

# JAMES R. BENN



# DEATH'S DOOR

A BILLY BOYLE WORLD WAR II MYSTERY

"Fascinating behind-the-lines mysteries from little-known facets of World War II history." —Booklist

ALSO BY THE AUTHOR

*Billy Boyle*  
*The First Wave*  
*Blood Alone*  
*Evil for Evil*  
*Rag & Bone*  
*A Mortal Terror*

# DEATH'S DOOR

---

*A Billy Boyle World War II Mystery*

*James R. Benn*



Copyright © 2012 by James R. Benn

All rights reserved.

Published by Soho Press, Inc.

853 Broadway  
New York, NY 10003

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Benn, James R.

Death's door / James R. Benn.

p. cm.

eISBN: 978-1-61695-186-3

1. Boyle, Billy (Fictitious character)—Fiction.
2. Murder—Investigation—Fiction. 3. Italy—History—German occupation, 1943-1945—Fiction. 4. Vatican City—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3602.E6644D43 2012

813'.6—dc23

2012012676

v3.1\_r1

*For Debbie  
First reader,  
First in my heart*

Satan arrives at Pandemonium, in full assembly relates with boasting his success against Man; instead of applause is entertained with a general hiss by all his audience, transform'd with himself also suddenly into Serpents, according to his doom giv'n in Paradise; then deluded with a shew of the forbidden Tree springing up before them, they greedily reaching to take of the Fruit, chew dust and bitter ashes.

—John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book Ten

## Contents

*Cover*

*Other Books By This Author*

*Title Page*

*Copyright*

*Dedication*

*Epigraph*

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-one

Chapter Twenty-two

Chapter Twenty-three

Chapter Twenty-four

Chapter Twenty-five

Chapter Twenty-six

Chapter Twenty-seven

Chapter Twenty-eight

Chapter Twenty-nine  
Chapter Thirty  
Chapter Thirty-one  
Chapter Thirty-two  
Chapter Thirty-three  
Chapter Thirty-four  
Chapter Thirty-five  
Chapter Thirty-six  
Chapter Thirty-seven  
Chapter Thirty-eight  
Chapter Thirty-nine  
Chapter Forty  
Chapter Forty-one  
Chapter Forty-two  
Chapter Forty-three  
Chapter Forty-four  
Chapter Forty-five

*Author's Note*

*Acknowledgments*

*About the Author*

*Preview of A Blind Goddess*

*Other Titles in the Soho Crime Series*

## CHAPTER ONE

BRINDISI. ITALY

*February, 1944*

THEY MUST BE in love, I thought, watching the couple as they danced to a scratchy tune on the Victrola. It was late, and the place was empty but for us, the dancers, and a waiter at the front entrance, trolling for customers. He'd gotten bored refilling my wineglass, so I poured the last of the vino myself and listened to the song. Again, since it was the only record in the joint.

"Who's that singing, Kaz?"

"Carlo Buti. Very popular in Italy. Billy, are you listening to me?"

"Sure. Guy named Carlo Buti. What's the song about?" I could count on Kaz to know stuff like this. He was smart in seven languages, but he didn't know everything, like when to mind his own business. He'd been yammering at me for the past hour, and I'd been doing my best not to pay him any mind.

"He is singing to his lover," Kaz said, leaning back and listening. "Love is beautiful when he is near her. It makes him dream, it makes him tremble. The usual romanticisms."

Kaz had his reasons to play the cynic, so I let it pass. He was probably right about the song anyway. The couple on the tiny dance floor swayed to the music, ignoring us and the waiter at the door, who called to a group of British officers to come in and try the mussels with fava beans. The dancers ignored the war, too, in a way Kaz and I could not. They were together, their arms interwoven, their passion thick in the night air. They were young, maybe nineteen or twenty, tops. She rested her cheek on his shoulder as his hand caressed the small of her back.

"They must be in love," I said, out loud this time.

"Indeed," Kaz said, finishing the wine in his glass. "And moneyed, as well. She is wearing silk stockings, and he has a decent wristwatch. No visible scars or injuries on the young man either, so it is likely he is either very lucky—which comes with money—or he avoided military service with the Fascists. They are drinking a Brindisi Rosso Riserva, so he can afford more than a common table wine. He has been sneaking glances at his watch, so he must need to get her home soon. This is the only time he can be alone with her, and hold her, which is why they are dancing."

