



ALL THE LIGHTS ABOVE US

A novel

**"Genius...this novel should
be required reading."**

**—HEATHER MORRIS,
#1 *New York Times* bestselling author
of *The Tattooist of Auschwitz***

M. B. HENRY

All the Lights Above Us

《 *A novel inspired by the women of D-Day* 》

M. B. Henry



alcove
press

OceanofPDF.com

This book is dedicated to all participants, in and out of uniform, home and abroad, of the Mighty Endeavor on June 6, 1944. It's their story. I'm just the typist.

OceanofPDF.com

VISION OF INVASION

OceanofPDF.com

Mildred

**BERLIN
MAY 1944**

The scratch of a record player startled Mildred, causing her to drop her pen on the polished coffee table. Ink smeared across the stack of papers that had fresh writing on every page.

She leaned back and rubbed her temple, fumbling for a pack of cigarettes. Considering the hard times ensnaring Germany, her apartment boasted luxurious furniture: plush couches, oriental rugs, a few decanters of French cognac. Mildred got a lot of it from the black market. Because unlike most, she could afford it.

She took a long inhale of smoke to clear her mind, then crossed her bare legs. Everyone always admired her legs. The rest of her wasn't so bad either, especially in her trademark black skirts and heels.

The horrid screeching of the record player faded into the song "Lili Marlene." Mildred snapped her head up and glared at Max, still fussing with the record. "You're incorrigible."

Max Otto Koischwitz, a handsome, older German man in an immaculate suit that made him look crisp, grinned at her. Not a single strand of his silver hair was out of place. He picked up her decanter, leaned over the coffee table, and topped off her glass.

"The theme song of my star radio personality grates on her nerves?"

"Of course it does."

"And the play?" He tapped the stack of papers. "What do you think?"

Mildred spread them out. “It reads well to me. You want me to play the mother? Evelyn?”

“I do, my sweet.” Max sat down beside her. His latest radio play told the story of a bloody, violent amphibious invasion gone badly wrong. Mildred’s role, a psychic mother named Evelyn who tries to save her shipwrecked soldier son, wasn’t even the starring one. Flurries of gunfire, dead bodies, and screaming people. A play unlike any Max had ever penned.

Perhaps that’s what spawned Mildred’s worsening headache. Too much had happened in the last few years, not just to him, but to them both.

Then, of course, there was the pending invasion. The constant talk of the dreaded second front, the spearhead to Hitler’s center. No one knew where or when it would happen, but it would happen. That much was certain, and it was all Berlin discussed. Everyone at the radio station constantly spoke of it, even the head of Nazi propaganda himself, Joseph Goebbels.

More than anyone else, Mildred worried about the coming invasion. Her own countrymen would be the ones storming those beaches. Boys from her old American homeland would soon upend her new one. She tried not to let that bother her too much. She’d chosen her side a long time ago and she wasn’t ashamed. She may have been born in America, but her destiny had forever linked her to Max. Wherever he was, she would be there too.

For now, that was Berlin. She was an employee at the Reichs-Rundfunk-Gesellschaft German radio, the RRG, along with Max. He wrote her plays and radio segments, and she read them into the microphone, broadcasting her voice all over the Reich. In a week or so, she would read this latest radio play, one that sounded an awful lot like propaganda.

Mildred hated the word “propaganda.” She carefully avoided it when she described her job. Oh sure, she said some pretty nasty things into that microphone. She slammed the Allies. She railed against the Jews just like everyone else. And she did it all with a smile. Politics wasn’t her business. The Jewish troubles didn’t involve her. She was a radio actress, a famous one at that. The Germans paid her a lot of money to read whatever words were put in front of her, more money than she had ever made in America.

It wasn’t like it was treason. Not the way Mildred looked at it. She didn’t give away troop positions or spout Army secrets. She had never put

any American lives in danger. That's what Mildred always told herself, the lullaby she sang every night to go to sleep.

I'm just an actress.

It's not propaganda.

It's just my job.

She turned to Max and her headache melted a little. The radio station had also given her this man she loved so much. She would do anything for him, follow him anywhere, even into hell. In many ways, she already had.

He ran a hand up the silky stockings that covered her legs—another luxury many German women had to do without. “Shall we go over some of your lines?”

She welcomed his hand as it grazed her inner thigh. “Not with your hand up my skirt.”

He kissed her behind her ear. “Axis Sally, you're no fun anymore.”

Mildred couldn't hide the smirk creeping across her lips.

Axis Sally ... Another gift from the radio station. She'd worked for fame all her life, and now, at long last, she was somebody. Thousands of Wehrmacht soldiers and GIs in war-battered Italy tuned in to her show every evening. With a hint of reverence in their voices, they called her things like “Axis Sally” and “my gal Sal.” Some of the wittier GIs dubbed her “the Berlin Bitch.”

Offensive perhaps, but to Mildred Gillars, fame was fame, be it insults or praise. She had what she wanted. She had a promising career in entertainment (*not* propaganda). She had renown, money, and Max on top of it.

His hand moved gently up her thigh, right to the top of her stocking. She struggled to focus, reading her opening line off the first page. “*Everyone knows that the invasion is suicide. Even the simplest person knows that.*” She read it again, this time in a more dramatic tone. It sounded dreadful.

“It won't be just empty dialogue, Midge,” Max said. “I'm going to fill in the background with battle noises. Gunfire, tanks, artillery, and screaming.”

Mildred read more. “*We could have done a lot about it. Have we got a government by the people or not? Roosevelt had no right to go to war.*”

That line gave her a chill. It was unveiled slander against the president of United States. Max usually kept criticism of her country more subtle, to protect her if nothing else.

Max inched his hand higher. Then higher. “Midge.” There was something in his voice. Something conflicting with his flirtatious hand.

Mildred’s eyes flicked to his.

Indeed, his demeanor had shifted. He looked worn, the playfulness was gone. “Do you ever regret it?” he said.

“What?”

“America. I mean, I’ve been indicted over there.”

“You were born in Germany. What business does the U.S. have indicting you?”

“Born here, yes, but a citizen there too. I lived and taught in New York for years. So yes, they’ve indicted me. And if the invasion does succeed ...”

Fear shot through her. “It won’t.”

“Well ... you could be next, you know.”

“What have they got against me? I’m a radio personality. Nothing more.”

He rolled his eyes. “Oh, Midge. Don’t be so naïve.”

“I’m an American with a home and a job in Germany. That’s not a crime, Max.”

“Whatever helps you sleep, my dear.”

Mildred’s eyes sharpened. “The consulate seized my passport, just because I told them I work at RRG. What would they have me do without my passport? Walk penniless through the streets and beg for food from Nazis? I needed a job and I have one. That’s all.”

“And the slander? The Jew baiting?”

“Just words.”

“Midge, it’s the German agenda. The Nazi agenda. It’s prop—”

She clamped her hand over his mouth. “I’ve never said anything that would hurt those boys.”

“But you’re okay with hurting everyone else?”

Mildred turned back to the play. She held the title page in her hands. *Vision of Invasion*. Max had written it to sway the Americans away from

going through with the invasion. He spared no details. He described the seventy to ninety percent casualties of the soldiers who dared to attack Hitler's troops. The dead bodies like "roasted geese" and "heads of cabbage" on the beaches. The sinking ships and bloodied beaches. He called the invasion suicide. *D of D-Day stands for Doom and Disaster, Death and Defeat.*

A knot tightened in her chest. This kind of writing did smack of the "P" word she tried so hard to avoid. Reading it aloud, to thousands of listeners, could make the difference between wayward citizen and treasonous defector.

Max smashed his cigarette into the ashtray, then rubbed his tired eyes. "Sometimes these walls feel a bit close, don't they?"

Mildred tossed back the dregs from her glass. Max's words echoed in her head along with the last lines of "Lili Marlene."

"You could be next ..."

She shuffled the papers on the coffee table into a tidy pile. Despite the dicey language, she would read it on the radio. She would do what she had to, just as both of them had for so long.

For both their sakes, it was time to sing that lullaby again.

"I think it might help the Americans. The play."

He lifted his gaze to hers. "Is that so?"

Mildred put her hand on his knee with a wink. To hide her own fear, she needed to pull off the hardest acting performance of her life. "We both know the invasion will fail. Germany is too strong. There's no reason to send those boys through the meat grinder, is there?" She gathered the papers into a neat stack and held it out to him. "You're *warning* them, Max. Trying to talk some sense into them. Saving lives, or at least attempting to. What's traitorous about that?"

Max grinned, ran his hand back up her thigh, and this time it didn't stop. He attacked her neck with his lips and pressed her down on the couch.

The record player scratched again, but Mildred ignored it. She tried to focus on the passion of the moment. But her headache lingered, even with Max making love to her with fervor. Her body felt heavy. She was afraid of

everything to come—and even more afraid of showing it. Especially in a place where “defeatist talk” could be the end of her.

OceanofPDF.com

Theda

PORTSMOUTH, ENGLAND JUNE 1, 1944

Theda Brown had never seen such a ruckus. The noise echoed down the coastline. Men spilling from tanks, marching in columns, and roaring past in fully armed vehicles. All of them headed for their loading positions.

The battle to come wasn't much of a secret. At least not in Portsmouth, a busy little port town just off the English Channel. Soldiers and stockpiles for the pending invasion of France had been building around here for months. British soldiers by the thousands were buttoned up into hastily built barracks near the port. Supplies of all kinds were stacked in all the dockyards, tanks and vehicles parked in every alleyway. Hordes of ships in each harbor slip. Enough planes had been amassed to blacken the skies of Europe. Sometimes on her daily walks, Theda stumbled upon troops of combat-clad soldiers prowling about the countryside on practice maneuvers.

This morning's activities suggested this was no drill. The clouds had gathered for the storm, and not just in the overcast, dreary Portsmouth sky.

She turned her head at the sound of giggling behind her. Two fellow nurses at the Voluntary Aid Detachment ("VADs" for short) from the nearby Queen Alexandra Hospital stood around her. One was Carolyn, a twenty-something, pastel-swaddled and stylish-heeled blonde. The other was Sheila, with her lips painted fire-engine red to match her nails. Both girls had lined the backs of their legs with ink to mimic the presence of stockings. They had also pinched their cheeks pink and coated their eyes with makeup.

There was no makeup for Theda, and a plain, polka-dot day dress did just fine. She didn't care about her appearance, outside of looking professional for work. Even though she was twenty-six, and the specter of spinsterhood had learned her name, she had other priorities. She relished the idea of answering only to herself and living her life exactly the way she wanted. With or without a handsome soldier boy of her own.

Besides, the wild soldiers annoyed Theda more than anything, including the ones gathered here today. British infantry, engineers, glider troops, and sailors. Royal Air Force fighter pilots waltzed around with a swagger. Swarms of bodyguards and aides huddled around the four- and five-star generals. Administrative personnel, looking haggard, stood with clipboards. Then there were the medics, marines, divers, cooks, and artillerymen. Every rank and file, young and old, man and boy. All of them, from all over the world, converged on this one spot.

The men were just one part of the invasion force. There were ships as big as small cities, destroyers armed to the teeth, sleek and deadly submarines, and medical ships with the newest life-saving equipment. There were planes too—bombers, fighters, escorts, and cargo planes.

Then came the supplies. Food, medicine, fresh water, bridge equipment, artillery, armor, weapons, and ammunition. Oh, the ammunition. Stacks of ammunition taller than the cliffs of Dover. Piles of artillery shells that rivaled Mount Olympus. Boxes upon boxes stashed in every corner, with machine guns, mortars, grenades, and rifles.

It was like the hundreds of thousands of English troops, and their anti-Nazi counterparts from all corners of the earth, planned to start a whole new civilization on some hostile, foreign planet. In a way, Theda hoped they would. Hitler's hordes had turned continental Europe into a terrifying and terrible place. Perhaps they really should start over.

Theda rubbed the pale skin on her arms. She knew, deep in her heart, that this was history right in front of her eyes. Win or lose, it was unlikely the world would see anything of this magnitude ever again. If chaos and doom hadn't ensnared half the globe, she might feel lucky to be alive at a time like this, to behold such a spectacle.

She stood firm in the anxious shuffle, while Carolyn and Sheila were all giggles, eating up the catcalls from the rowdy troops. Theda did have to admit the boys looked charming. So young and carefree. So innocent. They sure didn't act like they were about to face a bloody battle and imminent death. In fact, they didn't act much like soldiers. They whistled and winked at the girls. A few even patted some unwitting nurses on the bum.

Forward behavior like that just intimidated Theda. So did Carolyn and Sheila, whom she had grown up with in the countryside outside Portsmouth. Both seemed like naturals around those hell-raising young men. Their dresses perfectly hugged their dainty figures. They knew all the right dance steps and flirtatious words. Boys flocked to them in the pubs and restaurants, while Theda was left to her own devices, wondering why she didn't quite fit in.

The girls, of course, gave her plenty of reasons.

"If you would just dress a little fresher," Sheila had told her more than once. "Those polka dots are a bit tired."

Carolyn agreed. "Your figure could use a little reducing."

"Maybe a little rouge to perk up that pale skin?"

"Perhaps a nice chignon instead of always leaving that dreadful long hair down."

"A little less talk about medicine and work, Theda, and more about music and movies."

And Theda's personal favorite ... "Soldiers don't like bookish girls, Theda. They want girls to have fun."

When it came to the male gender, Theda figured Carolyn and Sheila knew better, and yet she didn't take their advice. She couldn't even if she wanted to. Everything about it felt foolish, even ridiculous. She had never been like the other girls, and she felt restless in cramped little Portsmouth. The urge to escape, to see the world, to travel to exotic places, had welled inside her ever since she was little.

These days, Carolyn and Sheila, and most of the other young women in the nursing circle, just wanted to find a husband. While Theda craved a lifelong career in medicine, they planned to quit after the war and start families. The only full-time job they wanted was motherhood. That they all

had the same dreams, and had the same route planned out for their lives, made Theda feel left out of the club. Like something was wrong with her because she didn't think and dream like them. Oh sure, Carolyn and Sheila were plenty nice to her. Everyone at the hospital was. But they had a way of making her feel like a stranger in her own hometown.

As for the local soldier boys, Theda had long since given up on them too. They seemed much more interested in big busts than big books.

Theda crossed her arms in the chilly breeze and watched the tanks roll by, shaking the ground beneath her. They were brand new, with shiny, white stars painted on the side. Polished guns jutted from their turrets like masts on a ship. Boys in olive and tan uniforms hung from their tops and off the sides. They waved to the gathered nurses and hospital personnel. They whistled at the girls and tossed them coins and goodies from their pockets.

Sheila and Carolyn squealed and waved their delicate hands.

Theda rolled her eyes. "If you girls act like dimwits, that's what you'll attract."

Sheila's face wrinkled to a frown. "Theda Brown, there's enough men here to satisfy every woman in England. Why don't you make a play for one?"

"No, thank you."

Carolyn scowled. "You'll end up an old maid if you aren't careful."

"Promise?"

Sheila's eyes flickered with irritation. That witty streak in Theda annoyed plenty of people. Even the doctors struggled to keep up with her.

Before she could say anything else, the roar of a tank snapped up her attention. As it passed by, Theda caught eyes with a soldier leaning off the hatch. He looked a bit more subdued than the others, more worldly. He took in the crowds, but he didn't cheer and jostle, he didn't poke fun at the girls. There was a hint of deep understanding in those aquamarine eyes.

Eyes just like William's ...

Theda's heart skipped a beat. Her older brother William was living proof that men existed who would love her for who she was, no matter what she chose to do with her life. And it was easy to see her brother in that boy. Because William was another tiny cog in this massive wheel, and today

would actually be his second go at the Germans. Even though his first had nearly destroyed him ...

Theda locked her shaking hands behind her back. The aftermath of Dunkirk wasn't how she cared to remember William. Her charming brother whom she loved so much, who always supported her, and who never seemed afraid of anything ... until he came home from those beaches.

The soldier on the tank called out to her. "Hey! You lass! In the polka dots."

Theda felt her cheeks turn scarlet. "I have a name."

Sheila nudged Theda. "Why don't you tell it to him then?"

Before she could, the soldier reached into his pocket and flung something at Theda, a glinting object that sailed through the air and plinked against the concrete at her feet. She stooped to pick it up and found it was a coin, worth three pence. She turned it in her fingers, admiring the newly minted shine and fresh, bold stamps on it, before looking up at the soldier.

His tank had pulled him too far away to speak to her. So he just flashed her the V for Victory sign, along with a smile. One that again reminded her so much of William and that, to her surprise, wasn't flirtatious or fresh. It was toned down and tired. A smile of surrender to the lot that fate had tossed him, one he knew he couldn't avoid even if he wanted to.

Sheila giggled. "A love memento? Perhaps there's hope for you yet, Theda."

Theda pushed the coin into her pocket and locked her fingers around it. She realized why he had singled her out. It wasn't because of her polka dots. It was because of her stern, serious gaze. He had seen her scars in it. What she had already lost, and what they both knew that tank was steering him toward. Where he was going, no amount of money could save him.

Or William.

Flora

CAEN, FRANCE
JUNE 5, 1944

Thirty-one-year-old Flora Babineaux sat on the floor of a rough flat, in a rough neighborhood, on a rough night, in the city of Caen, just a few miles inland from the Normandy coast. She dressed herself in rough pants and a heavy blouse, one of only two she owned. She preferred to spend her money on cigarettes, which were harder to come by. And getting them off the black market?

Rough.

She took a pull from the cognac bottle by her feet. The static from an illegal crystal radio drifted through the bedroom. Flora's longtime friend Bastien lay on her rickety bed on his stomach, his eyes focused on the primitive network of wire. He pressed an earphone to his ear, straining to pick up a signal as he made adjustments to the dial.

Constructing crude, portable, "foxhole" crystal radios was Bastien's favorite pastime under Nazi rule, most of them made from the simplest materials like coal and wire. It was a dangerous endeavor, since Nazis shot or deported anyone caught with such a device. Bastien tucked his creations into old tins, hollowed-out books, and rotting jewelry boxes, then he distributed them to his fellow French Resistance members on the sly. Although it was difficult to pick up faraway stations, Bastien worked them like a magician.

Yes, Bastien was a clever and good sort of man, but despite his many attempts to charm her over the years, Flora just couldn't think of him as

more than a friend.

Bastien cursed and yanked the earphone from his face. “All I’m getting is that damn Berlin Bitch.” He watched Flora take another long drink. “Easy, Flora. He’ll notice.”

