



HOW
*Angels
Die*

A NOVEL BY
DAVID-MICHAEL
HARDING

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David-Michael Harding

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By David-Michael Harding

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For
Courtney & Amanda

The old green bicycle assumed an exaggerated sway as Claire stood on its pedals trying to conquer the hill. The sun rose steadily as it crept down her body. It began by grabbing at Claire's tweed cap, snatching and releasing, snatching and releasing, as she pumped up and down on the bike. At the crest of the hill, the last hill, and gratefully so for her eighteen-year-old legs, came within reach, the sun's brilliant light broke over her face. She squinted and looked down, employing the brim of her cap to do its job. It did, and Claire concentrated on her black boots pumping at the pedals as the grey stony pavement slipped by in a slowing blur beneath them.

Her speed continued to wane, but the hill eventually succumbed. With the summit, the sunlight also triumphed and enveloped her. The warmth of the early June sun combined with the slow straining ride to heat Claire's body and flush her cheeks. She paused on the crest to catch her breath and survey the French countryside of her birth.

The city was laid out before her like a giant board game, the streets and roads crisscrossing the land like trails for game pieces. On the far side, the game board ended where it butted the English Channel. From her spot at the crest Claire watched the white lines of waves breaking appear and vanish near the beaches. They were so far away that there were times when the ocean seemed not to move at all, an illusion played out by light and distance.

Those beaches had been wondrous playgrounds when Claire was younger. They had been the world's biggest sandbox for her, her sister Monique, and their many friends. Claire had chased and been chased by her only sibling up and down and around and around that sand for what must have seemed endless hours for their mother and father. But those wondrous days were long removed from Claire's city now. Even on warm, bright days such as this, the beaches were empty except for the concrete pill boxes of the German machine gun nests and miles of barbed wire that stretched along the shore. The beach-goers had long since been driven away, underground or into reluctant servitude.

Back on the game board the houses and factories stood testament to the people, unseen from this distance, who still resided and worked there. These were her people, her kind. French, through and through. But among them was a virus, a cancer, and even from the faraway hilltop Claire could see and feel its presence.

She squinted against her friend, the warming sun, and shaded her eyes in support of the hardworking cap. Some way off she could make out vehicles moving, apparently slowly, again tricked by the distance. While their speed was hard to determine and their destination unknown, their color reached out to Claire across the valley and up the hill to slap her in the face. The cars, trucks, and half-tracks meandering through her city like warring ants invading a foreign colony were grey — German grey. And invaders were exactly what they were.

Claire could scarcely remember a time without war — or talk of war, threat of war, fear of war. And its latest face, occupation, was as hideous as war itself. There were nearly as many deaths now as when the German armies first approached the borders and the Luftwaffe dropped their incendiary bombs from the sky. Now, however, the

deaths were less pronounced, less dramatic, and the foreign press didn't notice them. Gone were the days of overt battle and fierce fire fights for desolate stretches of land that heretofore no one cared about. They had been replaced by quiet days of blank uncertainty as Germany's grip tightened around the throat of France. Yet in the subtle strangulation of a nation, many died invisible deaths.

The regular German Army had been replaced as well, at least in part, as large numbers of its members had been drawn to the east to battle the Russians. In its stead rose black-suited soldiers whose battle plan differed strongly from open confrontation, bombing, and bullets. Unlike those in grey headed to the front, the black uniforms seldom fraternized with locals beyond rape and torture. These were the German SS and the Gestapo, secret police who turned citizen against citizen and often family against family in a perverted attempt to turn France against itself. It was a form of death from within, or so they must have thought. The Gestapo were the eyes and ears of Berlin and the black uniformed SS were their executioners. A shiny black staff car, like a specialized black killer ant among the hundreds of vile greys, glittered in the distance, revealing the Gestapo's presence.

Questioning and arrest in the street had supplanted gunfire and artillery on the battlefield, although it occurred to Claire that the end result was often the same. At least on a battlefield one could claim the dead or the part that remained. Those arrested during this dragging foot of war that lingered over France just disappeared. They vanished into railroad cars like a magician's pretty assistant into a magic box. Her father, Sean McCleash, spoke of internment camps to the east where all those arrested were being held. To her face, Claire heard her father say that when the war ended, those folks would be released and allowed to return to their homes — the assistant always reappeared at the end of the trick. It seemed logical, as they had done nothing wrong, certainly nothing illegal, but when Sean McCleash spoke of these camps he did so in hushed tones, after which he made the Sign of the Cross over his thin chest and checked the lock on the door. The lock checked, he would glance around the curtain through the front window into the dark street. He knew more than he said, Claire reasoned, and she doubted that she would ever again see the entire families she had witnessed being rooted from their homes by the Nazi invaders.

Her own family had been untouched when judged by the perverted standards of war and the occupation. There were no sons or brothers to be killed or taken prisoner, and her father, as Irish and as un-French as one could be and still live within the country's borders, was "beyond the age of able-bodied men," or so a recruiter had once said. Claire smiled to herself at the remembrance of that declaration and the vicious diatribe that followed, delivered at the hands of her father, on the poor civil servant who thought he had done the senior McCleash a tremendous turn in sparing him from war.

Absent a veteran for a father and minus brothers who might have carried the McCleash name into battle, Claire believed it fell to her to represent the family's interest in the war. However, it needn't have been this way. Many young girls lived where Claire lived and lived as she lived, with parents and families not unlike her own and maintained a life apart from the Germans. This was actually supported by the occupiers, who needed the citizens to see to it that the country was fed at the very

least. Though the prime commodities, and often more than that, went to Berlin, many French conducted their lives and their businesses in a manner not much removed from the time before the Germans flew their flag over Paris. Claire's own mother still darned socks and mended shirts as she always had done, though now the French work shirts had become uniforms, and the simple colors of her neighbors had been replaced by the grey of German soldiers. It seemed the invasion hadn't put an end to the need for a talented seamstress.

Yet Claire's private world had taken a turn, and the better or worse determination of it was far from resolved. One might have considered, and reasonably so, that growing up in an air of conflict had made Claire what she had become. At six she had played on the kitchen floor with her older sister. As they squirmed and wrestled and sang around the chrome legs of a new Formica-topped kitchen table and the feet of their parents and neighbors, china cups and saucers clattered and talk of impending war with Germany dribbled off the table's edge. The words fell among the sisters and festered there over time. The sores would not break the surface and bleed for several years until 1940 when a cursed tyrant sent his legions against France in earnest. Then, amidst sporadic gunfire, sirens, and dashing feet, Claire cried like thousands of others through day and night as grey trucks carrying grey soldiers stole her country, and sometimes her friends.

During the first days of the invasion Claire hid, somewhat voluntarily, from the activity in the street. She listened to the whispers of her parents and the blaring sirens wailing across the city. Both made her tremble. One day she chanced a look through the front window curtain, drawn tight since the invasion, and watched in confusion as a neighboring family with a girl just her age was loaded, rather harshly, into a large grey truck. As the truck sped away and the family left the neighborhood, unknowingly for the last time, Claire's father discovered her at the window. She had braced herself for a lashing, but none came. Instead, he cradled her in his arms and sank into the dark green Victorian-style chair that was his throne and cried. He had never hugged her so tightly for so long and never had his tears lost themselves in his daughter's hair. These things a child remembers until she grows old enough to understand. Even then, the memories remain, but Claire had felt them shift from foggy confusion to fuel for an inner fire.

The early days of the occupation slipped into weeks and months, and the McCleash family turned the pages of their calendar with a solemn reverence for lost time. With another month gone, curiosity, boredom, and the temptation offered by fear bid Claire to peek out more and more from behind the drapes of the family's windows. On the heels of these timid glances up the street came the inevitable ventures into what was becoming a new country. The Nazi presence was everywhere. Their bland trucks skirted up and down Claire's familiar roads leaving dust storms and litter reeling after them. It was these trucks that became the center of attention for Claire and several other budding teenagers. Protected by their knowledge of the city, the children of France began tormenting the trucks in the manner they may have pestered a tied hound in earlier days.

For Claire it began when a slight stick she was carrying seemed almost involuntarily to leap out and scratch the grey skin of a parked half-track personnel

carrier. She instantly dropped the stick and sprinted away until she reached the safety of her house. Even then she ran until she was in her room, crouching on the floor in the corner. The shadow of safety cast by her bed held her at length while she listened for screeching tires and rattling gunfire erupting from the street in front of her house. None came. When she dared stand to check the window and the street below and found no signs of gathering grey or black uniforms, a warm rush coursed through her lithe frame and she sank to the floor once again, smiling.

It wasn't long before trying to hit the black crosses that graced the grey doors with rocks tossed from hidden places and rooftops became the local sport of choice. With the clang of a hit, a chorus of young voices would resound the feelings of all France. On the day when an errant throw missed its mark and instead shattered a windshield, forcing the truck under assault to veer into the gutter, the same rush of emotion that had captured Claire on her bedroom floor surged through the entire group.

The troublesome youngsters became teenagers and aged quickly, spurred by war, and their games grew with them. It was discovered that trucks with broken headlights could not move in the dark, whereas to Claire and her friends the night was an ally. So windshields and headlights suffered mightily until one afternoon an accidental escalation rocketed the bothersome antics of the group from buzzing gnats to be halfheartedly shooed away to the hunted — prime targets for the secret police.

Unthinking soldiers were stopped in a narrow alley when a garbage can dropped from a rooftop careened off the hood of their truck. The foolhardy driver stepped from behind the wheel into a barrage of bottles, stones, and bricks being hurled from above. One projectile or another, and from whose hand no one was certain, struck the German in the head. He instantly dropped to the ground, and a pool of blood spilled out from his broken skull. The brave and the reckless peered over the precipice of the building. Claire was among them, secure in both categories. She witnessed the single dying soldier, but for her he became all of Germany. There was a way to stop the Nazis, and she had found it at age fifteen.

When the driver's companion opened fire at the rooftop, Claire's compatriots darted away, but she remained, staring into the gunfire, never flinching. That calculated act remained with her through the years, a constant companion as she rained her own diminutive terror down on the occupying military. Now, from the hill, it was invoked yet again as she looked down on her infected city.

Three young Resistance fighters, one in old brown leather shoes with laces broken and retied, raced up the stairs two at a time. German soldiers in shiny black high-top boots, with rifle muzzles jumping ahead of them followed within seconds. Shots rang through the house, and a Resistance fighter, the owner of the broken laces, fell. The Germans were on him before his heart could stop, and another bullet entered his eye as he looked up at his executioner.

"Go! Go! Go!" Sergeant Sneitz yelled. "They went up!"

The sergeant, a despicable man who drank often and bathed little, whipped his two companions into a lather as he stood over the one-eyed dead man. "Hurry, you assholes! And don't hit that bitch! I want her, and I aim to have her!"

Two privates, Herbeart and Timic, ran up to the third floor ahead of him and encountered no opposition on the way. In seconds they had cornered the two fleeing fighters, one a young man and the other the object of the chase for Sergeant Sneitz. Herbeart, heretofore lost in the passion of the chase, suddenly realized the couple posed little threat. They may have been members of the Resistance, a great many young people were in one sense or another, but these were unarmed and merely walking up the boulevard when Sneitz had spotted the woman. Now they were running for their lives, and the route they'd chosen was the wrong one.

The last room had no weapons, not even a stick or a chair to fend off the pursuers. And still the young man, like a frightened animal driven to a corner, turned and jumped at the soldiers. Private Herbeart, the youngest of the Nazi trio, fired out of instinct. His partner pulled his trigger as well, and the young Frenchman withered against the wall and waited to die. In moments his wait was over.

Sneitz sped into the room just behind the shots. "If you shot that whore..." Then he saw the girl was unscathed. "Good job!" he said as he lowered his weapon and patted Herbeart's back. "Now we can have us a party."

For the girl, resisting the soldiers proved more painful than the attack. She tried, initially, but the sergeant invoked her cooperation with several well-placed punches to the face. The rape began while Herbeart and Timic searched the two dead men. Herbeart found a few francs on the dead man leaning against the wall and stuffed it in his pocket, carefully hiding the fact from his partners.

The sergeant was finished in minutes. Then the rape was passed to Timic while the girl stumbled through various stages of consciousness. When Timic had finished with her, Herbeart had seen enough.

"Next!" Timic yelled triumphantly.

When Herbeart didn't follow suit the others began to ride him.

"What's the matter, soldier?"

"Nothing."

"You aren't a queer, are you?"

"No, but...Christ, she's almost dead."

"So?"

"I'm not fucking no dead girl."

Sneitz kicked the woman in the side, and she uttered a tired moan. "See? She isn't dead."

"I'll pass."

"You fucking fairy, Herbeart!"

"Fuck you!" the young soldier said as he stormed out, chased by more taunts. No sooner had his boots hit the stairs than one last gunshot was triggered in the house. The report spun Herbeart on his heels, and he raced back to the room. He came into the doorway at the same time Timic tried to leave. They bounced against each other and faked to one side then the other, each anxious to go by in the opposite direction. Exasperated, Herbeart pushed Timic back into the room. Only then did he see the widening pool of blood streaming from the girl's head.

"Fucking Christ, Sneitz! What the hell's the matter with you?"

"She is...was, a part of that Resistance thing. Now she isn't. Let's go."

Herbeart stood stock still, staring at the blood as it moved across the floor, coming for him.

"I said, let's go!" Sneitz ordered.

"She was just a kid."

Sneitz looked back at the girl. Her pants were down, one leg torn free from them, and her shirt was pushed up. "She was old enough. Probably same age as you, Herbeart."

That realization struck him hard, and the puzzled look on his face deepened. Timic saw it and grabbed his arm. "Hey. C'mon. We got shit to do."

Timic succeeded in pulling Herbeart toward the door, but as soon as the retreat began, the sergeant stopped it. He lowered his rifle barrel across the doorway in front of the two soldiers. "Herbeart, you forget anything you're thinking. You go soft on me and you're apt to get hurt in a firefight some night. A bullet's a bullet. Doesn't matter where it comes from. Follow?"

"Don't worry about him, Sarge," Timic said with a laugh. "He just needs a little R and R. I'll take him to the Lights Club tonight and get him drunk as hell. Tomorrow he'll be right as rain."

Sneitz didn't say anything else, nor did the others. The soldiers fell in behind their sergeant and left the house to their conquests. The blood pool gave up trying to reach the men and slowed. Minutes later it stopped entirely and soon turned almost black as it dried on the floor and the hair of the pretty young girl.

Claire's breath was her own again, but before she left her vantage point on the hill she doffed her cap and discreetly peered inside. Tucked beneath the inner headband was a letter she had secreted away many miles and many hills before. She adjusted it slightly, more of an assurance to herself than security for the note, then pulled the cap back down tight over her tied-up hair and pushed on.

This side of the hill proved a comfortable friend and pulled her effortlessly down toward home. As the bicycle picked up speed it was swallowed by the increased traffic nearer the city. Freed from pedaling, Claire was able to concentrate solely on navigation, which was warranted as the grey cars and trucks seemed to care little about the lone bicyclist.

The air of the Germans was, however, not one of complete indifference. Even in her corduroy pants, boots, and baggy jacket, the curves of Claire's young figure were strong. Though she always preferred her pants to her sister's flowing dresses, today, on this two-wheeled sortie, her clothes had a purpose. She had hoped her unadorned appearance would help keep her from drawing the attention of passing Germans. As a result of the exploits of Claire and her young countrymen, the Nazis had become more cognizant of the Resistance and therefore more willing than ever before to stop and question the citizenry, especially pretty ones.

As she raced on, aware of increasing stares both piercing and passing, Claire hunched even further over her handlebars to conceal the curves of her breasts. She ducked her head to hide her face and glanced up only enough to save herself from crashing as the traffic swirled around her.

A convertible German field car — long, grey, low to the ground, its top down in the sun and bursting with a load of young zealous soldiers, slowed as it approached Claire head on. She heard the motor relax and looked up into the lewd stares of half a dozen soldiers. The car slowed nearly to a stop when it came abreast of the bicycle. Two soldiers leaned heavily out of the car and crudely swiped at Claire's bottom.

"You like to ride, baby?" they shouted in broken French. "I got something for you to ride on!"

The nearness of the pass forced Claire onto the grassy roadside and nearly into the ditch. The bicycle teetered on the uneven ground, but Claire forced it ahead. In the car, the driver was being goaded to stop. He resisted his comrades' playful punches

until his hat was pushed down over his eyes. As he slammed on the brakes and halted the creeping car, several of the soldiers clamored out the back onto the wide trunk and shouted at Claire who once again stood on the pedals and encouraged the bike ahead.

"Come back, sweetheart! I need riding, too!"

"No, no! Me, you sweet thing! How about dinner?"

Claire glanced over her shoulder as a third soldier snatched a candy bar from his pocket and jumped off the trunk. He jogged toward Claire dangling his prize. "Forget them, darling. I've got chocolate!"

Claire heard him and looked again, but more to judge the distance than the bait. The soldier took the glance as a positive sign and continued toward her as his partners laughed behind him. Claire's legs responded to the closing threat and pumped all the harder, easily outdistancing the candy suitor.

"But I've got chocolate!" he yelled woefully as he lumbered to a stop and the pursuit ended.

Claire cycled further on until she was easily out of reach. The soldier began returning to the car, which pulled away slightly as he approached. The candy-bearing soldier was soon forced to jog after it then run outright, shouting obscenities at the driver as his ride picked up speed. Claire stopped when she heard the commotion and straddled the bicycle as she looked back at the childish spectacle. She shook her head as her vanquished intended was forced to relinquish his precious chocolate in exchange for re-admittance to the car. The entire carload caught sight of Claire watching from her safe distance and threw her kisses. Then they laughed heartily at their sport and drove away while Claire watched, fuming. She squinted to better see the faces in the car, but they had become a blurring mass of grey.

"Perhaps we will get together some night," she said softly as she tugged at her cap and felt the letter hidden in its lining. "Perhaps we will."

The bicycle and Claire departed company with the car and was soon absorbed by the ebb and flow of traffic as the city wrapped its arms around her. Rows of tightly spaced similar-looking houses lined the narrow streets on either side as Claire pedaled the bicycle through toward home. She continued her leaning and weaving navigation until she turned up a cramped side street and coasted from the thoroughfare onto the sidewalk.

Before she stopped completely, Claire stepped through the bike's frame and hit the ground in stride. She moved hurriedly up the stoop of her parents' house wheeling the bicycle alongside. The pause at the door was only enough to work the lock; then she stepped inside, pulling the bicycle in with her.

The house was dim despite it being only late afternoon, but Claire's eyes would soon adjust to the subtle light of the foyer. This open hallway and the attached living room still rested behind pulled drapes four years after the invasion and those first ugly days. Had the curtains opened, the sun would have shone on a room neat and clean but lacking in décor, almost Spartan in its simple functionality. Impending war and war itself had prohibited Sean from furnishing it to the level he wished for his wife and children. He had the money, tucked away for rainy days, and worked part-time when he wanted at the local postal delivery office where in his prime, in better days, he had labored as a carrier and retired as a manager. The McCleash money was currently

hidden in the house, out of sight from the invaders who had early on pilfered the banks. The house itself — though plain, simple, and anonymous on the street — was paid for. It was his. But Sean and his family understood it would remain so only until such time as the Third Reich decided otherwise or the British and Americans bombed it in an effort to dismantle the German war machine.

The bicycle leaned against the wall, enjoying a well-deserved rest as Claire sent a standard glance in the direction of her father's chair. She didn't expect to find him there, and she was right, but the look was really an assessment of his pipe rack, which consumed the better part of a smallish end table that sat alongside the worn and comfortable chair.

The neat row of pipes, eight in all, served many functions beyond their designed intention. To Sean the various pipes were carriers of different tastes and different sensations to the mouth, nose, and hand. They had been years in assembling and had become comfortable friends to him and guardians of simple pleasures. But to the women of the house the pipes provided a wealth of information. They were both a barometer of the patriarch's temperament and a geographic locator of sorts.

When the radio sent music through the house, Sean held a rather dainty pipe with a hand-carved bowl and delicate stem that he seldom drew against. Rather, he seemed to wave it about like a maestro's baton, keeping rough time to the tunes. Yet when the limited news dispatches concerning the war interrupted the songs, the dainty pipe found its way back to its cradle and was replaced in Sean's hand by a dog-eared pipe with a robust stem suitable for grinding teeth. He would listen to the German propaganda and puff hard and fast, transforming the pipe into a locomotive's smokestack. At the end of the rack rested a glorious handcrafted carved white clay pipe from Sean's Ireland. This wonderfully fragile piece was reserved for holiday smokes and very special occasions only. Even after countless years on the pipe rack's throne, the white clay was scarcely discolored by tobacco. Holidays were few given the occupation, and to Sean there was nothing to celebrate.

Claire took a step toward the pipe rack and the information it offered, but was interrupted by the sound of her sister's voice calling out strongly from upstairs.

"Claire? That you?"

Monique's voice brought Claire up short, as if the youngest McCleash were bracing for a battle.

"Who'd you expect?" Claire tossed up the stairs in the first line of defense.

"Hurry along," Monique came back. "We'll be late."

"Late for what? And where's Father?"

As if on cue, Monique appeared from upstairs on a narrow landing halfway up the steps. She wore a shimmering maroon dress, which was as yet unbuttoned from her collar to her waist. A gleaming white camisole bursting through the front of the dress sat low and tight on Monique's ample breasts. She cast a potentially fierce glance at her sister then tossed her chestnut hair to the side and concentrated on a troublesome earring. As she primped herself in a full-length mirror that resided on the landing, she chided her sibling.

"I don't know the answer to the latter, and you know full well the answer to the former," Monique said to the mirror. "You're to go with me to the club. Now, get out of those boys' clothes and into the dress I've laid out for you."

Monique settled with the irksome earring and buttoned her dress to the top as she continued, "Being a few minutes late is fashionable, but too late..." She unbuttoned several of the topmost buttons, cupped her breasts and pushed them up. "Yes, too late, and well, let's just say the pickings may be slimmer."

Claire realized the words she was about to say were certain to ignite another argument and buffeted for the storm she knew was about to descend from the landing. However, the words were suddenly, albeit temporarily, squelched in her mouth by the admiration she felt for her sister as she looked to the landing. Claire recognized Monique's beauty and stunning figure, but also her command. As she watched her sister in those brief seconds, Claire found herself following the outline of the clinging maroon dress.

Monique's hips were full and the dress tight. Claire considered that it wasn't the type of snugness that came from too many parfaits, but rather it was the style of firmness that caused a yearning in men and invited them to ask for a dance and hope for breakfast. Monique knew what to do when they asked, for dances and more, and it was this ability to both excite and disarm that captivated Claire, although as sisters are prone to do, she was loath to let on the depth of that admiration.