"Not bad," I said. "How do you know she's not a prostitute?"

"Her shoes. They are expensive, and new. Also, they are still here, long after the meal is done. The young man would not wish to dance all night if he could take the young lady to bed. Therefore, he cannot. It is only a guess, but her parents must trust him to let her go out unattended. But, it is wartime, and these things may not be so important anymore."

"You might have a career as a detective, Kaz."

“You’ve taught me to study a room and the people in it as soon as I enter. We have been at this table for so long, I’ve had ample time. What are we doing here, Billy?”

“Having dinner, enjoying the view.” I gestured to the harbor, across the road from the *ristorante*. A Royal Navy destroyer was tied up at the dock, and the muted sounds of sailors moving about drifted across the wide street that separated the wharf from the city. A line of palm trees rustled in the breeze. February in Brindisi was not much like February in Boston.

“We finished eating hours ago. The wine was tolerable, more so than your company, I must say. Billy, face it. She is lost. By now, there is no hope. Why won’t you listen to me?”

Love is beautiful when you are near the one you love. When you can’t be, it is terrible. It makes you dream, but the dreams aren’t happy ones. And I tremble, too, along with Carlo Buti.

“I do listen, Kaz. Is it true that the old Roman road ends here, in Brindisi?”

“The Appian Way? Yes. Just around the corner, as a matter of fact. A Roman column marks the end as it comes down to the water. Why?”

“So we could leave here, start walking, and end up in Rome?”

“Well, yes. But it is almost three hundred miles, and the German Army might have something to say about it.”

“Yeah, that’s a problem.” I watched as a jeep full of American MPs drove slowly by, checking out the clientele. I rested my chin in the palm of my hand, tilting my head against my fingers to hide my face. The music had ended, and the young couple were gathering their things to leave. Almost midnight. The jeep stopped, and the MPs watched the lovebirds depart. There was a blackout in place, but the MPs were easy to spot with their white helmets shining in the moonlight. Light spilled out into the street, but the MPs didn’t say anything, simply rolled on, probably admiring the young lady.

“Are you in trouble with the MPs, Billy?”

“Not that I know of,” I said, my hand going to the table. It was true enough.

“Good, because this late, they may stop to question anyone out near the harbor.”

“Yeah, especially pretty girls. I think we’re safe.” Safe. I trembled.

“Billy,” Kaz said, laying his hand on my arm. I shook it off. “We heard a week ago. The message took two days to get here. You know what that means.”

“*Due grappe*,” I said, signaling the waiter. Maybe another drink would shut Kaz up, but I doubted it.

“It means that by the time we learned she was taken, the Gestapo had let her sit alone in a cell for two days, listening to the screams of the tortured,” Kaz said. “To soften her up. Standard Nazi practice.”

“*Grazie*,” I said as the waiter set down the drinks. I raised my glass, but Kaz ignored me.

“The first day might not have been too bad,” he continued. “They apologize for keeping you waiting, offering tea, coffee, cigarettes. A rational discussion,

to size the prisoner up. Some might give up information then, in the hopes of staying alive and keeping their fingernails.”

I drank half the glass down, the fiery liquor harsh in my throat. I didn't look at Kaz.

“But it is all a ruse,” he said. “To raise the prisoner's hopes and then dash them. Later that day, the actual torture begins. That would have been six and a half days ago. And the Gestapo would have worked fast, knowing that once an agent is captured, the rest of their group will go into hiding as soon as they hear of it.”

“When did you become an expert in Gestapo torture?”

“I was briefed by an SOE colonel.” The Special Operations Executive, Great Britain's spy and sabotage outfit. Set up in a villa outside of Brindisi, they sent the young and the willing to do the dirty work of winning a war for the old who had too much to lose. They had their own Royal Air Force squadron at their beck and call, plus a small army of forgers, tailors, demolitions experts, commandos, and smugglers. “You don't want to know the rest. Suffice it to say, six days is more than any mortal can stand.”

I finished the grappa.