Flora answered with an unfeminine belch. “If Geraud doesn’t want me stealing his liquor, he should hide it better.”

“And what of your looks? You’ll wreck them treating the bottle that way.”

“Like I have any looks to wreck, Bastien.”

This was true. Her sandy hair stayed ratty no matter how many times she brushed it. More freckles than she deserved smothered her dry, coarse skin. And her rough personality didn’t exactly have men beating her door down.

She glanced at a photo on her nearby dresser. She was so much like the portly Frenchman with mirthful eyes. He draped his arm around a tiny woman whose smile lit up the room, even in black and white. In short, two of the best people in the world looked at Flora through that photo. Of course, she was biased, because she did so love her parents.

Bastien watched the pain radiate through her. “Any news?”

Flora plunked the bottle on the wooden floor, which created a loud echo. She flinched. Bastien also froze, locking his eyes on the closed bedroom door.

No footsteps sounded on the stair, and no creaks reverberated in the walls. Nothing stirred. The apartment, and everything around it, remained still.

Bastien let out his breath and glared at her. “Flora, if someone storms in here and sees this radio, they won’t ask questions. They’ll just shoot.”

“Lovely Bastien. Always telling me what to do since childhood.”

“Only trying to keep you safe, since your parents can’t anymore.”

Flora took a determined pull off her cigarette and picked up the photo of her parents. Outside of this photograph, she hadn’t seen those beautiful faces in two years. The Gestapo swooped them up in 1942. No one had seen or heard from them since.

Back then, Caen had been a pleasant place to live, even though her family was among its poorest residents. Things changed when the Nazis rolled through in 1940. They commandeered familiar buildings and posted guards on every corner. They installed curfews and rationing. “Verboten” was their favorite word, and they flung it around frequently. People all over the city disappeared, like ghosts into the shadows. Jews, left-leaning folks, educators, agitators.

With their militant communist leanings, Flora’s parents didn’t take it lying down. After the First World War, they had joined an underground group that printed their own newspaper. When Hitler came to power, they turned their presses to anti-Nazi rhetoric. They worked from the basement of their longtime friend Geraud. In the early days of the occupation, they scratched V for Victory marks all over the city. They whistled “La Marseillaise” on their way to work.

It wasn’t long before the arrests began.

One day, Flora returned from her daily errands to an apartment in shambles. Someone had torn the pictures from the wall, overturned and emptied the drawers, and shattered the dishes. Furniture was smashed to bits. Clothes were strewn everywhere.

Flora dropped her basket of groceries, and her heart went to the floor with it.

Her neighbor, a scraggly woman with a brood of children and no husband, appeared in her doorway. She hissed to get her attention.

“You better get out of here,” the woman said. “The Gestapo came.” Her eyes wandered over the mayhem. “And of course the mess. Those brutes.”

“Where are my parents?”

“Gone. Arrested.”

“But—”

“If I were you, I’d make myself scarce.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re coming back for you.”

That was all Flora needed to hear. She shoved the woman out of her apartment and slammed the door in her face. There was no time to cry. There was nothing she could do.

For now.

Her only chance was to follow the instructions her parents had left in case this happened. She stumbled to the kitchen. She knelt before a peeling wooden cupboard and ripped it open. With a hardy pull, a board popped out from the bottom.

There were some family valuables hidden there. Some extra money, black market goods, and a stack of her father's newspapers. Flora pocketed the money and the cigarettes. Then she pulled out a folded piece of paper and opened it.

A photo of her parents nestled inside, along with a name—"Geraud Moreau." An address was scrawled below it.

Motorcycle engines rumbled just outside her window. Shrill shouts in a German dialect quickly followed. She ran into her bedroom and pulled a handful of clothes from her wardrobe. Then cursed. It was already too late to go out the front door. No matter. They hadn't had time to cover the hidden back entrance.

She scrambled down the hallway and burst out a back door leading to a metal balcony. German boots hammered up the main stairwell. If she wasn't so terrified, she would laugh at their stupidity. They'd do a lot better if they didn't make such a Prussian fuss when they came after somebody. With her clothes bundled in her arms, Flora flew down the rickety staircase and disappeared into the streets of Caen.

It was that easy, just as it should have been. She had practiced it with her parents a dozen times.

That was two years ago. Two years since she last saw her mother, since she heard her father laugh or smelled his cigarette smoke. She struggled to remember the last words they had exchanged. They were too casual for memory, though. Just the usual request to watch her step and don't be gone long.

When she showed up at Geraud's door, she was shaking like a leaf. He gave her a shot of liquor and shuffled her into a back room, where false identity papers and a bed waited for her.

This was the room where Flora sat now. All that time, her tears never stopped flowing.

She wiped off a fresh set of them with the back of her hand.

Bastien sighed.

“What about you? No orders tonight?”

“A bunch of messages came through this morning. I decoded them and gave them to Geraud. He said to lie low until tomorrow.”

“Again?”

Bastien nodded. “So much information on the move these days.” He leveled his eyes at her. “The landings must be close.”

Flora narrowed her eyes at the radio. “Let me listen, why don’t you?”

Bastien, still fiddling with the wires, handed her the headset.

She shoved her hair out of the way, pressing the earphones to her head.

Static shrieked through the headset.

Bastien leaned closer to her. “You getting anything?”

Flora shushed him. Through the crackles of noise, she just made out a whisper of a voice ...

“... Good evening ... This is the BBC reporting ...”

“Oh my God.” Flora rocketed upright. “It’s the BBC. You’ve got it.”

Bastien made some anxious flicks and turns on the radio’s wires. “Now?”

“... the dice are on the carpet. I repeat, the dice are on the carpet.”

Flora jumped to her feet so fast the liquor bottle tipped over, its contents dumping onto the wooden floor.

Bastien also stood up. “What, Flora? What did they say?”

Flora’s breaths came harder and faster. “They said ... They said the dice are on the carpet.”

The color drained from Bastien’s face. “What?”

Flora squeezed the headset so tight against her temple it throbbed. “I swear, Bastien. I swear they said it.”

“... the dice are on the carpet ... The dice are on the carpet ...”

“Shit, they just said it again.” Flora ripped the headset off and tossed it to Bastien. “Listen!”

Bastien dropped the earphones over his floppy ears. He listened for a long moment with wide eyes, but then he shook his head. “Flora, it’s all static. I can’t hear anything.”

“I heard it, Bastien. I swear to God.”

Bastien stared at the radio in shock. “The dice are on the carpet. You know that’s—”

“The code,” Flora said. “It means the invasion is imminent. I’m not stupid.”

“Are you sure that’s what you heard, Flora? Absolutely sure?”

Flora dove onto her mattress and began digging through the covers. “Absolutely. I’ve never been more sure in my life.”

Bastien looked doubtful. “Flora ... I’m still not getting anything.”

“I heard it, goddamn it.” Flora tore apart her bed until she found a cubbyhole she had carved in her box spring. Inside rested a small tin case filled with folded pieces of paper. Messages for other parts of the Resistance network.

Bastien slowly removed the headset and ran nervous fingers through his facial stubble. “Flora, I didn’t hear anything. And my God, if you’re wrong ...”

Flora whirled to face him. “I’m not wrong, Bastien.”

He beckoned to the tin of papers. “And where are you going with those?”

“My orders are Bénouville.”

“You’re activating the Maquisards? Shouldn’t you clear it with Geraud?”

“There isn’t time. We both know what that code means. We have to move.” Flora stuffed the papers in various hiding places on her body. Secret pockets in the hem of her pants, space inside a locket on her necklace, a knothole in the heel of her shoe.

“Flora, slow down a minute here. This is serious. You’re saying you just heard the code words that mean the landings are imminent. The words we’ve all been waiting to hear for months. I didn’t hear anything, and you’ve been drinking. You could just want it so bad that you ...” He trailed off and rubbed his face with his hands.

Flora turned to him with flaming eyes and a fierce face. “Bastien, please. I know what the Resistance thinks of me.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“I may drink sometimes, but I’m not deaf. I know what I heard. Please trust me.”

Bastien sighed. His eyes twinkled just a little, and Flora knew he had to trust her. He didn’t have a choice. Too much would be lost if they delayed even a second. “Alright. What the hell. Let’s move.”

Together, they dashed for the door. The cool night air shocked Flora’s alcohol-thinned blood. Her bicycle sat propped against the building’s corner, and she quickly went to work on the padlock holding it in place. As she did, she noticed they weren’t the only ones on the move. All through her normally quiet block, people were stirring to life. Steps rattled down the metal stairways. A few hissing whispers across air shafts. A dog barked. A light popped on in a window, and then blackout curtains quickly smothered it.

Bastien looked at Flora with a smile. “Alright, Flora. I guess you aren’t the only one who heard something.”

“Well, I told you I’m not deaf. So let’s get a move on, shall we?” She turned to sneer at Bastien, but he had already vanished into the night. Off to play his own role in the fight to come.

A tiny twinge of regret gnawed at her, but she shook her head and shoved her feet down on the bike pedals. She couldn’t focus on that now. It was time. After four long years of waiting ... it was time.

Adelaide

SAINTE-MÈRE-ÉGLISE, FRANCE JUNE 5, 1944

The village of Sainte-Mère-Église looked like it came from a French storybook. The old-fashioned buildings leaned beside homes with charming shutters and lush gardens with shrub roses and climbing hollyhock. Sea breezes from the Normandy coast rippled through cobblestone streets and a picturesque, ancient church steeple watched over the city center. Save for the swastika flags that draped across almost every window, it was an ideal place to live.

Inside a well-to-do townhouse on a quiet street corner, it was dinner time. Candles threw warm, apricot light around the dining room with its faded, floral wallpaper. Chattering soldiers in German uniforms crowded around a polished wooden table. They were young, and much too unruly for the refined surrounding. Their uniforms were pristine, but their bodies were not. Burn scars coated the hands of one. Another was missing an arm. A third had bullet holes in his leg, remnants of the horrible fighting in Russia. No longer fit for the barbaric Eastern theater, the Wehrmacht assigned these broken boys to the less chaotic coastal defense. If the German Army had not run so short on men, they would have been sent home altogether.

In contrast to the boys, their commander, Oberleutnant Henning sat like a statue at the head of the table. Silver patches and officer stripes decked out his strict, field-gray uniform. His eyes were clear, his cheeks pink, but his face always looked haunted. His stare was usually vacant. Sometimes when he ate, his hands trembled.

Regal, elderly Adelaide Paquet entered the dining room with a tray of bread. She was well into her sixties, although some days she felt much older. She tied her fine, silver hair in a clean, fresh bun every day, and her clothes were lavish compared to those of her neighbors. Her gray-blue eyes remained sprightly, her wit undiminished. Only the hunch in her shoulders gave away her age, the weight of the worries she carried with her everywhere.

Adelaide didn't fear the Germans, at least not the ones at her table. German soldiers had billeted with her on and off almost since the occupation began in 1940.

Those were troubled days for Sainte-Mère-Église, with curfews, rations, and the dark clouds of death. Soldiers stalked the streets of the once-peaceful village. The squealing of car tires, frightened shouts, and the thudding of boots echoed in the night. As did gunshots.

As a patriotic French woman, Adelaide seethed when the German Wehrmacht forced her to clear a room in her elegant home. As the young men swarmed into her parlor, dragging their filthy rucksacks behind them, her blood boiled with resentment ... at first.

Months of living with these wounded, affectionate, loud-mouthed boys had worn down Adelaide's resolve. They reminded her of the young men of her own country, many of whom were dead or missing now. These Germans had families and sweethearts they cared about, smiling from the photos that adorned their pockets and wallets. Stacks of crinkled and tear-stained letters lay on every dresser.

These boys had feelings, like anyone else. Most of them were damaged, both outside and in. They never quite recovered from the horrors in Russia. They clung to Adelaide and treated her like their own mother. They brought her flowers and kissed her cheek, helped with her housework, and slipped her extra rations. They opened up about everything, and they admitted they were scared and just wanted to go home. She caught many of them crying when they thought they were alone.

Whenever she saw a soldier in tears, she crossed the room and buried his head in her bosom. She let him cry it out, and though embarrassed, they were always grateful. Sometimes they called her "*Mutter*." It gave her

proud streak a hard tug, and she had to yell at them to tidy up their room to cover her feelings.

Adelaide had always wanted to be somebody's—anybody's—mother. She had grown up in a straitlaced, wealthy family, who raised her under the creed that children should be neither seen nor heard. A string of cold and heartless house staff, who cared more about their paychecks than her feelings, served as her only companions.

At age sixteen, her father paraded Adelaide in front of swarms of rich men. It made her feel like a horse at a show.

It might have embittered some, but it instilled in Adelaide a deep, passionate caring for others. She would mother the whole world since her own had failed her. When she had a baby, if she were so blessed, there would be no staff or wet nurse.

The time came eventually. Adelaide married the perfect specimen her parents picked for her. The marriage was more of a business affair than a love story. He wasn't mean or cross, but he expected her to clean the home, serve his meals, and see to his domestic bliss and comfort. Frankly, Adelaide came to see her husband as her first go at motherhood.

Then came the real thing. Her daughter, Georgette. Pattering baby feet and squealing laughter filled their comfortable home. Adelaide's heart practically burst each time she heard it. And, of course, it was all too fleeting. Georgette was grown and had a family of her own, all in the blink of an eye.

Then, after decades of marriage, Adelaide became a widow just before the war. It left her, the eternal mother, with no one to care for. These wild German soldiers would have to do. It wasn't always easy, but mothering never was. Her relationship with her own daughter had proved that conclusively.

The boys laughed and jostled for position as Adelaide set out the bread tray. They dug into it like animals. In the midst of the frenzy, one of them reached for Adelaide and swept her into a needy hug. He nestled his head into her waist.

And again that word ... "*Mutter.*"

Adelaide ran her fingers down his face and gently kissed his forehead. She retreated to the kitchen to put on tea for them. On the way, she passed her parlor. It put her face-to-face with a black-and-white photo of a lovely young woman holding a baby.

Georgette.

Adelaide turned from the photo before she cried for the thousandth time. Her daughter and grandbaby were out of reach, on their farm just off the Normandy coast. The five miles between them felt more like a hundred, because with coastal defense in full swing, the Germans had cut off all those villages from the rest of France. A bitter pill for Georgette to swallow, already short of help after her husband went missing in 1940. She had long suspected he was dead.

Adelaide frequently appealed to her occupiers to let her go to Georgette, but they refused. The coast would remain sealed off. Word of their preparations could not escape the beaches, could not work its way to the active Resistance cells.

The horrible times barred Adelaide from being a mother to Georgette. So she took care of these soldier boys who were caught up in something too big for them.

After all, even Germans needed a mother.

Emilia

CAEN, FRANCE
JUNE 5, 1944

“Thus emerged for Hitler, as for so many Germans, a fanatical belief in the legend of ‘the stab in the back.’ ... One had to live in Germany between the wars to realize how widespread was the acceptance of this incredible legend ... Millions of Germans refused to concede this [their defeat in World War I]. They had to find scapegoats for the defeat and for their humiliation and misery. They easily convinced themselves that they had found them in the ‘November Criminals’ who had signed the surrender ... Hitler was shortly to take full advantage of it.”

—William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*

Emilia Wagner once shook the hand of Adolf Hitler.

Back when she was sixteen, before the Bund Deutscher Mädel—the League of German Maidens—tried to place her in a program called “Lebensborn.”

The memory gave her some extra chills on this blustery night in Caen.

Emilia wrapped her uniform jacket around her narrow shoulders. Her fingertips brushed the German eagle patch on her left sleeve. The wind tore at the cap that didn’t quite cover her fair hair. A conservative black skirt danced around her legs, and her heeled shoes clicked on the damp, cobbled streets.

As a light rain dripped from the dark lampposts, so tension dripped from the city. Violence and Resistance activity had escalated in the last few months. The French Maquisards, a guerrilla army of the Resistance, had

railroads and Wehrmacht trains under constant attack. They released leaflets around the city like a plague. Gestapo officials, the *Schatzstaffel*, and German soldiers of the Wehrmacht quickened their step at night, with possible assassinations haunting their every move, and increased violence in the woods around Caen, where the Maquisards were known to hide out.

There was also an increase in prisoners where Emilia worked, at the Gestapo and *Sicherheitsdienst* intelligence office in Caen. Under the formidable eye of her boss, Commandant Harald Heyns, Emilia took notes during prisoner interrogations. They were not pleasant affairs. They were bloody, with brutal beatings, blackened eyes, and broken noses. That said nothing of the really dirty tricks like pulling out toe and fingernails.

It was hard for anyone to sit through, especially young and impressionable Emilia. She was barely in her twenties, from a traditional German background. A strict, sparkling, and pristine Aryan background involving big houses, big parties, and big plans for Emilia.

At least, that's what they said when they tried to shove her into Lebensborn.

Emilia forced herself to move faster. She shouldn't dwell on the past, because her present was scary enough. And the Gestapo and SD didn't frighten her nearly as much as the French Resistance. Those operatives loved to move about in the night. With strict blackout rules, they easily shuffled from one building to the next, swift and cunning as shadows. Man or woman didn't matter to their hungry rifle crosshairs. Her swastika-adorned arm was a target.

On the outskirts of the city circle, Emilia came upon an SS night guard. Named Hermann, he trailed her in age by a year or two, and his lanky build made him look awkward. His chin boasted no facial hair, and his face hadn't quite grown into its features. A boy in a man's uniform.

Hermann bowed his head politely as she passed. "May I escort you home, Fräulein Wagner?"

An escort. What a chivalrous and civil gesture. It was almost hard to believe those childish eyes gleaming in the darkness, and that gentle hand inviting her to take it, were involved in hideous things. He had dragged countless squirming prisoners through the headquarters. He had arrested so

many “undesirables” and sent them to God knows where. Probably those sadistic camps he and the other boys so often talked about, with bodies stacked up like logs, and people being stuffed by the thousands into gas chambers.

She flashed him a smooth-as-silk smile, because she wouldn't want to upset him. She had never seen those camps herself, so she didn't know how bad they really were. But she wouldn't dare tempt fate enough to wind up in one and find out. “No thank you, Herr Hermann. Sleep well.”

He tipped his cap at her. “Be safe, Fräulein.”

Safe ... a concept Emilia would never know. Especially around him.