What she did allow to show through was her contempt for Monique's practice of dating Germans. For her own brand of enemy contact, Claire relied on guns, not dancing. It worked, of course, was more final, and, to Claire, more fitting. She thought her sister's way took less of *something*, but she wasn't always certain what that something was. Guts. Courage. Nerves of steel? To lie in wait and pull the trigger. Versus Monique's seductive moves, delicate mannerisms, careful words. Was that a skill?

For all her intended resolve against the trip to the club, Claire could now only manage a weak attempt at misdirection. "These aren't boys' pants, are they?" she said as she brushed at the corduroy.

Monique pivoted toward the living room and thrust her hands onto her hips. "Move!"

"I'm not going," Claire said.

Almost ignoring her sister, Monique turned her attention back to the mirror and resumed primping. "It's been all argued out. You told mother you'd go. And Claire, please, there isn't time. We have to stop by the nunnery."

Claire had been ready to give in as she had the evening before when the plan was battled into existence by Monique and their mother. Now, however, she had unexpected ammunition. "Hold it. I might have said I'd go to the club. Repeat, MIGHT. But I never said anything about the nunnery. The deal's off."

Monique spun from the mirror again. Her face reddened slightly beneath her exquisite makeup, and she stepped menacingly down two steps toward her sister. "Listen to me. I haven't the inclination nor the time for one of your famous political tantrums. We are going to the club, and we are stopping at the nunnery. Now get dressed!"

Claire recognized the tone in her sister's voice and the set of her jaw. Pursuing the argument would be fruitless. She was overmatched and outgunned, and she knew it. "Alright. Alright. Don't get in a tizzy over it. Gee whiz, you'd think I cussed out the Pope or something."

With steps as plodding as a dying elephant's, coupled with an overemphasized sway to match, Claire reluctantly began climbing the stairs. "I'll go, but I'm not going in the nunnery. I hate that place, all full of those little German bastards."

Monique reached out and gently touched her sister's arm as she passed. The voice that had been so stern moments before evaporated, and the glare she had shot down the stairs vanished in an instant, replaced by a hurt in her deep brown eyes. "Please don't say such things, Claire. They're just children."

The change of attitude was marked and didn't go unnoticed by Claire. She had lost the previous battle, but the anguish in Monique's eyes betrayed a weakness which Claire targeted.

"Children, yes. German children. Father says they're from Nazis raping schoolgirls. He says they should send them back to Germany where they belong."

It was Claire's turn to grab her sister's arm. The effort was strictly for dramatic effect. There was no compassion. "Once I heard Father and some of his friends say the children should be...eliminated!"

"Don't say that."

"It's true! Father said that in the Great War there was a bunch of German bastards born, too. And now they've grown up. They went back to Germany because that was the only country that would take them. They trained them all as Gestapo, you know. Father says that now they've returned to France to kill and rape again. He says..."

"I know what Father says, but we're talking about children. It's not their doing they're here. Do you think they chose to be born into a war? Or chose to be born at all?"

"And do you think all those girls chose to be raped?"

"You don't know that all those children are the result of rape."

"They must be. No decent girl would be seen with a Nazi after what they've done to our country." Claire's eyes slid disapprovingly, but nervously, over her sister.

Monique recognized the intent of the speech and the glance. "They're just children," she said as she turned away. "The nuns have an awfully difficult job raising them with people like father around."

"And me!" Encouraged by her slight victory Claire left the elephant behind and bounded up the steps, continuing her bantering as she entered her bedroom at the top of the stairs. "I agree with father. Send the little bastards back to Germany. I hate them all. Them and all Germans. But you don't, do you? You don't seem to mind Nazis at all. In fact, I think you like the sons of bitches, especially the officers."

Claire set her cap and its secret letter carefully on her bed next to a neatly laid out glistening blue dress, which she callously pushed aside so she could sit. As she abused the dress, her sister appeared in the doorway.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

An intense stare had taken the place of Monique's mournful eyes. Claire saw it and immediately retreated. She shrugged meekly as if unsure how to end a conversation

she herself had begun. Looking for an ending, perhaps on the floor, Claire ducked her head and began untying her boots. Beyond her, Monique stepped away from the door and went down the hallway to her own bedroom.

The boots were only a short-lived reprieve for Claire. Monique soon reappeared in the doorway, running a pair of silk stockings through her fingers. "Here," she said as she tossed the stockings on the bed. "Put these on."

Claire carefully picked up the stockings and examined the delicate weave. She put a hand inside and brushed the fine hose against her cheek. "Silk stockings...I wonder what you had to do to get these."

Monique crossed her arms, closed her eyes dramatically, and leaned against the doorframe. "Not much," she said. "And I got a lot more than just stockings."

"I'll bet you did, but at what price?"

"No price."

"No? I didn't realize they were giving away dignity these days. I must be mistaken. I thought self-respect was still valuable."

"It is. And I still have mine. I have everything I've always had."

"Except your virginity."

Monique stepped to Claire's dresser and began straightening her sister's ragtag cosmetic collection. "Oh, grow up, Claire." She picked up a few disjointed blushes and liners as she addressed Claire's reflection in the mirror. "If you go on a date..."

"Fat chance."

"I said IF."

"I heard you, but you don't have to make it sound so...so if-y."

"Regardless. Let's say you go out on a date. The gentleman takes you to dinner then to a film. Naturally it's his treat."

"Naturally."

"After the film you stop at the club for a few drinks and some dancing. You spend more of his money."

"Your point being?"

"By the time the night's over you've spent his entire week's wages, right?"

"Hopefully," Claire laughed as she bounced to the edge of the bed as if hearing a good story.

"And what does the now broke date want in return?" Monique teased.

"I know this one! I know this one!"

Monique raised her eyebrows suspiciously. "I'm sure you do."

"Well, I mean, I don't KNOW personally, but I know what they're after."

"And do they get it?"

"No! Of course not!"

"How about a kiss goodnight?"

"Sure."

"How about some real passionate kissing in a dark corner on the way home?"

"Sounds kinda nice," Claire said dreamily.

"And then he runs his hands over you. Very gently..."

Claire closed her eyes and smiled to herself. "Yeah..."

"And then..." Monique said softly as she crept to the bed. "You rip your clothes off!" she screamed as she flung herself on Claire and pinned her to the bed, fighting to kiss her sister's neck. "And you roll around on the wet grass and hump each other like dogs in heat!"

Claire screamed as well but quickly recovered and flung Monique off her onto the bed. While her sister rolled in laughter, Claire scrambled to her feet and tossed the stockings in Monique's hysterical face.

"That's not funny!" Claire said as her own face reddened, initially from embarrassment, but also from a timid anger.

Monique regained her composure and propped herself up on an elbow, gently fondling the silk stockings. "But consider it, Claire. The poor slug's spent every cent on your date and in exchange you're going to give up at least a kiss and maybe a lot more."

"A little more."

"Okay, for you, a little more, or so you claim."

"Monique!"

"Alright. A little more. You're still talking about what you can get and giving them at least some of what they want. Am I right?"

"You make it sound awfully sterile. Like a date is some kind of legal business."

"Isn't it? You give, you get. It's business."

Claire walked to the dresser and began thoughtfully examining the cosmetics Monique had so neatly arranged.

For her part, Monique stayed on the bed. She gently stroked the stockings as she again watched Claire in the mirror, but now their positions were reversed.

"What about...love?" Claire asked. "You know, what about feelings and things?"

"All that comes later, if at all."

"And then what of 'business?'"

"Out the window!" Monique said as she set aside the hosiery, got up, and went to her sister. "When love enters the equation, forget everything I said."

Claire was noticeably relieved to hear the latest advice. "Well, at least that's good to know. I was beginning to wonder if I was going to have to keep a tally book by the bed after I was married."

"No, no book." Monique laughed, hesitated, then pointed to her head. "Keep your husband's records up here."

Claire pushed her away. "Now you're getting silly."

Monique went back to the bed, sat, and leaned back on her hands. "Husbands aside, most dates are just exchanges. Business. Agreed?"

Claire turned from the mirror and leaned heavily against the dresser. "To save an argument, agreed."

"You take what you can and give up as little as possible in return," Monique repeated.

"Okay, and so?"

"So," Monique continued, "I'm just saying what's the difference if you get the gifts, or the date, or whatever, up front and give them some of what they want later OR you

have sex with them first then get what you can? You're still peddling your ass, now aren't you?"

Claire's arms flopped down to her side, and her jaw dropped. "God, Monique, is that what you do?"

Monique got up uneasily and stepped back to the doorway. She shuffled her feet in an unaccustomed fashion and stared at the polished hardwood floor as she answered. "No...Not exactly."

"Then what, exactly, do you do?"

The pause that preceded Monique's reply was weighted and didn't suit the sisters or the room. This room had eavesdropped on them many, many times since they began sharing it years before when Claire first left her crib. And even after, when Monique, accused by Claire of abandonment at the time, moved out and down the hall to her own room, this small bedroom would collect the two when a situation or a circumstance suggested a sisterly talk was in order. In those talks, ears, fine tuned for hearing familial voices, listened intently as the sisters provided the right words or at times, just a shoulder. But the war had escorted those days into the past.

Monique remained in the doorway. She eventually lifted her head and spoke in a soft, but clear voice. "I do what I can for the Resistance."

Claire felt the heft of her sister's answer and followed with her own respectful pause. She took Monique's place on the edge of the bed, but found she couldn't contain herself as her thoughts formed words in her mouth.

"C'mon. Now who needs to grow up? You sleeping with Nazis. What does that do for France?"

Instantly on the defensive, a firmness crept back in Monique's voice. "You'd be surprised what attentive ears can learn on a pillow."

Claire snatched up the stockings and jumped up to her knees on the bed. She held the hosiery out to Monique and shook them at her. Though she wasn't angry, her voice was quick and impassioned. "Don't do this anymore! Come with us! Work with the active Resistance. It'd be great! You and me!"

Monique sighed deeply, but found a smile for her intense little sister. "Darling," she said wryly as she spread her fingers before her. "Look at these hands. I can't play with guns. I'm afraid I'd break a nail."

"Stop it, Monique. This is serious."

"I am serious! Do you know how much a good manicure costs these days? Why, you have no idea."

Claire lowered her head in defeat. Her hands dropped into her lap, and she absently tugged at the stockings. "Aww, c'mon, Mo..."

The shallow smile abandoned Monique's lips, replaced by a tender look of care and compassion. "You haven't called me that in a long time."

"No?"

"Maybe years. I kind of miss it."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Sorry."

Monique stepped into the room again and slowly approached her sister, whose body betrayed the exasperation she felt. "How come you never call me Mo anymore?"

"I dunno," Claire muttered as she continued her handling of the stockings. "Just grew out of it, I guess."

"When you were a baby, you couldn't say Monique. You could only get out the Mo part. I always liked it though. It was something just between you and me. Whenever I heard someone yell Mo, I knew it was you."

Claire chuckled a little and looked up. "Yeah, I knew you liked it. I remember how if I really wanted you to do something, I'd call you Mo."

"And I'd do it."

"Yeah, you would," Claire continued softly as her attention once more drifted to the stockings in her lap. "But I guess it doesn't work anymore."

Monique moved close to her sister and tenderly covered Claire's hands with her own, unconsciously gripping the silk stockings between them. "Honey, I'm no soldier. I can't carry a gun. And I can't do the things you and the others do. So I do what I can. Okay?"

Claire rose slowly, not pulling away from her sister's clasp. Monique's hands fell away regardless and the stockings with them. The fine hosiery slithered through Claire's fingers and dangled from Monique's manicured nails. She stared at the silk a moment then gently laid them on the bed next to Claire's cap as a pile of hastily discarded clothes began to grow beside her sister.

"It's not okay," Claire said as she stripped. "Not with me. I want you to know that. But if you won't listen to Father, you're not going to listen to me."

The reference to her father peaked in Monique a rush of emotions that ran a wide gamut. Fond memories of love and devotion were bordered by anguish and heartbreak. Even the most precious memories had been tampered with. Seeing them now in her mind's eye, the events were seasoned with ugliness, as if one could believe such a thing possible. Long ago, fear had unseated trust between father and daughter and had served to bury every hint of the old relationship. Long periods of silence had replaced the laughter that had once flowed so easily between them. Now, mournful periods of silence were unending and only interrupted by Sean McCleash's lectures regarding his eldest and her rendezvous with German officers.

Monique returned to the door as Claire stepped into the dress and awkwardly pulled it up. "You know, Monique, you can be awfully strange."

The words brought Monique to a slow stop in the doorway. She momentarily let the resurgent thoughts of her father pass and concentrated again on her sister. Though she didn't speak, she did raise an eyebrow at Claire's suggestion.

"Think about it. What do you do during the day?" Claire asked rhetorically. "I happen to know you go to that nunnery and help out with those orphans. You play nursemaid to them, I suppose. Then at night you dance with the same Nazis who rape our country and infest us with those identical little bastards. How in the world do you keep your sanity?"

The rush from Claire set Monique back as her footing was still awkwardly slipping across her father's opinion of her. She uncharacteristically hesitated with her reply and

tried to skirt away from the real issue of fraternizing with the enemy by forcing a weak smile. "I don't know. It's not as bad as all that."

"Yes it is. You live a life with bastards — bastard children in the daylight and bastard members of the Third Reich in the dark."

Monique's smile faded. "I wish you wouldn't put it that way. The children..."

Only half dressed, Claire went to her sister and grabbed her arms. The passion returned to her voice, but now it carried with it a desperation that suggested she would not ask again. And in that not asking there was a fear.

"One last time. Join us. The satisfaction of killing a Nazi has got to be better than babysitting their brats or sleeping with them."

"I can't, Claire. I'm no killer."

"Neither am I! I'm a soldier."

"I can't do that. I'm sorry."

"Are you? I wonder. I really and truly wonder."

Monique stood a minute longer in Claire's grasp, but her conviction was undaunted, and the resolve in her voice melted away her sister's hopes along with her arms.

The youngest McCleash went to the bed and began lazily pulling on the silk stockings as Monique turned away. "Hurry along. We'll be late."

As her sister disappeared down the stairs to the family's living room, Claire recklessly applied the minimum amount of makeup. She hastily brushed her soft brown hair, which, in spite of the rough treatment, came to life around her face and shoulders. As she stepped to the bed and retrieved the clandestine letter from the cap, Claire squirmed into her seldom worn dress shoes.

In the room below, Monique had slipped into her father's chair. Her head rested against the well-worn back cushion, and she closed her eyes. The breath she drew carried with it the musky smells that were her father. It was clean working man sweat, coupled with a very plain cologne supplied in days past by his children on Christmas and his wife on the occasion of their anniversary. Around the particular scent was the ever present aroma of tobacco and the pipes whose smell whispered for her attention.

She opened her eyes and looked at the old but neatly arranged rack of pipes. After a thoughtful examination, Monique very carefully slipped the white clay from its place and held it closely, exploring every minute carving and age-worn scratch, each one an indicator of a time apart from the present.

Claire didn't pause to check her look in the bureau mirror nor did the full-length mirror on the landing stop her on the way to the living room. Only when she bounced into the room did Monique force Claire's attention back on herself.

"Why, Claire," Monique said over a broad smile as she lowered the clay pipe to her lap. "It's a transformation. You look absolutely stunning."

Forced to pause mid-entrance, Claire glanced quickly at herself and brushed away a wrinkle in her dress. "You don't have to act so shocked. I am a girl you know."

"And you look every inch of it."

"Yeah, yeah. Thanks," Claire said, waylaying the praise, but secretly relishing each and every nuance of the compliment.

The dress had indeed done its job nicely. The shimmering blue material cascaded over Claire's curves and flowed around her waist and hips, propelled by the slightest of moves. All this while the letter flipped back and forth in her hands.

Claire sought to compound her new status as dress wearer by adding the importance of the letter and her role in the chain from author to the head of the Resistance. She tapped it demonstratively against her palm. "I've got to drop this off at the safe house. Supposed to go directly to Charlemagne herself."

Until now the dress had overshadowed the communiqué, but when Monique did notice it, it repelled her, representing as it did the Resistance, her seamy work, and the resulting conflict with her father. Much to Claire's dismay Monique was riveted again by the white clay pipe.

"You remember," Monique said, as if addressing the pipe and not her sister, "when we were little we weren't allowed to touch this pipe? All the rest were okay, you know? If you wanted to play Father or do something silly, it was all right to have one of the others, but not this one. Remember that?"

The dreaminess in Monique's voice asked Claire to set aside the importance of the letter and momentarily stay Claire's own fleeting dash to center stage. Claire moved, albeit cautiously, toward her father's chair, Monique, and the pipe. The letter, temporarily demoted, was still in front of her as if it and a suitable distance would shield her from blame should Monique's hand slip and the McCleash touchstone – the clay pipe – tumble to the floor.

"I wouldn't touch it now," Claire said through a laugh that did little to hide her seriousness. "If that breaks you're still going to get a whipping."

"He probably would whip me, wouldn't he? Like he needs another excuse."

The words were punctuated by the pipe being carefully slipped back into its place alongside the others. Monique withdrew her hands slowly and examined them as she sighed. "Father hates me, Claire." she said as she dropped her hands with resignation onto her lap. Her eyes were fixated on her hands, fingers, and nails in an abstract way.

The words did much to bring Claire close. She crouched down in front of Monique and rested her own hands on her sister's silky knees. Claire attempted to rouse her sister from the sadness that enveloped her as surely as if it had been smoke from the white clay pipe.

"Father doesn't hate you. He just hates the things you do."

"I only do what I can."

"I don't know about that, but I do know Father loves you."

"Not like he used to."

"Things are different now. The war has brought changes in all of us. But soon the Americans will come and we'll get back to the way it used to be. You'll see."

Monique sat quietly and seemed not to hear. Memories drifted in and out of her head, clouding Claire's well intentioned words until a thought took root and flooded her with remembrance. "Claire, you remember when we were little and we used to dance for Father all the time? We'd sing and dance and father would clap the rhythm?"

"You danced. I clapped with Father. You were the showgirl. I couldn't dance. Still can't."

"Yes. I suppose," Monique answered absently. "I'd dance around his flower bed out back. Remember how he'd never let us pick any? Why was that?"

"I guess he wanted them to stay put. When you pick them, they die. When they stay in the bed, you can enjoy them a lot longer. The speech went something like that I think."

Monique continued without acknowledging Claire's recollection. "And then Mother would bring out some of her little finger cakes and we'd have a party."

"I remember. God, those things were good! I could eat a hundred of them. When they're tiny like that they don't make you fat. You can eat as many as you want."

Claire's playful comments brought a smile to her sister and edged her a short distance from her melancholy. With the comfort of the distance, Monique gave Claire a disbelieving look.

"It's true!" Claire laughed.

"Regardless. Do you remember those times? Back when things were simpler?"

Claire patted Monique's knee and stood abruptly. "C'mon you. You're talking like it was fifty years ago. You're barely twenty-one and reminiscing like we're in the parlor of the government old-age home! Let's go if we're going. I've got to get this to the safe house, and I suppose you still want to stop at the nunnery."

Monique shook her head, trying to cast off the cobwebs of the recent past. The dream slowly cleared. "You're right. It just seems so long ago."

As she spoke, Claire stepped into the foyer and retrieved two light summer coats. "It's the war. And those damn Germans." She draped one coat over her arm and held the other out to her sister, inviting Monique to join her.

"Don't curse. It isn't ladylike," Monique said as she moved to take the coat.

"When I talk about Germans I don't feel ladylike."

"Let's get out of here," Monique answered as she pointed back to the pipe rack. "Father's walking pipe is missing. He could be home any minute. If he catches us dressed like this, we'll both be in for a whipping."

Claire answered by moving toward the door. She cautiously opened it, stuck her face out, and looked up and down the street. Monique poked her head out over her sister's shoulder and joined in on the surveillance. Not seeing their father, the pair slipped out the door and hurried away from the shadow of their house. The same streets that had first cradled and nurtured the girls in the early years and then come to haunt them with the advent of the Nazi presence quickly swallowed them as they made good their escape. Though assured of forgoing an immediate altercation with their father, Monique tossed a quick glance over her shoulder as she rounded the corner that would leave their neighborhood behind. Had Sean McCleash slipped onto the street unnoticed behind them, she would have had the luxury of preparing Claire for the inevitable scolding that would have been certain to come. As it was she sighed unnoticeably in relief and hustled up the boulevard at her sister's side.

Foot traffic increased as the sisters walked on, and they soon found comfort in the anonymity of the crowd. The people around them were all French or apparently so. Certain among them were German, or perhaps worse, German sympathizers, though the distinction wasn't an obvious one. All this was by design. In the years following the initial invasion, and indeed prior, the Gestapo had attempted to place spies over the breadth of France. Few were actual members of the Third Reich. Most were born French and considered by the invaders as converts to the cause of German supremacy. Understandably, the bulk of the country, the "true French" as Sean was apt to call them, considered these converts traitors.

While the lives of everyone, German and French alike, had changed beyond measure as the war became a part of their daily lives, few could boast a change as dramatic as those born to France who now gathered intelligence for the enemy. The modification for these people was more an emotional one, at least at the onset. They rode a line between their own selfish desires and the needs of their country. As often happens to those who find themselves astride a fence, they would eventually take a hard hit to the groin.

Few French, if any, were sympathetic when this eventuality struck. Cowing to the wants of a superior invader to advance one's private interest, even if that interest was food for the family's table, would elicit the harshest of responses from the natives. The care of the Germans toward these people, whom they considered necessary evils, wasn't much better. Distrust and pressure to produce almost always culminated with betrayal, real or imagined, followed closely by exile or death. It was one of the few certainties of the war, that once committed to espionage, the fate of the traitors was sealed, regardless of their initial intentions.

It was these people that the sisters looked for as they discreetly slowed their walk. They took turns scanning the crowd for any hint or clue that someone was watching them. Practice had taught them ways of looking into faces without their glances being returned, as direct eye contact might be a warning to someone inclined to look for such things as the sisters themselves were inclined. When they accidentally caught an eye, their painted lips jumped into smiles, easily disarming and dissuading and driving out thoughts of anything other than that pretty face. But today, all was quiet.

The pair stopped near the entrance to a narrow alley. Conversation had slowed with their steps, but once they stopped, Monique launched into a dialogue that would have been senseless save for the situation.

"So I told them I thought the apartment was fine. A touch small perhaps. I'll just have to adjust."

As she spoke, Claire surreptitiously glanced into the alley. Monique continued her dribble until the look in Claire's eyes confirmed that all was well. The sisters then drifted to the corner, and the conversation renewed itself as Claire checked down the street. Her eyes rested on the front of a nondescript row house. It was still, and the street in front was nearly empty.

Claire flashed a nearly invisible nod at her sister, which prompted the two of them to retrace their steps to the alley. Without looking back, and at a determined but casual pace, they stepped into the seldom used back street. Once they were out of range of the prying eyes on the main street, they hastened their steps until they reached the back door of the house Claire had observed from the corner moments before.