“They call their torture chambers kitchens,” Kaz said. “That should give you some idea of what they do. If prisoners don't talk, they will likely die from the interrogation. If they do talk, they are often shot once the information is verified. Or sent to a concentration camp. Either way, she is dead by now, or beyond all redemption.”

“How does SOE know all this?”

“It is their job to know these things.”

“But how can they, if all prisoners are killed or sent to concentration camps? There would be no way to learn those details.”

“There have been some escapes. And a very few people have been let go. Even the Gestapo makes mistakes.”

“Interesting,” I said.

“No, it is terrible. And what is worse is that you should cling to any hope.” Now it was Kaz's turn to drink. He took one gulp, and then finished the rest. His lips curled against his teeth as he swallowed, and the scar on the side of his face seemed to redden. Our eyes met, and I wondered which of us was the worse off. Kaz had been head over heels in love when I first met him. And Daphne Seaton had loved him too, but that all ended in an explosion that killed her and maimed him in body and soul. Daphne was never coming back, and that certainty haunted Kaz.

I was haunted by uncertainty. Was Diana, Daphne's sister, alive? Diana Seaton worked for the SOE, and had been reported taken by the Gestapo in Rome, where she was operating undercover as a nun. Was she dead? I couldn't believe it. But I couldn't do anything about it either, and it was tearing me up inside. Not that I would ever say it to Kaz, but I was jealous of him. He knew, straight out. I wondered, wept, and trembled again.

“Let's go,” I said. I threw cash down on the table, probably enough for a

dozen dinners. “Show me the Appian Way.”

Kaz led the way, passing a bombed-out building, around a corner and up too damn many stone steps. At the top, a single Roman column stood, next to a pedestal where its twin had once been.

“It is more correct to say this is where the Via Appia ends,” Kaz said. “There is no beginning here.”

The wind whipped around us as I gazed out over the harbor, the moon reflected in the low, lapping waves. Warships of all sizes floated in the calm waters, their immense guns immobile. Why weren’t they helping us get to Rome? Why did they sit, useless, in the Mediterranean night?

“How much longer are you here?” I asked.

Kaz—Lieutenant (and Baron) Piotr Augustus Kazimierz, of the Polish Army in Exile—had been detailed to liaison duties with the Polish II Corps, currently making its way to the Italian front from Egypt by way of Taranto, on the heel of Italy. Kaz and I both worked for General Eisenhower, and we often found ourselves loaned out when the General had no pressing matters at hand, investigating murders and other crimes that might impede the war effort.

“I have orders to return to London at the end of the week. Getting the Polish Corps supplied and coordinated with Eighth Army is nearly complete,” Kaz said. “I am sorry I haven’t been around to help you. Too much paperwork and meetings. All terribly boring.”

“Nothing you could have done,” I said. I’d spent every day, every hour, trying to get information about Diana—from the SOE, MI6, even Allied Command at Caserta—but had come up empty all around.

“What about you, Billy? Have you heard from Colonel Harding?” Harding was our immediate boss in General Eisenhower’s headquarters.

“Yes, I have,” I said, pulling a thick wad of documents from my jacket pocket. “Orders to return to London two days after we found out about Diana. Orders to proceed to the airfield at Brindisi for priority transportation to London. Inquiries demanding to know my location. And today, orders for me to return immediately or face court-martial for desertion.”

“Billy, you have to leave. You can’t ignore orders from Supreme Headquarters.”

“Oh yeah?” I held the papers up over my head and let them go. The wind lifted them and carried them out over the harbor, where they fell like tears into the sea.

## CHAPTER TWO

THEY FOUND ME the next morning. I'd hoped that I might have a day or two of grace, but Brindisi was full of Brits and not many Yanks, so I knew my chances were slim. There were no pretty girls to distract them this time, and I was in a part of town that wasn't known for officers' quarters.

I'd left the billet Kaz and I had been assigned a couple of days ago and gotten a cheap hotel room on the Via Cittadella, between a bordello and a bombed-out haberdashery. I'd met some of the officers from SOE when I was on official business, just before we got the news about Diana, and I simply kept showing up, carrying orders I had no intention of obeying, and asking everyone from the clerks on up if they had any further news of Diana. The orders had come from Colonel Harding in London, but no one at SOE in Brindisi knew what they were about, or that I was absent without leave. They were the left hand that didn't know what the right was doing.