Although they were a lot more alike than she cared to admit. Both came from parents who still smarted from the horrible days before the fire-breathing man with his sharp salute, swastika flag, and tiny mustache. They vividly remembered and deeply feared the world they had known after the first war. The hunger in their bellies, fortunes evaporating to dust, and a wayward attempt at democracy while political radicals and revolutionaries ran amok with their violent protests and shootouts in the streets.

It was a time so different from the shining Germany that Emilia and Hermann grew up in. They were so young when Hitler came to power. All they knew were flowers in the streets and bright red flags draped over the buildings. Stolen mansions became their childhood homes. They filled them with the furniture and precious goods of deported Jews. Youth programs and schools ingrained them with Nazi ideology. Bloody beatings and disappearances became common, a price to pay for this so-called “greater Reich,” of leaving behind all the deep poverty and even deeper humiliation.

Emilia's own parents latched onto Hitler with fervor. He breathed oxygen onto the burning coals of their anger from those bitter times. Her father, delighted to have a scapegoat for his suffering, spewed Jewish slander louder than anyone, all the while rubbing elbows with higher-ups like Goering and Himmler. Emilia's mother, all too happy to exchange her rags and malnourished frame for lavish gowns and a well-fed figure, immersed herself in all the important Nazi social circles. She crammed her child into every Nazi Youth program that would have her. She made her

adore the large portrait of Hitler in the dining room every morning at breakfast.

When Emilia reached the brink of womanhood, she often accompanied her parents to fabulous parties and balls in impressive estates. Her eyes sparkled like crystal champagne flutes at the sweeping hairstyles and flowing ball gowns of the women. Her budding thighs produced new sensations around the uniformed specimens of Hitler's Aryan race. She marveled at the piles of delicacies on the silk-covered tables. The fountains of champagnes and wines, the lovely string quartets, and the swirling couples on the marble dance floors.

And the attention ... Emilia drew plenty of it wherever she went. Her low-cut, fashionable dresses always exposed her swollen bosom. She tied flowers through her shimmering, golden hair. Her perfect, Aryan blue eyes had a special sapphire glow.

In short, Emilia Wagner was a knockout.

Even Hitler must have thought so, since he shook her hand during one of those rabid Berlin rallies in 1938. The Nazis were at the pinnacle of their power, and teenaged Emilia was at the height of her beauty. The whole city square was blanketed in swastikas on that crisp day. There were golden eagles and scarlet carpets, and endless columns of marching soldiers.

Her parents stood proudly in the front row, next to other prominent Nazis, all their postwar struggles forgotten. After one of his wild, maniacal speeches, and while thousands of people went mad with applause, Hitler came down from the podium to greet some of his rabid supporters.

Having spent all of her young life in his shadow, with her parents treating him like a god, Emilia about died when Hitler approached her. He took her satin-gloved hand in his and murmured something about a shining German beauty. All the cries of "Sieg Heil" and "Heil Hitler" drowned out most of his words. So did the rush in her head as he leaned down and kissed her hand.

The Lebensborn recruitment came shortly after that, from one of her instructors in the Bund Deutscher Mädel, or BDM for short. The female version of the Hitler Youth packed her schedule with group outings, training in the domestic arts, formal marches, and picnics in the park. They kept her

busy from dawn to dusk, and she had no time alone. It was like they didn't want her to think.

That didn't bother Emilia. She was too anxious to find her place in the blossoming German society. She knew she would find a good one, because she was skilled at many things. Even typing, which many of the domestically inclined girls shied away from. Not Emilia. She ached to join the German machine and help steer her beloved homeland to victory. To make Germany great.

She just never imagined what that machine had in mind for her. Her BDM instructor, with spinster bitterness and barn owl eyes, made it all too clear. During a picnic in the Berlin Tiergarten, she handed her star pupil a pamphlet with the word "Lebensborn" stamped across it. It showed a bold SS flag draped from a shining building, and a row of gorgeous Aryan women standing beneath it. The pamphlet made lavish promises about security benefits, honor in the Reich, and a chance to win medals.

Emilia's eyes crinkled.

Lebensborn? She had never heard of it. She scanned the pamphlet more closely. The words "birthing homes" finally made her realize what Germany really wanted from her. A space just under her belly button went cold with absolute dread.

Emilia lifted her gaze to her instructor's, who looked more evil somehow. Maybe it was just the clouds moving over the sun ...

"I'm sorry ... what is this?" Emilia asked.

"You are almost an adult, Emilia. It's time to think about your place in society."

Emilia held up the card. "As what, exactly?"

Barn Owl's eyes snapped down into hard slants. "Lebensborn is an honor, Emilia. Your blood is pure and your looks are radiant, as you are often quick to remind us. You would make an ideal specimen for ensuring our future racial security."

"What?"

"There are many fine men in the SS, Emilia."

"For marriage?"

“For children. As many as your strong body can bear. The Reich takes excellent care of their Lebensborn mothers. You will have benefits, a full medical staff to care for you, and the birthing homes are the finest in all of Germany.”

“You mean ... I won’t even marry this SS man?”

Barn Owl slipped her an almost vicious grin. “You might pair with more than one. Healthy, pure German children are the greatest will of the Führer.”

“And who helps me raise all these fine, Aryan children?”

“They’re given away, Emilia. To the greatest families in the Reich, for good and proper upbringing.”

Emilia’s heart dropped. “I don’t understand.”

“Lebensborn ensures that our future generations will be racially pure, with excellent genetics. You can do your part for the German Reich without the trials of motherhood. The birthing homes are modern and efficient, and quite secret.” She placed her cold hand on Emilia’s rigid shoulder. “It is a great honor to be chosen for this, Emilia.”

An honor, Barn Owl called it. An honor for Emilia to part her virgin legs for a strange German SS man. Who knew how many times or how many men? All to make a baby that would never be hers.

Emilia felt something shrivel inside. Perhaps her innocence. “I have many other skills. I can type better than anyone. I could go to the Wehrmacht and work with them.”

“The army jobs are for men, my dear. As a woman, you must know your place. For you, I can’t imagine a better place than Lebensborn.” She ran her chilling fingertip through Emilia’s fine hair. “After all, I’ve seen looks like yours ruin plenty of girls of fine upbringing. You wouldn’t want to wind up in a position of shame. Lebensborn can ensure your security, and that of your parents too.”

Emilia took a step back and seethed inside. So that was it. They all thought she would accomplish nothing more than pregnancy out of wedlock, so they decided to get the jump on her. All because she had some looks to brag about. Well, no way would she accept a situation like that. In that moment, with fear choking her by the throat, she felt she would kill to stay out of Lebensborn.

And so she had, in many ways.

Emilia's mind returned to the lifeless streets of Caen, where a cold raindrop drilled her flushed forehead. She wiped it off with the back of her hand as her boarding house came into view.

Emilia had taken part in some horrible things, and these days she felt the solid, steel ground shaking beneath her. They all felt the Allied invasion growing closer. It consumed those boys in the office, needled at them piece by piece, cracked their composure.

It put Emilia on edge too. She had seen what the Russians could do. The Americans were a force to be reckoned with as well. There wouldn't be many options for the likes of her.

Unless she could come up with a plan.

MIDNIGHT IN THE GARDEN

OceanofPDF.com

Theda

PORTSMOUTH, ENGLAND
JUNE 5, 1944

Theda dreamed about William that night.

She saw them both as children. William, with his sunny locks, scrawny limbs, and shimmering turquoise eyes, bursting with energy and laughter. He led shy, quiet Theda through “king and queen” games by the old shed with its musty, thatched roof. Their smoky-colored, ancient stone home loomed behind them. Tall hedgerows and open farm fields hemmed in the fresh, green lawn. Their comfortable estate, addressed Number 6 and tucked back from the roads, shut them off from the world.

Mr. and Mrs. Brown preferred it that way. Both straitlaced and very conservative, the previous generation and their own horrible war had left them badly shaken. They did all they could to shelter their children, with plenty of money and their good, honest country life. They even denied them school and opted for private tutors instead.

Theda rolled over in her squeaky, musty, dormitory bed. A far cry from what she had enjoyed in her childhood bedroom back at Number 6. Her subconscious brought more images of little William.

He made a good king. A bundle of branches from the hedgerow served as a crown, and a giant stick became his scepter. He barked commands at an old squirrel skittering across the lush grass. How like him to rule over every situation, even playtime, while Theda stood by with a smile.

It wasn't much different as they grew up. William donned that hedgerow crown and took charge of the world around him. He often skipped lessons

by creeping out his bedroom window. He spent his afternoons on wild adventures through the pasturelands, and he came back filthy, with various country souvenirs in tow. In later years, he crept out with girls instead, and he came back smelling of perfume and swooning.

That was William. He got away with everything, especially with Theda as his enabler. He knew the way to her heart was books, and she acquired plenty of reading material in exchange for silence about his antics. Thank heavens, because Theda's strict parents never let her have books outside her lessons. They chided her for reading so much instead of preparing for marriage and a family. But if William wanted a book, all he had to do was ask.

It made her envy William a little, as much as she adored him. It was like that hedgerow crown and stick scepter followed him all his life. His charm opened every door and broke down every barrier. If he wanted to go to university, he would have his pick of schools. The working world would pull him into whatever field he chose. His money would be his own to manage and control.

Not so for Theda, or women in general. It was a man's world. She would always be relegated to playing the queen, standing off to the side and pasting on a smile. Most women she knew, like Carolyn and Sheila, seemed perfectly content with that role. Her mother relished staying at home and caring for the children. Girls Theda's age longed for the day when motherhood would claim their time and lives. It was what they wanted, and it really made them happy.

Not so with Theda. That life made her want to scream, and she hated how discontented she felt. Everyone else seemed fine with their lot. Why wasn't she?

Probably because of William. He reminded her that being different wasn't a crime, and he never let her give up on the deepest desires of her heart. He insisted her intelligence could get her out of Number 6 and into the wide, adventurous world. She didn't have to find a husband if she didn't want to. He always listened to her interests with a smile.

At least he had before Dunkirk. That void, blustery French beach in 1940, where he became one of hundreds of thousands of sick, starving,

battered, and entrapped British soldiers at the mercy of the German Army. They could only wait for rescue next to the frothing waves, with no food or water, no supplies for the wounded, and no place to bury the dead. They struggled to stay alive while their country amassed boats and ships of every size to come to their aid.

Theda's dream world suddenly clouded over. It showed her grown-up brother at the table in the family's large den. He hadn't said a word since his return from those beaches. He sipped his tea with trembling fingers. His face looked worn and his skin was gray. Even his remarkable eyes had faded to a dim, slate blue. A nasty scar slashed across his right arm, with the faded blob of a bullet hole resting on top of it. The war wound looked remarkably like a scepter.

Low rumbling moved in on Theda's sleeping mind. The picture dissolved at the corners, and a loud crash pulled her back to reality. A few gasps and shrieks from the crowded VAD dorm pried open her eyes.

The rumbling continued, even though she was wide awake. It shook the walls and beds. Desk drawers cracked open, books fell from shelves, and ink jars tipped over. Girls in night dresses with curlers in their hair kicked their bed sheets off, stumbling around to discover the source of the noise.

"What's all the racket?"

"Lord, is it the Germans?"

"Find a torch, will you, Betty? You know they won't let us have the lights on."

"Well, I can't find anything in this dark."

Theda pushed her own covers aside and jumped to her feet. "Sheila? Carolyn?"

She searched through the hordes of girls for her childhood chums, while pandemonium broke out in the dingy VAD dormitory. Portsmouth had just endured a nasty bombing in April, and the memory of it still lingered. Girls tripped over beds and trunks in the dark. They shrieked and pulled on bathrobes. Their stern ward sister barked them to attention from somewhere near the door.

"Alright, ladies, get a hold of yourselves. Single file, we will make our way to the bomb shelters across the alley. That's it now, nice and steady.

Single file.”

While shaky VAD girls formed straight lines and jockeyed for the door, Theda finally found her girlfriends and greeted them by clutching their hands in hers.

Carolyn gasped with relief at the sight of her friend. “Theda, what in the world is happening?”

Theda linked arms with them and steered them toward the door. “Another bombing, I’m sure. Off we go, ladies.”

Sheila, her rumpled hair a mess, let out an annoyed grunt. “Join the VADs, Theda told us. It’s the right thing to do, she told us. Never mentioned a word about being bombed to oblivion in our sleep.”

Carolyn said nothing, clinging to Theda so hard her nails dug into her flesh.

The excited, chattering VADs followed the ward sister down the creaky stairs of their building and out into the frigid Portsmouth night. The chill pressed Theda’s thin nightshirt against her trembling skin. As she emerged with the swarm of girls into the streets, the confusion grew worse instead of better. Blackout rules kept the whole city completely dark, while the rumbles above grew louder and more intense. Shouts came from everywhere and nowhere. A few torch beams cut through the blackness.

It was the sky that stole the show, though. Theda tilted her head back, and her jaw dropped to the ground. Strange lights smothered the dome from one end to the other. Low-floating and ghostly orbs of red and green. They blinked in and out as big objects continually passed in front of them. It was like an ocean of gemstones splashed across a giant black cloth.

It sure didn’t sound that pretty, though. The rumbling was deafening, and Theda clamped her hands over her ears, buckling at the vibrations in her chest. While Carolyn and Sheila stuck to her like glue, pointing at the sky and shouting, she finally realized the lights were planes. Hundreds of them, maybe even thousands. But instead of moving inland to drop a load over unwitting London, the massive fleet went the opposite direction, headed straight over the Channel.

Theda frowned as she noticed. “They’re going the wrong way ...” As soon as the words escaped her lips, her eyes went wide and her jaw went

stiff. She suddenly knew exactly what that meant. “My God ... the invasion.”

At those words, Theda's ward sister came to an abrupt halt, so unexpectedly that a half dozen girls bumped into her back. Her grip loosened on the oil lamp she held so her charges could follow her in the dark. She stood aghast at those lights, the thousands of lights, the armies of planes heading straight for the heart of France. The oil lamp dropped from her hand, shattering into a hundred pieces while the flame fizzled out.

“Fuckin’ hell,” she said in a complete break from her strict, martinet character.

Theda stifled a laugh, nudging her compatriots. “Well, well. It looks like her mouth is the first casualty of D-Day.”

Mildred

BERLIN
JUNE 5, 1944

Darkness and loneliness danced a waltz around Mildred's fancy, brass-framed bed. Night shadows crawled across her floor. Berlin blackout protocol kept her thick, silky curtains bundled over the window. Nothing from the outside world came in, including company. These tense times had brought Max's frequent sleepovers to a screeching halt. He spent most of his time at the radio station now, deep in his writing. She wondered if he was really so busy, or if he just needed the distraction.

Either way, his absence weighed heavy during these long, intense nights. The bed practically swallowed Mildred without his warm body in it. Sleep didn't visit her either. Instead, in the eerie flicker of a single candle, she gazed at an old newspaper clipping encased in a beat-up frame.

It was from New Jersey, and it showed a small, faded photograph of Mildred's much younger American self. She was dolled up with a 1920s bowl hat, curled hair, and a respectable dress. She knelt by the side of a tall, lethal-looking bridge with a desperate look on her face. Police and onlookers crowded around her. The small clipping referred to her as "Barbara Elliot," and it told the story of a pregnant bride deserted by her husband. At the absolute end of her wits, this woman in the nice dress had decided to end her life.

Mildred chortled in the candlelight.

It was all a hoax, of course. She wasn't Barbara Elliot, she was struggling Broadway and film actress Mildred Gillars. The show at the

bridge had been a publicity stunt.

It was drawn up by her then-producers, as advertising for their upcoming film *Unwelcome Children*. The pregnant, deserted bride was Mildred's starring role in the movie. They wanted every spoke in the rumor wheel turning for their premiere, so Mildred took an ad in the New Jersey paper under her character's name. She revealed her condition and begged her husband to come home. When reporters contacted her, the producers upped the ante. They had Mildred go to the highest bridge in town and stage a very elaborate suicide attempt.

That got Mildred some attention alright. Some long-awaited, all-consuming, and very satisfying attention.

Although, when the truth came out, the attention wasn't as warm. The authorities were furious at the silly actress trying to promote a silly movie. The public panned her and the "dirty picture," but Mildred didn't care. It had put her name in the papers.

And after her miserable childhood with an abusive, then absent father, Mildred needed all the attention she could get. She started in college with those young American boys and their lusty appetites. She had no trouble getting on their radar. Not with her stylish clothes, her sensual behavior, and her over-the-top flirting. While the girls gossiped behind her back, the boys fell right in line.

It only made Mildred hungry for more. The stage found her while she attended Ohio Wesleyan, and she decided she was destined to be the next great American actress. She dropped her college ambitions and moved to New York City.

Her theater career didn't unfold as successfully as she'd dreamed. She spent the 1920s struggling penniless through the Manhattan streets. She lived in pigsty apartments, ate meals on credit, and fumbled through countless failed auditions. She worked grunt jobs for demeaning people who never treated her as an equal. She begged, borrowed, and while she didn't steal, she considered it often.

One failure followed another until she arrived in Germany in 1934 to study music. A mustached man named Hitler had taken over by then. There were some terrifying whispers about him in the streets. Alarming rumors

spread about the fate of the Jews. She witnessed questionable behavior from his swastika-clad troops. Still, it was hard to argue with the clean streets and jobs aplenty. Not to mention all the food. After her squalid life in New York, Germany felt like an oasis.

An oasis with Max Otto in it, a high-level figure in German radio. When Mildred moved to Berlin and first got a job at RRG, she mostly opened for other broadcasters or cranked out meaningless tunes. But suave, dark-haired Max took a shine to her and hatched other plans.

She and Max created their own radio shows as well as romantic sparks. They used the winning combination of her sensual, husky voice and his self-proclaimed writing genius. Together, they forged her a new life, a steady paycheck, steamy sex, and a new identity. Axis Sally, one of the most well-known names in German broadcasting, was born. Mildred wasn't the scorned gossip of a small town in New Jersey any longer. People all over the world knew her name.

She gently laid the clipping aside. She slipped out of her light, summer bed cover and crept on bare feet to the heavy curtain. She moved a small sliver aside.

Outside, Berlin slept in total blackness. A few lumbering SS agents stalked the streets. Other than that, it was another quiet night. That was a big change from the searing flashes, violent bangs, and blasting fires of the bombings. Constant attacks from mobs of Allied planes that smashed buildings to rubble and buried thousands of Germans underneath. The mighty air forces, and the fear of them, kept Berlin on its toes for most of 1943 and into this year too.