This was the Resistance safe house for this section of the city. Countless others dotted the country, but their locations were far from permanent as the Resistance was forced to move them often. The houses were actually far from safe, but the name stuck. Too often the Germans learned of a house's location and raided it, usually leaving the building burning in their wake. Given the confines of homes in neighborhoods like this one and others in the city, adjacent houses often caught fire as well. This was of little consequence to the Nazis who relished a good burning as a way of purging France of what the Germans took for blight and the French took for patriots. Because of the potential for fires and also the fear that the Gestapo would retaliate in other ways against the nearby homes, suspecting them, usually wrongfully so, of being affiliates, the formation of a safe house was not totally embraced by the neighborhoods into which they fell. Due in part to this reaction, the path of a home's induction as a safe house into the Resistance was very gradual. This seemed to ease the transition of the house and, to a smaller degree, the neighborhood from civilian to paramilitary duty.

The owners of the various houses were seldom compensated and, as often as possible, the actual owner had no direct affiliation with the Movement. It was vital that as much figurative distance as possible be set between the house and the Resistance, leaving location as a secondary consideration in the selection process. Owners, however, to the man, and to the woman, gave up their homes readily, many times moving completely out for safety's sake. For some it was the only way they could contribute to the effort. For these citizens, losing their homes, first to the Resistance then to the Germans and perhaps fire, was accepted with a glad heart.

This particular safe house was typical. It was as nondescript as any other on the row. The front stoop blended in with countless others but was special for a secret it concealed. Lost along the risers of its steps was a miniscule vent. It was all but invisible from the steps themselves and entirely so from the street. Like the house itself this was all part of the design, and also like the house, the vent served a purpose well above its original intent.

Below the house in its basement was the current war room of the French Resistance for this region. The hidden vent was its lifeline to the streets. A tube ran from the vent through the subterranean walls of the house and opened into the room in which decisions about the future of France were being made with increasing regularity.

The intelligence information those decisions were based on was often passed from person to person across the country. However, as the proximity of the safe house drew closer, hand-to-hand passes of notes were often deemed too risky. Then an intelligence officer in the Movement or perhaps a child bearing German troop placements, arms shipments, or intercepted communiqués would sit briefly on the steps of the safe house and deliver a message under the noses of the Germans, but out of sight of their eyes.

For the moment, staying out of sight was also the concern of the sisters. They had moved hurriedly through the alley and now Claire was reaching for the simple latch on the back door of the safe house. The plain door gave way easily, but also triggered a silent alarm in the house.

Once inside the alley entranceway the sisters found themselves facing a second, more secure door. The alarm had summoned security guards that checked on the visitors through a peephole. The girls were instantly recognized, and the main door to the safe house unlocked, but not opened. The sisters heard the latch slip, but they waited another minute, allowing the guards to retreat to their posts hidden from view in upstairs windows with machine guns leaning against the sills. Protocol called for the girls to wait — the less faces that recognized other faces, the better off for all.

Beyond the doorway was a short darkened hall that opened into a large living room. Claire led the way and entered a quiet beehive of activity. Young men and women, most dressed in dark clothes, moved around and through the room quickly and noiselessly. Some carried papers and maps, some weapons, and others just coffee cups. In the center of the bustle was a large table that held a collection of the carried items. Empty cups rested near maps that were held down at the corners by gun stocks and rifle clips.

The appearance of the sisters triggered a soft hum of recognition. As various members of the movement passed within arm's reach they stopped to hug Claire or grip her arm in silent acknowledgement. Of the many who passed few said a word outside of a soft hello and fewer still acknowledged Monique beyond a negligible nod.

Sophie, whose figure rivaled Monique's, stood against the far wall chatting quietly but in a lively manner with a younger girl. In sharp contrast to the dark clothes of those around her Sophie wore a bright pink dress that flowed as she moved. Though her flouncing manner and appearance might have indicated otherwise, Sophie was a ranking member of the Resistance. Her specialty was intelligence gathering, which benefited the Movement and left her with silk stockings gently tucked away in dresser drawers. Monique was her protégé.

When Sophie saw Monique she excused herself from her companion and skirted across the floor. Unlike the others, Sophie passed Claire and embraced Monique fully and warmly as they exchanged cheek kisses.

"Darling," Sophie said through a caring smile. "You look absolutely a picture!" She held Monique's hands and took a slight step back glancing up and down her student's body. "That dress would entice Goering to give up the fuehrer's home phone number. You'd better keep your wits about you."

"I will," Monique answered without a hint of shyness at the flattering comments.

"Being careful?" Sophie asked as though quizzing a past lesson.

"Very careful. And you? You're dressed to conquer the world. Will I see you stepping from the door of a colonel's villa tonight?"

"You'd have to be there to see that, wouldn't you?" Sophie replied playfully.

"One can never tell where the night will lead."

Though Monique was clearly being comical Claire rolled her eyes and turned slightly but markedly away from the pair of professionals.

Sophie saw the move and added more incentive purely for her own pleasure. "The door to his villa? I don't think so. His bedroom maybe!"

Satisfied with her shock treatment Sophie turned her attention to Claire, but deferred and motioned back to Monique. "You look out for your sister here. She's a true saint."

"I'll try," Claire offered cordially. "But I'm kind of out of my element tonight."

"You'll do fine," Sophie said offhandedly. "It sure beats careening down some dark road in the middle of the night with bullets whistling by your head."

As she finished speaking a handsome young man dressed in black from head to toe slipped through the room seemingly unnoticed by all but Claire. As he completed his stealthy exit he made brief eye contact with Claire who absently responded to Sophie's suggestion.

"Oh, I don't know...We all do what we can."

Sophie didn't see the cause or take notice of Claire's distraction. Rather, she continued her interest in the sisters' presence.

"What brings you two here anyway?"

Claire responded by turning slightly away from the room and slipping her dress up to retrieve the letter from the top of her stocking. Sophie glanced around the room and down at Claire's exposed thigh.

"Nice stockings, Claire. New?"

Claire dropped the hem of her dress and held up the letter. "New to me. They're Monique's."

Sophie smiled knowingly at Monique and playfully patted her arm. "Good work, girl."

"I learned from a master."

"Thanks," Sophie said as she cocked her head to the side. "I think."

Claire purposely ignored the veiled references to the ladies' enterprises. Instead, she tried to command attention with the letter, tapping it vigorously against her hand.

"Is Charlemagne in?"

The name wrenched Sophie from her playful mood. "I'm afraid not, but I'll see she gets it," she said as she reached for the letter.

Claire held it back noticeably, acting as though she hadn't heard or hadn't believed. "I was hoping to give it to her personally. I pedaled my butt off to get this here and, well, I've never met her."

"Yes, dear, I know," Sophie answered compassionately. "I'm afraid that's how it'll remain." She saw the disappointment register across Claire's face and quickly added. "At least for now. I'm sure you'll meet her one day soon."

But Claire was not yet ready to relinquish control of her only tie to the head of the Resistance. "Are you positive I couldn't just drop this off to her? I'm...I'm sort of a...a fan. Ever since the Nazis came I've been hearing about Charlemagne and the Resistance."

"I know, dear. But those who head the Movement must be very careful." Sophie clutched Claire's arm. "Not about you, but rather FOR you." She eased her grip on Claire and looked to Monique for help then back to the younger McCleash. "See, sometimes the less we know the better off we are. Understand?"

Claire didn't respond, but handed the letter to Sophie and walked away. Monique and Sophie looked after her steps and watched her exit the room through the same doorway the young man had used moments before.

"Monique, talk to her," Sophie begged.

Claire made her way down the hallway, stopping periodically to peek into the rooms that sprouted from it. She listened intently at a closed door then slowly cracked it open. It was dark inside. Her hand skimmed up and down the inside wall groping for the light switch until she found it. When she turned on the light she saw the young man in black, Michel, immediately before her. He smiled easily and reached for the light switch, covering Claire's hand with his. Using her hand as his own he flicked the light back off then eased Claire into the darkness and into his arms.

Michel closed the door with Claire's body as he pressed firmly into her. Their lips sought out one another in the dark and they kissed. Their hands cradled each other's faces until they fell to other things. Claire roughly squeezed his upper arms. Her hands danced back over his shoulders to his face then raced across his chest and again to his arms as passion filled them and the room.

Michel's hands dropped away from Claire's face and brushed along the length of his young lover's arms until they slipped onto her hips and down to her thighs. There they began to creep beneath the hem of the tight blue dress.

Claire's response was immediate, but not total. Her hands jumped down to Michel's wrists and gripped them tightly, stopping their advance.

"You look so good," Michel said as he nuzzled Claire's neck.

She let her head fall backward offering up her throat to her lover. "How can you tell in the dark?"

"Then you feel good," he said as he pressed his hips hard into hers. With the pressure Claire relaxed her grip, and Michel's hands slipped beneath the blue dress and squeezed her thighs through the silk stockings.

"So do you," Claire breathed as she arched into him.

They kissed and touched in the dark for several minutes. Flames began to lick at the dress until Claire slowly but firmly pushed Michel back until she could rest her arms on his chest.

"Down boy."

Michel smiled in the dark, but grabbed Claire roughly and pulled her close. "I never saw you in a dress before. Is all this for me?"

"I wish it was," Claire said softly.

Michel eased slightly out of the embrace. Even in the dark she could see the question on his face.

"I'm going to the Club of Lights with Monique."

Michel's hands froze on his lover. They stopped their pursuit and, unnoticed in the dark, one went to the light switch. He flicked the light on and stepped incredulously away from Claire. She shielded her eyes from the sudden brightness with one hand while the other pulled the hem of the dress back into place. All the heat that had been passion just moments before turned to ice with the switch of the light and the expression on Michel's face.

"You're kidding."

Now it was Claire's turn. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

The mutual responses of shock were pushed aside and in their wake lines had clearly been drawn.

"I'm looking because I'm trying to find Claire, the fighter. I want to ask her if she's forgotten about the Resistance."

"I haven't forgotten. That's what this is about."

Michel started to step backward then nearly rushed in on Claire. "The hell it is! And forget the Movement a second, what about us?"

"Stop being so dramatic. You act like I'm going on a date."

"Aren't you? I know what Monique does. Is that what you want to do?"

Claire clenched her fists, turned her back on Michel, and stomped further into the room. "Christ, I can't believe you'd ever think that!"

Michel followed her. "Why not? You get all dolled up to dance with German officers — dance and who knows what else. And you do it in the company of the biggest prostitute in all of France!"

"She's not a prostitute!"

"Then what is she?"

Claire cooled for only an instant. "I don't know. She does what she can."

"She's a whore!"

Claire wheeled on him. "She's my sister!"

Claire's words echoed between the walls and fueled the anger on her face as the young lovers locked eyes in the small getting smaller room. Michel was more than upset, though he did trust her. It was the possibility that frightened him. Monique's influence on her sister was great and Michel knew it. But he also knew that Claire would not waver once committed. He had seen it many times as they matured in their work. So after a cold minute Michel allowed her to win the short-lived staring contest and looked away. The simple victory stymied Claire's anger and allowed her to quietly approach her lover. She stepped gracefully around him until she was able to rest her hands flat on his chest.

"Don't do this, Claire," Michel pleaded the lost cause.

"I told Monique I'd go."

"Please?" he asked in a whisper as he gently held her.

Claire smiled at the child-like request and answered in her own soft voice, the anger now completely absent. "I'll be home early. Everything will be fine."

"Do I have to beg? Don't go with that..."

Claire put a finger over his lips and silenced him. "Don't do this to me, Michel. Don't make me choose."

Michel lovingly gripped Claire's hand, kissed it, and pulled it away from his lips. "Would it be so bad? Is it such a tough choice?"

Claire answered by kissing his cheek and stepping toward the door. "Nothing will happen. Relax. Okay?"

She opened the door and was already in the hall when she stepped partially back inside. Michel met her near the door, and she rewarded him with a kiss.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Claire said softly. Then she looked up and down at Michel's black clothes and knew the look of a guerilla's uniform. "Be careful tonight." Another quick kiss and she pulled the door closed behind her.

"You too," Michel said faintly to no one.

Back in the living room, Claire stopped to talk with a small group of guerrilla fighters rather than go to Monique and Sophie. Just beyond the group was Paul, a rugged fighter in his mid-thirties, old for the work he did. His face was chiseled, handsome by all accounts, and his powerful arms filled his sleeves, but his eyes were nearly dead, as cold as a snake's, and he walked with a noticeable limp. He seemed to never look directly at anyone, or away from anyone, but somehow saw everything. His experience as a fighter had kept him alive, and his hatred of Germans kept him dressing in black whenever the needs of the Resistance beckoned.

Back in the early days of the war Paul had fallen in love with another fledgling guerrilla, Valerie, Sophie's younger sister. With matching soft brown hair and glorious high cheeks beneath deep brown eyes, many mistook the sisters for twins, though Sophie was several years older. Their diverse roles in the Resistance foreshadowed Claire and Monique's, and Valerie would have become a fine teacher for Claire had the Germans not intervened. On a cold and drizzly afternoon in the fall of 1940, the Gestapo routed the Resistance from a safe house. Too long in one place and a loose tongue had led the Nazis to the door. In the melee that followed, Paul and Valerie found themselves in the streets with German soldiers nipping at their heels.

Five minutes before, the couple had been lying on an old bed upstairs in the safe house. Words were soft and slow between them, like the lovers they were, talking and dreaming as if saying things would make them real. Then there came the abrupt sounds of crashing and splintering doors as the Gestapo rushed the house. Gunfire erupted from the floors below and instantly each knew what was happening. Having been lured by passion into the seclusion of the upstairs bedroom, neither had their weapons. Even if they had, Paul would not have hesitated in opening the window and coaxing his lover out onto the roof. To stay and fight the encroaching enemy would be fatal, either immediately or shortly thereafter, following the torturing interrogation that would be certain to precede it.

The pair slipped along a shallow rooftop two stories high while shouts and bullets ricocheted inside the safe house behind and beneath them. When they reached the end of the building Valerie looked back at her lover.

"We're out of roof."

Paul looked up the main street and saw German trucks approaching. In the alley behind the house he saw a Frenchman in a dark blue beret. He recognized him immediately as Renault, his mentor and a senior member of the Resistance. Renault

had been headed to the safe house when the gunshots had stopped him. Now he was in the alley, trying to find a way to help. Paul waved him back, and Renault stepped out of sight into a shallow doorway.

There was no more time to look for another way off the roof and nothing to look for had time permitted. The window was the only safe way, and it would be full of German guns any second. Paul quickly slid down the incline of the roof to the edge. He peered over and down at the ground, nearly twenty feet away. A short distance to one side, at the base of the building, was a row of garbage cans.

"Come down here!"

Valerie followed, thinking another lower rooftop must be waiting. When she slid up next to Paul she looked over the edge and back at him.

"I can't do that. It's too far."

In reply, Paul kicked at the rain gutter that circled the rooftop to test its strength.

"I'm going to hold onto the gutter. You climb down me to my ankles then drop on those garbage cans. It won't be far to the cans. Then stack up a couple for me and I'll drop."

"We'll kill ourselves!"

Paul looked over his shoulder at the escape window. "You want to wait for them? They'll kill us both right here."

"Paul..."

Without giving her a chance to finish, Paul clamored over the side of the roof and hung by the gutter. "Hurry! I can't hold on long!"

As gently as possible Valerie began the descent over her lover. She too gripped the rain gutter, carrying as much of her weight as possible until the last moment. Her legs circled his waist until one hand let loose of the gutter and clutched at his clothes.

"Are you ready for me?"

"Yes," was all he said.

"I love you," Valerie whispered as she kissed his cheek from behind.

"Tell me later, can't you?" Paul laughed ever so slightly.

Valerie dropped her remaining hand to his clothes and felt them sag on his body with her weight. Paul's fingers cut into the edge of the gutter but held on as Valerie lowered herself down. She crouched on his feet and wrapped her arms around his legs. First one foot slipped off his, then the next. She slid down his legs until her hands were gripping his boots. Up above, blood was beginning to trickle out from beneath Paul's fingers.

"Go!" he encouraged as firmly but as quietly as he could.

Valerie looked down for a second and judged the fall to the garbage cans. It was still a long way, but a sudden burst of gunfire from the house pushed her and she dropped.

The cans scattered beneath her like bowling pins, but did their job. She spun away onto the ground, rolling out of the fall like a paratrooper. In a flash she was on her feet stacking the cans as high as she could like a banged up metal safety net. The timing was close. No sooner had she pushed the top can in place than Paul released his fragile grip on the steady gutter. The drop was longer and harder than Valerie's. He hit the top can, and though it slowed him it knocked him away from the others. His

arms flailed at the cans to catch his fall while his right leg abandoned its partner and shot out to the side for balance. His left foot stretched down for the ground as if to shorten the distance. At least he wouldn't land on his head.

When his foot smacked the ground the speed and shock turned his ankle and knee. If not for the racket of the tumbling cans he and Valerie would have heard the tearing of tissue and cracking bone in his left leg. With the collapse of the leg the rest of Paul's body crumpled down in a heap.

Valerie was on him before the cans ceased their squealing. As she pulled him to his feet the damaged leg folded up like an accordion and he went down. While they each took a turn holding the knee, feeling for protruding bones and the like, the crashing of the cans, twice now, had summoned German soldiers from the safe house.

"Let's move, Paul. Up you go."

In the attempt Paul felt the knee give way again. "You go. I'll catch up," he winced as crippling pain shot up his leg and into his back.

"Not a chance," Valerie lectured in a flurry. "You get up or I swear to God I'll sit down right now and wait for the Gestapo. Either you get up and move or I'm theirs. You decide, but you better do it goddamn fast!"

Paul could only look at Valerie as the sweat, born from pain, ran down his face.

"What's it going to be, mister?"

At that, Paul began to struggle to his feet. She aided him greatly, and with his torn knee against her, the pair started to hobble quickly up the alley behind the house.

Renault had seen the couple's leap and entered the alley to help, but the escape was far from complete when the first soldiers found their way out the rear of the safe house, drawn by the beckoning garbage cans. They spied the limping couple fifty yards away, but did not notice Renault straight beyond. The soldiers shouted for them to halt before immediately opening fire.

Renault flung himself into a narrow space between two houses, but there was no such protection for the couple. There was also little run left in Paul and no abandonment in Valerie. The length of the alley would be their undoing. Without hesitating, Paul crashed through the nearest door with Valerie tucked under his arm. Splinters of broken casing were like confetti on the pair as they slid across a polished kitchen floor.

Bullets whistled through the alley in front of Renault as Paul and Valerie scrambled off the stranger's floor. Neither stopped as they limped together through the kitchen and into the front of the house, intent on leaving through the main door. Paul's dim hope was to delay the Germans long enough to find a sanctuary somewhere beyond their sight. But as the couple passed through the living room they came face to face with a frightened mother crouched in a corner holding two children. The boy, about eight, hid his face, but the little girl, perhaps two or three years older, looked up at the interlopers.

"Don't be afraid, Mommy," she said firmly. "They're French. Not German."

"But they're coming," Paul ordered. "Hide the children...and yourself. Hurry!"

Without waiting for a reply, Paul and Valerie ran out the front door while the woman pulled her children across the floor to a plain closet. The front door, the closet door, and what remained of the back door, all moved at once. Paul and Valerie

vanished into the street, the children were secreted, and the Germans burst into the kitchen. The last man in was Private Herbeart. He lingered with the others, accessing the room for the wanted and to protect themselves from attack. Across the alley, Renault waited to hear gunshots. When none came he slipped deeper between the houses.

The slight delay of the anxious soldiers gave the fleeing fighters time to cross the street and enter yet another house, this one apparently abandoned. The plan was to again race through the house and out the other side to divert any pursuing Nazis, but Paul's leg was failing him miserably and Valerie could no longer support his bulk.

"We can't run," she told him as the escape stalled in the battered house.

"You can."

"But I won't."

"So we hide here?" Paul asked as he looked around the disheveled home.

"We do. And hopefully they'll miss us or move on. Maybe they've had enough blood for today."

"Nazis never get enough blood," Paul answered as he struggled for the staircase. "Let's get to high ground."

Across the street the frightened mother was facing Nazi guns.

"WHERE ARE THEY?" a black-suited soldier screamed as he grabbed the poor woman's hair.

Her answer was her own scream as the soldier jerked her across the room away from the closet door and onto the floor. Though flailing, her eyes gave away her children's hiding spot. As the first soldier held her, another silently gripped the handle of the closet door. Private Herbeart and another soldier aimed their weapons at the closet, certain they would find the Resistance fighters inside. Herbeart, the most junior member of the group, licked his dry nervous lips, his eyes wide above them. When the door was flung open instant reaction almost brought death to the children, but the soft colors and tiny sizes of the intended victims held up the bullets. With three machine guns trained on them the children cowered in the corner of the closet, out of sight of their mother.

As disappointment registered on the faces of the hunters, their superior, Lieutenant Rheinholt, burst in the back door with a host of black uniforms. The Nazi lieutenant, who served as the local head of the dreaded black-clad SS soldiers and Gestapo, was a short man, thin, with a sunken face and tiny cruel eyes. His uniform was the standard black fare, impeccably neat and pressed, with a bright red swastika band gracing his left upper arm.

"Where are the two from the alley?" Rheinholt ordered as he came into the front of the house. "I was told a man and a woman?" The hurried officer was looking from face to face over the woman on the floor for an answer.

The SS soldier at the closet door looked at the children. "In here," he said jokingly. "But they seem to have shrunk."

Herbeart laughed, pleased at the opportunity to relax. But the smile faded fast when Rheinholt looked quickly in the closet then sharply slapped the face of the soldier at the door.

"You think this is funny?" The question, and the man who sent it, did not want an answer. "Search the house."

Trying to redeem himself, the joking soldier, his face still smarting, addressed his lieutenant. "Sir, the man appeared badly injured. I don't believe they could have gotten far."

Rheinolt looked harshly at the transgressor then issued more orders sending a number of soldiers into the street. "Secure the rest of the houses in this sector for one square block. Begin searching the perimeter."

Only now did Rheinolt look at the mother. "Where are they?"

"I don't know..."

To encourage the woman the soldier who held her tightened his grip.

"I DON'T KNOW!"

Rheinolt held up his hand, and the soldier's grip eased slightly. Then he motioned to the closet for the children. As they were pulled from their hiding spot the lieutenant continued the interrogation. "Where is your husband?"

"You killed him."

"Did I?" Rheinolt answered as the boy and girl were shoved to his side. They reached for their mother and her for them, but all were restrained by stronger arms.

"You mean, he was killed fighting against the country of Germany, not that I killed him myself."

"You are all killers and butchers."

"I see," Rheinolt said as he knelt beside the children. "What's your name, little girl?"

"Claudine."

"And how old are you?" the lieutenant asked pleasantly.

"Ten."

"Did you see a man and a woman come through here?"

The little girl nodded.

"And where did you hide them?"

"Leave her be! You filthy dog!"

Rheinolt looked away from Claudine to her mother. "You have a poor opinion of us."

"You are pigs. I spit on you." And the woman did, the spittle catching Rheinolt in the face and unknowingly sealing her fate.