But the snowdrops knew. They were waiting by my jeep, outside the hotel entrance. It was one of the few US Army vehicles in this part of town. One of the only vehicles, period. It probably was a dumb move to park it next to a whorehouse, but I had paid the concierge to keep his eyes peeled and to chase the *scugnizzi* away when they got too close. I could see some of them now, eyeing the military police from behind piles of rubble. Street kids, orphans most of them, a common sight in any Italian city that had been bombed or shelled. They were grimy, always hungry, and clothed in rags that had once been uniforms, impossible to tell from which side. One of the MPs glanced in their direction and they vanished into the rubble as if invisible.

"You got me dead to rights, boys," I said, flashing my friendliest grin. "What'd I do?"

"You Lieutenant Boyle?" the sergeant asked, his white gloves, helmet, and leggings sparkling in the morning sun.

"Call me Billy, Sarge, everyone does."

"Let's go for a ride, Lieutenant. Someone wants to see you." He hitched his thumb in the direction of the passenger's seat. No pat down, no handcuffs. A good sign.

"What about my jeep?" I asked.

"Be right behind us," he said, and snapped his fingers. One of the MPs took my jeep, and the sergeant climbed in behind me. He was a big guy, square-jawed with a deep, growling voice. He needed a shave, which probably meant he'd been up all night looking for me, or throwing drunks into the stockade. Whichever it was, it hadn't put him in a good mood.

"Where we going?" I asked, as I buttoned the collar of my trench coat and held onto my garrison cap.

“You should be going to the stockade, like all the other deserters, but you seem to have friends in high places.”

“Hey, I didn’t desert, Sarge. I’m only a little late heading back to London.”

“Everybody’s got an excuse, Lieutenant. I’ve heard ’em all.”

“Don’t bet on it. You going to tell me where we’re headed?”

“Nope.”

“Aren’t you going to take my weapon? Put the cuffs on? Shackle me or something?”

“Only if you’re planning on shooting all of us, and I don’t think you have what it takes. No need to cuff you either; me and my billy club can take care of a dozen wiseass lieutenants any day of the week. I do have a dirty rag back here though, and I will gag you with it if you don’t shut up.”

I got the message. I sat back and enjoyed the view as we circled the harbor, heading north. It was the same route I’d taken to the SOE station, past the rusting hulk of a bombed-out freighter in the harbor, the barbed-wire fence surrounding the ammo bunkers, and the open pit where army dump trucks deposited mounds of Uncle Sam’s garbage every day. Dozens of women and *scugnizzi* sorted through it, the luckiest of them wearing discarded combat boots—German jackboots, GI combat boots, British ammo boots—some of them reaching up to the knees of the smaller kids. They looked up warily as we passed, ready to scatter, but went back to their scavenging when the MPs paid them no mind.

“Those kids will steal anything,” the sergeant said. I took this as an invitation to converse.

“Most are orphans,” I said. “If either of their parents are alive, they were probably taken by the Germans as forced labor. It’s a hard life for a kid, all alone, home destroyed, no one to look after them. Hard to blame them for snitching K rations when they can.”

“Bunch of them tried to steal a truckload of liquor,” he said. “The kid driving had blocks of wood strapped to his feet so he could reach the pedals. They’re thieves, plain and simple.”

“What did you do with him? Break his legs?”

“Shut up before I get that rag out, Lieutenant. We’re almost there.” He tapped the driver on the shoulder and pointed to the access road for the airfield. He showed his orders to the Royal Air Force guard at the gate and was waved through. We drove past Halifax four-engine bombers, painted flat black, with the RAF roundel on the fuselage and not much else in the way of markings. Same with the Lysanders, the rugged single-engine craft used for quick landings behind enemy lines. These were the aircraft of 148 Squadron, assigned to the SOE for the work of delivering arms, agents, and saboteurs behind the lines. It was all night work, which was why the aircraft were on the ground, under camouflage netting, waiting for the sky to become as dark as their airframes.

We passed the warehouse where SOE had a packing station for parachute containers, and drove on to the edge of the airfield, where a dirt road led to a

villa, perched on a small hilltop overlooking an inlet. It was surrounded by cypress and palm trees, the breeze off the Adriatic Sea producing a calm rustling sound at odds with the grimness of the enterprise.