But planes hadn't shuddered Mildred's window panes for weeks. Screams and cries no longer pierced the night. People in Germany sighed with relief, but not Mildred. The silence left a hard rustling in her gut, coupled with an eerie sensation of doom. It felt like the calm before those violent Ohio thunderstorms she had endured as a girl.

She also knew better. There was no reason the Allies would stop bombing Berlin ... unless they were too busy preparing for something bigger.

Flora

BÉNOUVILLE JUST AFTER MIDNIGHT, JUNE 6

Flora had always wanted to join the Resistance.

Long before the Nazis arrested her parents, she burned to get in on the action. It didn't matter if it was a menial job, not back then. As long as she could help kick the Third Reich from her country.

But her parents were firm in their refusal. It was too dangerous. She didn't know the city well enough. They didn't have the means to protect her. No matter how many times she begged, they didn't acquiesce. They kept her out of anything that would get her in any kind of trouble.

After they were taken and she moved in with Geraud, Flora became obsessed to join. Geraud was high up in the network, so she knew he could make a place for her. He should, too, because she had to take up the mantle of her lost parents. They would never see the Nazi-free world they dreamed of, so she had to make sure the next generation would.

Just like her parents, Geraud had an infuriating stubborn streak to him. Even more so, because he wasn't invested in her feelings. Her parents turned her down with gentle words and soothing comfort. Not so with Geraud. When she screeched at his constant rebuffs, he just stared at her with his no-nonsense charcoal eyes. His pursed lips didn't crack, and his wavy dark hair with gray flecks didn't ruffle. He lit up a cigarette and ignored her as he would a pesky child.

Flora got so angry she stopped speaking to Geraud. Then she stopped looking at him. She always slammed the door when she went to her room.

She didn't help him around the house any longer, which was a risky gamble. Her rent for living with him was cooking the meals and keeping the place clean. When her "payments" came to a halt, Geraud noticed. He grumbled and scolded her, but he still didn't lose his cool. He didn't even threaten to throw her out.

He may not have realized it, but it gave Flora a bargaining chip. Since he didn't evict her, he saw her as valuable. She wasn't clear why, but she knew it was something she could use to get her way.

Their standoff stretched into three, then four weeks. The flat got cluttered and garbage smells leaked into the hallway. Geraud finally broke when the neighbors complained.

"Fine," he said in an exasperated tone one day. He clicked open his lighter and lit up a cigarette. "You can join. I'll start you as a message courier between here and Bénouville."

She should have been ecstatic, but Flora only managed a glare. Menial jobs weren't good enough anymore, and Bénouville was one of the quietest sectors of blood-soaked France.

"That's boring. Give me something better."

"Boring?" Geraud puffed his cigarette. "Couriers carry risk no matter where they work. Bénouville is not a strategic goal, but it will give you a chance to get your feet wet."

"I don't need to get anything wet. I'm ready."

Geraud rolled his eyes. "Flora, to be in the Resistance, you have to rise above your emotions. You have to make crucial decisions based on intellect, not on your wild temper."

Flora bristled and balled her hands into fists.

Geraud blew smoke in her face. He grinned when she coughed. "Welcome to *La Résistance*. You can start by removing the waste."

Flora resumed her housekeeping duties, but she also became a courier for the local network. She used her bicycle to carry coded messages (deciphered and recoded by Bastien) from Geraud's apartment in Caen to Château de Bénouville, a handsome, old-fashioned villa that Bénouville had converted to a hospital, mostly seeing to maternity care for farm wives.

Other than that, the town of Bénouville had little danger to boast of. There were only a few houses, and a humble café overlooking an iron bridge over the river. The bridge was the only dangerous part of Flora's work, because German guards never left it alone.

As for the hospital, there was some risk there too. The roof had been transformed into a sniper's nest, and Germans with a large, intimidating machine gun kept it under constant surveillance. Sometimes, an armed guard was stationed at the villa's entrance.

Of course, the harried guards rarely stopped women for random searches. If they did, with her well-crafted false papers identifying her as a nurse, she got by every single time—no muss, no fuss. In fact, most of the young German guards waved her in without question.

Once admitted, Flora went straight to the lady of the house, Madame Vion. The middle-aged, sharp Frenchwoman ran more than the hospital. She was Geraud's contact between the forest-dwelling, guerrilla fighter Maquisard forces and the Caen Resistance network. Running such a scam in the middle of a German sniper nest had its disadvantages, but Madame Vion preferred it that way. "Hiding in plain sight," she called it. Once Flora gave her Geraud's messages, Madame Vion distributed them to the Maquisard fighters in the woods.

It was a pretty smooth operation, with only one snag. Caen to Bénouville and back every day meant a lot of time on the bicycle. It was an hour ride each way, more if Flora ran into muddied pathways or extra Germans. She did her best to enjoy the time outdoors, admiring how the bike rides strengthened her muscles. She also noticed her mind worked more clearly with all the exercise, and her movements felt more fluid. She had grown stronger and faster.

She also had grown restless with her menial job. Flora was capable of more, but her pleas for advancement fell on deaf ears. Geraud didn't take her seriously. None of them did, really. How could they? All she did was ride her bike back and forth. It didn't allow her to prove herself.

It sent a fresh spurt of anger down Flora's legs, which helped push her bicycle through a countryside thick with fog and darkness. Damp sweat tickled her forehead and soaked her armpits. The perspiration came partially

from fury, but she couldn't deny she was a little scared too. She had never done a night run before. Anyone could be lurking out here.

She chomped on her lip and kicked her legs into high gear. This was no time to let her imagination run away with her. Her instructions were clear about that message on the radio. Once she heard it, it was time to act.

Mud from the recent rains splattered over her loose-fitting mechanic pants. She also felt an occasional raindrop on her burning hot face. The bike groaned in protest under Flora's hard pushing, but she soon arrived at the familiar bridge over the sloshing Orne River. As Flora cycled over it, and the metal shivered beneath her, she noticed there were only two or three Germans on duty, all too busy acting the fool to notice her. The rest had probably gone to town. She knew from Madame Vion that one of them had a girlfriend nearby, who frequently kept him occupied until dawn.

Flora skidded to a stop in front of the Château de Bénouville. A single German guard stood at the doorway. His Prussian features stiffened as Flora approached.

"It's past curfew," he said in a thick German accent. "Go away before you're arrested."

"I received a summons from Madame Vion." She produced a pre-prepared telegram. They had typed it up months ago and had Madame Vion sign it. It also had a well-crafted fake seal of medical approval from the Caen Gestapo—compliments of Bastien.

Flora pointed to it. "An urgent matter, Monsieur."

He snatched the paper and scrutinized every word. "What urgent matter?"

A flick of anxiety shot through Flora's stomach. She had never had this much trouble before. Her eyes darted up to the roof and the big machine gun. She'd seen it countless times before, but it looked a lot scarier under the gaze of this growling guard.

"A difficult labor, Monsieur. The mother is very ill. Madame Vion needs my help."

"Why your help?"

"We are the only ones who know her case. She thought it better if I came."

The German scanned the telegram for an agonizing moment or two, then he thrust it back at her. "Make it quick."

Flora forced a smile and entered the hospital.

It was subdued, but that was no surprise. A few sick Germans slept in their beds, and a very pregnant woman struggled to get comfortable. A true nurse sat in a corner, reading a book to pass the long night hours. Candles flickered here and there, the only lights allowed during enforced blackouts. They threw peculiar shadows about the antique stone walls.

It didn't take Flora long to spot Madame Vion. The calm and collected French woman pressed her stethoscope to a young German's back. He struggled to breathe, and she listened intently.

"Pneumonia," she said as she folded up her stethoscope. "From the damp weather, no doubt. Rest and a hot meal." She caught sight of Flora, and her eyes narrowed. She noted the wild expression on Flora's face. She checked the old pocket watch at her breast.

She didn't miss a beat in front of the sole conscious German, though. "Well, into a bed with you then."

The boy slipped his shirt back on and skirted away.

Without a word, Madame Vion took Flora's arm. She led her out of the main room and down a darkened corridor. Neither of them dared speak with all the danger around them.

When they reached the end of the hall, Madame Vion pulled a ring of heavy brass keys from her apron pocket. She fumbled through them, their clinks echoing loud against the stone. At last, she rammed one through the hole of a tiny, narrow door. She pushed Flora inside and went in after her, closing the door tight behind them.

They found themselves in a tiny pantry. A few bare and rotted wooden shelves lined the walls. Spider webs occupied the corners. A damp smell permeated the stale air.

Madame Vion returned the keys to her apron pocket. "Flora Babineaux, do you have a death wish? What do you mean cycling here after curfew?"

Flora pulled a crumpled pack of cigarettes from her pocket, along with a book of matches. She lit up and took a long drag. "Protocol."

"For what, exactly?"

The glow of the cigarette lit the seriousness of Flora's gaze. "The invasion. I heard the code on the radio."

Madame Vion froze. "You're certain? Certain you're not mistaken?" She took a step closer. "I smell liquor on you."

Flora couldn't ignore the sting, since it was the second time someone had accused her of hearing things instead of taking her seriously. She took a deep breath as she dug her messages from their various hiding places and laid them out on the shelves. Doubt knocked on the door of her mind and threatened to diminish her confidence, but she wouldn't dare let it.

"They said it twice. Even a drunk wouldn't miss it. Besides, you should see the city right now. Everyone was getting out of bed and moving about in a hurry."

Madame Vion leaned over the messages and scanned them. "These are instructions for invasion activation." She looked at Flora with wide eyes. "It ... it's time? They're really coming?"

"They said the dice are on the carpet, the code for the landings being imminent. Twenty-four hours. Maybe less."

"You know, once I activate these networks, there is no going back. Should you be mistaken, they will all be caught. Arrested. Deported. Killed. We won't be able to reorganize."

Flora took another drag off her cigarette. It suddenly hit her what was really at stake. Real human lives, several of them. Maybe thousands. Even with a menial job like hers, if she got one thing wrong, if she did indeed conjure a message out of that thick radio static, it could spell a whole lot of bloodshed. Doubt knocked harder now, and this time it got through a little.

She drew her lips in a tight line and tried to will away the nervous sweat. She flashed back to her apartment, and remembered the feel of that headset against her ears, and that faint whisper in a British accent.

"The dice are on the carpet ..."

She let out a frustrated sigh. She wouldn't let the doubt win. "I'm not mistaken."

Madame Vion crossed her arms. "I understood from Geraud the invasion is expected further north. Pas-de-Calais. Why would he activate our sector so quickly?"

“I don’t know.” Flora looked at the floor, her ears hot with shame. “He ... doesn’t tell me much, Madame Vion.” She took another pull from her one source of comfort. “But he did give me strict instructions for when I heard that broadcast. Get the messages and bring them to you. I know no one trusts me, but I can do some things right.”

Madame Vion softened. “You can do a lot of things right, Flora, and you are very brave. Those men just like to keep us ladies in our place.”

“I’ve begged them to let me do more. They never do.”

“And they never will, but don’t take it personally. They don’t even trust each other. All they do is squabble, more concerned about who runs this place after the Nazis are gone, hoarding weapons to slit each other’s throats later. Out with one tyrant and in with another, yes?”

Madame picked up each message and read them through, while Flora looked on with a wistfulness in her eyes.

“They’re all in code.”

Madame Vion gave her an ornery smile. “Bastien?”

Flora ignored her suggestive smirk. “Are you allowed to tell me what they mean?”

“The Resistance doesn’t have the means to fight directly, but we can slow the Germans down. We’ll cut communication wires, disrupt railroads, and barricade the main highways.” She stacked the messages up and put them in her apron. “And I guess we have no time to lose, do we?”

They suddenly heard an ear-splitting crash from outside, accompanied by cracking and splintering wood. Shouts in a German dialect rang out. So did screeching noises and another loud crash.

Madame Vion and Flora clambered out of their secret pantry and hurried back down the darkened hallway.

Out of breath, with her blood pumping, Flora bolted out of the hospital and into the chilly night. She was just in time for another crash that echoed across the village. A giant shower of sparks sprayed across the foggy, dark field. More crashes and squealing noises followed. Gunfire erupted from somewhere near the bridge, and red tracer bullets cast an eerie, flickering glow over the fields.

Flora forced her eyes to focus. She took in the faint outline of a large, wooden object lying on its side near the bridge. A few men hobbled from it and scattered into the dark. More tracer bullets erupted from phantom shooters. Machine guns pounded from somewhere in the mist. German voices, alarmed, barked at one another.

Their tracers, white, yellow, and red, outlined the silhouettes of men running in a frenzy. A man tackled another man. More men wrestled at the foot of the bridge. There was a shout. More gunfire. Someone fired a Very light, and it squealed into the air before bursting into a brilliant, fierce white glow. The sparkling orb burned and fizzled over the bridge, bathing the whole terrible scene in ghostly light.

Madame Vion appeared behind Flora. “What in God’s name is happening?”

Flora suddenly darted off at a run, barreling toward the bridge as fast as her legs could carry her. Underneath her wild emotions, a glimmer of logic told her the bridge was a dangerous place to be. Yet she ran for it anyway, almost as if her body acted separately from her brain.

The tracers illuminated a few more tussles, and the smell of gunpowder invaded Flora’s nose. There was more yelling, but in a different language. Flora recognized the dialect, and it lit a long-dormant fire inside her chest.

English.

“Able-able-able,” a deep voice called out in the night.

“Baker-baker-baker,” another answered.

Flora had worked in the Resistance long enough to know it was code. They were trying to locate one another in the dark.

Red-hot tracers suddenly flashed so close they blinded her. A grenade explosion roared in the dark, and the concussion threw her to the ground. She curled up and buried her face in the damp grass, covering her head with her hands.

There came a final shout in German, and the gunfire finally went still.

Once she felt safe to do so, Flora climbed to her feet on unstable legs. Her whole body quaked, and a low ringing from the grenade blast obscured her hearing.

She crept toward the towering outline of the bridge over the Orne. The one she had crossed countless times with false identity papers. It usually swarmed with German guards. Now, men of a whole other breed gathered across it. Some nursed cuts and scratches. Others called out orders and made anxious hand motions. Another lay still in the grass.

Flora made out more large structures. Wooden gliders, huge ones. Many of them had split open and broken on their rough landing.

She came upon a man hunched over a ham radio. It burst out useless static while he flipped a dial over and over again. Another man stood by him, sporting a dark green uniform with a proper English mustache.

“Come on, Tappenden,” the standing man said in a demanding voice. “Hail them up on that radio and let them know we’ve done it.”

“Ham and jam,” Tappenden barked into the radio. “Ham and jam, over. Ham and jam. Are you receiving me? Over?”

Nothing but static.

As Flora stepped up behind them, the ringing in her ears faded away, but her breaths still came in rasps.

It caused the standing soldier to turn and look at her. He had a much calmer gaze than she expected. It told Flora that, unlike her, this man had no doubts about his place in the world.

Flora found her voice along with her English. “Just who the hell are you?”

He blinked his eyes once or twice. “General Howard, Madame.”

“British?”

He nodded.

Flora smiled. Her shaking hands fumbled in her pocket for her cigarettes. She took one and offered another to General Howard.

He took it with a bemused smirk.

“You’ve really come then.” She gave him a firm nod. “I’m so glad I wasn’t hearing things.”

Adelaide

SAINTE-MÈRE-ÉGLISE, FRANCE

1:00 AM, JUNE 6, 1944

Adelaide's upper-story bedroom held the last vestiges of her family's great wealth. While German soldiers had pilfered most of her fine things, Oberleutnant Henning had let her keep her bedroom set.

There was the antique, cream-colored wardrobe with hand-painted birds on the side. Next to it was a handsome, three-piece wooden vanity with a silver-framed mirror. A matching silver-framed brush set adorned the dresser. Adelaide slept in a spacious double bed with clean sheets and a lace canopy. Wispy, sheer curtains in the open window flapped in the gentle night breeze.

In her arms, Adelaide held another part of a faded life, the picture of Georgette and her baby. She often slept with it to feel a little closer to her daughter. Along with physical distance, she and Georgette had put some miles between their hearts.

It didn't start that way. Mother and daughter were once quite close. Adelaide came in a flash when Georgette scraped her knees or cried in the night. She held her little girl's hand during strolls through the countryside. She never refused a hug or a kiss. They cooked breakfast together every morning. Every night, she tucked Georgette in with a kiss to the forehead.

"Sleep well, my darling," she whispered. "I'll be waiting for you in the morning."

She always was waiting, too, even when Georgette blossomed into womanhood.

That was all that stayed the same, though. The times changed hard and fast around them. It wasn't just the rise of Hitler and the fear he put into everyone. The years upended every part of the old-fashioned world Adelaide once knew. Especially the world of women. Adelaide always dedicated herself to being a mother. It was a destiny to point her mast at, and she aimed for it all her life. Her job was to care for people, and in her eyes, it's what all women were made for.

That's why it shocked her deeply when Georgette turned out much differently. First, she married someone Adelaide couldn't wrap her head around. A simple, plain boy, whose parents had no legacy except a crumbling cottage and a dairy farm in Saint-Germain-de-Varreville. He met Georgette when he made a delivery to their doorstep by mistake. He came back on purpose over the next several days. They spent long afternoons in Adelaide's beautiful garden, exchanging intimate giggles, plucking flowers, and pointing at butterflies.

Adelaide always watched them from a crack in her curtains. As their romance swelled, so did her anxiety. She wanted so much more for her daughter than a farmer's life. She tried to advise Georgette, nineteen at the time, against the match. Yes, she should marry for love, but she also had to think of her children, and how a husband might provide for them.

Georgette met the criticism head on. She wasn't afraid to marry a farmer. They would buy their own field near his parents, and she would help with the work. Help her husband financially support their children.

Adelaide never dreamed of working outside of motherhood, and she didn't want her daughter to, either. She had trained her to run a household so she could be a good wife and mother. She assured herself Georgette's "help on the farm" talk was just a passing phase. Once a child came along, she would be too busy. She would come to her senses.

It wasn't long before that child was born, a precious little girl named Francine. Yet Georgette didn't stop farming with her husband. She enjoyed her work and liked being useful. She stubbornly insisted she could do both.

Adelaide butted heads with her often. "Motherhood is your job now. Who will be there for that little baby if you are working all day?"

It became a constant source of contention between mother and daughter. Adelaide always pointed it out, with a hint of triumph, when Francine cried and Georgette couldn't quiet her. She hovered over Georgette's shoulder and noticed every failure. More often than not, Adelaide had to soothe Francine while Georgette stormed away in a fury.