As the soldiers rushed for her, the lieutenant again held up his hand to stop them. While the room watched, he pulled a hanky from his pocket and slowly wiped his face.

"Without a man to tend to you...to meet your needs," Rheinolt said as he neatly folded the hanky and returned it to his pocket. "You have grown aggressive...Perhaps you would like some of my soldiers to take you upstairs and temper your spirit."

"Do with me what you want. Beat me, rape me, kill me like you killed my husband, and my children and all the children of France will rise up one day to avenge our deaths!"

"Perhaps you are right," Rheinolt said as he ripped the pistol from his gun belt. Without another word the lieutenant placed the gun barrel against the back of the boy's head and pulled the trigger. Blood and bone exploded from the child's face and

showered his mother. He fell to the floor without a sound as the ringing in the soldiers' ears was replaced by the screams of both mother and sister.

"He will avenge no one," Rheinholt said without pity. "I ask you again. Where are they?"

The woman fell to her son's body. Her hands faintly touched the gaping wound in his head in disbelief, as if trying to put back the shattered pieces. When the woman's only answers to Rheinholt's questions were cries, he grabbed the girl by the back of her neck and forced her down on top of her brother's body. He rammed her face into the bloody mess that had been her brother's head as he screamed. "DO YOU WANT ME TO FEED THIS ONE TO MY DOGS? WHERE ARE THEY?"

The woman was in shock. She tried to hold the girl and began tugging at Rheinholt's fingers to loosen his grip on the child's neck. The girl was crying, the mother was pleading, and the lieutenant threatening.

"WHERE ARE THEY?"

The lost mother broke herself from grief long enough to reply. Blood was on her hands and face as she looked at Rheinholt before lowering her head, ashamed to be revealing anything to the Nazis and terrified if she did not.

"They went out the front door...as soon as they came in. I don't know where they are, sir. I didn't see..."

"YOU LIE!"

"NO! I was tending to my children."

"LIAR!"

"THEY RAN OUT AND CLOSED THE DOOR BEHIND THEM!
I...couldn't...see..."

The woman collapsed over both her children, weeping and pleading with her tears. Rheinholt released the girl and stepped away. He slammed the closet door in disgust. "They're not here," he muttered as he stepped toward the front door. "But they're not far. Bring the woman."

Paul and Valerie had heard the single shot from Rheinholt's pistol as they settled in an empty room on the upper floor of the abandoned house a few doors down and across the street. Valerie went to the window and carefully peeked out at the house they had broken through. As she watched, black-suited soldiers emerged, weapons at the ready, scrutinizing the nearby houses, including hers. She continued to monitor the Germans as she spoke to Paul.

"That was from the house with the kids."

"Jesus..."

Valerie looked at him, saying without words that the fault was theirs.

"We didn't know, Val."

She nodded and looked again out the window. "They'll be coming for us."

"I know," Paul said as he tried to examine his leg.

She saw him and came to his side to help. "Let's have a look."

But the examination was a short one. Paul's knee had swollen so that his pant leg was tight around it.

"Something's broke in there. I can't even bend it."

"We'll just wait until dark. I'll slip out and bring back some help to get you out of here."

"Maybe if I rest a while. Jesus, it's killing me!"

She hugged him and kissed his face. "I know it is. Hold on 'til dark."

"And if they don't wait until dark?" he said as he motioned toward the window and the street beyond.

"We'll worry about that later."

The gap in the conversation was filled with their eyes searching each other's faces. In their looks was the knowledge of what would happen to them when the Nazis came. There would be torture for both, worse for her, then a bullet if they were lucky, death in a concentration camp if they weren't.

Paul began to drag himself across the floor. "Help me downstairs."

"Why?"

"I'll distract them out front. You go out the back and run like hell."

"Forget it."

But he continued to drag himself. "Help me!"

"No!"

"Goddamn it, Valerie!" he said as loud as he dared. "Get me to the door!"

She reached for him, and he relaxed, but her grasp was only to jerk him back into the room. His leg twisted, and he almost passed out from the pain. When he regained himself he was nestled in her lap.

"No heroes, Paul. If we make it, we make it together. If we don't...we don't. Together."

"That's foolish. Goddamn foolish," he said gently.

"Isn't it, though?"

"I'd leave you."

"No you wouldn't."

Paul could not argue, but a realization was settling over them both. "You know what'll happen when they come," he said softly.

"I know," she said as she held him tightly.

"I can't let that happen to you."

"If they come, we'll make such a fuss they'll shoot us both right here, together."

"Me, yes. You, no. They won't shoot you...not at first."

Valerie squeezed him very tight and her armor began to slip. "I know that."

Outside, the Germans were loading captured fighters, most wounded in one fashion or another, into a truck as they cleaned out what had been the safe house. Two additional trucks waited nearby, one for captured weapons and intelligence and the other for bodies. The truck for the dead would carry more Resistance members than the first.

The prisoners loaded quietly, having been calmed by fists, boots, and the butts of German guns. As two of the trucks pulled out of the way with their cargo, the already dead and others destined to be so, the third truck pulled up on the sidewalk and began accepting weapons and ammo from the belly of the house. Soldiers not assigned to the weapons recovery split into units of fours and fives and began searching the houses on the street for the escaped couple.

A few houses away Lieutenant Rheinholt led the procession from the home with the shattered rear door. The woman, lost in a dreadful numb stupor, came out behind him, a soldier on either side. Claudine was clinging to her mother's bloodied dress. The woman's hands, also bloody, massaged her daughter's shoulders and held her close, whispering words of encouragement that she herself did not believe.

"LISTEN TO ME!" Rheinholt bellowed into the instantly quiet street. "WE ARE LOOKING FOR A MAN AND A WOMAN. THEY ARE ESCAPED PRISONERS. IF YOU KNOW WHERE THEY ARE HIDING, COME FORTH NOW. DO NOT ATTEMPT TO HIDE THEM. THEY WILL BE FOUND AND YOU WILL BE MADE TO SUFFER FOR ANY ASSISTANCE YOU RENDER THEM."

Though many heard, no one moved on the street. Most residents just tightened their drapes and checked the bolts on their doors. Paul and Valerie heard Rheinholt as well. They didn't speak and waited for the German's next command.

"Very well," the lieutenant said stoically. "Bring the woman into the street."

The soldiers forced the woman to her knees along the sidewalk. She woke from her nightmare enough to struggle. Her daughter was caught in the conflict. As her mother battled with the soldiers, Claudine began to scream and cry frantically as she too fought the enemy.

"Take that child back in the house," Rheinholt ordered Herbeart. "Shut her up. I don't care how."

The young soldier tore the girl from her mother's dress and stuffed her under his arm. He bounded up the stairs into the house, grateful for not having to witness what was about to happen.

Once back inside the house he closed the door with his body and leaned against it. Unknowingly he was holding the girl out toward her brother's mutilated body. Claudine screamed all the louder at the sight. Herbeart put his hand over her mouth, and she bit him. As he winced and grabbed his hand she broke free and ran to the window. She saw Rheinholt standing behind her mother, his pistol in his hand. A soldier was on either side of the woman. Each man was holding a twisted arm, pinning Claudine's mother to her knees as she screamed and pleaded.

"THIS WOMAN HAS BEEN FOUND GUILTY OF AIDING IN THE ESCAPE OF CONVICTED CRIMINALS. THE PUNISHMENT FOR SUCH CRIMES AGAINST THE THIRD REICH...IS DEATH. IF YOU KNOW WHERE THE CRIMINALS ARE HIDING TELL US NOW AND SPARE YOURSELF A SIMILAR FATE."

Herbeart snatched Claudine up from the window, but she clutched at the curtain long enough to see the smoke spew from the lieutenant's pistol. The report of the gun was muted slightly by the house, but Claudine witnessed the red puff of blood erupt from her mother's head before she went limp. The child screamed uncontrollably as her mother's body continued to be held up by the soldiers who gripped her wrists.

"Goddamn it!" Rheinholt screamed as he turned toward the house. "Go in there and shut that little bitch up!"

Another soldier, bloodlust in his eyes, ran up the stairs to the house, pulling his pistol as he did. He dove into the front room and found Herbeart holding the girl in

front of him, his hand firmly over her mouth. Tears from Claudine's eyes were running down her cheeks and over the soldier's hand.

"Give her to me!" the soldier with the pistol said.

"For what?"

"The lieutenant said to give her back to her mother," the soldier smiled.

"She's dead."

"Right. And this little noisy bitch is about to join her."

Herbeart held the child away as the pistol reached for her. "Jesus, I thought we were soldiers! We don't kill children!"

"Don't we? Where do you think all those kids we've been stuffing in those trains go? Summer camp? Give her to me!"

The junior soldier continued to hold her, Claudine's hot breath blasting from her nose, fanning against his hand. He could hear it as his hand felt it. In his arms he could feel her tremble even as her tiny fingernails dug into the skin on the back of his hand.

"GIVE HER TO ME!" the other threatened, thirsting so for blood that he appeared ready to shoot a German soldier just for the pleasure of killing a French child.

"I'll do it!" Herbeart shouted back. "The lieutenant gave her to me!"

He did not wait for a reply. Instead, he jumped with the girl in his arms over the body of her brother and darted through the kitchen. He crushed pieces of the door beneath his boots as he left the house that would never again be the same.

When Herbeart entered the alley his footfalls immediately drew the attention of Renault, who was creeping along between houses, still trying to assess what could be done. Renault froze until the sound of the running boots passed him, then he chanced a look out from his hiding spot.

The little girl's legs dangled limply around the running man, and her arms flopped around his shoulders making no attempt to hold on. Renault took her to be dead. When the soldier vanished around a corner down a converging alley, Renault pulled his knife and took flight after him.

As Herbeart sprinted down the alley he looked back over his shoulder searching more for his own kind than an intended enemy. Not seeing anyone, he focused on the back doors of the houses nearest him. With no criteria in mind, he stopped short at a simple back stoop and rapped quickly at the door.

A few seconds too many passed, and Herbeart knocked again louder and faster. An elderly couple opened the door together. The old man stepped in front of his fragile wife at the sight of the uniform. "Go away from here," he said. "We've done nothing."

The request was ignored as Herbeart plunged the little girl into their arms. "Take the child. Hide her well! You'll learn soon enough!"

"No!" the old man answered as he held the girl back out to the soldier like a bag of potatoes. "We see nothing! We know nothing! We stay alive!"

Herbeart shoved Claudine back inside and the man with her then grabbed the door and pulled it closed as he jumped away from the stoop. His feet carried him running up the alley back toward the safe house before he could again be refused, but

he heard the door open behind him and glanced over his shoulder as he ran. What he saw was the old man setting the girl on the back steps like the night's trash.

The sight brought Herbeart's feet to a stop, but as soon as the door to the old couple's house closed, it opened again and the aged woman stepped out. Slowly and apparently painfully, she picked up the little girl, limp from shock, and took her inside. As the door closed behind them once again, Herbeart took off toward the corner of the alley. He had no way of knowing that Renault was approaching the same corner from the opposite direction.

The reluctant soldier spoke to himself as he ran on. "Rheinolt would kill me," but as he rounded the corner Renault was waiting, knife in hand. The momentum of Herbeart's run coupled with Renault's strong arm to drive the knife into the young man's chest and pierce his heart. Surprise and shock left him motionless until the damage inflicted by the knife could take full effect. Renault expertly twisted the knife in the dying man's chest, and its blade ripped the flagging heart.

As Herbeart collapsed he clutched the hilt of the knife over his killer's bloody hand.

"Die, baby killer!" Renault tormented. "Where'd you dump her, you miserable bastard?"

Herbeart did not have time to explain, not that it may have mattered, clothed in grey as he was, nor did he have time to cry out, but he looked over his shoulder and pointed toward the old couple's house with a bloody finger. In another moment the hesitant soldier died, and Renault withdrew his knife which he unceremoniously wiped on Herbeart's grey jacket.

Renault stood and looked down at his handiwork for a moment, then his eyes shifted around him. "If your friends find you, they'll burn the entire block, or maybe only a few houses since you were just a private. What do you think, huh?" Renault asked the corpse as he nudged it with his boot. "No opinion, ah? Well, I think we should hide you."

At that, Renault sheathed his blade and took hold of Herbeart's body. He dragged it down the alley toward the door of the old couple. When he began to pass it the old man stepped out. He and Renault locked eyes over the dead man. The Resistance fighter dropped the arms of the young soldier and waited.

"I have stayed away," the old man mumbled. "Now my wife, she says we have stayed away too long."

With those words, the wife appeared beside him in the doorway. Claudine, eyes still wide above tear stained cheeks, pushed in between the two. Renault's jaw went limp, and his shoulders dropped as he looked from the child he thought was dead to the dead soldier at his feet.

"We are in it now," the old man continued as his wife nodded and held the little girl in front of her. Renault could not reply, but the old man began his entry to the Resistance with vigor. "And it feels good," he said clearly as he came down the steps. At their base he turned back to his wife. "Take her inside. She has seen enough death for a lifetime."

The old woman complied and took Claudine into the front room where she held her on her lap in a straight-backed chair. While she talked softly, introducing herself,

her husband, and their home, she heard the coal door open at the rear of the house. When she heard muffled voices and the sound of rough shoving, the woman began to hum a lullaby, held Claudine's head against her breast, and placed a free hand over the child's other ear.

Paul and Valerie were holding each other as well. They remained settled in the same room where they had heard the reports from Rheinolt's pistol. Paul's powerful arms circled Valerie's waist as he sat on the dusty floor between her legs, his head laying gently against her breasts, which heaved with nervous breaths. She cuddled close to him, stroking his hair. They could not see each other's face; neither saw the other's tears.

"Val?"

"Yes?"

"I never thought it would be like this."

"Thought what would be like this?"

"Getting caught like a rat. Trapped in a filthy box."

"Who says we're caught?"

"I do...and you know it too."

"Yes, I know it."

"I don't want you to hurt."

"I know you don't."

"Won't you please run?"

Valerie did not answer.

"Are you thinking about it?" Paul asked.

"No. And don't ask again. It may be foolish, but that is how I want it. I love you. If they take you from me, I would die of a broken heart."

He hesitated. "Would you like to make love?"

She hesitated. "Perhaps."

"If you were pregnant you would have to leave, to save our baby."

"But I'm not."

Paul adjusted himself in her lap and saw the water in her eyes. "We could change that. Right now."

Valerie shook her head. "No, Paul. That's a nice trick, but it won't work. Besides, who says I would even escape? They could catch me and still do what they want. No. No more talk."

Paul's head fell back to her breast. "I don't want them to hurt you."

"We'll fight when they come, like I said. We'll both be in heaven within a minute of each other. Whoever gets there first has to wait for the other."

"I wish I had my gun," Paul said with a quiet resolve.

"Tough guy Paul wants to take a few with him, does he?" Valerie said as she smiled and squeezed him.

"No," he answered slowly. "It would be for us."

There was scarcely breath between them. Thoughts whirled in their heads as the sounds of Nazi boots and voices came close to the house.

Valerie eased her lover up in her arms. She kissed him and held his face. "Paul, if they come — when they come — rock me to sleep. Hold me, won't you? Squeeze tight," she said as her hands went to his and brought them to her throat. "I don't want them to hurt me," she cried. "And I won't leave you. I love you." The tears came in earnest. "Squeeze me tight and rock me to sleep." Valerie's voice became a choked whisper. "Rock me to sleep..."

Paul nodded yes. With each drop of his chin, new tears escaped.

"Will it be quick?" Valerie asked with a cracking voice.

"Yes."

"Will it hurt?"

"No. You will be asleep in a few seconds."

"And will you come to me as fast as you can?"

"I'll be right behind you."

They kissed there on the bare floor. It was as long and loving an embrace as the world had seen. But it could have climbed yet higher mountains had the door to the house not been flung open below them.

The couple jumped in each other's arms. Instinctively they shuffled quietly across the floor to a far corner of the room previously occupied only by a ragged and dirty blanket. When they reached the wall their positions had been reversed. Valerie was now sitting between Paul's legs. His arms were around her, his right up high above her breasts. Both of her hands grasped his arm and alternated between pats of assurance to a tight restraining grip.

There were sounds in the house now, clamoring steps and voices. The steps were quick and ran from room to room below them. Paul's arm slipped further up until it brushed Valerie's throat.

"Not yet!" she cried softly, then heard the anxiousness in her own voice. She stroked the muscles in Paul's forearm. "It's okay, my love. I'm fine. I'm ready."

"I love you," Paul said into her ear as he adjusted his arm until the crux of his elbow rested firmly against his lover's throat.

"Don't make me wait," she whispered.

"I won't."

Paul tightened his grip as the footsteps found the stairs.

"I love you, Paul. I love you so."

The steps hit the second floor and Paul's strong muscles contracted hard. Paul pulled Valerie's head against his chest and tucked his fist hard under his own chin. She tried to gasp, but could not. Her hands clutched at his arm, but they were no match for his strength. The door to the room burst open, and a black-suited soldier leveled his machine gun at the couple as he shouted for his partners. The message was relayed out of the house and across the street. In seconds, Lieutenant Rheinholt and others were running toward the front door.

Valerie was stiff, as every muscle fought against what she had voluntarily asked for. Her mouth was open, but she could neither breathe nor speak. The blood to her brain was being cut off, and she was fainting quickly. She felt Paul's kiss against her face and the tears on his cheek. Then the soldier with the machine gun began to fade. As he screamed at the couple he disappeared entirely, as did the rest of the world.

Paul held his lover's throat as tight as he could despite what the soldier and the machine gun were screaming. The shouts brought the rest of the soldiers on the search detail and Lieutenant Rheinholt from the street. The racing soldiers also captured the attention of several neighbors who peeked from behind pulled curtains in anticipation of another execution.

"Release her!" the soldier screamed again and again as he shook his weapon at the couple, locked in a fatal embrace on the floor.

"Fuck you," Paul answered coldly.

"Do it now!"

Paul's answer was to squeeze tighter.

"NOW!" the German screeched as Rheinholt and others crowded in the doorway around the soldier. "Release her or die where you sit!"

"I'm coming," Paul whispered, and he kissed Valerie's cheek.

The soldier aimed his weapon at Paul's head.

"Are you waiting?" Paul said softly into his lover's ear. "I'm here."

"Wait!" Rheinholt howled. "WAIT!"

The soldier lowered his gun, and Paul raised his head. His mouth hung open and his arm relaxed ever so slightly around Valerie's neck.

"Get him away from the woman," Rheinholt ordered. "Hurry!"

A stream of uniforms flowed into the room. Paul clenched his arm again, but the time for reaction from Valerie had long passed. The first soldiers grabbed her legs and his, pulling the couple apart. Paul kicked as hard as he could, but the broken knee would not help ward off the attack.

With both arms wrapped around his Valerie, to protect her from the soldiers in a way only Rheinholt had recognized and with only one good leg, even Paul's strength was no match for the horde. The soldiers used their guns like clubs against his back, head, and legs as they tried to wrench Valerie from him. He had completed his task, but Paul held her for himself and against what he saw in Rheinholt's eyes.

"Get him off of her, you idiots!" the lieutenant shrieked. "He's killing her!"

With several soldiers now on Paul, ignoring Valerie's listless body, the battle was nearly over. One arm was ripped free leaving Valerie dangling in the other and tossed about as the soldiers fought against Paul's strength. A well-placed rifle butt to an obviously wounded knee sent Paul to the brink of passing out and allowed Valerie to

be pulled away. His groan signaled the end as the Germans pinned him face down to the floor. He no longer struggled, but smiled through his fainting stupor as he looked across the floor directly into Valerie's vacant face.

"I'm coming, Val," he whispered.

Rheinolt walked into the room for the first time. He looked down at Valerie's body and put the toe of his shiny boot under her belly. With an easy flip he rolled her onto her back. Her eyes were white, rolled back in her head. She was not breathing. He knelt down and placed his fingers against her throat. Not feeling a pulse, his hand slipped off her neck and very gently brushed the hair from her blanched face.

"Pity. Such a beautiful woman."

"Leave her alone," Paul growled from the floor through gritted teeth as he tensed.

Rheinolt smiled and continued stroking Valerie's hair. "Or? What will you do? Save her? You've already done that, haven't you? That was your intention, was it not?"

Paul didn't speak, and his struggling lessened as Rheinolt stood up from Valerie's body and walked over to him. The lieutenant knelt again, this time in front of Paul.

"You are a hard man, but I suspect you loved this woman. You must have, to do what you did. To kill her."

He stood and walked around the room thinking out loud as Paul and the others watched him. The soldiers' eyes jumped from the body to Paul to the lieutenant in rapid succession, not certain of what to make of the things they had witnessed.

"You are prepared to die," Rheinolt said. "No, let me rephrase that. You expect to die, wish to die. Did you plan this...this...little murder-suicide of yours? My suspicion is that you expect to follow this woman to the grave. And you would like for us to accommodate you."

The scheme was laid bare bones on the floor of the dirty room. In the lieutenant's words Paul discovered that the ending of his life would not come as he and his lover had expected. The fervor of the euthanasia and the wrestling match with the Germans had subsided. All that remained was Val's body on the floor with the smell of urine and feces emanating from it. And surrounding it, smelling nearly as sickening in Paul's nostrils, was the knowledge that Rheinolt had found him out.

"Place the prisoner under arrest for murder. Remand him to the custody of the local authorities. He is to be tried for the murder of this woman. We are all witnesses."

"No," Paul muttered, but the words did nothing but bring Rheinolt crashing down next to him. The lieutenant grabbed Paul's hair and wrenched his head backward.

"Oh, yes! I know you! I know the kind of animal you are!" He pointed Paul's face sharply at Val's body. "Look! Any man who can do that would never break, even under my...special treatment. And after days and days I would have nothing, and you, you would die miserably. But that is just what you want!" Rheinolt crimped Paul's neck even more. "ISN'T IT?" Then he threw Paul's head forward and stepped away. "No, you will live, not for an hour or a few days, but for a long time. You will die in prison. In two prisons. One of stone and one of your own making."

Rheinolt walked by Valerie's body and waved at his nose. He knelt and picked up the ratty blanket with the tips of two fingers and tossed it over her. "Bring up the

truck of corpses from those bastards' wretched house. Get this stinking bitch out of here. She shit herself. And cuff this animal. Place him under a suicide watch, around the clock. You will be tried, and you will be convicted, but mostly you will live. You will live to suffer."

The lieutenant left the room to his soldiers. Paul's struggle began again, but several blows to his knee and as many to his head reduced him to a form as limp as his lover's. The Gestapo cuffed the unconscious man behind his back and the soldiers carried him down the stairs. The sounds of their cursing Paul's weight and the shuffling of boots on the stairs masked the slight cough that came from beneath the dirty blanket.

Natei, a boyish fighter in the circle at the current safe house, tugged playfully at Claire's dress.

"Nice outfit," he teased.