I was puzzled as to why we were here. I'd expected to be taken to the nearest provost marshal's office, or at least to a US Army facility. But a British outfit? The same SOE station I'd been haunting for the past week? It didn't add up. If there were news about Diana, they wouldn't send American MPs out to find me; they knew I was bound to show up sooner rather than later. Which of my friends in high places did the grumpy sergeant mean? For the first time, I felt uneasy. I figured I could talk my way out of the desertion charge; although that was perhaps technically correct, it was an overstatement. I was still in uniform, out in the open at the last place my orders had sent me. Not counting the orders to London, that is. But being delivered by American MPs to a British SOE unit got my hackles up. It meant somebody wanted me, and the last time the Brits wanted me, I got shot, along with a few other people. None of us enjoyed it.

"Wait here," the sergeant said as he got out and spoke to a guard at the door. British Army uniform, no markings.

"Do you have any idea what's going on?" I asked the driver. He was a young kid, a private, nineteen years old at most.

"Not a clue, Lieutenant. But I know one thing for sure. Sarge ain't as tough as he makes out. He gave that kid a spanking, then sent him on his way with Hershey's bars and Spam."

"That qualifies as both cruel and unusual punishment. So why bring me here? Don't you guys have your own hoosegow?"

"Yeah. We use an old *carabinieri* station. Kinda bombed out, but the cells still lock."

"How come we didn't go there?"

"Because Sarge said to go here. That's how things work in the army. You should stop talking now."

"Hey, I'm a fellow cop, don't sweat it. At least back home I was. Detective, Boston PD. You looking to get into police work after the war?"

"Maybe. Can you beat prisoners who won't shut up in Boston?"

I was beginning to irritate the kid, but I didn't have much time. Sarge was signing some paperwork with an officer who'd appeared in the doorway.

"Senseless. But we frown on turning our collars over to the feds, and we'd never give up one of ours to foreigners."

"These guys are our allies."

"You Irish by any chance?" I asked, going for the long shot.

"One quarter, on my grandpappy's side. The other three quarters are glad to get rid of you. Good luck, Lieutenant. I truly have no idea why we're here."

Sarge walked up and motioned me out of the jeep, his jaw clenched. My detective skills told me he was steamed, at me, at the Brits, at whoever ordered him to deliver a shavetail to a secret headquarters, no questions asked. They sped off, spitting gravel, before I had a chance to say, "Call me

Billy. Everyone does.”

## CHAPTER THREE

“ANDREW CROFT,” SAID a British captain, grinning and shaking my hand as if I were a welcome houseguest. “Follow me, Lieutenant Boyle,” he said, pronouncing it *left-tenant* in the odd British way.

Croft was tall, with a strong, dimpled jaw, thick blond hair, and a weathered look to his face. A guy used to the hard life, not a paper-pusher. His uniform was bleached-out khaki, as nondescript as the guard’s had been. But his had the look of being worn in the salt air and hot sun, and I wondered if I were being shanghaied for some against-all-odds mission. At the end of the hall, French doors opened to a balcony overlooking the Adriatic. It was impressive. Clear blue water to the horizon, waves throwing foam at the rocks below. Maybe it was going to be tea and crumpets, not death-defying odds.

“Not the worst digs possible,” Croft said with a sly smile. “You know what the regular army chaps call SOE? ‘Stately ’Omes of England,’ since we seem to find the choicest estates to bed down in. Coffee is on its way. You do want coffee, don’t you?”

“Sure I do. And that quip is hilarious. But what I really want is for you to tell me what the hell I’m doing here. Then we’ll have some joe and swap jokes.”

“Don’t we all?” Croft said. “I haven’t a clue myself. Orders came from the top to wait for you and a Yank courier from Naples. All will be made clear, one hopes. Ah, coffee.”

A silver coffee service was set down between two chairs on the veranda by a corporal wearing a revolver and a long knife on his belt, and a scar across his forehead.

“What unit is this?” I asked. It felt more like a pirate’s lair than a British Army headquarters.