That was their relationship ... until the Germans came. Now they didn't have one at all.

Adelaide turned over under her soft covers and kissed the picture in her arms.

She felt so useless. Her daughter had long since learned to rely on herself. Women in town who were once her friends just didn't have time for her. The war that consumed all of Europe didn't need her, because she was too old and frail to fight. To resist. Age was an even harder curse in wartime, because the elderly stood to lose the most, yet they had no power to fight back.

And that was a frightful specter, one that kept Adelaide nitpicking at her daughter. Because it was the only way she could put up a fight.

As she hugged her precious photo a little tighter, and the first few tears gushed from her eyes, a rumble suddenly started outside. It soon swelled into a long, loud drone, strong enough to rattle the mirror and objects on her vanity.

Adelaide shot upright in bed, clutching the covers to her trembling chin. Airplanes flying over weren't all that uncommon anymore, but they didn't usually come this close to Sainte-Mère-Église. And these sounded like they were flying awfully low. The reverberations soon toppled her mirror, which crashed to the floor and shattered into pieces.

Adelaide cursed as she jumped out of bed. "Seven years bad luck," she huffed to herself.

She started tiptoeing toward the window, but she dropped to the ground, glass be damned, when a frightful bang came from outside. A blinding flash accompanied it. Her flower-papered walls sprang to life with a bouncing orange glow, pulling and stretching at the daunting black shadows.

Trembling from head to toe now, just like her building beneath the armada of planes, she hurried to the window, batting the sheer curtains

aside and leaning out. The chilly night air rocked her lungs while she scanned the familiar landscape, and she gasped.

In the nearby town center, huge tongues of fire climbed into the night, crackling and popping with fury. The smoke made Adelaide's eyes water, and the sharp scent of burning wood invaded her frail nose. Her ears picked up shouts mingled with isolated bursts of gunfire.

Beyond the town, just off the coast, tracers and antiaircraft fire lit up the sky like fireworks. The thuds and bangs reverberated across the landscape and rattled Adelaide's window pane. Bursts of yellow, flares of red, and flaming balls of green lit up the sky. And the low, threatening airplane rumbles underscored all the chaos.

Adelaide shrieked and ducked from the window. She banged her shutters closed in an attempt to keep the smoke out.

She slipped into a satin robe hanging off the back of a chair. Then she stumbled out of her bedroom and into the dark hallway. Constant, bright flashes and orange glows lit the way as she flew down the stairs with her robe fluttering behind her.

She arrived at a closed bedroom door just off her parlor. It was once Georgette's, but now it housed someone else.

She rattled on the handle. "Boys! Wake up."

There was no answer.

She tried again. "There's something going on out there, you'd better get a move on."

Silence.

"Boys!"

The door creaked open by itself, and Adelaide stepped inside.

All the boys she billeted shared this one room, and it was cluttered accordingly. There were open rucksacks, dirty socks, and piles of various artifacts and possessions. The covers on the bed sat twisted and empty, as did the stacks of blankets on the floor.

Adelaide staggered out the back door while she shoved pins into her gray hair. The night moisture in her small garden, and the scent of dew-covered blossoms, swirled around her along with the billowing smoke from the fire. She tilted her head back for a better view of the sky.

She couldn't see the waves upon waves of airplanes in the darkness, but the noise, and the reverberations crawling up from the ground and tickling her bare feet, suggested they came in numbers she hadn't fathomed before. And somehow, over the immense growling, there came another sound. A flapping noise, similar to a canvas tent blowing in the breeze. The snapping of blooms and vines came next as something landed with a thud right behind her.

Adelaide's heart pounded in her chest, and in slow motion she turned around.

There stood a large, lumbering man, hooked to a silk parachute. He stomped about in heavy boots, struggling to untangle his body from his harness. Ammunition and grenades clattered against his chest. His helmet was locked firmly over his massive chin, and black paint coated his ferocious face. An American flag patch clung to his shoulder.

More flapping noises indicated he wasn't alone. Other men in chutes landed with a crash all around her. They smashed Adelaide's hollyhock and trampled her roses, groaning and cursing in the night. She heard the pops of harness belts coming undone. Whispers in a dialect she didn't recognize.

The first paratrooper noticed Adelaide, and he reached for her with burly, hairy hands.

Adelaide screamed at the top of her lungs, then she wheeled around and scampered into the streets of Sainte-Mère-Église, running as fast as her feeble legs could carry her. When she arrived in the town center, out of breath and with her hair in shambles, she didn't find anything to calm her shattered nerves.

The fire still raged, the flames flowering red and amber in the inky black night. A thick cloud of smoke had settled over the area, and an intense heat radiated through the town center. Dozens of Sainte-Mère-Église residents were out in their pajamas and nightcaps. They stood in a line bailing water under the direction of the haggard mayor. A few of them wailed with fear, and a child's screams came from somewhere nearby.

A host of armed German guards stood off to the side. The shadows from the flames played on their faces, and their long coats made them look like

demons. The grizzly sneers and twitchy fingers indicated they were nervous, and therefore even more dangerous.

One of them was a boy who billeted with Adelaide. Relieved to see a familiar face, she took a few steps toward him. But what unfolded next stopped her cold.

The boy grabbed a wailing woman who tried to break from the crowd. He shoved her to the ground and thudded her back with the butt of his rifle. His face went red with rage, veins popping out of his neck while he squealed at her in German.

A teenage boy ran to the scene with rabid, wild eyes. Clearly the woman meant something to him, and he wouldn't stand for a German beating her.

Without a second thought, that lovely German boy, who had once hugged Adelaide and called her mother, shouldered his rifle. He fired a single shot that echoed across the town.

The bullet sank into the boy's heart. Gore spewed from his back. He collapsed to the concrete and his eyes froze in death, while his face remained twisted with anger. The abused woman broke out in wails. She ran to the dead boy and buried her face in his bloody chest.

It was a bucket of ice-cold water in Adelaide's horrified face.

As for her soldier boy, he only hurled curse words and threats at the woman. When he finally locked eyes with Adelaide, he froze.

Adelaide fought back tears as she took in his transformed face. Some savage beast had taken hold of that boy who had laughed and smiled at her dinner table. It reminded her these weren't just boys who clung to her skirts and longed for a mother. A whole other side of them glowed red hot in the firelight. They had been swept into a cruel war, and it made them capable of doing incredibly cruel things.

He stared at her, shame pouring from his eyes. Then he turned away and disappeared around the corner.

"Madame Paquet!"

The mayor of Sainte-Mère-Église jogged up to Adelaide. Soot covered his clothes, and panic flashed through his normally calm face. "Have you come to help?"

"Monsieur, you have a situation."

“Don’t I know it. A stray bomb came from one of those planes and landed right on that hay barn. The Germans let us break curfew to put the fire out, but we aren’t getting anywhere.” He shielded his eyes from the inferno and turned to the coast. “And what in hell is going on at the coast? It looks like Bastille Day over there.”

“Paratroopers landed in my yard.”

The mayor turned to her with an open mouth and bulging eyes. “Madame ...”

“I mean it.”

His breathing picked up. “It’s ... it’s the landings. They’re here.”

More loud, menacing rumbles came from the coast. Within minutes, they were right on top of Sainte-Mère-Église, shaking the entire town.

The German guards snapped into action. Under the Prussian bark of commands, they hoisted their guns toward the sky and opened fire.

People in the bailing line began to shriek. Their buckets clattered to the ground, water splashed everywhere. They scattered like bugs under a light, colliding and tripping in their haste to get under cover.

Explosive devices didn’t drop from the planes, though. Instead, there came a bouncing barrage of quivering, rippling parachutes.

Flora

BÉNOUVILLE

Flora stood by the small café across from the iron bridge. Her cigarette supply had dwindled to half, but that didn't stop her from lighting up another one.

The night was off to a hell of a start.

The British Tommies were busy setting a perimeter around their captured bridge. They hoisted machine guns, piled up sandbags, and pulled extra ammunition from mangled gliders. A few climbed under the bridge to disable any German plans to blow it up. They did it with minimal resistance too. A single German officer trembled in the arms of his British captor. He begged to be killed, since he had "lost his honor." The British soldier just rolled his eyes and handed him off to the medics.

As Flora stood and watched, she learned a lot. General Howard mentioned the bridge was one of only two crossings over the Orne River, and that's why they came for it before anything else. More British troops had quickly secured the other bridge. Without them, German troops would be forced to divert defensive armies with disastrous detours and roundabouts. It would take them hours, maybe days, to get their Panzers to the coast.

An urgent situation for Germany, but there was a much calmer air here in Bénouville. At least for now.

Flora looked on from the café, and the cigarette glow made her eyes gleam bitterly.

She tried to tell General Howard and the others about her courier role with the Resistance. She detailed her hard bike ride in the dark, and how she had passed off important instructions to activate the Maquisards.

“We can help you in your noble effort. The Resistance is ready to fight.”

She said it with a puffed-up chest and raised head. She expected praise from these British soldiers. Maybe they would reward her somehow. Some cigarettes would have been nice.

Instead, they barely acknowledged her. Only one of them managed a mumbled thank you. Then he hurried off for “more important things.”

It crushed Flora. She just couldn’t understand why no one ever took her seriously. Women were arrested too. They were locked up, deported to camps, and killed right along with the men. And Flora’s alleged “safe zone” wasn’t safe at all in the end. Soldiers landed here first and put her in danger before anyone else in France. Yet they still made her feel minimal, even ridiculous.

She dropped her cigarette into the wet grass and smashed it with her boot heel. A boot once stuffed with coded messages to aid these men who laughed at her.

She tipped her head skyward when another round of planes thundered overhead. They’d been coming in large batches for the last several minutes. She knew she had better get back to Caen and tell Geraud what had happened.

She made a move for her bicycle, but a grinding, squeaking roar echoed from somewhere in the darkness.

Tanks ...

One of the British soldiers whistled through his fingers. “Sounds like the welcoming committee is here.”

Soldiers scrambled to man their positions and reload their weapons, just as the first menacing German Panzer burst through the nearby shrubbery. It made an angry charge for the bridge, while another one followed close on its treads.

Flora dropped on her belly in the grass. Gunfire popped and shrieked above her. Tracer flashes tore into her already shredded nerves. She saw a

British soldier, illuminated by all the glowing flares, mount a large weapon onto a waiting stand.

His voice came out in a growl. "Boys, load me up."

A soldier came from behind him and dropped an odd piece of ammunition into the back of the gun. It was big and bulky, almost like a grenade attached to a stick.

Flora frowned. She wasn't familiar with that weapon, but she suspected it could cause those Germans a lot of grief.

The boys soon confirmed her suspicions. Just before the lumbering tank mounted the bridge, the gun fired a rocket that slammed into the tank with a loud peal of a whistle.

A ball of fire belched from the machine and ripped it apart like paper. A blast of heat flashed across the field. Screams shattered the night, but no one lasted long inside that burning tin can. Only one German was thrown clear, and he paid a steep price for it. The explosion severed both his legs and scorched half his body. He screamed and tumbled around on the ground. His bloodcurdling cries made more than one British soldier offer to put him out of his misery.

As for the other tank, the German driver had seen enough. They wheeled their machine around and beat all hell back into the shrubbery.

Meanwhile, Flora watched the legless German soldier with growing horror. Although people had died all over Europe for half a decade, seeing it right in front of her made her sick. So did the heavy stench of burning flesh and human hair from the tank. She felt her gut tip over, but she wouldn't dare vomit in front of these soldier boys. They already had enough reasons to mock her.

More explosions hurled from the metal tomb. Flares shot out with frightening hisses and whistles. They scattered colored sparks and embers every which way. A rocket whizzed out of the tank, squealed high into the sky, and exploded in a swath of color.

General Howard pressed his helmet down and ducked with each report. "Christ! What the hell did you fire at that tank?"

"Only a Piat, sir."

“They must have been loaded with extra ammunition,” General Howard scoffed. “Welcoming committee indeed.”

Another loud explosion ripped through the night, and it shot burning Panzer parts half-way through Bénouville.

Flora pressed herself as far into the grass as she could go.

The whole thing felt like a big reality check. This wasn’t a battle for honor or glory, or even a battle for status, although women always had to fight that. This was a battle for survival, for Flora and everyone around her. These Germans were only the first to die. There would be more. France would run red with blood.

She had to get back to Geraud, because he and his network had their hearts and invasion maps set on Pas-de-Calais. It made the most sense. It boasted the shortest crossing from England, and it already had a port for Allied use. Rumors swirled about a massive army led by the famous General Patton, stationed just across the Channel from there.

It all made a convincing case for an invasion farther north, but the planes pouring past, the captured bridge, and the burning tank told a different story. The invasion wouldn’t come at Pas-de-Calais. It would come right to their own damn doorstep.

Adelaide

SAINTE-MÈRE-ÉGLISE TOWN CENTER

Adelaide remembered plenty from the First World War.

She didn't live in Sainte-Mère-Église back then. She lived in a big city close to the action, and she volunteered at a convalescent hospital. She never forgot all the dismembered men hobbling on canes and crutches. Awful coughs from gas-rotted lungs resounded in her ears. Then there were the tortured and lifeless stares from living bodies with dead souls.

She knew danger in that war too. The guns were close enough to crack her windowpanes. Stray shells killed people she knew. Her own husband was a captain in one of the French regiments. He lost an ear, a few teeth, and part of his chin in a shell blast. It forever twisted his face, but he marched off that battlefield with his life and both feet, when so many others didn't.

The Great War taught Adelaide all about the horrors of fighting. She knew the haunted look in her husband's eyes, and the scores of women who walked through her hometown in mourning. The Great War was hell alright.

But it was nothing compared to the hell of this night as war made a house call to Sainte-Mère-Église.

Paratroopers dropped on the town in a shower of open chutes. They emerged from their silk webs with blackened faces, spirited screams, and weapons at the ready. Gunfire punched blinding flashes through the ghostly orange firelight. The thudding clang of the bell in the church steeple pounded in their ears, and a paratrooper landed with a bang right on top of it, his chute draping over the perilous steeple points.

Another came down in a tree near Adelaide. Branches snapped and broke around him. His own chute strangled him, and his limp body swung in the smoke and flying hot embers.

A third chute dangled right over the searing flames of the burning building. He scrambled his legs and arms to steer away from the inferno, but the flames were too quick for him. They wrapped around his legs like the tentacles of an octopus, pulling him down into their sweltering depths. Sparks showered outward as the ammunition on him went off in the heat.

Adelaide turned away with a sob.

Gone were the days of her husband's war. Something more sinister was born in this one. Germans tackled paratroopers to the ground like wildcats. They shredded them to Swiss cheese with bullets. They took no pity or prisoners. Even citizens who tried to help were shot in cold blood.

As for the Americans, with only the firelight to guide them, they groped through the madness to locate one another. They bawled out code words and howled out commands. They helped one another up and tried to gain a foothold. All while the church bells clanged and the town's people staggered to get away from the danger.

Adelaide clamped her hands over her ears and bolted her eyes shut.

So this was the invasion, the one everyone had talked about. The one the Allies and French people dropped leaflets about, got arrested over, passed messages for, and risked their lives to aid. The one they built the Resistance around. The one Georgette had so much hope in. Here it was at long last, the hour of liberation.

It didn't look like liberation to Adelaide. Not right now. Instead, it wrought hell on her city and turned men and boys into murderers.

Adelaide pulled her tears to the back of her throat, then she ran back down the war zone of a street. Sweat from the fire dripped down her chest. Her robe threatened to come unraveled and expose her underclothes to the world. She barely noticed as her feet slammed on the pavement and carried her back to her house.

The door hung open just as she had left it. The blackened upper-story windows stared down at her like vacant eyes. She burst into her open parlor, crashing into her own side table with fresh blooms from the garden. Down

it tumbled. Dripping water, flower petals, and broken glass made a minefield of her floor, especially in her bare feet.

Adelaide stooped to clean up the mess, but an iron pair of hands grabbed her by the arms.

Her instincts kicked in fast. She may have been an old woman, but she was no frail damsel. She huffed, puffed, and out came her fists. But the harder she swung, the tighter the hands gripped her.

“Frau Pacquet, enough of this.”

She recognized the voice. Oberleutnant Henning, the commander of the boys who billeted with her. There was no reason to think he would hurt her. Like the boys she watched over, he always played the gentleman. She saw the Germans in full swing tonight, though. She couldn’t trust anyone anymore.

Her fists swung again. This time, one connected with the soft, fleshy skin and stubble on his cheek.

It was a solid hit, but it barely fazed him. He wrapped his giant, leather-gloved hand around her pumping knuckles. Then he pulled her in a bear hug to keep her still.

“That’s enough, Frau Pacquet. I won’t hurt you. You know me. Settle down, now.”

She squirmed in his arms for a long moment. Then her burning lungs and raspy breath forced her to go still. She broke out in animal-like sobs.

Henning moved his hand to her back while her shoulders heaved underneath it. “Listen to me, you must leave.”

Adelaide exploded. “Are you crazy? There’s too many ways to die out there.” She wiped her tears with the back of her trembling hand. “They’re just boys, you know. All of them. American, German. Just boys! Why do you make them do this to each other?”

“This is the invasion. It will only get worse. You must go to your daughter.”

Your daughter ...

Georgette was the only comfort to Adelaide’s riled-up insides. She had tried to get to her daughter for so long. The daughter whose husband was

missing and whose baby was hungry. The one who needed her mother more than anyone in Sainte-Mère-Église.

She looked into Henning's stern face. From somewhere inside, she sensed he truly wanted to help her. Better still, he wanted to let her go to Georgette.

"Where does she live?" Henning asked her.

Adelaide swallowed hard and tried to catch her breath. "Varreville—off the coast."

Henning drew his pursed lips into an even tighter line. "If this is truly the invasion, that's the worst place to go."

"But I'll still go." Adelaide beckoned to the streets outside. "If you can get me past those boys of yours, anyhow. They have guns. They're ... they're killing people. Anyone who tries to escape."

"I can get you past the city perimeter, but we must hurry."

He helped her to her feet. He practically dragged her to her quiet bedroom, still awash in firelight with its hellish, dancing shadows. He pulled open drawers and tossed a few things into a carpetbag. He unclipped a knife from his belt and tossed it in too. "You must travel light. Only what you can carry."

"Yes, sir."

"You don't need to call me that."

