried not to stare at the slim black woman. She learned later that, though eighty percent of the population of the Bahamas where they had landed, were black there was wide discrimination against them by the white population.

"Why have you got the Cochy Joes here?" the new arrival asked suspiciously.

"Hush, Mamma," Danardo retorted. "They're from a ship wreck. Been floating out in de Atlantic for weeks, I reckon. We always look after those in trouble, you know that." He turned to Kristin. "Dis is Lashandra, my good wife."

"Danardo rescued us when our life-raft was wrecked in the reef," Kristin said.

"You aren't Cochy Joes or Yankees?"

Bern explained. "Cochy Joes are the ruling whites whose ancestors were British Loyalists driven from the United States after independence."

Lashandra's eyebrows shot up when she heard the language. "Jerries?" she whispered and turned to Danardo. "You get on de radio and call de constable...now!"

"No, Mamma," Danardo replied firmly. "De war's almost over. Look at dem. They need our help."

"If you can loan us a canoe we'll leave," Bern said in fluent English. "Johan, though,

needs care. He's quite ill."

"No." The woman relented. "Danardo's right. Come in if you don't mind a black man's 'ouse. You look like dem Cochy Joes and they wouldn't be seen dead in a place like ours. I heard de Jerries are worse."

Petra squeezed Kristin's arm in alarm. "What's wrong?" she said. "I can't understand them."

"It appears she is suspicious of white people, not just Germans," Kristin replied. "She more or less said we're invited in if we don't feel it's beneath us."

"Of course we don't," Petra retorted. Without hesitation, she stepped forward, hugged Lashandra and kissed her on the cheek. "Thank you," she said in English and stepped inside.

Petra's actions did the trick. Now reassured, Lashandra became efficient and fussed after everyone. She brought out a pile of clothes, both male and female, and placed them on the kitchen table. Next she dragged a huge tin tub from under a bench. This was filled with steaming water from a copper that, Kristin guessed was originally going to be used to wash a pile of clothes in a nearby cane basket.

"You men get out of here," Lashandra scolded. "Can't you see de girls need a hot bath. You males don't care how you look but us girls do. Now scat."

Bern and even Johan grinned, turned and followed Danardo outside into the sunshine.

The following days were like paradise for the four survivors. The Rolles, Kristin soon discovered, were the only inhabitants on Little Toe Cay and were almost self-sufficient. Further along the archipelago of coral islands were Middle Toe and Big Toe that lead northwest to other islands. One day a month when Danardo and Lashandra needed supplies they paddled to Big Toe where an old ferry took them to Nassau on the island of New Providence another four hours journey away.

Danardo joined the British army in 1939 and was one of the thousands evacuated from Dunkirk during the evacuation from France. He'd been wounded and spent several months in a hospital in England. Little was said about his war activities but an old photo and string of medals that hung proudly on the wall told their own story. Apparently, Danardo received a small disability pension and had capitalized on some of it to purchase their few acres of land on Little Toe. He'd married Lashandra fifteen months back and the pair had lived on the island ever since.

"We had two neighbors," Lashandra explained one evening. "The men went off to war and their 'omen moved to Nassau. There's not a lot left here but we keep an eye on their property. I guess they'll be back when de war's over."

The climate, good food and friendly environment helped them all. The sores and rashes retreated and sunburn soon became their major hazard along with bites from the no-see-ums, almost microscopic gnats had bit their ankles and limbs in the evening. Kristin and the others soon learned that long loose clothing offered the best protection. So two weeks slipped by. Johan grew stronger and Petra made no pretence of the fact that she and the young man were sexually active.

"And why not?" she said one evening when she was in the small bedroom she shared with Kristin. "We love each other. If you weren't so snobby you'd realize that's what Bern wants, too."

"What do you mean?" Kristin replied.

"Isn't a petty officer good enough for you after being a Kapitanleutnant's mistress?"

Kristin flushed. "It's not like that," she said. "Anyhow Falk and I only did it when..." She bit on her lip and swung away.

"Go on..." Petra said quietly.

"I didn't enjoy it. We only did it twice and both times... well you know."

"No. Tell me."

"He practically raped me," Kristin retorted. "Oh, I guess I felt honored but..." She glanced back at her friend. "I don't want to talk about it."

"I know," Petra replied. "Did you ever go to one of those officer's parties?"

Kristin shook her head.

"They took turns. We couldn't object. It was our duty to the Fatherland. I only married Thilo to get away. It was just a brothel, Kristin. It's different with Johan." She shrugged. "I have a feeling Bern's the same."

"But..."

"The war's almost over, Kristin. We're never going back. It's a new world and nobody will help us. This island has given us one chance, one we'd never have had if we'd ended up in Argentina. You found out what Falk was really like. I bet he bedded dozens of women..." She stopped again "And now there's Bern. He loves you Kristin. Just look at his eyes when you walk along the beach." She laughed. "Glance a bit lower, too. Males are quite unsuccessful at hiding their anatomy when they're aroused."

Kristin flushed bright red but knew Petra was right. "Okay, what do I do?" she asked.

"Just let it happen. Relax and don't turn frigid if he touches you. Then we can swap rooms so I don't have to put up with your snoring." She smiled, rolled over and fluffed her pillow up. "Night, Kristin."

"Night Petra." Kristin turned off the oil lamp and gazed out the tiny wire screen that served as a window. Outside, waves lapped on the shore and the wind sighed through nearby trees. Except for perhaps those couple of years at university before the war, she had never felt so... what was it? Happy she guessed but even that word couldn't describe how she really felt. She dropped asleep and dreamed of the petty officer only one wall away.

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