“They call us Force 226,” Croft said as he poured. A breeze came up off the water, blowing his thick blond hair back. “We do a bit of business everywhere, from Corsica to Crete and points in between.”

“Just how high up did those orders come from?” I asked.

“The very top.” Croft sipped his coffee and leaned back in the chair, letting the sun wash his face.

“As in Kim Philby?”

Croft raised one eyebrow at the mention of Philby. “Best not to name names, even among friends,” he said. “There’s no reason to let on you are that close to those in exalted circles. Could get you killed if some bloke repeats it.”

“Almost has,” I said. Kim Philby was with the British Secret Intelligence Service, head of MI6’s Mediterranean Section. We’d worked together before, done each other a favor or two, and I thought we were even. Maybe I was

wrong. "When is the courier due in?"

"He's here now, finishing breakfast in the kitchen. I thought it would be good for us to chat first, get to know each other."

"Why? Are we going on a trip together? Someplace exotic, with explosives?"

"I've no idea, Lieutenant Boyle. But if we are, I'd like to know the sort of man I'm traveling with."

"I'm an unhappy man, Captain Croft. I'd rather be somewhere else right now, with someone else. The sooner we get this over with, the sooner I can go back to being miserable." I drank my coffee and inhaled the sea air. I felt guilty, with Diana in a Gestapo cell while I sat in the sun, powerless to help her. Or too late.

"You do have the look of a man who needs to *do* something," Croft said, turning his blue eyes on me. "Anything but sit here far from the shooting war, I'd dare say. Restless. Haunted, perhaps. Why?"

"Everyone's got a story," I said. "Mine is too complicated to tell."

"Ah, a woman," Croft said, smiling.

I felt like taking a swing at him, but he couldn't know it wasn't a laughing matter. It wasn't that the course of true love never did run smoothly; it was more like its path was marked by torture, death, and finality. Croft was sharp, and likable, but I saw no percentage in giving anything more away. So I drank his coffee and let him think he had me figured out.

"Here's our man now," Croft said, as the sound of heavy footsteps echoed in the tiled hallway. "Not the highest-ranking confidential courier I've ever seen, but certainly the largest."

It couldn't be, I thought, as I put together the visit to the kitchen, the heavy footsteps, and the comment about rank and size. But damned if it wasn't Staff Sergeant Mike Miecznikowski himself. Or Big Mike, as everyone from privates to generals called him.

"Hey, Billy," Big Mike said, raising his hand in the least possible semblance of a salute.

"When did they let you out?" I asked, ignoring the salute and giving him a slap on the back. No mean feat when you took into account Big Mike's shoulders. He looked like a cross between a linebacker and a lumberjack, stuffed into the largest olive-drab getup Uncle Sam had in stock.

"Couple of days ago," Big Mike said, puffing out his cheeks as if he'd run up a dozen flights. He sat down heavily, beads of sweat on his forehead. The last time I'd seen him was more than a week ago, in a military hospital in Naples, his head swathed in bandages, coming out of a deep sleep after a nasty blow to the head.

"Do you need help, Sergeant?" Croft said, a look of confusion on his face.

"Naw, I'm fine, thanks." Big Mike had a way with officers. Most guys couldn't pull it off, but he had the knack. Unless he sized up one of the brass as a real twit, he treated him like one of the guys. He knew when an actual salute was called for, and he could toss off a nice one when he had to.

Otherwise, it was like old pals chewing the fat. And who didn't mind a likable strongman as a pal?

"You don't look fine," I said. I wanted to find out what was going on, but I was more concerned at that moment about Big Mike. He was pale, and his face looked thin and drawn—and thin was a word I'd never applied to him before. "Are you sure you shouldn't still be in the hospital? Or on your way back home?"

"I'm okay, Billy, only a bit winded," Big Mike said. "I was in bed for a week, that was enough hospital for me."

"Were you wounded?" Croft asked, giving Big Mike the once-over, looking for telltale signs. Big Mike took off his garrison cap, revealing a crescent-shaped incision on his skull, above the right ear. His hair was shaved down to a crew cut, and the red, angry scar still showed where the stitches had recently been removed.

"Subdural hematoma?" Croft said, peering closely at the scar. Big Mike nodded, his eyes closing as he did, trying to shut out the pain. "Acute?"