She paused and stood tall with her hands on her hips. "I don't need to call you that? Your boys just loved the salutes and 'yes sirs' yesterday."

He buried his face in his cap.

Adelaide wanted to be sorry for her smart mouth. He was trying to help, after all. Maybe it wasn't right what she said, but it also wasn't right what they did outside. It wasn't right what they had done the last four years. She gave a tired sigh before she vanished behind her separator to change clothes.

Meanwhile, Henning dumped the last of his rations and his compass into her bag, then pressed it together and clicked it closed.

She emerged from her separator, dressed in an old-fashioned, sturdy brown work skirt, ragged leather boots, a faded cream blouse, and a scarf.

Henning took her hand and they thumped back down the stairs. Before they went out, he produced the picture of Georgette and tucked it into her bag.

Adelaide looked up at him with teary eyes, but the mood changed fast when he pulled out his pistol.

She gasped. "But you said—"

"Trust me."

It was a lot to ask after all she had seen. Even so, she allowed him to twist her arms behind her back and put his gun to her head. With that, he pushed her out the front door and they marched toward the outskirts of town.

The entire city had come alive in the night. Gunshots flashed and echoed from every house and street corner. Windows shattered with all the stray bullets. Glass glittered in the streets. The chilling sound of marching boots reverberated everywhere. Keyed-up German soldiers screeched at one another while they rounded up prisoners left and right.

One of them made eyes at Henning and Adelaide. He put a hand to his holster and took some long strides toward them.

Adelaide felt her stomach turn to lead, but once the soldier saw Henning's uniform, he stood at attention and saluted him. "Herr Leutnant."

In his best commanding voice, Henning put him in his place. "Did I ask for your help?"

"No, sir, but—"

"The landings are here, in case you didn't notice. Go do something about that, why don't you, and leave this swine to me."

"Yes, sir." The soldier crawled away in embarrassment.

As for Henning, he gave Adelaide a rough push to show the rest of them he wasn't fooling around. Satisfied with his ruse, they all went back to their business.

With Henning's high marks and Adelaide's whimpers, the rest of their walk went undisturbed. The chaos faded into quiet as they strayed from the turbulent streets.

They soon reached the edge of town and the vast expanse of hedgerow country, soggy marshes, and sniper-infested orchards that stood between Adelaide and Georgette. The dark void, shrouded in eerie fog that smelled

like gunsmoke, looked like the worst ghost story she'd ever heard, and it was a perilous dive into the war-rattled unknown. Her daughter's farm would be a long walk.

"You should be safe on your own now."

Adelaide turned from the beckoning farmlands and looked up at Henning.

His build would normally intimidate anyone, but now he just looked like a terrified little boy. It cut her more than she thought it would. While she hated the way their lives had collided, she couldn't say she hated this man.

She knew she was supposed to. He wore a different uniform, and his countrymen did terrible things—unmentionable things. Yet he and his boys had become a fixture in her life. They gave her back some purpose in this crazy world. She looked after him, cared for him, and fed him. She saw his emotions and his frailties, and she knew his wounds were deep.

Everything was so complicated. She wanted to be with her daughter and be a good Frenchwoman, but she struggled to say goodbye to this German man. One she considered a friend.

"You would do well to get to your daughter as quickly as possible. Something tells me you don't want to be anywhere near that coast come sunrise." He forced a smile. "Kiss that baby for me, yes?"

All of Adelaide's barriers dropped. There was no more France and Germany, not in this part of town. She set down her bag and wrapped Henning, who was twice her size, into a motherly hug. She let her emotions soak his uniform, but only with warmth and affection. She wouldn't dare cry. He would have enough tears in the days ahead.

She took his head in her hands, and gave him a long kiss on his cheek. "You will take care of yourself?"

"Of course."

"And ... the boys?"

He nodded. "I will do my best, Madame. You hurry now."

She picked up her bag and turned back to the countryside.

She knew what this meant. She was the first person in her village to be officially liberated. It didn't bring much relief, though. With that big, black

road stretching before her, the terrifying coast beyond that, and the gunshots already echoing everywhere, she only felt more afraid.

She clutched her things and took a few steps into the grassy fields. She turned for one last goodbye with her soldier, but Henning had vanished into the fog like a phantom.



Adelaide hiked for hours, trudging through damp, pitch-dark orchards and climbing around snarling, tangled hedgerows. It certainly didn't feel like the charming French countryside she had come to love over a lifetime, that she had admired on countless trips to the coast in comfortable horse carts and even the occasional motorcar. No, this was nothing like that.

This was a place of swirling fog, enveloping chill, and horribly frightening sounds from the darkness. Every rustle of leaves and crunch of grass made Adelaide jump from her skin. A harmless encounter with a lumbering dairy cow almost gave her a stroke. Flashes and thuds from the coast battered her nerves. Then there were the crickets. So many damn crickets, even though it was only June. Their haunting chirps echoed from everywhere and nowhere, like tiny alarms. She could have sworn she heard whispers and footsteps along with them.

Adelaide also wasn't dressed for such a challenging trek, as much as she had tried to prepare. Her flimsy old boots constantly snagged on long stalks and thistle bushes. The swampy ground at her feet soaked her skirt in mud. Hair came loose from her bun and stuck to her face and neck, while her body struggled with exertion she wasn't built for anymore.

As she stopped to pull her heavy brown skirt from the mud for the thousandth time, she heard another round of roaring and rumbling in the distance. The thuds of anti-aircraft fire echoed across the land. A flood of searchlights popped on, bathing the sky in a glaring, harsh light.

When she tilted her head up, she could actually see the solid wall of airplanes. And she could see the countless parachutes dribbling from their open side doors. They bobbed like dandelion seeds in the wind, knocked askew by flashing flak and popping ground fire. A few of the planes burst

into fireballs and careened toward the earth, streaking the sky with ominous smoke trails.

Adelaide turned from the morbid display and put a hand to her thumping heart. Deep fear sunk into her bones and made her legs move even faster. She realized, with alarming clarity, that she wouldn't be alone for long. Those thousands of paratroopers, all armed to the teeth, would soon be crawling across France. They would bring a whole lot of violence and bloodshed with them. Only more people would crash and burn in their wake.

Time was already running out.

OceanofPDF.com

THE DAY WILL DAWN

OceanofPDF.com

Mildred

BERLIN

Mildred hated to be up this early. Her broadcasts were normally much later in the day. That was the way she preferred it, and that was what she got. As the most famous personality at RRG, and as the not-so-secret lover of one of its managers, she almost always got what she wanted.

Not that she should brag, at least not too loudly. People grew envious and became enemies. Some were armed and dangerous.

She rubbed her temples to soothe another headache. She got so many lately, probably from the increased tension around Berlin. Everyone crept along on their toes waiting for this damned invasion.

Although the sun was barely out of bed, more invasion talk had already found her. This time, it wasn't a bunch of uniformed, short-tempered men around a map at the studio. It wasn't Goebbels and his paranoid dribble as he worked on the best spin. This talk was the real deal. Because it came from Max, the only person she trusted.

She reached for her decanter, poured an early breakfast, and then lit a cigarette. Her eyes shot to the calendar on the nearby end table.

The date, June 6, glared up at her like an enemy soldier.

Max had barged into her apartment not twenty minutes before. He told her all about the landings with frantic gestures, pacing around the room like a caged animal. He laced his scant reports with curse words she had never heard from him.

Max had always made his way through obstacles like a stream in the woods. He just flowed. Even when his ardent Nazi ideals cast him from the

American shores and exiled him to his German homeland, he didn't bat an eye. He just got to work and made a new home for himself in radio.

It wasn't long before he occupied the top tier at RRG. Women swooned and men envied. When the war started and hardships spread through Berlin like a disease, Max Otto didn't crack. Even when the Wehrmacht got bogged down in frozen Russia, swirling "defeatist talk" didn't slow him down. He just rose higher at Berlin Radio, bringing Mildred right along with him.

Max was just as determined with Axis Sally between the sheets, regardless of his marriage to another woman. They both got what they needed from each other. Something to help them forget about the crumbling world around them.

Whenever Mildred had doubts, whenever she became afraid, Max was there to stomp her fear away. He swept her up in his rolling tide. Even if she wanted to leave him, she didn't think she ever could. He had become her world, and she had given up an awful lot for that.

So had Max. Earlier in the year, bombings had leveled Berlin. The city was always on fire. Piles of dead bodies and rubble greeted each dawn. It was one crisis he couldn't ignore, because during that insanely dangerous time, his wife gave birth to his fourth child, but neither survived. Max's wife and new baby perished when Allied planes bombed the hospital where she lay in recovery.

Max had lost everything, and that almost included Mildred. She was livid about the baby, because she viewed it as a betrayal. Max was hers and hers alone. His wife was just the woman who got in their way. A baby meant Max was splitting his time, sharing his affections, and pleasing another woman.

It made Mildred seethe. Wasn't she—the sexy, sensual, and famous Axis Sally—enough?

She was ready to toss Max for good until he showed up at her door. His clothes were rumpled and his breath reeked of booze. His wife and child's death had broken him.

Determined and steadfast Max could never break. It would mean all this horror was too real. If Max collapsed, Mildred would have to face

everything, and her complicity in it, whether she wanted to or not. So she forgave and forgot. She took Max to her bedroom and removed his clothes. She straddled him on her bed and comforted him the only way she knew how.

After that, all returned to normal. Well, almost normal. That *Vision of Invasion* radio play set off some alarms for Mildred. It wasn't typical of the cool and conniving Max. The writing showed that while his exterior remained the same, his insides were starting to crack.

Then came this morning.

Max paced her apartment in a fury. "All those stuffed shirts at the studio think this is a goddamn ruse. A diversion. It's unbelievable, the shit they're spewing. The real invasion is coming up north, they keep saying. For hell's sake, Midge! *This* is the real fucking invasion."

The curses were jarring, but a glimmer of the old Max managed to leak through. Because above all else, his goddamn radio station still got top billing.

"German radio got it out first, you know." The grin advanced into crackling laughter. "That's right, the first official invasion report came from right here. Those damned Allies can't even keep up with their own headline news. For Christ's sake, the British BBC are probably still fumbling around in their bomb shelters." His voice turned to a snarl. "Well, not RRG. We reported it first, yes we did. The first flash went out before those fucking planes even dropped their first fucking bomb." He looked at his watch and beamed. "We are the first network to report their invasion will fail."

Mildred wasn't convinced. She knew Max only acted this way when control slipped away from him. The cursing and growling was an attempt to pretend he was still in charge.

The fact that he wasn't sent a ripple of fear through her. Max had warned her what would happen if the Allies succeeded. Now that they were here, Germany suddenly felt a lot less impregnable.

She had so many questions, but Max didn't answer a single one. He just met her with the same answer every time. "The RRG reported it first."

It was all he cared about, even if they were just the first to report their own destruction.

She cleared her throat and chanced another question. “What are they doing now? The German defenses, I mean?”

“Well, it will take time. Hitler isn’t awake yet, so I hear. And no one can find Rommel.”

Some of Mildred’s “breakfast” caught in her throat. No one could find Rommel? The head and orchestrator of the entire German coastal defense was missing at this critical moment? The famed Desert Fox, who had scattered the British troops in Africa, whom all of Germany hailed as a hero, into whose hands Hitler put Germany’s fate... he was gone when they needed him the most?

She struggled to hide her panic. “What do you mean, no Rommel?”

Max huffed. “He’s an old wash-out anyway. Thinks our only chance is to chase the Allies off the beach. I say let them come inland. Let them all come aboard. We’ll blast them to kingdom come. They’ll never regroup. It will all be over.”

Mildred felt a cold sweat break under her arms. She couldn’t shake the waves of dread bursting from deep inside. She also couldn’t silence the voice whispering in her ear.

This is just beginning.

Flora

CAEN OUTER LIMITS

Flora felt like an idiot. She never should have scoffed at being a courier.

As night's curtain lifted, and the purple sky paled as dawn broke, Geraud's words from all those months ago echoed in her rattled mind. A courier job was dangerous. People risked their lives. Anyone could die doing it.

When she remembered her past complaints, her wounded pride, and her foolishness, Flora shuddered. She tried to focus on her perilous present instead, but the memories always snapped back to taunt her. They didn't give her a moment's peace for her entire bike ride through those threatening hills.

What a ride, too. She spent most of it cowering and shaking on the ground. Each time a gun went off, or a flare went up, or antiaircraft boomed, Flora leapt off her bike and sprawled into the mud for cover. With all the times she had to stop, her hour-long bike ride turned into almost five.

As morning birds came awake and flitted through the brightening sky, she finally reached the sloping hills outside Caen. The city sprawled out beneath her, but it was nothing like she had left it.

Flora had actually smelled the city long before she saw it. The sharp tinge of smoke and burning buildings pierced the air. Snow showers of ash fluttered around her for the better part of an hour. Thick, black towers of smoke billowed up from the vicinity of the city center. She developed a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Flora sucked in her breath and went back to pedaling, soon arriving at one of Caen's large rail stations. The city's vast train network gave the Germans ample reason to dig their heels in. Those rails shipped military supplies and men all over the continent, granting the Germans easy access to most of the European front. They kept the Wehrmacht running. Hitler couldn't lose that network or the city, and his henchmen would put up a nasty fight for both.

Flora noticed the station already humming with activity. The sight of her enemy's hurried movements and panicked faces gave her a mounting thrill. My, how the tables had turned.

She brought her bike to a slow halt and watched them hustle under an armed guard. Just as she prepared to cycle on, she froze.

The men crawling all over the train station were not German soldiers. They couldn't be. They wore plain clothes, and they talked and signaled with civilian manners. Their guns were decrepit and out of date. They didn't wear helmets or boots. Yet they did very soldierly things. They wired explosives onto the railroad tracks. One threw a box of shiny silver tacks across a muddy road. Another leaned a ladder up against a phone pole and snipped all the lines with a large set of cutters. The men flashed signals across the way with their hands. They worked at a fevered, military pace.

One of the men, with a bright blue handkerchief around his neck, caught sight of Flora.

Her knuckles turned white on the handlebars of her bike. She braced her shoulders and waited for him to pull a gun.

Instead, he raised his hand in the V for Victory sign, and flashed her a toothy, tobacco-stained grin.

The Resistance. Madame Vion had activated the Maquisards. Now they would slow down the German defenses any way they could.

The blue-handkerchief resister turned to his fellow Maquisards and gave a sharp call through his lips. The entire group split up and darted to various hiding places. Just as they disappeared into the underbrush, an explosion lashed through the countryside. The earth rose under it like an angry monster. Metal rail lines squealed and curved under its weight. Many of them snapped in half like toothpicks.

Flora collapsed into the mud, her bicycle landing hard on top of her. She curled in a ball and covered her neck with her arms while pieces of rail tie, mud, and rail spikes showered the ground all around her.

When the reverberations died away, machine-gun fire cracked through the rail station. It shattered the windows and tore up the platform. Then came a sharp whistle blast, and a piercing shout in German.

A fierce battle between Maquisards and the Wehrmacht began. Precise German automatic fire met with haphazard pistol bullets and rifle blasts. Yelps of pain and roars of fury rang all around the depot. A soldier dropped here, and a resister dropped there.

In the midst of hell for a second time, Flora crawled to her feet. She made a useless brush at the mud plastered to her clothes. The melee had smashed her last remaining cigarettes too. She picked up the soggy packet and tried to clean it off.

“God damn it ...” She shoved the pack into her pocket and hopped back on her bicycle.

She pedaled hard for Caen.

Adelaide

NORMANDY COUNTRYSIDE

Adelaide had been walking in the muddy Norman lowlands for some time, picking her way through the mucky fields, tapping Henning's old compass, and struggling to make sense of her direction and surroundings. But she felt even more lost when she took a step forward onto what looked like solid ground, only to splash knee deep into slimy, filthy water.

She shrieked, barely keeping her balance, flinching and cursing with both the shock and cold. In a frustrated huff, she yanked her sopping limbs out of the muck and struggled to wring the stinking swamp water out of her brown skirt. Then she stood up straight and took a hard look at the vast expanse before her.

In the eerie, misty, early morning light, it looked like a place more fit for nightmares. Still, soupy water, coated with a thick layer of mossy algae, had turned this naturally marshy place into a toad-colored, flooded-out bog. Empty, tattered parachutes were splayed out all across it. Some had been snagged on twisted tree branches, their wires creaking in the stiff breeze. Some coiled up in the water like frozen jellyfish, partially submerged in the pond. Ghostly blue lights also pierced through the water, attached to what looked like crates and barrels of supplies. Badly needed supplies that had sunk into the swamp, where they would be of no use to anyone.

And then there were the bodies. Bloodied corpses in American uniforms, all of them face down, some already bloated. Their pilots had clearly mistaken the bog for solid ground. An understandable error, given

the thick topcoat of algae. And the paratroopers, weighed down by guns, ammunition packs, and heavy uniforms, hadn't stood a chance in that water.

Adelaide felt her stomach knot up and her breakfast roil inside of her. She buried her face in her hands to try and calm her nausea, but it didn't shield her from the wretched smell emanating from the bog. Putrid, rotting algae mixed with the sharp odor of decaying flesh.

She took a horrified step back, only to have her heel jabbed by a hard metal object in the grass. It poked right through her flimsy boot soles and into the fleshy bottoms of her feet.

Crying out in both pain and anger, Adelaide clawed the object out of the earth and turned it in her fingers.

It was small enough to fit in her pocket, with hollow brass shaped like a rectangular whistle. The ends stuck out to form a small clicker. A "US" stamp identified where it came from, but not exactly what it was.

She ran her finger over those two letters. No one could hide from it now. The Americans and all their might had arrived on French soil. The paratroopers in her town, the flaming planes, and the bodies in the bog reminded her that many had already died for freedom. She wondered what purpose this bizarre little piece played in such a mighty endeavor. She also took a good look around, making sure none of that mighty endeavor would find her if this object made any noise.

When she felt sure the dead bodies were her only company, and that the mystery object wouldn't explode, she pressed the ends of the trinket together. An audible cricket chirp came out.

"What the ...?" She shook the piece and pressed the clicker again. The same chirp pierced the silence. Despite all the ugliness around her, her cracked lips pulled into a grin.

All the crickets she had heard the night before had astounded her. It was early in the season for so many of them, and it gave her a distinct feeling of foreboding. But it wasn't crickets. It was the vast army of American paratroopers trying to find each other in the dark.