Claire brushed his hand away then in a flash gripped the back of his neck with one hand and stabbed the extended fingers of the other up under Natei's jaw, causing him to wince in pain. The others smiled as Claire pressed her knife-like hand against his jawbone. "Glad you like it, Natei. But remember, the prettiest snakes have the deadliest bite."

She withdrew her hand and smiled at herself as Natei touched the sore spot beneath his jaw and suffered a weak smile himself. "I can see that."

Paul passed within reach to the side of the group. "You're still one of us," he said as he patted Claire's shoulder, ignoring the dress. His words brought stares to the group and bestowed confidence and justification to Claire.

When Paul limped out of earshot, Natei spoke again, but this time he used a hushed voice. "He speaks. I've been here almost a year and never heard him say a word."

Renault's short and stocky frame, capped by his constant blue beret, was suddenly behind the young fighter. "He speaks little and kills often. Do well to learn from him."

"Learn?" Jon, Natei's older brother, asked. "How can you learn anything from him when he doesn't talk?"

"By watching," Renault continued. "By watching."

"Yes, but if he would talk to us perhaps we could learn quicker," Claire chimed.

"Watch instead."

"Team me with him, Renault," Claire suggested. "There's a lot I could learn from..."

"No!" Renault said sharply. "You stay away from him!"

The harshness startled the entire group. After the words escaped, Renault felt their intensity and countered, "Paul has a death wish. He is very, very good at killing Germans, but he will not live to see the end of the war." The senior fighter took Claire's arms and held her, almost as in a distant caress. "You are the future of the Movement, with or without that dress. We need you and others like you. Paul will continue as he must, but on his terms. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good, now—" Renault cut his words short when two men in German uniforms appeared from the hallway and strolled into the main room. They garnered little attention and paid the group of fighters no mind.

"I wish they'd wear a goddamn bell or something!" Renault said sternly. "After all these years I cannot get used to seeing our boys in those uniforms. They walk in, and I reach for my knife. Every damn time."

He walked off, following the uniforms and complaining all the way. "Hey, boys? Why the hell don't you whistle or something?"

The group laughed at him as Michel joined them from the hall. "What's the joke?"

"Renault," Jon laughed. "Every time he sees a uniform in a safe house he gets crazy."

They all looked and chuckled at the Resistance leader, watching him as he chastised the phony German soldiers.

"What did he mean?" Natei said quietly. "You know, that Paul had a death wish?"

No one answered.

"What? Is it a secret or something? I think maybe he's shell-shocked. Acts kind of nutty most of the time if you ask me."

"No one's asking you, Natei," Michel said firmly. "Just leave Paul alone."

"I don't understand. He's our best fighter, according to Renault. And what's this death wish? He walks around like a zombie most of the time, like he just lost his best friend."

"He did."

"He did?"

"When?" Jon picked up for his brother.

"About four years ago. In the early days. Paul and his fiancé were trapped. He did what he thought he had to do and..." Then Michel checked himself. "She got killed. Paul was captured. His knee was already broken so they beat on it until he passed out. That's why the limp."

"Are you kidding? How'd he escape?"

"He didn't. They let him go, made him go really."

"What?"

"He was to be tried for murder, but the police couldn't assemble a jury. I guess the Gestapo got tired of torturing him. They'd seen what he...that he blamed himself for her death. Some ruthless bastard decided the worst punishment for Paul would be to make him go on living. And they were right. Finally the local police released him to Renault. If it wasn't for him, Paul would have killed himself four years ago."

"Christ," Natei said slowly as he stared across the room at the killing idol.

"Just leave him alone. That goes for everybody," Michel said as he registered with every face in the crowd. "Leave him alone."

They would all follow his advice. When Paul was in the room the youngest fighters still collected near him, as near as they dared, in hopes of learning something from him that for a few would propel them to greatness, but for the others, would just keep them alive.

While the small band of fighters continued to discuss what they had just heard and repeatedly laugh and mimic Claire's knife attack on Natei, much to his chagrin, Claire saw Paul slip through a door that led to the basement, the war room and, presumably, Charlemagne. Claire moved away from the group, intent on passing through the door as easily as he had. But as she reached for the doorknob a hand materialized from nowhere and caught her fingers before they could turn the latch.

"You can't go down there right now." Claire followed the hand and saw that it and the voice belonged to Sophie.

Claire immediately pulled her hand back. "Why?"

"There's a meeting."

"I need to see Paul."

"He's busy."

Claire's temperament was rising. "Look, Sophie, I'm not after him if that's what you're worried about."

"I'm not worried," she answered, increasingly tired of Claire's brackish attitude. "Paul does what he wants with whoever he wants. It makes no difference to me."

"I bet you wish he felt the same," Claire answered with a bite.

"No I don't, but it's none of your business how I feel."

"And it's none of your business where I go," Claire answered as she reached again for the knob.

Sophie grabbed her wrist. "If you open that door, I'll have the sergeant-at-arms bar you from the house."

"You can't do that."

Renault spoke up from behind Claire. "Yes, she can."

The women looked from each other to the senior official. Renault took both the wrists and pulled them apart. He released Sophie immediately and motioned her away with a look.

Renault turned Claire toward him and hugged her. He kissed her forehead then shook her the slightest bit. No one could see it, but Claire felt the force.

"Claire, you are one of the finest soldiers we have. I want you to do...your...job."

"Yes, sir," she answered somewhat sheepishly.

He removed his hands and walked away leaving Claire alone by the door, implying a trust that was not all that strong. She looked at the door and thought of the impressive, but invisible Charlemagne just beyond, then felt Sophie's eyes on her. Claire met her glance and shot darts at her with her own eyes then abandoned the door and huffed away to her own kind.

Monique shook her head at the goings-on and then exchanged kisses with Sophie amid last minute warnings and advice. She stepped up to her sister and without words said they should be going. The fighters gave tough-guy hugs to Claire, many verbalizing their condolences for the duty she had drawn at the insistence of her sister. The women in the group eyed Monique harshly while the young men, pretending to do likewise, secretly lusted after the curves accented by the shimmering maroon dress.

Reunited, the sisters exited the safe house through the same back door they had entered. They cautiously navigated the alley for the second time that day and re-entered the main street, quickly blending in with the flowing foot traffic.

Several minutes passed without a word between the pair. It could have just been in the interest of security that the sisters continued to eye their surroundings for any indication that they had drawn attention to themselves or the safe house. But a greater share of the silence grew from the widening gap between the two over their eventual destination and the work they would do once they'd arrived. Monique recognized this as the root of the extended quiet and hoped to bridge the gap with a radical change of conversation from that which each had held in the safe house.

"Who's the guy back there?" she asked as they continued up the boulevard.

"What guy?"

Monique raised her eyebrows at her sister.

"Oh, him. Michel. Just a friend."

The look from Monique was comical, displaying obvious disbelief.

"He is!" Claire said loudly, as though trying to convince herself. "Or at least he was."

"Why do you say that?"

"He didn't want me to go to the club."

"You've been to the club before."

"Not like this."

Claire immediately thought that she'd like to have her last words back, but of course it was too late.

Monique's eyes fixed straight ahead and lost the gleam of girlish teasing she had begun to muster. "You mean, not with me."

There was another pause, equally as poignant, before Claire answered. "Something like that."

There were a few more steps that served to move the sisters away from the awkward hurt.

"How'd you leave it with him?" Monique finally asked.

"Not too good."

Monique leaned forward as she walked and looked into her sister's face to judge the degree of hurt. It was there, but not too deep in Claire's generally bright eyes. Monique straightened away from Claire's own stare.

"What?" Claire said forcibly.

"Just friends, huh?"

"Yes! I hardly know him!"

Monique didn't say a word for several steps then she spoke quietly. "Claire?"

"Yes?"

"Your lipstick's smudged."

Claire stopped in mid-stride, her feet stuck on the sidewalk. She dabbed a finger at the corner of her mouth, looking straight ahead as if her reflection waited there. Her sister watched with a growing smile. When Claire realized she'd betrayed herself her hand dropped in unison with her head. And like her sister, a soft smile started. Then, relaxed and comfortable with Monique's easy jab, the smile blossomed into a brilliant, slightly embarrassed grin. Laughter erupted from them both as Monique tossed her arm around her little sister and the pair again stepped off on their travels.

The laughter had just begun to stop bubbling when Claire tossed a different coin into the fountain. "Sophie's a bitch."

"No she is not," Monique defended. "Why would you say such a thing?"

"She thinks I'm after Paul."

Monique smiled. "I doubt that."

"Yes she does. Hey! You don't think Paul would be interested in me?"

"I know Paul. He's only interested in killing Germans."

"But he and Sophie are together a lot."

"There's a reason for that. They are very close friends. That's all. He doesn't even date."

"Why?"

"Broken heart I suppose."

"He'd probably go out with Sophie if she didn't date so many Germans herself."

"No. She reminds him too much of Valerie. Self-imposed torture. It's both heaven and hell for him to be with her. Or as close to either as he can get — though he continues to tempt whichever would have him." Monique's thoughts came up short, as though she'd pulled a curtain back too far. She recovered by seamlessly shifting gears. "And Sophie works, she does not date."

"I doubt if Paul, or if not him any other man, sees it that way."

"And there's the rub, isn't it?"

"So why doesn't she stop?"

"Stop what?"

"You know...with the German officers."

"Ask Paul when he will stop killing Germans. When he stops, she stops."

Claire walked on a few more steps, closer to the destination and the carefully crafted words in her mind. "It's not the same."

Monique needed no yards for her words to form and no time buffer to protect herself. "It is the same. It is very much the same."

The words invited no response or reaction. They were a statement, plain and true, at least to Monique and the other women like her. Whether they sought truth or justification, it carried them and allowed them to continue as clearly as Paul and Claire were permitted by their credo to kill again and again.

Turned back at this front, Claire chose another. "But she could have let me see Charlemagne. She actually grabbed me by the basement door! Wouldn't even let me go downstairs!"

"So, it has nothing to do with Paul."

"He went down alright."

"I mean your dislike of Sophie. You're mad because she wouldn't let you down to the war room."

"Well, no, but for Christ sake! I'm not going to tell anyone! You know that."

"Of course, but how easy it is to keep a secret if there is no secret to tell."

"Keep a secret if there's no secret? What does that mean?"

"Think about it."

If Claire thought about it at all, it was fleeting. "I'd never tell anything. No matter what. They'd have to kill me before I'd tell."

"I don't think even the Gestapo has figured out how to do that yet."

"Do what?"

"Kill you then make you tell."

"You know what I mean."

"I do. Sophie has a job to do just like us. You do yours, I'll do mine, and we'll let Sophie do hers."

"You sound like Renault."

"Then listen to us!"

"But I wouldn't say anything," Claire pouted.

"Yes, yes," Monique said as she stuck her lip out in an exaggerated version of her sister. "I know. It's a terrible thing that darn old Sophie did. Just awful. She's so mean to you."

"Knock it off."

"Knock it off," Monique echoed.

"I mean it!"

"I mean it."

Now Claire couldn't help but laugh at the common sisterly taunt they had tortured each other with for years. "You're such a—"

Monique grabbed her sister. "Sweetie!"

"Hardly! You drive me nuts!"

"In your case, that's a very short trip."

"Funny."

With several blocks of easy laughter and sisterly ribbing behind them, Claire and Monique found themselves hand-in-hand in the shadow of the spire of St. Catherine's Cathedral. As the shadow engulfed them Claire's hand came away from her sister's.

The tower of the ancient church was perched a hundred feet over the mammoth stone structure. Years had done little to deface the stonework aside from stains and color, which only added to its character. The war too, had graciously left the church unscathed, on the outside anyway. Inside, it had undergone several changes. The cathedral had become, as many churches had in this time, a Mecca for those whom the war had impacted the deepest. It had witnessed the funerals of hundreds of young men who had grown up fidgeting in its pews beneath the firm stares of their parents. The church had also listened as atrocities committed in the name of war had painfully trickled, and sometimes gushed, from the mouths of parishioners wracked by pain and doubt.

The walls of the city's Holy Mother heard the petitions of her children every day at masses that were seemingly unending. On many days the benediction of one all but became the opening processional of the next, such was the depth of need. Though the masses were constant, attendance was not always so. The Gestapo, always fearful that the church and its leaders were instrumental in the Resistance, occasionally lodged a small garrison near the church to observe, check papers, and overtly harass the worshipers. Generally the true Resistance knew when such an ineffectual plan was in the offing and advised the denizens of the city accordingly. Subsequently, the Germans were left to haggle with toothless old women wrapped in black shawls who gave as good as they got and frightened the imposing Gestapo soldiers nearly as much as any battle.

But when unimpeded by the Germans, the pews filled with souls and the rafters filled with prayers sent heavenward by pleading and desperate hearts. Petitions for the dead of war commingled with pleas for the release of their country from the grip of the Third Reich. And dancing in and about these offerings were hesitant prayers from Resistance fighters looking for absolution from things they were trying to justify under the name of war. The stones of St. Catherine's had always said, "Thou shalt not kill." Now, hidden soldiers, many in their teens, others in black shawls, and still others in pretty dresses, came to ask God if He made exceptions for soldiers.

Next door to the sanctuary proper was a much lower building of matching stone. In better days it had served as the church's community center and also as home to its

priests and nuns. Now it was employed as a catch basin for the lost children of the war — young boys and girls orphaned by German bullets and babies left with French girls who believed that the tryst with a handsome German soldier would last a lifetime.

The nuns had surrendered their quiet life to crying children when the war descended on the city. Their service to God and Mother Church now came in the form of caretakers. The women in draping black habits saw to education and training, blind to lineage. The children themselves, protected in the cloistered walls, were blind as well. Growing in a tiny world free from prejudices, they had not learned to hate for hate's sake. They had learned only the language of worship and play, oblivious to the disparity in features that signaled "different" to most and "enemy" to some.

While the nuns had at least temporarily stymied bigotry they often found themselves confronting sometimes larger and certainly more immediate problems. Most were as basic as food. The original war effort had placed a burden, though one taken without complaint, on the resources of St. Catherine's. Following the occupation, any stores that had been laid in were soon bled off by the invaders to support Germany's home interests. As a result, the nuns came to the city and often the Resistance for help. All were eager to assist — assist the French orphans of war, that is. The illegitimate German children were another matter.

The Sisters of St. Catherine's painted with broad brushes though, and managed to keep food in tiny stomachs and clothes on little backs independent of political sentiments. Meager donations and volunteers struggled to help the nuns keep up with the growing numbers within the old nunnery. All the while, the Germans, through killing and lust, provided an endless supply of hungry mouths and French tears, from eyes young and old often to be dried with the frayed edges of black habits.

Monique hadn't noticed Claire's release of her hand, but she quickly recognized the reason behind it when she reached the top of the stairs to the nunnery alone. She turned back to her sister who was still waiting at the base of the steps eyeing the church tower.

"Hurry up," Monique ordered.

Claire hugged her own arms and rubbed them as if they were cold. "This place gives me the creeps."

"You're such a baby."

Claire's eyes skated over the nunnery. "I hate this place."

Monique's eyes followed Claire's, but more to see if anyone or even the stones themselves had heard her sister's blaspheming. "Don't say that!" Monique said in a near whisper. "It's a church!"

"Oooh, a church," Claire said as she pretended to quiver nervously under the eyes of the old cathedral.

"Stop it, Claire."

In reply, Claire began to swing her arms back and forth, occasionally clapping, as she pivoted away from the nunnery and meandered slowly around on the sidewalk. "I'll just wait out here."

This was not acceptable. Monique retreated in a jog down the steps and grabbed her sister's reluctant hand. "Oh no you don't. I want you to meet someone." Claire

feigned weakness as Monique pulled her up the stairs and through the weathered oak door.

The pair stepped into an expansive room with a high ceiling above a shiny marble floor. The center of the large room was empty, but the sides were alive with young children too numerous to count. They sat at short-legged tables facing the wall on crude benches built low to the floor. On the tables, beneath stubby little hands holding tiny pieces of broken chalk, were dusty and cracked slate tablets. The sheer number of children seemed to command noise, but the room, even with its ancient marble floor, could barely muster a whisper.

Every small eye glanced at the sisters, openly or covertly, until the guiding hands of the nuns, islands of black amid the sea of little ones, pointed back to the slates. The nuns themselves stole looks at the pair, whose stylish dress set them far apart from the surroundings. Claire had never visited the nunnery, but Monique was a regular volunteer and yet the glowing dress and bright lipstick made her painfully out of place.

Across the wide room, Sister Arlene, the Mother Superior, recognized Monique immediately through the makeup and after dutifully assigning her young students to the care of another came to greet her. She walked with her arms folded in front of her until she was close enough to reach out and cover Monique's manicured hands.

"So grand to see you, dear!" the old nun said with soft enthusiasm. She paused a moment and tilted her head to the side as to reveal a well known secret. "Someone's been asking after you."

"I figured as much. Unfortunately, things have kept me away."

"I know they have. And she understands as well. The main thing is that you are here today. But you are not alone, I see," the nun said as she took notice of the younger McCleash.

"Mother, this is my sister. Claire."

"Oh, my stars! You can't be little Claire! Just look how you've grown. I haven't seen you in such a long while. You must not frequent mass as I'm certain to recall such a lovely young lady."

"Thank you," Claire said shyly.

"Do stop in for prayer and communion. During these difficult times our relationship with the Heavenly Father is more valuable to us than ever before. Wouldn't you agree, dear?"

Claire's mind had already drifted away from the conversation.

"Dear?" the nun repeated.

Monique stepped in for her sister. "Yes, you'll get no argument from us on that point. Right, Claire?"

"Oh, right. Certainly."

Sister Arlene tried to do her part to dispel the awkwardness, but Claire made little attempt to hide her disdain of the children around her, the orphanage, the church, and, at present, even the elderly nun.

Once again, Monique stepped in to move the conversation in a new direction. "Is she about?"

The sister tore her gaze from Claire's distant face and focused again on Monique. "I'll see to her."

Before Sister Arlene could step away Monique pushed a small roll of German currency into her hand. The nun looked down discreetly and saw the tightly rolled money. "Bless you, dear. Someday we will use their money to start the fires in our trash barrel. But for now the children have great need of it. God bless you. I'll be right along."

Sister Arlene appeared to glide across the polished floor. Her feet were invisible beneath the long black robe, and it took only the smallest amount of imagination to make one believe she was hovering inches above the floor as she moved out of the room through an open archway.

"Nuns are spooky," Claire said as she hugged herself and rubbed her arms again. "How do you stand it here?"

"Now who's strange? You sneak around in the middle of the night with guns and bombs, but a sweet little old lady scares you. How can that be?"

"I repeat, nuns are spooky. C'mon, you paid your penance. Let's go." Claire punctuated her words with a step toward the door, but Monique caught her arm.

"Wait. Here she comes."

Monique was looking back across the room to the archway where Sister Arlene had reappeared. The nun was resting her arm around the thin shoulders of a five-year-old girl whose blonde curls contrasted greatly with the black sleeve of her guardian. The child's face was blank as she surveyed the room until she spied Monique. Instantly the little face erupted into a brilliant all encompassing smile, and she bolted from the nun.

"WALK!" Sister Arlene called out sternly, which immediately corralled the little feet and reduced them to a brisk walk.

Monique had already squatted down in anticipation of greeting the little girl. Claire towered above and scowled at the stiffly approaching child. "Blonde," she said bitterly. "Blonde Nazi father."

"Hush!"

The words barely had time to escape Monique's mouth when the little girl launched herself into the arms of her benefactor.

"Where have you been?" the girl asked through teeth clenched in her tightest hug. "You didn't come see me for a long, long time!"

"It's only been a few days! Let me have a look at you." Monique held the girl out in front of her and brushed at her dress, smoothing away new wrinkles compliments of the dash, jump, and hug. After she had been made presentable, Monique turned the child toward Claire. "Here, do you know who this is?"

"That's Claire."

Monique stood and urged her on. "Very good. Introduce yourself."

The little girl curtsied, smiled, and held up five fingers. "Hello. My name is Essey. I'm this many."

Claire looked away and shifted purposely in her stance. "That's nice. C'mon, Monique. We've got to go."

Essey turned from Claire's rebuff to Monique, her little face already drained of the delight from moments before. "You have to leave already?"

Monique tried to soften the harsh blow Claire had delivered. "I'm sorry, sweetie. I do, but I'll be back tomorrow. I promise."

"Promise?" Essey asked slowly over a pouting lip.

"Promise," Monique repeated. "You go and play. I'll see you in the morning. First thing!"

"Promise promise?"

"Promise promise."

Essey sighed and took what comfort she could from the sincerity of Monique's words. "Oh, okay," she drew out slowly.

"You run along and play now. I'll see you in the morning." Monique crouched down again and exchanged hug for hug and kiss for kiss with the little girl. Essey turned to hug Claire but ran into her outstretched hand instead.

"Sorry, kid. I don't hug. C'mon, Monique." With that, Claire headed toward the door leaving Essey standing where the affront had stopped her.

Only a heartbeat passed before Monique snatched Essey away from the rebuke. She tried to make up for the rejection with another round of hugs and kisses. "Don't let that bother you, honey. You know that's just Claire being Claire. She doesn't mean anything by it."

"She acted like she mean-did it."

"Yes, I know. She can be quite convincing. But we've talked about Claire before. You'll have to trust me. She's a softy."

"You sure 'bout that?"

They hugged yet again, and through it Monique tried to relay a positive answer, but she never lent the feeling words because they would have been weak and she wouldn't have believed them herself. She had never seen her sister so cold. The war had brought changes to everyone, she knew that, but it was only in tiny events like this that Monique caught glimpses of this new hardened Claire. What she saw frightened her, but it also made her mad.

"Okay, you. Off you go," Monique said as she turned Essey toward the tables and patted her off with a playful swat on the butt. The little girl's feet shuffled reluctantly, but slowly carried her into the quiet turmoil of the lost, the unwanted, and the nuns.

Once the room had swallowed the child Monique turned her attention toward the door where Claire paced like a tiger in a cage. Monique approached quickly, passed her belligerent sister, and hit the door hard. As she burst through she chided her sibling roughly. "That was rude."

Claire followed her sister through the slamming door. "Rude? I told you I didn't want to meet any of these little German bastards. I don't need any reminders that the Nazis are raping our country."

"Cut it out, Claire."

"I would like to meet the brat's father, though."

Monique stopped at the base of the stairs and turned back to her sister. "Now, why would you want to do that?" she asked with a burst of sincerity.

"To kill him, of course."

"Stop it, Claire! Just stop it!"

The sudden vehemence in Monique's voice caught Claire off guard. It was a moment before both recovered and Monique could continue in a voice more accustomed to her. "I don't ever want to hear you talk like that again. I've told you, I don't care for it."

The words brought Claire up short on the steps, but like her sister, she recovered and blared down the stairs. "You don't care for it? You don't CARE for it? You think I CARE for this?" she said as she motioned to her stockings and dress. "You think I CARE to get dolled up like a goddamn whore so some German son of a bitch can paw me over?"

