

# Prologue



**June 5, 1944**  
**0930 Hours**  
**Rome, Italy**

The three men sprinted up the last flight of the white marble stairs. They halted on the landing, and before an ornate wrought-iron door. The door itself was a work of art, although its beauty was lost on the three men. Their prey was not far ahead.

The senior soldier was a tall captain with a dark brown tan, black hair, and incongruently ice-blue eyes. He held his hand up to stop his party behind him and he cautiously peeked around the corner of the landing. Before him was a long empty hallway dotted on either side with heavy wooden doors each leading to a luxury apartment. The officer knew which apartment their prey would have likely gone to, and he silently motioned for his companions to follow him. He slipped around the door, raised his Thompson submachine gun to his cheek, and walked as softly as he could down the richly carpeted hallway.

Both of his companions mimicked his movements, although neither of the other soldiers carried a submachine gun. They were both armed with M-1 Garand rifles, which were carried in a ready position: cheek against stock, and rifle butt against shoulder. No safeties were on any of their weapons, and fingers rested with gentle competency on triggers.

All three men were breathing heavily, not just from the exertion of the chase, but also from the excitement of the hunt. Months of effort had led to this moment, and although all three men were veterans of the hardest fighting America had seen in the war up to that very week, they could barely control the adrenaline, the breathing, and the rapid pulse.

The smallest man was a scarred and bespectacled sergeant. He was seemingly too young to be a soldier, let alone a sergeant, yet he was the coolest killer in the small company of killers. The young sergeant was the first to regain his composure. He had been paying attention to the iron numbers mounted on the doors to either side of him, and he knew they were getting close. He gently put his hand on the shoulder of the soldier before him, and when he had his attention, he held up two fingers and mouthed the words, "Two more on the right." The tall captain nodded.

The last man was an even taller captain. He was fair with light blue eyes, and his frame was heavier and more muscular than his cousin's—the leader of the group. He was regarded as something of a gentle giant, but today, he had a dangerous angry look in his eyes. He had come on a mission of vengeance.

Captain Perkin Berger, the leader, halted his party when they were still twenty feet from the apartment doorway. In the softest whisper he could manage, he said, "Sam, you kick the door in and move to the side. Eddie, toss a grenade in. I'll move in first."

His companions, Captain Sam Taft and Sergeant Edwin Kulis, barely heard the words but they knew what to do. They had dreamed of this moment for countless days and nights, and while their dreams had seen themselves capturing and interrogating their prey or making him beg for his miserable life, they all knew subconsciously that those dreams were silly flights of fantasy. Their history with their prey had been far too costly for such indulgences.

They would kick the door down, and then they would kill everyone in the apartment without mercy.