"No," Big Mike said. "The doctors called it subacute, or something like that. Are you a medical man, Captain?"

"Not exactly, but everyone in Force 226 is trained in emergency medicine to one degree or another. It helps to assess the effectiveness of men in the field. I'd guess you should still be on bed rest at least. Discharged from the service at worst, although perhaps you wouldn't think of that as the worst outcome."

"No need to discharge me yet, I'm fine," Big Mike said. I watched him take a deep breath, like an old man in a rocking chair. Then I understood.

"Big Mike is a career policeman," I said to Croft. "I'll bet he talked his way out of a medical discharge because the Detroit Police wouldn't hire him back with a certified head injury. Am I right, Big Mike?"

"Can't say I'd mind going home," Big Mike admitted, shaking his head wistfully. "But I can't risk losing my spot on the Force, or my pension. So I told Sam to keep me in Naples as long as it took to rest up and get back in shape."

"Sam?" Croft said.

"Colonel Samuel Harding," I explained. "He works for General Eisenhower, and we work for him in the Office of Special Investigations."

"Exalted circles, indeed," Croft said, raising an eyebrow. "The air you breathe is positively rarified. Sergeant, we are both restraining our curiosity about what comes next. If you are able, please get on with it."

"Sure, sure," Big Mike said, resting his hand on a manila envelope marked Confidential and sealed with red tape. "I've got a pile of paperwork here, orders, briefing information, memos from MI6 to SHAEF with copies to Captain Croft. But maybe you want the long story short?"

"Paperwork gives me a headache," Croft said. "Please, in your own words." I was beginning to think this guy was okay.

"There's been a murder," Big Mike said. So far, no surprise. Murders that

get in the way of the war effort are our stock and trade. “A priest named Edward Corrigan took a shiv between the ribs. A monsignor, actually.”

“Corrigan? Was he Irish?” I wondered if this were leading to another trip back to the old country.

“Nope. American. Now comes the tricky part. He was murdered in Rome. At the Vatican.”

“Rome,” I whispered. Diana. I felt my heart race, and hoped God would forgive me for how glad I was that someone knifed Monsignor Corrigan. In Rome.

“A pity, to be sure,” Croft said. “But what does it have to do with SOE, or Lieutenant Boyle, for that matter? Vatican City is neutral territory. Surrounded by German-occupied Rome, another problem altogether.”

“I’ll answer the one about Billy first,” Big Mike said. He spoke slowly, each word a struggle, and I worried about the toll this trip had taken on him. But I wanted to know more about Rome and getting closer to Diana, and I willed him to get on with it. “Monsignor Corrigan is, or was, an American. But he held Vatican citizenship, and had lived and worked there for years.”

“Corrigan worked for the Pope,” Croft said.

“For the Holy Office, to be precise,” Big Mike said. “He was a lawyer, and drafted statements on church doctrine for the cardinals to review, that kind of thing.”

“What does this have to do with me?” I asked, impatient for the other shoe to drop. The death of a priest in a city of priests was hardly earthshaking news.

“What it’s got to do with you is that Monsignor Corrigan is a cousin of Bishop John Murphy Finch, of New York. Him and FDR are childhood buddies. From what I hear, when Bishop Finch got the news that cousin Edward was murdered, he gave FDR an earful. FDR passed it on to General Marshall, who passed it onto Ike, who handed it over to Sam. Sam got the news before he left Naples for London, and told me to bring the details to you once plans were in place. It helped keep me from getting sent home, since I was under orders from Ike himself.”

“Forgive me, Sergeant,” Croft said, “but in the British Army, noncommissioned officers are not usually privy to the thoughts of the general staff.”

“I got a few pals at SHAEF,” Big Mike said. Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force in London was where we were based, and where Big Mike rubbed elbows with General Eisenhower, not to mention his chief of staff at SHAEF, General “Beetle” Smith, who knew everything about everybody. Nobody got along with Beetle on a regular basis, except Big Mike. “We stay in touch.”

“So President Roosevelt wants me to find out who murdered Monsignor Edward Corrigan, so he can tell Bishop Finch justice has been served,” I said, getting the conversation back on track, and trying to understand what was being said—and what wasn’t.