The muscles in Monique's face tightened as she stared down her sister, but the nunnery and the cathedral behind Claire caught her attention and steered the conversation away from the fight that was certain to come, if not today then soon. Monique relaxed and her shoulders fell as she sighed. "You promised mother you'd go."

Claire stomped down the stone steps. "Oh yeah, I promised. Promise promise," she mimicked cruelly.

The words tore through Monique's dress and dove into her heart while the callousness behind them continued to shock and surprise. "What's happened to you?" Monique asked.

The question caused Claire to spin on her heels. She accented her words with a pointed finger. "ME? What's happened to you? You're the—"

Her words were broken off by the opening of the nunnery door and the appearance of Sister Arlene and a second nun. The pair walked reverently down the steps and through the scene of the impending row.

"Good day again, ladies," the Sister said firmly. The other nun did not speak but nodded as they unintentionally stepped between the feuding pair and on up the sidewalk.

Monique didn't let Claire resume her attack. "Let's get this over with," she said as she stepped away.

The pair walked on in silence, a marked contrast to the frolicking mood they had been in as they walked these same blocks minutes before. Though the evening June air was warm and pleasant, both women buried their hands deep in their light coats and their shoulders hunched against an unseen cold wind. There had never been this distance between the two. And each considered that it might be too easy to blame the war and the Germans for their trouble.

The quiet held between them as the streets gave way beneath their feet. After a long quiet time they were within sight of the Café of Lights. Monique nudged her sister. "Try to smile."

Claire flashed a quick phony smile then let it fade just as fast. Monique just shook her head.

Up the street at the club the doorman was busy. Parties of soldiers were filtering in and out. Couples came and went. Every man was in uniform. There were no exceptions. As the sisters approached, Monique managed a smile for the doorman who returned it as he held the active door. "Good evening, ladies. Welcome to the Café of Lights."

Monique's transformation continued as she stepped through the door. When she emerged on the other side the hurt was buried, and she had successfully painted on a pleasant face. Claire came into the club as angry as she had been in the street, and the scene before her did nothing to change her mood.

The floor of the club seemed to be alive and moved like choppy waves as dancers bobbed to the music while others moved in and around the vast rooms. Waiters and waitresses in black pants and skirts, white tops and black ties, darted and weaved their way through the mass, deftly balancing trays of drinks and appetizers. The dance floor was lower than the rest of the club and was the focus of attention for most. At one end of the floor a band, each member looking sharp in a crisp tuxedo, churned out renditions of popular tunes from a small platform.

The musicians' black and white attire was the perfect backdrop for the dancers. The women, all French, wore bright summer dresses with short sleeves or thin straps above flowing skirts. Every color of the rainbow was represented in fine order. Blues danced beside pastel pink and sun-bright yellow with red as though it didn't matter. The dresses flashed and winked their splashes around glimpses of silk thighs and the alluring tease of bouncing breasts. Women's hair, after hours of struggle to obtain the right style and look, now shook to the music and was matted at the temples by beads of sweat brought on by the vigor of the dance, alcohol, and impending passion.

Every man on the floor was in a grey German uniform. In such contrast were the male members of the troupe of dancers to the women that despite their blandness, or perhaps due to it, the ensemble complimented one another nicely. The men danced slower than their partners except for the odd unruly enlisted man whose legs and hips had been oiled by liquor and beer into such a state that gravity and physics, not to mention good taste and ethics, seemed suspended.

Rank however, remained constant. Although alcohol loosened hips, only on rare occasions did it do the same for tongues. Foot soldiers sat with foot soldiers, non-commissioned officers with non-coms, and the officers with themselves. Unintentional jostling on the dance floor and accidental bumps in the crowded club were acceptable but seldom occurred without being followed by a harsh glance from the higher rank. This play took stage throughout any evening and the soldiers were kept wary by the quickness with which the participants could change. A sergeant would be bumped by a private and revel in his superiority only to turn away and run into a lieutenant and be subjugated to his own treatment. The more levels that existed between the ranks, the greater the fear or disdain. Minus the uniforms and rank, the club could have been anywhere in the world and held a large degree of the same posturing, for effect and for women, as might have been done in the smoke of a fire outside a cave a hundred thousand years prior. But in the modern smoke of the club the collar ornaments and shoulder patches were so distinct as to permit the hierarchy of the battlefield to easily carry over onto the dance floor. Occasionally reason gave way to drunkenness, and the gap of rank seemed inconsequential. The fights were always over a girl, whether officially or the result of distant jealousy. Still, this was generally the exception in The Café of Lights. It seems there was enough fighting to be done outside.

And so it was that the war was moderately suspended in the club. It was relegated to a far second among chief topics. The winner's circle was now occupied by affairs of the heart, or with the veil of propriety removed, affairs period. The soldiers plied their trade with a dimming flash of uniform and rank while the girls flirted and toyed. As the women teased, the men were left to stumble for words in conversations only meant as fillers before they chanced a reach beneath the Café's starched tablecloths and caressed a soft thigh.

The recipients of those secretive touches had their own reasons for being at the club, and they were as varied as the colors on the dance floor. Most looked for a little laughter and fun to counterbalance the despair outside. Though their country's economy was battered beyond recognition many of the women had jobs, but they were often jobs that had once belonged to absent or dead fathers, husbands, brothers, or other missing Frenchmen. Their work was often difficult and underpaid if paid at all. The club and a strong drink, even if offered by a hand protruding from a grey sleeve, was a welcomed respite.

The vacuum in the workplace was replicated in the social circle. Several young ladies danced their way into the hearts and beds of the wanting soldiers for simple pleasures. Many were seeking only an hour's worth of human touch, but some sought true love and in their minds transformed the German grey into shining silver and military cars into white horses. These women were often the ones eventually left most shattered while their French sisters, those who smiled, danced, and loved away the weary nights, continued on as long as their looks and legs allowed.

Of these, nearly all were amateurs — looking merely for laughter and lovemaking. The strict professionals, the whores, were not allowed, openly anyway, to solicit in the Café. Lastly, there were those like Sophie and Monique who were skilled professionals as well, though their clients, who grinned like sly foxes as they dressed in the foggy French mornings, never realized how exorbitantly high a price they had paid for a woman's momentary favors.

While the ebbs and flows of the early mating rituals continued around them, Monique and Claire began edging through the club toward the tables. Claire took her sister's elbow, a bit too tightly, and leaned toward her ear as she spoke, her free hand motioning toward the dance floor.

"See that? That's what Germany brings to France," she said with contempt dripping like venom off her tongue. "All the bright colors are French. The grey is Germany — dull, stupid, grey. They bring nothing but misery. Do you see it?"

"I see people having a good time."

"Then you're blind."

"I can see fine, thank you."

"You only see what you want."

"And you don't?"

"I see the truth."

"Stop being so dramatic. Enjoy the music."

Claire continued to glare at the German dancers as the sisters moved for an open table. She stepped alongside Monique at a break in the crowd and spoke again, a little too loudly. "Do you know what color besides grey looks good on a Nazi?"

Rather than provide encouragement by admonishing her, Monique played along quietly. "Is this a joke?"

"Not really."

Monique hesitated with a sideways glance before continuing. "I'll bite. What other color looks good on Nazis?"

"Red. Blood red. Their own, of course."

"Of course," Monique answered as she shook her head. "God, you sound more like Father every day."

"Is that so bad?"

"Tonight, yes. It isn't wise to say things like that in here."

"Then maybe I should leave," Claire said as she half-heartedly turned in the direction of the door.

"Fat chance," Monique said as she pulled Claire toward an empty chair. "Have a seat, little sister, and learn from a master."

Monique slipped gracefully into her seat while across the small round table Claire flopped down roughly. "Oh, this ought to be good."

A frail-looking waiter, who moved with quick darting motions and a para-military bearing, suddenly appeared beside the table. He snapped a towel beneath his arm and brushed vigorously at the tablecloth, smoothing the tiniest of wrinkles.

"Good evening, ladies. Miss Monique. As always, it will be a distinct pleasure for me to serve you. And for you and your companion, complimentary shrimp cocktails," he said as he plucked two prepared glasses and an equal number of tiny forks off a passing waiter's tray. "Courtesy of a misplaced shipment bound for Berlin and table number twelve!" The waiter and the sisters shared a laugh as Claire all too openly looked around the room for an annoyed German waiting for a shrimp cocktail.

"Anything special to begin your evening?" he continued. "Or shall I wait a few moments for one of these swine to bolster the courage to approach your grace?"

"Jean, you're teasing again. I'll have white wine. You select for me, please."

"And your lovely associate?"

"Excuse me, Jean. This is my sister, Claire. Claire, this is Jean. The finest waiter in all of France."

Jean snapped to attention sharply and politely bowed his head. "I am known as Jean Luc, loyal only to a free France and my customers. It is a pleasure to meet the sister of Miss Monique." Jean Luc took Claire's hand and bent to kiss it. As he came close to her he whispered. "It is also a pleasure to meet someone whose convictions mirror my own. The hope of our country lies in your hands and others like you. But be careful, as your reputation grows, so does your vulnerability." He kissed her hand, rested it gently on the table, and stood back with a sharp click of his heels. "I will be your waiter and attentive servant, Miss Claire. What may I bring you?"

It was a moment before Claire focused on his question. She was stunned, but pleasantly so by his remarks. "Oh, uh...just a beer."

"Excuse me?" Jean asked as if he really hadn't heard.

"She'll have white wine as well," Monique interjected.

"Very good, ladies." At that, Jean Luc vanished into the atmosphere of the club snapping his fingers and issuing orders to busboys as he went.

Claire leaned toward her sister excitedly. "Did you hear what he said?"

"Not all. Thank God," Monique answered as she looked around.

"How'd he know?"

"Jean hears and sees much with his towel."

"He works with the Re—?"

Monique cut her off. "How can you be so stupid and still be alive?" she whispered fervently. "Don't ever even say that word! Not here, not anywhere! To no one! You hear me? No one!"

Claire cowered for the first time that night. "You're right."

"Then you wonder why Sophie protects you the way she does."

The sisters quieted and let Claire's mistake slip away into the music. Monique relaxed shortly and rested one elbow on the table. "You have to adjust your thinking. And given your tendencies, it will be no small feat. Lesson number one," she continued as she pointed after the darting Jean Luc. "That is the last drink you buy. And the only one you drink. From now on you have the drinks bought for you, but you don't drink them. Perhaps a sip or two from each at most. Then after half an hour you ask for a fresh one."

"Oh, that's rich! Father will be so happy I'm only a prostitute not an alcoholic."

"Hush up and listen." Monique scanned the club as if searching for a target. "Lesson number two. Nothing below a lieutenant. Absolutely no enlisted men. None. No matter how handsome he might be."

"I don't get it. Not that I want to."

"Enlisted men don't know anything. Just lieutenants and up. Captains are excellent. Majors even better. And colonels, well, if you can get a colonel you're really on to something."

"Oh, God, a shopping list of whoremongers."

"Pay attention! Officers know things. And they love to talk to soft attentive ears. You make them think they're the smartest officer in the service. Whatever rank he is tell him he should be the next one higher. Get them talking and they won't stop. Oh, how they love to impress us! Act enamored by their conversation and they'll tell you the combination to Hitler's safe if they have it. God, men are dumb."

"No. This is dumb."

"No it isn't. It's important. All you have to do is talk to them. They'll do all the work. You'll see it's actually quite easy."

"Don't you mean sleazy?"

Monique tightened her brow at her sister. "Just talk. That's all. You'll soon find that you won't be able to shut a lieutenant up even though they may not have a lot of what we want. Now colonels on the other hand know plenty, but they're a tight-lipped bunch. I suppose that's how they get to be colonels. But pressure, applied correctly, can loosen their tongues."

"After you loosen their pants, right?"

"Don't make this harder than it is. Let's just leave it as talking for now. Dance and have a good time. Agree with what they say and take mental notes. For bigger fish and bigger rewards you have to use more bait. That's the only difference."

"Not to me it isn't."

"With intimacy comes a trust. You can use that to your advantage. Pillow talk has made and broken more men than battle."

"It's repulsive."

"It's important."

"I can't do this," Claire said as she started to get up.

Monique grabbed her arm and held her. "Sit still. There's a couple of lieutenants trying hard to look like they're not, but they're coming our way. Practice."

Sure enough, two young officers were working through the mix of crowd and tables, taking a roundabout way to the sisters. They leaned heavily on their drinks, sipping them often and smiling over the rims at no one. Throughout their charade they looked often in the direction of the McCleash table. Though she had watched their approach as deliberately as if they had been planes on a radar screen, Monique feigned a pleasant surprise when the junior officers finally found their way and the nerve to approach the table.

The closer they came the quieter Claire grew. When the officers finally stepped up and said hello Claire had scrunched herself deep into her chair and was considering the notion of invisibility. Monique, on the other hand, was in full swing. As she talked and teased, Claire couldn't help but be amazed at what she heard come out of her sister's mouth. When Monique produced a cigarette from her purse, though Claire knew she didn't smoke, Claire's mouth fell open. Though still repulsed by the scheme she had become a part of, watching her sister skate so skillfully through the Germans was only two steps short of fun.

"So, where are you stationed?" Monique asked as she held her cigarette and leaned forward in anticipation of a hurriedly produced light. In her leaning, Monique revealed considerably more cleavage, which sped up the lieutenants' heartbeats but hampered the production of the match now caught in a shaky, fumbling hand. The temptress seductively touched the officer's hand, settling its quiver as she stole the light for her smoke.

"Oh, we're not stationed in country. We're news correspondence officers."

Monique wanted to laugh out loud at the notion of their work — typing press releases, being told what to say so the German people could be told what to read. Instead she leaned back and drew ever so slightly on the cigarette as she sized up the men before her. Regular correspondence officers might dispatch important documents, but even they'd never be able to access them. Certainly all the information would be coded. Intelligence could decode many messages she knew, but nothing could come from news dispatches. For her labors with these two she would gain nothing except a sweaty over-exuberant youngster who would probably shoot his cum long before he shot off his mouth and neither projectile would be worth a damn. Monique laughed at her analogy and allowed a smile to bubble to the surface. These were nobodies, glorified typists, but then again maybe good for something.

Her laughter was out of place, but she excused it quickly. "Excuse me," she said as she touched her lips with her fingers. "Too many drinks on the way over here tonight. Wine makes me silly."

The explanation and smile eased the tension of the officers just as Jean Luc returned with the previously ordered drinks.

"You look very happy tonight," Monique's lieutenant said with a smile as he took her drink from Jean's tray and placed it in front of her. "Here. Drink up. Be silly. I love your smile."

"Oh, I always smile in the presence of a gentleman," Monique said as she began rifling through her purse, taking great pains not to find her money. Claire recognized this part of the ploy and actually smiled herself for the first time since entering the world of The Café of Lights.

As Jean skillfully flipped paper coasters on the table and gently placed the sisters' drinks on them, relocating Monique's, the lieutenant dove for his money clip. "Here, allow me." The confidence in his voice would be short-lived.

"Thank you so much," Monique said slyly. "What a gentleman."

Jean grabbed the lieutenant's money, dropped his arm, rolled his eyes, shook his head, and turned away laughing.

The officers looked after him and tried to erase the obvious thoughts they were having. Monique brought them back with well-placed compliments, blatant flirting, and the occasional forward lean. The work was well rehearsed, though not recognized as such, and very skillful. Through all the subtle wordplay Monique intentionally never asked the two men to sit. As she continued to hold the attention of her lieutenant, the second shifted his focus to Claire, who had yet to speak.

"You're kind of quiet. I like that," he said with a smirk across his lips.

The remark touched a nerve. Claire instantly felt violated, even by the soldier's attention. Her face held the fiercest gaze she could manage and burned into his eyes as she struggled with what to say or do next. Beside her she could scarcely hear and even less understand the droning of her sister. The sounds of the rest of the club had disappeared entirely.

She was unarmed for the first time in weeks on a night spent working for the Movement — if this was indeed considered work. But the lieutenant had a sidearm. Claire's eyes shifted to the officer's weapon and studied it as her thoughts raced on to the beat of the unsuspecting German's babble, meant to coax her into his arms. She could try to snatch the gun then and there and kill him now, but the risk would be tremendous. Monique could get hurt in the shooting, and she'd be caught for certain. The Resistance could be exposed as well. All for a single dead typist.

No, she thought. *I'll play this game. I'll invite him to take me for a nice ride in the country. Then when he takes off his gun belt in anticipation of taking off his pants, I'll tease him. "Is this your gun?" I'll say as I stroke his pistol. "Or is this your gun?" I'll say as I ease down his zipper. And when he laughs and reaches for me, all confident and hot, I'll shove the gun against his temple and send his own bullets through his horny little brain.*

"Hello in there?" the lieutenant said as he tapped Claire's temple with his finger. "I said, would you like to dance?"

She jumped and brushed his hand away from her head. There was a rush through her, not unlike the feeling that came when she raided with the Resistance. Ignoring the repeated question, she pointed at the officer's pistol.

"That's a Luger, isn't it? The P-08?"

Her suitor was taken aback, but recovered enough to look down at his side. "Uh, yes. Yes it is."

Claire moved slowly and ran her fingers across the butt of the weapon until only her middle finger hung near the action. "Makes a nice neat hole. Not a lot of knockdown power though. Not like the Americans' 45, but then again you have the advantage of a larger capacity clip." The same finger now moved to her mouth and hung on a protruding lip. "Or not? I can't remember. Isn't that silly! Yours, I should think, was manufactured in Berlin or maybe Karlsruhe. Do you know?"

"Uh, no I don't." The lieutenant played his role to perfection and stood up straight, away from Claire. For her part she increased the tempo.

"You ever see what a 45 caliber bullet does when it slams into someone's temple at close range?" Her index finger was firmly pressed against the side of her own head as her eyes widened. The lieutenant's eyes widened with hers as Claire pulled the trigger on her play pistol and let her head fall limp, her tongue roll out, and her eyes cross.

"Denise! Please!" Monique said with a noticeable nervousness in her voice. "You'll have to excuse my friend. The combination of too many drinks and too many stories from the front." She leaned back in her chair behind her sister and slowly twirled her finger around the side of her head. "The war affects us all differently," she said as she made an odd face and pointed discreetly to Claire.

The lieutenants could only manage shallow, painful smiles. The first politely excused himself, promising to return to Monique for a later dance. The second only stared at Claire's drooping head and still crossed eyes as his partner pulled him away by the arm to begin the search for easier, saner prey elsewhere in the club.

"Claire!" Monique whispered harshly. "What are you doing?"

"I hate Germans. I can't pretend to be nice to them."

"Well, you'd better do better than that! One more chat about guns and the Gestapo will be hauling you off for questioning. Now wouldn't that be just marvelous? You and your guns."

Sergeant Sneitz, completely drunk, suddenly sprawled across their table. "Hi ya, sweetheart," he slurred to Monique. "Wanna dance?"

Claire pushed back from the table, repulsed by both the look and smell of the man. Monique held her ground and was unflappable. "No thank you, sergeant."

"Awww, c'mon, Frenchy. Whaddaya say? How's about you and me goin' for a midnight ride in the country?"

"I said no thank you."

"Why not? I'll show you a good time, baby."

"I'm sorry. I'm waiting for someone."

Behind Sneitz, Private Timic and another equally drunk friend began to laugh. "What's the matter, Sarge? I thought you were gonna charm her."

"Yeah, you said you'd charm the pants off of her."

"Or the dress!" The pair laughed all the louder at their own joke and fell into each other hysterically. The sergeant followed by leaning closer to Monique, who remained strong and proper.

"That's right, Frenchy. Let's take that ride. Then we can get you outa that fancy dress and have us a real party." He roughly grabbed her arm and began jerking her out of the chair. "Let's go!"

Monique twisted her arm away and Sneitz stopped momentarily as if shocked that he'd been met with such resistance. While he collected himself Claire nudged up to the table and discreetly slipped a shrimp fork into her hand. She fingered it nervously beneath the table, testing it for the best possible grip. She wouldn't shoot a lieutenant tonight for fear of retaliation, but she could test this sergeant's hide to see if he was well done.

Sneitz recovered from Monique's rebuff and lunged for her. She responded quick as a cat and tossed her drink squarely in his face.

The sergeant's companions roared behind him as he licked the drink around his mouth and wiped his dripping chin on his grey sleeve. Claire's muscles tightened, and she gripped the edge of the table with one hand, preparing to propel the other toward the German's throat if he moved again. He moved, but it was a feint as if to step away, then he returned fast and pulled back his hand to slap his hesitant date. But at the height of the sergeant's swing someone grabbed his wrist.

The sergeant stood dumbfounded. For her part, Monique recoiled into her chair, but Claire leaped across in front of her sister with the tiny fork jutting out of her hand. In the move, she bumped the table roughly and spilled her drink.

His snatched wrist kept the restrained sergeant from moving forward with his intended slap and into the tiny tines of Claire's fork. The rush of movement from all sides froze as if it were a still picture.

Monique's savior was a major. His features were chiseled and his grip on the sergeant's wrist was tight, but his voice was calm and almost matter-of-fact as he stared down at the smaller man.

"There a problem here, ladies?"

Monique looked squarely at the stymied and drunken sergeant with the wet face. "I don't know. Is there a problem?"

"Naw," Sneitz answered as he eyed the major's collar ornaments. "No problem here, Major. These whores was gettin' lippy is all."

Claire bristled as she stood her ground, fork in hand, while Monique feigned shock. "I beg your pardon!"

"Perhaps you and your men ought to move along," the major suggested.

Sneitz crudely jerked his arm from the major's grasp, and the drunken party moved a comforting distance away. "Sure thing, Major. Sure thing. Damn, French whores."

"Sergeant. I suggest you leave. Immediately."

With each retreating step the sergeant's words grew bolder. "Officers' whores is what they are! Won't even dance with an enlisted man." Sneitz pointed beneath the table. "That's how you got them fancy silk stockings, isn't it, Frenchy? Fucking officers!"

"Get out! Now!" the major bellowed as Claire dropped back into her chair with her fork and pulled her legs up under the table.

"Yeah, we're going. We're going. Damn French whores. That's all they are."

The trio of banished men slowly exited the club, all the while staring back at the sisters' table. The major returned their glares until they disappeared then turned gallantly to the table.

"Are you ladies alright?"

"Quite. Most rude however," Monique said as she faked a nervousness that caused her to pat her hair and adjust jewelry that didn't need it.

"If it's possible I would like to apologize for the actions of my countrymen. Please know that not all Germans share their opinion of the French."

"Thank you, Major. You are most kind. Won't you please sit down?"

"Thank you. I believe I will."

Claire rolled her eyes as her enemy pulled up a chair next to her sister. "Oh, Christ," she muttered under her breath as she fingered her tiny fork.

As the major settled in he looked beyond Monique to Claire. "I think it's the sergeant who should be thanking me, not you. If I hadn't stopped him I'm afraid there'd be a soldier somewhere struggling to pull a fork out of his throat."

The major chuckled with Monique and didn't hear Claire's quiet threat. "There's still time," she whispered.