She clicked the cricket chirp again, and a pitiful voice came from nearby.

"Help me ..."

As if she had been caught stealing, Adelaide threw the clicker down and her eyes darted across the lonely, silent swamp.

Everything was still. The bodies remained face down in the swamp. There was only the quiet dripping of water from nearby and the whisper of moist grass.

Just when she thought she must have gone mad, the swamp water in front of her split apart in a violent splash. A human head and a pair of shoulders broke the surface. A sputtering cough escaped from the depths of a man's soaked hair and drenched clothes.

"Help me!"

A young paratrooper was locked in a lethal battle with his weighed-down uniform and the slimy water. He gasped for air and flung his mud-covered arms. After a few seconds of wrestling, the water pulled him under again. The algae moved back over the opening. A tattered, silky parachute was the only sign that anything had disturbed the bog.

It was also a sign of the boy's predicament. Clearly it had somehow pinned him beneath the water, only letting him surface at intervals for precious gulps of oxygen. Who knows how long he had been there, fighting the thing that had been designed to bring him safely to earth?

Adelaide didn't need to be told twice what to do. She tossed her bag on the ground, digging through its meager contents with hurried flicks of her wrists and determined focus in her eyes. She found the small knife Henning had packed for her and slipped it into her waistband. Then she rolled her brown skirts up as far as she could. She timidly dipped her legs into the icy, muddy sludge.

It felt like chilled, rotted jelly against her tired old legs, but she put it out of her mind and forged ahead, fighting the muck that pulled at her skirt and boots. Muck that got deeper and deeper as she approached the struggling boy. The vague notion that she was in grave danger rolled through her mind, but she ignored it.

She couldn't let him die like this.

By the time she touched the edge of his parachute, the water came up to her bust. She folded the silk over, scanning the murky swamp for any sign of its owner.

He suddenly burst to the surface and almost knocked her over in his panic. "Help me!"

Adelaide recovered fast and grabbed his slimy hand before he went back under. She yanked on him with all her body weight, and he wriggled and squirmed to keep his face above water. His green eyes were wild with fright. The water had tinted his lips blue and wrinkled his skin. He must have been trapped in this death struggle for quite some time.

"The ropes ...," he said as the water closed in on his face. "They're caught underneath, and they're pulling me—" He took a final gulp of air before he sank under the surface again, pulled down by his tangled parachute cords.

Adelaide whipped the knife out and snapped through the dizzying web of parachute lines. Her frozen fingers moved at half the speed she needed them to. Her joints screamed in pain, no longer used to working this hard. Just when she thought her hands would lock up with arthritis, the final bit of harness pulled away from the chute. The boy burst back to the surface, at last free from his bondage.

While he struggled to catch up on oxygen, Adelaide wrapped her arm around his waist, and put one of his arms around her shoulders. With her human cargo in tow, she grappled with the stubborn swamp to keep both of them on their feet. At last, while water and stink poured down her skirt in buckets, she plopped the soldier onto the muddy yet solid ground next to her old carpetbag. Then she crawled out of the sludge and knelt beside him.

He convulsed from head to toe, his teeth chattering loud enough to wake his dead mates.

She wrapped her arms around his slimy form and situated his head on her lap. "There now, you must be freezing."

He coughed up a little more water while his quakes dissipated into manageable shivers. "Madame, you saved my life!"

Mustering her best English, she smiled. "All in a day's work."

"I've been stuck in there for hours. Christ almighty. I couldn't believe when I hit water instead of solid ground. My head went under and my ankles flew up, then the cords wrapped around me. Luckily I got my face

above water but not much else. Thought I was done for until I heard you use that damn cricket chirp.”

She noted the soaked American flag patch on his ripped uniform sleeve. “Well, we couldn’t have that. *Vive l’américain.*”

Her sunny attitude poked through his fear, and he managed a boyish grin. “Thanks to you, anyway.”

She assisted him to his feet while he squeezed the swamp out of his dripping clothes. As he did so, he took in his dead comrades and tried to keep from crying. “Those bastard, dumb ass pilots. I’ll have their scrawny little necks for dropping us in this shit hole!”

The harsh sentiment stung Adelaide, the burning planes she had seen in the night flashing through her mind. The horrid smoke trails that lingered in the sky. The flaming wreckage sinking down to earth. It would be just as awful a death as drowning in a swamp.

And as horribly tragic as each death was, she knew they weren’t done yet. Many more would die in the days ahead, whether they flew planes, dropped in parachutes, or walked across a boggy countryside just to reach their only child. Getting mad at any of them wouldn’t take that away. With an exhausted sigh, she put a gentle hand on his arm.

“They didn’t drop you here on purpose,” she said. “Besides, normally it’s not water. Muddy and marshy, but not flooded. The Germans must have opened the river locks.”

The boy ran a hand through his swampy-smelling hair and turned away from her. Biting his jaw to keep his emotions at bay, he tore through his many pockets for supplies that survived his brush with death. All he found were a few saturated boxes of cigarettes and a completely spoiled candy bar.

Adelaide’s heart melted. “Are you hungry?”

“Starving.”

She opened her bag and pulled out a small loaf of dry, stale bread. It wasn’t much, but it was the best she could do. She ripped it down the middle and handed half to the ravenous American soldier.

He wolfed it down without stopping for breath. “My first meal in France.” He licked the crumbs off his dirty fingers. “How do we get out of

this mess, anyway?”

The boy's question reminded Adelaide that it wasn't just him in a predicament. The bog looked vast and unending. She had no way of knowing how deep the water got. Forging ahead would be far too great a risk, but going around could burn precious time in her quest to get to her daughter. She put her hands on her hips and frantically turned the wheels in her head, struggling to remember the many side roads and byways in these parts.

“There's supposed to be a main highway somewhere around here, yes?” the boy asked.

She shook her head. “It's too far back, and I have to get to the coast.”

The boy drilled a hard gaze into her. “The coast? Are you mad?”

“My daughter is all alone with her baby. They need my help.”

Her plight didn't move him. “Pretty soon hell itself is going to drop on that coast. You'd be an idiot to go that way.”

“I won't leave my daughter alone there.”

“A battlefield is no place for an old woman, you hear me?”

The comment slapped her like the cold of the bog water.

Old woman ...

She looked down at her gnarled hands and ran a few tired fingers over her wrinkled face. Her vision felt blurry where it was once crystal clear. Her fine hair looked gray instead of silver these days. Her limbs were a lot more sore than they used to be.

He was right, wasn't he? Somewhere along the line, between two world wars and a few smaller ones in her own house, Adelaide had become an old woman.

Sensing that he had hurt her feelings, the soldier put his hand on her hunched back. “You're a brave woman. But still, you can't go to the coast. No woman should go to that coast. It's too dangerous.” Convinced that settled it, he began scrounging some equipment off the dead soldiers.

But his words only rankled her more. Adelaide stewed to herself while the gut-swirling smell sank into her clothes and drying mud turned her skirt into a stiff, solid block.

The anger surprised her, because that soldier had said nothing she didn't agree with. She always believed a woman's place was in her nest tending to her young ones. It was woman's role in this crazy world to bring up a new generation in love and understanding, to wipe away all these wars. The soldier said it in a different way, but the core values were the same.

Shame took root alongside the frustration in the pit of Adelaide's stomach, and she wasn't sure why at first. Maybe it was the tone of his voice, so haughty and arrogant. Maybe it was the irony of having her own advice slung at her. Or maybe it was because she had just saved him from drowning, so he had no right to tell her what she was capable of.

It wasn't the first time she had heard such talk from her male counterparts, either. Men always tried to poke their nose in her business. Her husband delighted in telling her how to raise her daughter, how to cook the meals, and how to tend to the house. He had no problem barking orders, but when she offered to let him do it himself, suddenly it was "women's work." He had "more important" things to do. Much like this war, they loved to make the mess, but they didn't revel in cleaning it up, did they?

She wrinkled her nose into a hard frown, and she noticed the corner of Georgette's picture sticking out from her bag. A ray of understanding seeped in through years of conviction and ideals. It made her bow her head in disappointment. Not with the soldier, but with herself.

She had never understood Georgette's ways. It made no sense why her daughter would want to work in addition to raising children. Now she felt as if she'd just had a glimpse inside Georgette's mind. Her daughter wasn't stubborn, she was brave. She took on years worth of tradition and exposed the falsehoods in it. She confronted attitudes like that soldier's. She wanted to prove that no matter what a man did, a woman could do it too, even with a child on her hip.

Adelaide sighed and ran her finger over the silver picture frame. She should have stood aside a long time ago and let Georgette become her own woman. Maybe now she could make it up to her by taking a page from her modern book.

She stood up tall and didn't break her gaze from the soldier boy. "There's a small thoroughfare. A side road. Not far from here. It runs

parallel to the coast. We can take that way.”

He snapped his head up at her. “We?”

“Unless you brought a boat with you.”

The soldier looked ready to give her a real piece of his mind, but both of them froze when a chorus of thuds and reverberations rocked the air, the trees, and the swampy ground at their feet. Shrieks and explosions cut through the morning gloom. Flashes flickered across the horizon. All coming directly from the coast.

“More planes?” Adelaide asked.

The Soldier shook his head. “Nope. That’s a naval bombardment.” He let that hang in the air for a moment, then he turned to Adelaide. “No way in hell I’m going to that coast, lady. You’re on your own.”

Theda

VAD DORMITORY PORTSMOUTH, ENGLAND

While France fell apart across the choppy Channel, Theda sat in the much more composed VAD dormitory. Girls went about their morning routines while somber, gray daylight struggled through the windows lining the dreary brick walls. Rain pattered against the glass and blurred the city view outside. A dormant fireplace did nothing to alleviate the dampness in the wide, dank room.

Theda, dressed in the blue skirt of her VAD uniform, sat on her own squeaky, narrow bed with a thick medical volume on her lap. Her long hair formed a curtain around her shoulders, and a cool cup of watery tea rested on the table beside her.

On the bed right next to hers, Sheila gripped a hand mirror with one hand. With the other, she applied a coat of fire engine red lipstick with all the precision of a surgeon. Carolyn squished beside Sheila and picked at her already pristine blonde hair.

All three girls tried to ignore the radio, which blared from across the room. Only a droll classical sound came from the large cathedral-like set. The violin strings couldn't have been wound as tightly as the ward sister's nerves, though. Eliza, always strict and well put together, looked as if she'd come to pieces if someone dropped a pin. Now fully dressed in her stiff, conservative, and complete uniform, with her hair swept back under a starched nurse's cap, she paced the floor with a fist in her mouth and waited for any updates.

“Do you think they’ll start dances at the pub around the corner soon?” Carolyn asked, wrapping a strand of her hair around her finger.

Theda didn’t look up from her reading. “Who would you dance with? All the boys are gone. And they were holed up in those barracks long before today.”

“I’m sure some stayed behind,” Sheila said.

“Just to dance with you, I suppose.”

Sheila turned from her mirror to give her friend a stern glare. “I’m tired of this old war. I’m ready for everyone to come home and things to go back to how they were.” She looked at her bare legs and glared. “Not to mention being able to wear stockings again.”

Theda just turned a page in her book and took a sip of her tea.

Carolyn chortled. “At least there’s been no shortage of lipstick. What would you do without it?”

“Probably die an old maid.”

“Something tells me those brutes at the pub would kiss you with or without lipstick,” Theda said behind her tea cup.

Carolyn let loose a bubbling laugh, one that didn’t fit the intense news of the morning. “You know what I’ve had a belly full of? Those blasted ration cards. Lord knows there’s never enough to get everything we need. And don’t get me started on how much I miss a drive through the country without worrying about fuel rations.” She leaned back on the thin pillow and sighed. “I’m ready for all the boys to come home too. Maybe find one to marry me. It would be so blissfully normal.”

Theda gripped her book a little tighter. Pieces of last night’s dream about King William and his hedgerow crown flitted across her memory, as did visions of the broken man he was when he returned from Dunkirk. She laid her hand over the smooth leather binding of her volume, one of the many he had given her in those golden days. Before the war and Dunkirk. Before everything was different.

Carolyn noticed the cloud that had dropped over her friend’s demeanor. “Theda? What about you? Aren’t you ready for things to go back to normal?”

“Normal ... that won’t even mean the same thing after all this is over with.”

Sheila snapped her eyes away from her mirror. “What on earth can you mean by that?”

Theda buried her nose back in her book to hide her hardening gaze. “Perhaps you should ask William.”

Carolyn’s ears perked up at the familiar name. “So that dashing brother of yours has gone away with the rest, has he? Come now, don’t worry. I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

“Indeed, he shall,” Sheila said with a nod. “That brother of yours could slap the mustache off Hitler himself. I’m sure those silly German boys will be no trouble at all.”

The comments would have made Theda laugh only yesterday, but today they came nowhere close. Nothing could penetrate the thick wall of nerves that had appeared around her heart in the last few hours. She drew in a long breath, unable to play along with the carefree attitude of her friends.

“You know, when Will came back from Dunkirk, I knew right away he wasn’t my Will.”

Carolyn frowned. “He came back in one piece well enough.”

Theda shook her head, remembering that pale, trembling stranger sitting at her dining room table. “It’s his eyes. There’s something darker in them now. Something more sarcastic and less hopeful.” She forced a smile. “My Will’s body is whole, but the boy ... the normal boy is gone.”

Sheila reached her hand out and rested it on Theda’s shoulder. “Will was lucky. A shot in the arm, and a gash on his wrist, while many didn’t come back at all.”

“Yes. His outer wounds were minor.”

“Outer wounds?”

Theda sighed. “William will never be normal again, girls. And war only gets worse before it gets better. Even if he survives all that, what will it do to him? What will it do to all of them?” She turned her misty eyes to her two friends. “Those dances at the pubs, the shows at the theaters, the ‘normal’ times. I’m afraid ... I fear ...”

With a tremble, Theda found she couldn't complete the sentence. *I fear those carefree days of our youth have flown away for good.*

Just then, a shriek of static broke up the classical music on the radio. A male voice crackled over the wires. *"Under the command of General Eisenhower, Allied naval forces, supported by strong air forces, began landing Allied armies this morning on the northern coast of France ..."*

Eliza halted in her relentless pacing and let out a quiet whimper. Girls went rigid in their beds. Once buried in their various distractions and activities, their gossip and giggles, one by one, the girls fell silent as their eyes turned to the radio.

Sheila slowly lowered the mirror in her hand, and Carolyn drew her knees close to her chest. Their smiles faded, their talk of dances halted. They couldn't hide anymore. As much as they had tried to ignore it over the years, as much as they had tried to keep up their beauty routines, their social lives, and their plans for the future, struggling to live like no war raged across the water, their minds had caught up to Theda's now. They knew what was at stake. The fate of countless people around the world rested on this one day.

One look between frightened women laid the magnitude of it bare.

Theda turned her eyes to the windows. Outside, the rain had stopped. Someone's abandoned white linens, soaked on the laundry line, flapped in a strong breeze. They had absorbed a brown and gray hue. Not from the raindrops, but from the oil. The air outside was rife with the smell of petrol and exhaust. Formations of planes had roared past all morning, and normal went overseas with them.

What would be left when those planes returned?

Flora

CAEN CITY CENTER

It was late morning by the time Flora, with her bike tires as short on air as her lungs, arrived in Caen.

Her city had dissolved to a blown-apart pile of rubble. There were downed power lines, showers of sparks, and gutted buildings. Geysers of water from ruptured mains sprayed into the air. Some persistent fires crackled and burned. Smoke brought tears to Flora's eyes and burned her throat. Any buildings left standing were dark inside, with most of their windows gone. People hung out of the empty spaces and shouted into the streets for help.

The people on the streets were broken too. Teams of dust-covered civilians chipped away at brick mountains to get to those trapped beneath. They left the corpses in heaps to be dealt with later. Injured were put on makeshift stretchers and carted to impromptu aid stations. They were pitiful, with bloody ligaments, shredded clothes, and faces blackened with mud and soot. Their wails and sobs cut into Flora's heart like a sword.

She couldn't say they were safe now, either. As she walked her bicycle through the broken glass and shattered brick, Flora felt the thump and reverberation of distant, heavy guns. She heard the booms and squeals on the horizon. It wouldn't be long before that fighting came inland, and it had already rattled the Germans. A few drove by slowly in an open army car, tires crunching over the debris. A loud, thickly accented voice over a megaphone insisted that people return to their homes, stay inside, obey curfews, do not aid the enemy. And of course ... violators would be shot.

Flora turned onto a narrow street with cobbled stones and looming buildings. It sucked her into a swirling twister of white paper leaflets. They rattled and whipped in the breeze, piled up on fences, and tumbled down the street, drifting in and out of the smoke.

She knew an Allied pilot had probably dropped them that morning, so Flora plucked one from the filthy ground. Her heart pumped faster as her anxious eyes scanned it.

The initials “USAAF” caught her gaze. So did the mention about bombing key strongholds in Caen. Electric plants. Railroads. Factories. They were all targets. They advised citizens to flee to the countryside or risk their own lives.

So more trouble was inbound, and that right soon.

Flora cursed and crammed the paper in her pocket. She grabbed her bicycle and pedaled into the leaflet vortex for Geraud’s.

Emilia

CAEN SS/SD AND GESTAPO

Emilia stood in a narrow street, outside a somber, gray stone building, one of the few left standing after the early morning bombardment. She didn't know what purpose the building had served before, but now it was the headquarters for the Caen Gestapo and *Sicherheitsdienst*, or SD, the intelligence wing of the dreaded SS.

The structure must have been built to last, because a few shattered windows were the extent of the damage. Emilia supposed that meant she was fortunate, even if she didn't feel like it. The day had already pummeled her. The office was so chaotic she had insisted on stepping outside for a few minutes, despite the many dangers lurking there.

She puffed on a cigarette, and her eyes narrowed when a twenty-something woman turned the corner and hustled down the street. She looked like hell. Mud covered her clothes, and her bicycle tires were almost flat. Even so, she walked with speed and a sense of purpose. She went to another small building several doors down, locked her bicycle against the door, and disappeared inside.

Emilia glared through the cigarette smoke wafting across her face. She knew that woman. Her name was Flora, and she rode by on her bicycle almost every day, always going in and out of that same building. Something about her felt unsettling. It was that determined way she walked and that no-nonsense look. She obviously had a lot of secrets, yet she wasn't afraid. Not of the Gestapo, the SS, or anyone else. She just charged that bicycle through a war-ravaged world dominated by men.