Suddenly the major became very formal. "Please excuse me, my name is Pieter Von Strausser. At your continued service."

"My...", Monique said as though terribly impressed. Then she held her hand to her chest. "I'm Monique, and this is my friend, Claire."

The major extended his hand and took Monique's tenderly. He did not kiss it, but bowed his head slightly toward her as she spoke. "Absolutely charmed." Then he released the soft hand with great hesitation and eased slightly up out of his chair to reach across the table toward Claire.

"Claire," he said politely. "My pleasure."

The major's reluctance to release Monique's hand was mirrored by Claire's hesitation to take his. The fighter looked at the hand with loathing, but slowly took it and to the major's surprise squeezed tightly.

"Me too," Claire answered coldly.

The major felt the awkwardness of the grip, but lost concentration on it nearly as soon as it released him as Monique deftly leaned in between the two soldiers. In seconds she had totally captivated the unwary major.

Over the next several minutes Monique plied her wares with practiced precision and in the process spun a web for the blinded officer. As the couple exchanged basics and moved on to open flirting, Claire tried to make herself small. When she couldn't stand it any longer she stood up. Monique broke away from the major and grabbed Claire's arm, but the fledgling intelligence officer in silk stockings tore it away. "I'll be back," she said disgustedly.

Monique's smile and cleavage dismissed any questions about Claire from the major's mind. While the couple returned to their flirting, Claire worked her way to the bar. It was awash in grey, but parted politely for the pretty French girl who walked a bit stiffly in her high heels.

As soon as she hit the rail Claire motioned for the bartender. "Whiskey," she ordered as he stood in front of her.

"Whiskey?"

"Did I stutter?" she asked harshly.

"Whiskey it is."

Claire stared down at the bar, ignoring the countless eyes peering at her from their grey fortresses. When the shot glass touched down in front of her she pushed her money forward, picked up the drink, and downed it in one gulp. She gave a short dry whiskey breath and pushed the glass toward the bar keep.

"Another."

The bartender retrieved the whiskey bottle from its place on the back bar and filled the glass. This time he held the bottle at the ready in case Claire was going to repeat. The nearby soldiers waited, too, but rather than wait to fill her glass they had thoughts of a soon-to-be drunken pretty girl and her misplaced inhibitions. Both the bartender and the soldiers would be disappointed.

Claire went through her money again and tossed just enough beside the waiting glass of whiskey. She cradled the drink in both hands then turned her back to the rail.

From her station at the bar, Claire watched her sister step away from their table and into the major's arms. As Monique began to sway on the dance floor, a corporal who had watched Claire's drinking habits with delight moved closer to her. He smiled when he brought Claire's eyes away from Monique and the major.

"Hi," he said pleasantly.

"Fuck you." And the corporal's dream ended before it began.

Before he or anyone nearby could recover, Claire left the bar and returned to her empty table. She set the drink down too hard, and some of the elixir jumped over the rim of the shot glass. As she took her place she licked her fingers and looked for Monique on the dance floor. She discovered her there, lightly stepping and swaying with the major.

As Claire looked on, Monique's easy gait and ability to fraternize with such apparent ease totally transfixed her. Claire was appalled to even sit in the same room with Nazis. Her eyes shifted from her sister, now wrapped in grey and surrounded by the chords of a slow romantic waltz, to the far reaches of the club.

Gathered in all the corners, in every nook, were soldiers. Not unlike men in dance halls around the world and across time, they lined the walls and ogled the girls. Each held a cold drink which they would have traded in a second for a warm hand. Each also held onto something else — the hope that one of the flowery dresses would somehow become so enamored by their look, stance, or hidden charm that they would ask them to dance, to drink, and make love. They knew the hope was slim at best, but for the possibility, however remote, they held out, waiting and leaning, watching and dreaming, sipping their slowly warming drinks, and laughing too loud.

The laughter found Claire and brought her to concentrate on its source. She would stare intently into a grey mass and wish for her eyes to be rifle sights and her stares bullets, but then more boisterous laughter from another part of the club would snatch her away from her victims. With each shifted gaze the fire burned a little hotter, partially fueled by the warming whiskey in her stomach.

To Claire the men became nests of roaches, grey instead of black. They moved slightly against the walls, not anxious to give up prime spots from which to see or be seen. They were huddling together for security against the rejection of the flowery ones, real or imagined, but Claire saw them as conspiring against her, the Resistance, and France.

"What a delightful bombing could take place here!" she mused. "If there was a way to keep Monique and the others away just one night." But there was no way, no way of certainty. If not Monique then it would be one of the other girls who presently whirled across the floor in colorful blurs. And then there'd be the matter of the waiters. And the busboys. All French, each and every one. But each one catering to the Nazis.

Claire shook her head no in wonder and spoke quietly to herself: "How do they do that?"

She washed down the words with the whiskey then without speaking continued the thought. "They must know what these bastards are doing in the hours when they're not here. How do they smile so easily at the faces that killed their friends yesterday and will kill their families tomorrow?"

A young lieutenant, willing to brave the harsh and vacant stare that had deterred a dozen others in the moments before, stepped up to Claire's table and dared ask for a dance. The spell was broken, and Claire focused, albeit slowly, on the lieutenant. Thinking he had not been heard, he asked again.

"I was wondering if you'd like to dance?"

Claire came out of her trance slowly. Her eyes focused on the face before her and deemed it pleasant enough. In another place at another time she would have been flattered, but here in the club, the grey of the German's uniform soon obliterated all else.

Despite the clouding of her vision, brought on in part by the strong drinks, Claire scanned the uniform before her for the insignia of an officer. On his collar were lieutenant's bars. She extended her hand with a delicacy that did not match her words. "Why the hell not," she said as the whiskey took full effect. "It'd make my sister happy, right?"

"I can't say, but it would make me happy."

"Don't be so sure," Claire said as the lieutenant took her hand and escorted her from the table. "You could wake up dead."

The comment was not totally absorbed by the junior officer. His comprehension was hampered by desire and the rush of success at having come off the club wall and bagged one of the bright dresses. Claire could have said, "Yes, I'll dance, but afterward I'll eat you like a mating spider." And even if it could have been true, he still would have escorted her to the dance floor.

The newest couple in the club made their way through the crowd like so many others before and spilled into the dancing scrum. The music was soft and slow as the lieutenant slipped his arm around her waist. He pulled her toward him, but the distance wasn't an unacceptable one for dancing. Still Claire was repulsed and looked for an excuse to make a scene. She was prepared to push away and slap the young officer's face when she caught Monique watching her beyond her suitor.

Monique was swaying slowly in her major's arms, but had effortlessly positioned her partner so she could observe her sister. Now she was looking around the major's shoulder, intently watching Claire dance. When she caught Claire's eye she flashed a slight smile and gave an approving nod. Claire returned the acknowledgment by crossing her eyes and letting her tongue loll from her mouth as she dropped her head

on the lieutenant's shoulder. Her student's apparently painful entrance into the world of covert intelligence brought an impromptu laugh from Monique. She covered her mouth as the major gently held her out in front of him.

"My dancing is so funny?" he smiled.

"Oh, no. You dance wonderfully," Monique smiled in return as she pulled herself back into her newest partner.

The feel of her body next to his erased any subsequent questions about the source of the laugh, just as Monique had known it would. A touch, a caress, a kiss, or the slight exposure of a thigh or breast had many times proved useful in squelching questions. She had used her hands and her lips as erasers on blackboard minds so many times it came without thinking and with such a gentleness and sincerity, not once could she remember having to answer difficult or revealing questions. No, in this world she was the one to ask the questions. Her dates, her quarry, need only dribble their answers down the front of their unbuttoned shirts and trousers.

But for now there was only the waning music and the obligatory applause of the dancers. As Monique and her major moved from the dance floor she looked through the disbanding dancers for her sister. She found her, but was flooded with short-lived disappointment as she saw Claire across the club handing her ticket to the coat check girl.

While she was waiting for her coat, Claire turned back to the club and caught her sister's questioning face. Monique mouthed the word, "Why?" though the answer was never in doubt even when the argument turned into agreement at last night's shouting match in the family living room.

Claire smiled sickly, shook her head in an easy no, and shrugged her shoulders. The clerk touched her with her coat, and she turned to take it. As she slipped it over her shoulders she blew Monique a kiss that said despite the evening they were still sisters and best friends. As Claire turned to the door Sophie entered on the arm of a captain.

"Calling it a night already?" Sophie whispered as the captain checked her coat.

"Just too far out of my element, I guess."

"Don't worry. It'll come," Sophie said as she patted Claire's arm.

Claire wanted to say something clever and to the point, like "I hope not" or something worse, but Sophie's arm was being taken from behind by the captain. So instead she smiled and pointed across the floor. "Monique's got a table over there somewhere."

"Oh, I don't think I'll intrude just yet," Sophie said as she waved across the floor to her student who was working back to her own table.

"Shall we?" the captain asked, motioning further into the club.

"Indeed. Claire? Are you leaving alone? Perhaps the captain could ask one of his lieutenants to escort—"

"Thank you, but I'm meeting someone."

"Oh, very good. Have fun!"

Claire's goodbye was a flashing faint smile as Sophie and her captain were absorbed by the throng. The newest, but soon to be retired intelligence officer, stayed in the club just a brief moment longer looking after Sophie as she, like Monique, eased

through the crowd and the Germans. The entire scheme remained disgusting, but they had such grace and carried themselves with an air of remarkable confidence. Claire again felt the sense of awe that came over her as she watched her sister primp in the mirror hours before. Then she turned on her heels, tightened her coat around her, and stepped out the door into the cooling night air.

Inside, Pieter was still escorting Monique back to their table as Sophie and her captain searched for one of their own. The major held Monique's chair appropriately as she slipped into it. As he sat, never removing his eyes from her, she turned slightly, looking for Sophie. Now Pieter followed her eyes and watched with her as Sophie and her escort disappeared across the club.

"Friend of yours?"

"Yes. I was going to ask her to join us if she couldn't find a table, but I guess she's all set."

"Nothing against your friend, but I'm glad she found her own table."

"I'll accept that as a compliment."

Pieter smiled and nodded an acknowledgement as Jean Luc materialized beside the table. "Anything from the bar, Major?"

"Yes. Bourbon."

"And the lady?" he said, disguising the fact that he knew Monique as a regular.

"Monique?"

"White wine, please."

"Very good, madam."

Jean disappeared under a flutter of his snapping towel and fingers. Before the couple could launch very far into advancing their conversation, Jean reappeared with the drinks. The major's was a double - purposely placed oil for Monique to work with, compliments of the ever diligent Jean Luc.

Unaware of the stacking odds, Pieter stirred his drink as he searched for words in a game he was not conscious of. While he planned his course of action, preparing to thrust and parry, flank, assault, and regroup, Monique, far better prepared, went to work on hers.

"Tell me, Major, what do you do when you're not rescuing damsels in distress?"

"Oh, military things," he said as he raised his glass to his lips.

"That doesn't tell me much."

"Perhaps that was my purpose," he said as he drank triumphantly.

"And perhaps I was just being polite," Monique said as she coyly dropped her eyes and face as though he'd hurt her feelings.

His reaction was immediate. He reached across the table and gently clasped Monique's hand. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that. The war has made me cynical."

"And rude."

"No. I could never be rude to a woman as lovely as you."

Monique did not respond — rather, she waited, giving the poison time to work. In seconds, her venom had reached his mind and though he slowly pulled his hand back from Monique's, he started to talk.

"I'm an administration officer. A lot of paperwork, scheduling shipments, and transports. Nothing too glamorous I'm afraid."

"That would depend on your definition of glamorous."

"Most people, certainly civilians, think all the excitement is in the Luftwaffe and the Panzers or on the front lines."

"My idea of excitement doesn't mean being in a position to kill someone or get killed."

"You might not believe this, but I tend to agree." The major's words slowed and he diverted his eyes for one of the first times all evening. Monique took note of it. "To tell the truth, what I do, even though it's well removed, generally, from the action as one might say, can still trouble me."

"How so?" Monique said as she took her turn in reaching across the table and covering a hand. The major stroked the back of her manicured fingers as they rested on his.

"Sometimes I think about the men and weapons I arrange transport for. I know what they'll do. And I know that many of the men I send won't come back."

There was no true caring behind her words, though the keenest ear could not have heard otherwise as Monique clenched the major's hand tighter. "If it bothers you so, then why do it?"

"Tradition, if nothing else."

"Tradition?"

"My family, the Von Straussers, have been fighting for our homeland for generations."

"Von Strausser. Sounds as if it should have 'Baron' before it, certainly 'Colonel.'"

"Thank you," the major answered shyly. "Perhaps one day. But I wouldn't be the first 'Baron Von Strausser.'"

"Perhaps then you could be the first 'Baron Von Strausser' who does not fight."

There was no reply. The major digested the words as he looked out over the crowd. Monique was left to search her own mind for the origins of the statement. It had surprised her. She had never cared whether a German fought or didn't. She cared only for France. Pieter shifted his eyes back to Monique without moving his face, which was stern but rapidly melting. Suddenly he leaned hard toward her and took Monique's hand once again. "You're very easy to talk to."

"Anytime."

"Tomorrow?"

"Perhaps."

Then he reconsidered. "Oh, actually tomorrow might not be possible, but beyond it are a great number of certainties."

"There are very few things certain with this war around us," Monique said in her softest voice. "Still and all, a quiet dinner would be a pleasant diversion, wouldn't it?"

"It would at that, but..."

"You've already made plans with someone else?"

"Yes. If you consider the German Army 'someone else.'"

"Ah, the famous Von Strausser devotion to duty."

"I'm afraid so."

Monique spoke beneath a well placed set of batting eyes. "Perhaps if you are close enough, when you are finished..."

There was a pause as Pieter ran through the events to come the following night. He spoke almost absentmindedly, unaware that Monique was logging each word. "Are you familiar with the Clovington Turnpike?"

For her part, Monique registered a blank look and lied. "No. Why?"

"I have a troop convoy headed out that way for the coast tomorrow night. I generally accompany my transports if possible. I wonder how far it is from here?"

"One is never far from the coast in this part of France."

"That's true, isn't it? Could I give you a call when I'm finished?"

The answer took the form of Monique rummaging through her purse for a pen and a scrap of paper. She wrote gracefully, fully aware that Pieter was watching, hypnotized by the simplest gesture. The paper came up between her fingers and was flamboyantly extended toward the major than snatched back. Monique rubbed the paper seductively against her neck, raising her chin and closing her eyes as she did so. Not content, she retrieved a tiny bottle of perfume from her purse and dabbed the fragrance near her telephone number. Again she held the paper out to Pieter who took it and held it under his nose before he even read it.

"My, how delightful."

"Just a name and a number may not be enough to get you to keep your promise."

"You needn't be concerned about that, I assure you," he said as he began reading the note aloud. "Monique McCleash, ICB-829." He smiled and slipped the paper into his breast pocket. "McCleash doesn't sound very French."

"My father's people are from Ireland."

"A thousand shades of green. Isn't that what they say?"

"My father says ten thousand, but that's my father."

"I understand it's a lovely country. Have you been?"

"Just once, when I was young, but my father returns often, at least he did, but for the time being the occupation prevents him."

"My apologies to your father."

"He loves his 'Emerald Isle,'" Monique said through a gentle smile, imitating her father's accent and instantly lost in memories of days when the relationship was not strained.

Pieter laughed a little at the attempt. "It's good to be proud of one's country. Don't you agree?"

"Oh, he is definitely proud. But still, he was kept from it by 'me darlin' French lass.' That's what he calls my mother."

Pieter took Monique's hand and gently held it to his lips. The kiss was slow and soft. "I can see how such a thing could happen to someone. Love of country or not." And he kissed her hand once more.

Several blocks away Claire was trotting up the front steps of her house. She entered the dim foyer and slipped off her coat in one fluid motion. The coat landed on the nearby tree as she headed past her bicycle for the stairs and her bed beyond. A faint light coming from the kitchen diverted her. On the way to the open doorway she glanced at her father's pipe rack. Even in the pale light she could see it was full. The McCleash patriarch was in.

Gauging her father's presence and mood by the pipes always made Claire smile. Tonight was no exception. A tender look broke over her as she thought of her father and his rough and rustic charm. His tongue was quick like hers, and he was a bit of a rabble-rouser, again like her. God how she adored that wiry man with his stout arms, sharp wit, and callused but tender hands. It was him that had taught her, directly and through example, to be what she now was. The journey did not seem a long one, and he had generally made it fun.

She pulled her shoulders back with pride as the kitchen light fell on her shoes. Her father would be proud of her for leaving the club as she did. He would laugh with her and pat her shoulder when she relayed the story of the sergeant and her fork. The story began even before she entered the room.

"Hey, you should have seen..."

But when Claire stepped into the kitchen, there, seated at the simple table with the chrome legs, was her mother.

Claire's smile vanished along with her cocky storytelling attitude. The surprise at finding her mother was only half the cause. All the affection she had for her father was mirrored by an equally intense dislike for her mother. It hadn't always been so. The divide that now pulled the air from the kitchen had begun as a crack when Claire tossed the first rocks at the German trucks. While Sean McCleash had cheered, Claire's mother cringed. The disapproval in Estelle's voice blossomed into shouting matches with both Claire and her husband. Monique had aligned with her mother, and the division in the family was cemented.

Estelle looked up at her youngest daughter from the dim light of a single lamp set on the table. Around the light were short piles of grey German uniforms, some neatly folded and others haphazardly strewn about which had either enjoyed the attention of Estelle's sewing needle or waited their turn.

Though she looked up to greet Claire's face, her fingers continued to dance with the needle and its long tail of thread. Estelle's hair was greying at the temples and was

pulled back in a tight bun away from a face that had traded beauty for thin lines of character. Still she was attractive, though tonight, and every night since the occupation, the face was tired. She wasn't heavy, but thought she carried more pounds than she should. Sean said, "More to love," and he meant it, so there was no real concern in her thoughts. Her dress was neat and clean and still well pressed after a long day that had now extended late into the night.

Tension sprang up in the room as soon as the women saw each other. Though the pair had clashed often with increasing harshness, Estelle still loved her daughter with the dangerous life. The affection was not returned, however, and was deteriorating into disregard. This fissure was growing increasingly obvious in the McCleash home and was ready to ignite yet again in the simple kitchen.

"Oh, I thought you were Father," Claire said in a voice dripping with disappointment. Her last word was still escaping her mouth as Claire turned back to the living room.

"You can talk to me, can't you?"

Estelle's words brought Claire up short in the doorway just as they had throughout her childhood, but now the years, her brashness, and the war had made Claire bold.

"Not really."

"You used to be able to talk to me."

"You used to listen."

"I still can."

"I'm tired. Goodnight."

Again Claire tried to step away, but as before, her mother's words stopped her as surely as if a door had closed in front of her.

"You look lovely, dear. Have you been to the Café?"

Claire remained frozen in the doorway, her back still to her mother. "Yes," came out through lips that tightened behind the word. What followed was an uncomfortable and prolonged silence.

"And?" Estelle questioned as she continued working.

"And WHAT?" Claire exploded as she spun and faced her mother with both teeth and fists clenched.

"How did it go?" Estelle asked in a gentle voice, trying to diffuse her daughter's growing anger.

"If you mean did I screw any Nazis, the answer is no!"

Estelle dropped her mending into her lap and looked at her daughter with sorrowful eyes. "Claire. Why do you say such things?"

"Me? Why do you want me to give myself to the same sons of bitches who are destroying France?"

"I never said that."

"Well that's what Monique does, and you treat her like she's an angel!"

"Your sister does what she can for the Resistance."

"The Resistance? What do you know of the Resistance? A silly housewife who mends the enemy's clothes for pennies." Claire swiped at a neat pile of German

uniforms and sent them sprawling across the table and onto the floor. "I'm no seamstress to the bastards! And I'm not their whore! I'm a soldier!"

Claire wheeled back to the living room, but Estelle was hot on her heels. "Yes. Yes you are, Claire, but dresses are better than guns. Safer."

"No! I'll never cater to the Germans!" Claire shouted as she vaulted up the stairs.

"Wait!"

"Or bow down and mend the same uniforms that kill French! Not now, NOT EVER!" She slammed the bedroom door to emphasize her point.

Estelle stood with one hand on the banister looking up the stairs, but she knew Claire would not come out again tonight. Another moment passed before Estelle let her hand and hopes slip away from the railing. She walked slowly back to her work in the kitchen while the furrows in her brow deepened.

The sole light greeted her and reminded her of Claire's outburst as it shone on the clothes scattered across the table and the floor. She bent down on aging knees and picked up the grey pieces, folded them neatly, and stacked them on the table. Then, as before, she took up her place at the table and drove her needle deep into the grey flesh of the German uniforms.

Upstairs Sean had stumbled from his bed, disturbed by Claire's shouts. His hair was wild and his eyes sleepy around a face that still bore pink wrinkles left by a pillow crunched up around his head. The flannel pajamas he wore were well faded, threadbare in spots, and slightly askew on his thin frame. He paused at Claire's bedroom door and cocked an old ear against it as he tapped softly.

"Go away!" Claire answered sharply to the knocking.

"It's Papa."

The door opened immediately. "I'm sorry, Papa," Claire said. "I guess I got a little loud."

"Aye, ya did. Ya did," he said, the accent as thick as molasses.

"But Papa, she doesn't understand. She doesn't know the Resistance. What it means to me to fight!"

Claire gave way to her room now, and her father followed.

"Oh, I don't know," Sean said in a voice that still carried a sleepy gravel.

"She doesn't! She sits around here and actually stitches the holes in their uniforms so they can put them on again to kill us. Why?"

"Your mother's a fine woman, honey."

"She fixes their uniforms, Papa!"

"Aye, but there are reasons."

"No, Papa! Nothing is worth that. Do we need the money so badly that we have to sell our dignity? Sell it for pennies?"

"Of course no, but still in all, everybody must do that which they can. Do you understand, me little girl?" Sean ran his gnarled fingers through Claire's hair and pushed it back from her face.

She sensed that her father was attempting to lessen the gap in the house, and she wasn't prepared, fresh from the fight with her mother, to allow it. There was a way to turn her father and she knew it. And she wasn't above salting his wound a little in order to stem the tide she felt was turning against her.

"She wants me to...to do things...with Germans. Like Monique does."

The change was immediate and profound. Sean looked above his daughter's head as if reading a message on the ceiling. He sighed deeply and licked his teeth behind his lips then flexed his jaw as if testing it, readying it for a blow. He began to nod his head, slowly at first, but faster as his face reddened.

"I know," he whispered as he turned away and moved toward the door. He stopped at the hallway and ran a hand over the dark wood of the door casing. "Claire, ya mind your father here now. Ya stick...to...your...guns...Stick to your guns. Take that in all the ways ya want. Ya hear me, girl?"

"Yes, sir."

"Don't be givin' in t'them for no reason ner nobody."

"I understand," Claire said, glowing inside from the victory.

"I'll tend to your mother," Sean said as he turned and reentered the room. "And ya might as well be forgettin' 'bout your sister. She's got 'er mind set in a bad way. God will deal with 'er in His own good time fer the things she's done."

"Yes, Papa."

Sean kissed her forehead tenderly and patted both her shoulders at once. "Now ya better get to sleep. Tomorrow there's more rocks to be pitchin', aren't there now?"

Claire smiled at the memory and nodded like a child. Her father smiled with her and left the room without another word.

Alone again, but feeling like a real soldier once more, Claire closed the door behind her father and slipped out of the dress. She reached for a hanger from the closet but caught herself. Instead she tossed the dress on the bed, sat down beside it, and roughly began taking off the silk stockings Monique had given her. Purposely or otherwise, the stockings had several runs by the time Claire pulled them off. She wadded the stockings and the dress together in a ball and threw the mess into the corner of her room on the wings of a vow not to wear a dress again until all the Germans had been driven from France or preferably killed.

For now, one of those Claire wished to eradicate was dancing slowly with her sister under subdued lights. The brass in the band had muted their horns and the drummer used his softest brushes. Pieter held Monique as tight as he dared, and she responded by nestling her carefully painted face into his shoulder. When the song ended the couple applauded politely with the rest of the dancers.

Again they weaved through the crowd retracing their steps to the table. He stayed in character and eased Monique's chair out. She caressed the back of the chair slightly then picked her purse up from the table as she spoke.

"Would you excuse me a moment?"

"Of course." Pieter paused then touched Monique's arm. "Is everything alright?"

She smiled disarmingly and leaned toward him as she whispered. "I have to powder my nose."

Pieter smiled, a bit embarrassed, and Monique slipped off through the crowd. He settled in his chair and tapped and tightened a pack of cigarettes against the back of his hand.

The ladies' room was three-quarters full of primping, gossiping women. Giggles mixed with hard glances at the hair and dresses of the competition. Monique passed by it all and was pleased to find an empty stall. She entered it quickly, not unlike the others, but once inside she fumbled through her purse for her pen. She held the pen in her mouth and continued to rummage for a scrap of paper. In her hurry, a lipstick case fell to the floor drawing the attention of several women outside. She hesitated and grimaced at her clumsiness then bent quietly and picked up the offending piece. Outside, the gathered women paused only briefly, exchanged nondescript looks, and returned to their bantering amid rushed adjustments to their makeup.

She placed the paper on the stall door and held it firmly while she printed hurriedly but as neatly as possible: *Troop Transport - Clovington Turnpike - Tomorrow Night - Heading to Coast*. She returned the pen to her teeth as she quickly folded the note. Then she stopped, unfolded the paper, and put it up against the stall door again. Her pen hesitated over the note then wrote another word: *Invasion?* Monique watched the word for a moment as if it might reveal something, having been set out in the open, but it did not. So the pen went back to the purse and the note was folded over the word and tucked in her bra.

Then she froze, except her hands. She stared at the unusual quiver in the delicate fingers with the painted nails. She had done this a hundred times, a thousand. There hadn't been this nervousness for years. Women took forever in the bathroom. Everyone knew that. There was no need to rush. And yet here she was blasting through her purse for a paper, dropping things, and scribbling as though time were about to expire on an examination. She took a deep breath, still staring at her hands.

"Calm down, you idiot!" she whispered to her palms as she turned her hands over and back, but they didn't answer. She filled her lungs again and let the breath escape slowly.

"Okay. Okay. Slowly. Move slowly. Move slowly and think quickly. That is the key. Move slowly. Think quickly."

Monique tugged and brushed at her dress to straighten it, flushed the unused toilet, then opened the stall door. The bathroom was as full as before, but the faces had changed. Few took notice of the lovely lady in the maroon dress as she dabbed at the lipstick in the corner of her mouth with her little finger. She cocked her head from one side to the other checking her look, ran her fingers through her hair as if they were a comb and as if it changed anything, then headed away from the brightly lit vanities into the darkened club.

Once outside the confines of the ladies' room Monique positioned herself to see Pieter from a vantage point where he could not do likewise. From across the club, she watched for a moment as he sipped his drink and flicked the ashes from his cigarette. Finding him occupied, Monique shifted her attention to locating Sophie. The crowd was lighter in the rear of the club, and she moved easily but a bus boy was busily clearing Sophie's table as Monique walked up.

"Excuse me," she asked. "Where's the lady who was sitting here?"

"Gone," the boy said as he continued clearing glasses and wiping the table. "Walked out with a captain about five minutes ago. Didn't stay long enough to finish their drinks."

Lost in a thought that centered on the notion that she would have given her message to Sophie, Monique cupped the unbuttoned neckline of her dress and touched the note. The information could not wait. Preparations needed to be made and quickly. She would have to use another avenue to the Resistance tonight. There was another moment's hesitation at the empty table which allowed a second thought to arise in her mind, then she returned to her major.

As she moved back to the table her fluid movement through the crowd caught Pieter's eye. He wasn't alone. Other men watched in envy, not unlike like Pieter himself, each dreaming, with the help of their liquor, of falling in bed, in love, with such a woman.

"Miss me?" she said as Pieter helped her with her chair once more.

"I'd be a fool not to."

"You are the charmer, aren't you?"

"You make it easy."

"What I have to say next may change all that."

"Oh?"

"Not to worry," she said playfully. "I've had a wonderful time."

"That's good to hear."

"It's just that I have to be going."

Pieter checked his watch. "It's still relatively early. Are you sure everything's alright? If I've done something..."

"Oh, heaven's no. It's been a lovely evening, but I do have to work tomorrow. And as I remember, so do you."

"I'm hoping to remedy that."

"I'm hoping so as well, but for now I'm afraid I'll have to say goodnight."

Monique stood abruptly which snapped Pieter to his feet just as quickly. From a distance one might have thought an argument had ensued save for the pleasant smile on Monique's face as she extended her hand. "Perhaps tomorrow then?"

He took the offered hand graciously. "Allow me to see you home."

"That won't be necessary."

"But I insist. It wouldn't be proper to abandon such a beautiful lady to the streets after she's graced me for so long."

"I only live a few blocks. I'll be fine, but thank you."

"I'm afraid you'll have to let me," Pieter continued, oblivious to Monique's growing anxiousness. "If not I'm certain to follow you."

This conversation was no longer cute. Being followed was very serious to someone who worked as Monique did. Even Pieter's words, meant to be playful and charming, struck a harsh chord that made Monique's stomach tighten.

"You'd follow me?" Monique asked in disbelief.

"I'm afraid so."

Monique could only stare at the moonstruck major who smiled like a mischievous little boy.

"Well, you needn't," she said. "But it doesn't appear as if I can stop you."

"If it would make you more comfortable I'll walk a half block behind."

A nervous laugh escaped Monique's throat, but Pieter, so overcome with her, failed to sense it.

They went for their coats with his hand barely touching the small of her back as part guidance and part attachment, demonstrating to the rest of the men in the club that she was with him. Though none could know with certainty if he would make love to her that night, in the walk across the club Pieter projected the air that she was his girl and that sex was a given. None need know that the couple had just met.

For her part, Monique felt the touch on her back and the stare at the curve of her hips. She didn't exaggerate the sway though, as easy as it would have been to torment both Pieter and the others. What sway existed was natural, subtle, and extremely erotic all on its own and Monique knew it.

As expected, Pieter retrieved her coat and assisted her with it, continuing the assumed role of gallant gentleman. She tightened the belt on the light coat and walked ahead of her escort through the door of the club and into the streets.

"Which way is home?" he asked.

She pointed. "Rue la Blanc."

"Shall we?" Pieter said as he took up his position on the street side of Monique and offered his arm. She slipped her hand comfortably through his arm, and the couple stepped away from the busy foot traffic of the café. In moments the bright lights began to fade, taking with them the noise and bustle that defined the club.

The cool early summer air was refreshing, as it always was when she exited the club after a night of dance. On so many evenings the air plucked at her cheeks and drove away any romantic notions that had begun to take root on the dance floor or over the rim of a wineglass. The freshness of the night air had often served to remind her of the assignment that had brought her to this hunting ground in the first place. Tonight the breeze was just as fresh, but Monique resisted the call to wake up from the dream that was taking hold of her, compliments of Pieter.

He was a delight, not pretentious or arrogant. Neither stupidly suave or cold. He was charming, witty, handsome, and fun. And, she thought, vulnerable in a way that asked her not to play her hand to the strong suit. In his words and mannerisms, the inflection of his voice, Monique gained a sense that this was a man out of step with his work but pleasantly in time with the beat of her lonely heart. She knew all too well she had to maintain an inner distance from Pieter, but he was making it difficult.

They walked along enjoying the refreshing silence of the quiet street. Words came easily to both and soon brushed away the uneasiness that had overcome Monique in the club. Talk of childhood, of family and friendships, of travel and places seen and places yet to be seen, snippets of the good and the bad, spilled from each with an ease neither had known before. Pieter spoke in a voice as soft as the summer evening breeze. The bearing and confidence that had served him thus far in his life had little use for volume or verbosity. He felt no need to impress this woman with tales of triumph in an attempt to bed her. Instead, he related stories from his days growing up on assorted military bases throughout Germany, while she countered with tales from her past and dreams for her future. Commingled throughout the seamless conversation were reassuring squeezes on a carried arm or a leaning shoulder. Recounted stories that still carried unsettling memories were complemented by

comforting assurance. Other remembrances, happy ones, ended with shared laughter. Each story and each smile ended as another brick in a rapidly growing foundation of an intimate friendship.

Streets and blocks passed effortlessly beneath the couple's feet. Their talk continued, having long ago moved away from the sparring flirting that had begun at the café table. But as quickly as the anxiousness had taken her back at the club, it returned. Monique took her arm from Pieter's and thrust her hands deep in her pockets.

"Cold?" Pieter asked tenderly.

"A bit." The answer was a lie. In truth, Monique realized that she had just listened to herself reveal far more about her life in the last half hour than she ever should have. She had walked these streets countless times before on the arms of ranking Germans and had never said more than a few words that were true. Normally she listened, which was the plan — her job as it were. When she was forced into an answer they were routinely vague and shallow. She was, for the purposes of the mission, bright and articulate only enough to be alluring. Certainly most occasions required little of either as she let her hips and curves work their magic well in advance of the need for conversation, but the chance encounter with Pieter had been different from the onset. Business had been somehow relegated to the background and rather quickly so. Traversing this new ground felt foreign. It had been years since a walk in the dark and pleasant conversation had fanned flames in her heart. And still she caught her tongue, hoping it wasn't too late but also cradling a second hope that somehow the exchange with Pieter would continue as it had.

Pieter slipped his arm around her shoulders and squeezed tightly to ward off the fictitious chill. "Does that help?"

She couldn't help but smile. "Some."

A more comfortable quiet enveloped them until they reached the street corner that held the safe house. With no visible hesitation Monique turned up the sidewalk. Pieter fell away from her shoulder and looked up at the street sign.

"I think we go straight, Monique. Rue la Blanc. Correct?"

She didn't stop moving, only turned and began playfully walking backward. "Pieter, can't you tell when a girl wants the night to last a little longer?"

He immediately stepped in her direction, pleasantly surprised. "But the girl I left the club with had to get home."

"Don't tell me you've never heard of a woman's prerogative?"

Monique was still backing up the street as Pieter threw up his hands, smiled at the game, and followed. When he overtook her, she turned into him and slipped her arm back through his.

The safe house was fast approaching on her left. There was the slightest of plans afoot in her mind, but it was clouded by Pieter. As before, an abnormal feeling near anxiousness but rooted far from fear, coursed through her. She had entertained so many Germans in so many circumstances and had gathered and passed information so smoothly that few opportunities slipped away. Even now she knew there was a way to notify the Movement with relative ease, but she advised herself that doing so with Pieter in tow might not be wise. And still there was a gentle tug deep within her that

whispered that all would be well. Perhaps it said other things before and after, but Monique didn't hear them. She wanted, needed, to do her job, but she also didn't want the night with this powerful yet endearing soft-spoken warrior who seemed to possess a poet's touch to end. There was no time for more deliberation as the safe house was alongside. If Pieter had felt her pounding heart he might have deemed himself the cause, and of course he was, but not in the way he would have considered.

Monique stopped immediately in front of the safe house stoop and tugged through her dress at the top of her hosiery. "All that dancing has given this stocking a mind of its own," she said over a smile as she put her foot on the first step of the safe house stairs. Hidden on the riser beneath her high-heeled shoe was the small vent.

She pulled the hem of her dress above her knee to access the supposedly troublesome stocking that in truth was fine.

Pieter stared at her exposed thigh and felt a surge common to men in such situations race through him.

Having set the hook with her leg, Monique stared back at the gaping major.

"Pieter?"

"Hmm?" he said as though startled from daydream.

"Would you mind?" Monique asked as she twirled her finger, requesting he turn around.

"Oh! Of course, of course."

Pieter followed directions and gave Monique his back so she could attend to the stocking with some degree of privacy. Much to his delight he immediately discovered that he could see Monique's broken reflection fairly well if he pieced them together from window panes across the street. There was a moment's hesitation as valor wrestled with voyeurism, but the battle was soon lost to more self-indulgent interests. Pieter settled in comfortably to watch the show.

Monique was tensely watching his back, attempting to insure that he remained facing away. Her interest in his back was such that she failed to notice that she was being watched even more intently. With her eyes glued to Pieter, and his clandestinely to her, Monique stepped down from the safe house and reached into her bra for the note she had written in the club's bathroom. In one fluid movement, she squatted, slipped the note into the vent on the step's riser, and stood again, replacing her foot on the same step. As before, she hiked up the hem of her dress, but its allure had been vanquished. Pieter's interest had shifted miles beyond the measure of her silky thigh.

Below the steps of the safe house, safely tucked away in the corner of the basement, Renault, Michel, Paul, Jon, and Natei were leaning over a battered table. As they scoured maps and a few aerial reconnaissance photographs, Monique's note tumbled from a delivery tube onto their pile of ragged papers. As one, all the men slowly turned their faces toward the ceiling.

"Alright, Pieter," Monique said almost proudly, having seemingly carried off her delivery. Pieter, however, did not move. He remained transfixed by the reflection in the window and the flashing memory of what he had seen there.

"Pieter? You may turn around now," Monique offered again, this time nearing a question.

Pieter dropped his eyes from the girl in the glass and turned ever so slowly hoping somehow that when he had done so, a trick played by the reflecting image and the dim light would be revealed. But that would not happen. The stunned major brought his eyes up to Monique's face, easily ignoring the teasing thigh. When Monique had recaptured his attention she dropped her hem and brushed it flat as she stepped down from the riser.

"Shall we go?"

Pieter neither answered nor moved. He stood in continued shocked silence waiting for the dream, now perhaps a nightmare, to be over and show itself as something other than what he feared it was. He searched her face for a sign, an answer, or an explanation, but was only rewarded with her usual smile. Even so, it was enough to sway him, and in his consciousness he felt the sight of Monique bending low to the vent, pushing in the note, being itself pushed back in his mind. She disarmed him so. In her smile there was no hint of larceny or treason. And Pieter believed the smile. Slowly he extended his arm for her.

With her arm slipped delicately through his they stepped away from the safe house as if they had indeed only stopped to adjust a stocking. But the ease that had permeated the conversation of the major a block ago only a minute before had vanished. In its stead was a silence born out of rapid but deep thought, confusion, and a seasoning of distrust and anger.

Back in the lower reaches of the safe house the note that had caused Pieter's dismay was being examined while a short wave radio in the corner of the room hummed. Renault, the most senior man present, held the note in both hands. He was a short thick man now in his fifties with an increase in wrinkles around his eyes brought on by the last four years of occupation coupled with years assembling the Resistance while the German war machine assembled nearby. He was made an inch or so taller by the dark blue beret, a trademark which rode high on his head. Irrespective of his height, there was real power in him. Renault said what he meant and meant what he said and was mean enough to say it when need be. His thick arms in his oft-worn blue and white striped shirt cradled Monique's paper as he read it to himself.

Below Renault's hands lay several maps of the surrounding area, some of which were hand drawn and others of French or German design. Most were in various stages of decay. All the German maps, stolen or recovered as booty from raided convoys, were covered in handwritten French notes, corrections to improper locations and highways. These roads, so familiar to Renault, Michel, and the others, had once carried them to school and to the arms of their lovers. The war had evoked so many changes that the lessons at the end of the roads were much different now, much harsher, and the consequences far more reaching. And the lovers that traveled these roads now often followed hearses, laying precious hearts and bodies to rest under ground that seemed unable to find that same peace and stillness.

When Renault finished reading he set the paper aside and began rustling through the maps. "Where's the Clovington Turnpike?"

Without speaking Paul pointed out a spot on a map with a well-scarred muscled hand. Natei, proudly standing near the vicious fighter, spoke for him though it was not necessary. "It runs to the coast."

Renault's voice was distant. He did not appear to be referring to either Paul or Natei. "I think you may be right," he said softly. "I think you may be right..."

Michel exchanged looks with the other men as though Renault was questioning the obviousness of Natei's comment. "Who's right?" he asked.

"Our messenger," Renault answered without looking up from his search.

Michel scanned the pile of papers on the table and picked up the note. He read it quickly then handed it to Paul, who scarcely glanced at it before dropping it on the maps. Jon snapped it up and read each word with Natei looking over his shoulder, studying as though he was privy to something unusual, as indeed he was. While Jon and Natei read, Michel questioned Renault.

"An invasion?" Michel said almost with a chuckle. "Do you think it's time?"

"Apparently the Germans think so and that's what matters."

Suddenly more serious, Michel snatched the note from Jon and held it out to Renault. "How do we know this information is good?"

"It's good," Renault replied, still not looking up from his study of the maps.

Unable to garner Renault's attention, Michel looked again at the note. "Looks like a woman's handwriting to me. I don't think we should rely too heavily on it." Michel looked to the others for support. Jon shrugged his shoulders to Michel's unasked question and was mirrored by Natei, who then simply stared at the paper. Paul ignored Michel completely and continued studying the maps with his mentor.

Renault let Michel's words hang for a moment then disappear entirely from the air before he spoke. "The information is solid," Renault said with no urgency.

"Yes, but," Michel said as he began to pace around the table, waving the note as if trying to rally the others in the room, "this may be the whimsey of a woman. It may—"

"Leave it alone, Michel." Renault cut him off with a tone that was just beginning to show a hint of impatience. "We've got a great deal of work to do." He pointed out a route to Paul that intersected the Clovington Turnpike. "Here, Paul. I know this spot. We lay charges in the road, here and here, just where they slow for the turn. The terrain is steep on both sides of the road. Have your snipers and machine-gunners on these banks. On either side of the road. Jon, you and Natei mine the road before the curve. Lay the trip wires along the ditches. When the charges are touched off we—"

"Do you know who sent this?" Michel interrupted as he halted his pacing with a snap of the note out toward Renault.

For the first time since the inquiry began, Renault raised his eyes from his work. There was a long pause as he stared intently at Michel, carefully gauging both the young fighter and his own answer. "I may," he said slowly.

"Who is it?"

The question was so sharp it caused Paul to uncharacteristically tighten his eyebrows in concern.

For his short time at his country's work, Natei did not know enough to be surprised. Jon, however, felt his mouth suddenly hang open in shock.

"Why?" Renault said in his same guarded voice as he moved away from the maps and around the table to Michel.

"I'm curious about the person you are so quick to trust."

"You ask too many questions, Michel."

The two men were now face to face. Michel was looking down at Renault, and his voice was full of resolve. "We have limited resources. You know that, Renault. I think we should be very careful how they're deployed. We cannot afford to—"

"Is that it? Is that what you're concerned with? Resources? Numbers? Counting bullets?"

"I think—"

"Or is it possible, let's say, that you are more interested in names than in numbers? Perhaps for the Gestapo even, eh, Michel?"

"That's ridiculous!"

"Is it?"

"It certainly is."

"Says you."

"Don't turn this on me, Renault. All I'm saying is that we can ill afford to invest our time, energy, and resources in the pursuit of Germans who may or may not even be moving as this mysterious writer suggests. We can't jump every time some woman takes it into her head that she's somehow suddenly become privy to information about the Third Reich that our regular intelligence has been unable to gather."

Renault snatched the note from Michel's hand and glanced at it. "What makes you think this is not from our regular intelligence?"

"Because it's a woman's handwriting."

"So?"

"I know the intelligence members in this city, and they are men."

"How do you know them?"

"Renault," Michel said, "I've been with the Movement from the beginning."

"As have I."

"Then you must know—"

"I know nothing! And I know nothing because I CHOOSE to know nothing! And what I have known, I have also forgotten!"

"I am not blind, Renault! And neither are you! We can only do so much. We're running low on virtually every munitions we once had in abundance. I want to know our sources — judge their reliability — so we can determine where best to invest what little we have."

"Those are not your decisions. You do as you are told. Same as me. What is important and what we can afford to do will be determined by Charlemagne and the directors."

"Yes. Yes. But if we can filter out the whims of—"

Renault waved the note. "This is not a whim."

"Perhaps."

"Trust me, Michel."

"Trust you? Then you trust me. Who dropped the note?"

Renault looked at the message again, fondling it with both hands. His eyes drifted up slowly and searched out Paul, Jon, and Natei, pausing on each before he suddenly broke his gaze away and returned to the maps. He placed the note on the edge of the table and began tracing the route of the German convoy. He did not look up as he spoke. "Paul? You and Jon. If Michel asks any more questions...kill him."

"Yes, sir," Paul answered immediately as he looked with frozen eyes at Michel.

"Jon? Did you hear me?"

Jon looked from Renault to Michel and back again.

Renault's voice rose. His face was reddening as he looked up from the table. "Jon! If he asks any more questions, kill him! Do you understand?"

Again, Jon did not answer directly. His feet began to shuffle beneath him, and he looked at the floor. Natei stood helplessly frozen.

"You can't be serious," Michel said, thereby saving Jon from Renault's glare.

Renault slammed both fists down hard. The table, and Natei, jumped. "GODDAMN IT!" Renault screamed as the veins in his neck bulged to near bursting. "I am deadly serious! And for me, too! If I ever ask too many questions, kill me! Do you hear, Paul? Michel? Kill me!"

Renault took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a few seconds. When he opened them again, he scanned the faces of the men under his command.

"Boys. The Nazis are masters at covert infiltration — spies. We can not, I repeat, can not, be too careful. If one should turn it will mean the gallows for all. And our families besides." He paused again and once more took a breath meant to relax both him and those nearby. "For now," he continued, "we are forced to trust one another." He picked up Monique's message one more time. "I'll send off a memo to Charlemagne on this. Jon, prepare an inventory of what explosives you have remaining. Natei, see what we have for vehicles to get our people out to Clovington. Paul, check the small arms. Then all of you get some sleep. Tomorrow may be a long day."

Natei looked at his watch then to Renault. "It is already tomorrow."

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