Perhaps no one had tried to cram her in a Lebensborn house. Or she was just up to something fishy and hiding in plain sight. Emilia had long since suspected as much.

She knew a good number of French women were resisters. They carried messages, delivered packages, cut communication wires, and disrupted German mail. As much as she hated them for it, a part of her rooted for them too. She never ratted on Flora because of that imagined kinship. She admired those women who had bucked male authority, who made their own mark on the world.

Women like Flora, who never felt the need to run away.

Whereas Emilia had no choice but to run away. Especially after that dreaded picnic in the Tiergarten in Berlin. She had marched straight home on that awful day. She packed a valise and stormed out of the house before anyone could tell her to stop.

She didn't run far. Just to the nearest recruiting station that might make use of her talents. At first, the haughty male administrator sneered that it was a *male* auxiliary. They would place young German *men* in secretarial posts with the Wehrmacht and SS. When he finally looked up from his precious paperwork, and he took in the voluptuous beauty before him, he froze. His eyes traveled over her, and it was clear he wanted his hands to also. It melted his arrogant air into mush.

He gave an embarrassed clearing of his throat. "Well, if your typing is really so good, we might find something for you ..."

It gave Emilia her first important lesson. Beauty was a double-edged sword, one she could brandish as a weapon in the right crowd. That Barn Owl might have hated her for it, along with the other BDM girls. They wanted to sweep her under a baby-making rug in an isolated brick mansion, where she wouldn't be a threat to the rest.

Men were a different story. When it came to looks and charms like Emilia's, men were too weak to be vengeful. She could crush these flaxen-haired Aryan boys in her tiny, porcelain hands. Her beauty would help her survive. That, and her damn fine typing skills.

The recruiting center placed her in a female staff auxiliary program, transferring her to France in 1942. That's when she met Harald Heyns, head

of the Caen SD intelligence wing.

Emilia dropped her cigarette and crushed it with her worn heel. She prepared to get back to work, but a shrill yell came from around the corner, followed by violent cracks and thuds.

She peered around the building and saw a mob of Gestapo and SS officers. One of them was Hermann, who had offered to guide her home the night before. How he had transformed with the dawn of the invasion. He and some others had rounded up a small group of civilians. They accused them of spying and sabotage, beating and haranguing them for answers.

As much as it disgusted her, Emilia wasn't surprised to see some extra roughhousing. The invasion had keyed up the entire city. Even though they knew it was coming, they were convinced that Pas-de-Calais would bear the brunt of it. They also thought it would be weeks away. Shells and bombs flying through their windows proved a serious wake-up call. Now they wanted someone to blame for their failed calculations. Anyone but themselves.

She watched in aggravated silence as the trench-coated Hermann, just a boy really, beat those French civilians to a pulp. Blood splattered and bones crunched as his baton connected with human body parts.

Emilia turned away with a shake of her head. Such awful things the Gestapo and SS had done, but she wouldn't pity anyone. She was too ingrained with the Aryan principles of keeping her mouth shut and her head down. Besides, a world like this had no place for pity. The way she saw it, death would find them all. Whether it was in a camp, in a battle, in a prison, the throes of starvation, or one of those damn bombers that made nighttime something to dread. It caused Emilia to shed any empathy she once had and think only of her own survival, no matter who had to pay for that.

Although she wasn't sure why she needed to live. Maybe just to spite everyone. Her parents, the male-dominated Reich, and the sniggering girls in BDM. Old Barn Owl and her damn little pamphlet.

Emilia pushed through the splintered doorway of her office building. The power had been cut, and the only light came from the shattered windows. Resisters kept snipping the phone cables, so only one phone shrieked for attention. A thick cloud of bitter cigarette smoke hung in the

air. Dust from all the concussions had settled over the desks, making the whole place look ancient and unsightly.

Emilia went for the tiny desk outside of Heyns's office. His wide, spacious, and red-carpeted office with its handsome oak desk and valuable stolen artworks on the walls. As she tackled a stack of notes from yesterday's interrogations, the Gestapo agents from outside barged into the office. They dragged along a filthy Frenchman with a blue handkerchief around his neck. Mud dotted his clothes, soot coated his hands, and his yellow-toothed, lanky grin betrayed months living on the lam.

Emilia winced as Hermann wiped away the smirk with a fist across the jaw.

"They think he had something to do with that railroad explosion this morning," the officer in the desk next to Emilia said. "Those damn Maquisards. All riled up with these bombings."

Another officer leaned over his desk. "We had a report before the third phone went out. There's thousands of ships on the coast." He ran a hand through his platinum hair. "It has to be the invasion."

Emilia's ears perked up.

She longed to join the office war chatter. After all, her eyes and ears had experienced much since 1940. She and these boys knew enough about each other too. Likes and dislikes, fears and quirks, families and sweethearts back home. After a few drinks in the office, Emilia usually let them know more. As her womanly urges mounted, she turned to her handsome office mates to fulfill her needs. They got to know everything about each other indeed.

It also added another valuable weapon in her arsenal. Sex. It made men vulnerable, and the hope for it gravitated them around her like a planet around the sun. It created trust in a world where no one could be trusted, soft spots in a wall of steel.

Except at the office, where they expected Emilia to keep her pretty little head in her typing. Women like her were to be seen and not heard.

Or placed in Lebensborn.

"This is all a ruse, I think. Pas-de-Calais is where the main hit will come. We have ample evidence to support this."

“Thousands of ships seems excessive for a ruse.”

“Where the hell is Rommel anyway?”

“Last I knew he was in Germany. No one can find him. If he has any sense, he’s halfway to Switzerland.”

The office door behind Emilia opened with a bang, and Harald Heyns strode out in all his Nazi finery. His long, black trench coat just touched the tops of his black, shiny leather boots. The swastika-stamped SS medals on his chest jangled together when he walked. His gray eyes shone like industrial diamonds from under a hat too big for his skinny face. Ghost-white skin made him look much older than his thirty-odd years.

When he saw Emilia, he instantly softened. “Emilia, my angel.”

She got to her feet and threw her arm in a salute. “Heil Hitler!”

As much as she had come to loathe that gesture, she didn’t always loathe this man. He didn’t view her as a sexual plaything or treat her as such. The charm oozing from her had an entirely different effect on him. One that made him keep her close like a good luck charm to ward away his troubles. When he was upset, he just called for his angel Emilia. She cooed words of comfort, whispered assurance and validation. Her fingers worked through the stubborn knots in his shoulders. He rewarded her with higher pay and important responsibilities. Something no one else in Emilia’s life had ever given her.

Heyns had even hired her, over several qualified (and envious) men, to be his personal administrator and right hand. It gave her a front row seat to his handiwork in “Aryanizing” France. She saw him kick the Jews from their homes, purge the streets of “non-Aryan” businesses, and round up citizens with the butt of his baton. She saw the arrests, the beatings, and all of his “interviews” with prisoners. Most of them devolved into torture, no matter what fancy words he used for it. She saw the deportation lists, and she heard the horrors of the places they went. The ash-spewing chimneys, the overcrowded trains, the gas chambers ...

Like a mangy cat, Heyns’s antics pulled at the threads of respect she once had for him. He morphed into a monster before her eyes. Yet a part of him was human. The part of him that looked at her with proud eyes and

gave her opportunities when no one else would. The Harald Heyns who helped her survive, and who looked at her and didn't see Lebensborn.

While the rough morning shook everyone else to the core, Heyns kept his hands behind his back and his chest puffed out strongly. He sneered at the newest prisoner.

He turned to Emilia and took a handkerchief from his pocket. He wiped a shining swastika ring on his finger, even though it was already cleaner than a mirror. Every time he got a report he didn't like, or something went against his normal routine, that stained handkerchief went to work. The thought crossed Emilia's mind that perhaps it wasn't the ring he was trying to scrub clean.

"Bring me that prisoner," he said in a voice that meant business. "I'd like to have a little chat with him."

Flora

CAEN

Geraud's tiny flat was a wreck.

The silence Flora and Bastien had enjoyed late last night had disappeared, replaced with alarmed shouts, electric waves of anxiety, and a heavy cloud of cigarette smoke. About a dozen poorly dressed men, all at their wits' end, paced in every corner. Worry clouded their eyes, and their fingers and faces twitched. No amount of cigarette smoke would calm them.

In the kitchen, men distributed guns and weapons. They stacked more in the hallway, along with boxes of ammunition. In their haste, stray bullets clinked to the floor and rolled about the flat. Another thing for the men to kick around, along with their numerous opinions.

"This isn't the real invasion," said one of them. "Pas-de-Calais is the place. We've had the evidence for months."

"Codes have been all over the BBC all morning. Underground network says De Gaulle himself might even speak this evening. That has to mean the real thing."

"Then why all the armies right across the Channel from Pas-de-Calais? It doesn't make sense."

"It could have been a ruse."

"Just like this so-called invasion could be! Can we afford to take these risks?"

Flora stood in the middle of the chaos with her hands on her hips. As the only woman in the room, most treated her like another obstacle to kick out

of the way. Men pushed and shoved past her, bellowing orders to everyone while not even looking at her.

She fumbled in her pocket for her crushed pack of cigarettes. Only one or two remained, and they were mushy. She put one to her lips anyway. She clicked her lighter open and struggled to get the soggy cigarette to catch.

Of course, it refused. She muttered a curse and gave the lighter a hard shake.

Geraud appeared through the throng of wound-up men. He somehow maintained his calm, paternal demeanor, even in such madness. His graying locks were neatly combed, and his eyes didn't betray a hint of stress. The only visible sign of agitation was his missing jacket and rolled-up shirtsleeves. A striking, informal gesture for him.

He stepped up to Flora and held a lighter under her cigarette.

Flora refused it. She just tossed her mushy cigarette away and went for one of the personally rolled smokes in his breast pocket. She slid one out and then lit it with her own lighter.

Geraud didn't push it. He just put his lighter away and crossed his arms.

Flora produced the leaflet she had picked up outside. "I hope you enjoyed the bombing this morning, because more is on the way."

Geraud snatched the leaflet and gave it a glance. "Where did you find this?"

"Outside. There's hundreds of them floating around."

He shook his head and tossed the paper aside. "It's a false trail. They only want to scare the Germans. Divert their troops from Calais."

"What makes you so certain?"

"Common sense, Flora. What strategic value does this town have?"

"Highways, railroads, and an electric plant."

"Which are all located in the middle of nowhere. It's a pinprick compared to the resources farther north. They'd be foolish to waste their time here."

"Unless, of course, they want surprise on their side."

"Flora, you're no military general. Leave it to the rest of us."

The words struck a nerve in the very exhausted Flora. A nerve so raw not even the fresh drag off her cigarette soothed it.

Ever since she joined the Resistance, these men laughed at her work and ideas. They rolled their eyes when she spoke. They shut her out of conversations and made her feel like a worthless part of the team, despite the many times she proved otherwise.

Her eyes turned to steel and she blew smoke right in Geraud's face. She decided her voice would be heard this time, no matter what.

"You idiots have no idea what's happening out there, do you?"

Her volume could have been heard on the coast, not to mention the Gestapo headquarters right around the corner.

The whole room came to a standstill. Some of the men exchanged weary glances. A few sneered their disapproval.

"Have you even stepped outside this apartment today? Or are you little boys too busy bickering while the big boys move in on the coast?"

Geraud grumbled. "Flora. Enough of this."

"They've taken the bridges at Bénouville."

The announcement started another excited buzz through the room.

Geraud kept his eyes glued to Flora. He slid his hands into his pockets, so the rest couldn't see when he balled them into nervous fists.

Flora saw she had the floor. "A British glider unit showed up around midnight. All hell broke loose. And planes were flying over all night. Bombers. More glider troops. This is the real thing, I assure you."

Geraud took his hands from his pockets, but only to rub them across his face. In that instant, age crept up on him. His shoulders stooped. The tangled network of wrinkles by his eyes grew deeper.

"What happened to Pas-de-Calais?" one of the other men asked.

Geraud faced his troops. "I don't know about Calais, but glider troops mean the landings are here. And I do mean here, in our own backyard." He looked at each anxious face, but he didn't break his resolve. "It's time to activate the Maquisards."

Flora gave a haughty perk of her shoulders. "Already done."

Geraud shot her a glance so hot bullets could have come from it. "What are you talking about?"

"This morning. I heard the code on the radio and took your messages to Madame Vion."

“Without clearing it with me first?”

“That’s right.”

Geraud bit his tongue to keep from screaming at her, but he couldn’t hide his anger. The skin at his collar went scarlet with it.

Flora didn’t flinch. He was probably just irritated. She had more information than he did, and it made him look foolish for once. Flush with her newfound confidence, she just scowled at his rage.

Geraud turned back to the men. “Intelligence says the 21st Panzers will be dispatched for Caen’s defense. It’s a crack German unit. We’ll need our best men on the job.” He pointed to the group of men by the pile of guns. “You disperse through the city. Taking the guns is too dangerous for now, but cause as much trouble as you can. Cut power lines. Block the main roads into town. Set barricades.”

“Yes, sir.” They grabbed their hats and coats and were gone.

“The rest of you, knock on doors. Make sure everyone has seen these leaflets. We’ll have to prepare for an evacuation.”

“Yes, sir.”

The rest of the men scrambled for their things and disappeared.

Only Flora and Geraud remained. He stood with his hands on his face and his back to her.

She again noticed how much he had aged in the last five minutes. She couldn’t really blame him. Instead of a comfortable supporting role in an invasion far up north, his feet now dangled right in the middle of the blazing bed of coals. It would put the fear of God into anyone.

She was scared too, but she wouldn’t dare sit on the sidelines. France was ready to fight back, and so was Flora.

She planted her feet and stood tall at his side. “Geraud, you didn’t give me any orders.”

He picked away some imaginary dirt from his fingernails. “You have none.”

“Why not?”

His eyes were harder than usual, glowing with the mysterious anger that still lingered. “You’ve done your job, so you told me. You activated the

Maquisards. Which, by the way, you never do without my authority ever again.”

Flora stood her ground. “*Au contraire*. I did exactly what you told me.”

“Is that what you think?” His voice came back sharp.

Flora puffed out her chest, still refusing to back down. “You told me the radio code weeks ago. You said if I ever heard it, and you weren’t home, I should take the messages to Madame Vion right away. No hesitating. That’s exactly what I did.”

“Yet no one else heard this code?”

“Bastien was here.”

“And he told you to go?”

Flora gulped.

Geraud caught the stall, and he knew exactly what it meant. “You went behind my back, with no authority whatsoever, and activated an entire unit of fighters that could have been wiped out in one German stroke. That was incredibly reckless, Flora. You’re goddamn lucky the Allies actually did come. You know how many false alarms there have been these last few months?”

“I know what I heard,” she said. “All I did was follow orders. Now I’m ready for more.”

“No. It sounds to me like it’s time for you to stand down.”

An angry flare burst in Flora’s chest. She pursed her lips and took a step toward him. “I won’t stay here and rot while the landings come in at our doorstep. It’s what my parents gave their lives for. This is history unfolding, Geraud. I won’t sit that out.”

Geraud heaved the gustiest of sighs and whirled to face her. He looked anything but pleased with her attitude. “Fine. You want to help? Go to the hospital.”

“Why?”

“The bombardment was hell this morning. Go help. And while you’re at it, report any of my men wounded or killed.”

Flora knew what kind of job that was. Geraud wanted her out of his hair. He wanted her changing bedpans and wrapping bandages in a place where he didn’t have to deal with her.

She met his hot gaze dead on. "Send someone else for that."

"Flora, the Resistance is a form of military life. I would have had anyone else strung up for the stunt you pulled this morning, not to mention your attitude. If you want to be a soldier in this army, you do what you're ordered."

"I want to help the Maquisards."

Geraud towered over her. "No."

"I've already been across the countryside. I've seen everything. I can report on movements. Help them lay traps. They need me."

"It's too dangerous."

Her belly clammed up into an angry ball. "I'm not a child."

"Aren't you?"

She took a menacing step closer to him. "I've proved I can pull my weight. I'm old enough to know what I'm doing."

"Old enough perhaps, but not mature enough. Or responsible enough. You couldn't even check with anyone before you stormed off to Bénouville to activate the Maquisards. So you can go to the hospital or evacuate with the rest. It's your choice. And if you go over my head again, I'll make sure every Resistance member in France knows to sideline you."

Flora's cheeks caught fire with rage. She had some trump cards against Geraud, but he had just played his game winner. He had all the connections, and all the authority. He could tell the whole network she couldn't be trusted. It would blacklist her for good.

Her arms went rigid, and a strong urge to hit him seized control of her. Instead, she just glared and breathed hot coals. "You're despicable."

She turned on her heel and slammed the door behind her.

Emilia

CAEN SS/SD AND GESTAPO

Emilia sat at the large desk in the middle of Heyns's office. She scooted the chair all the way in and crammed her knees together. It wasn't for lack of room. The desk could swallow her whole. Yet it couldn't shield her from what went on in front of her.

The beatings had not bothered her so much in the past. When Heyns first let her into his SD intelligence world, they were just routine. So were the disappearances. These people were threats, enemies of the state, and dangerous. It's what Emilia had been told from her youth, by her wild-eyed parents and their tales of the poverty and destruction before Hitler.

Things changed when she saw these people in person, looked them in the eyes, heard their cries. She knew some of them weren't bad people. She had seen them walking the streets, minding their own business, and lining up for rations like everyone else. She couldn't understand the crime in that. The more interrogations she sat through, the more agitated Emilia became. Something started to keep her up at night. It knotted her stomach so she couldn't enjoy food, not that much of that floated around anyway.

The pain had grown steadily inside her like a thistle since 1942. Since before then, actually. It started somewhere around that Berlin picnic in 1938. The Lebensborn pamphlet put a small crack in her dedicated admiration of the Reich. It was the first shift in her trust, the first glimpse inside a world that was much darker than she thought.

This morning, that thistle in her stomach kept her hunched behind the desk, while Heyns went to work. He stood over a lump of clothes and bones

that somewhat resembled a human. It was that Frenchman brought in from the countryside. He grinned no longer. Instead, he curled up in a ball with his hands over the blood-stained blue handkerchief on his neck. Blood smeared the carpet around him. Squeaks escaped his throat, and his body shuddered under the heavy, oppressive leather boot of Commandant Heyns.

Emilia kept her fingers glued to the typewriter. When the prisoner spoke, she recorded, just as her boss instructed. She became a machine during these proceedings. Her eyes pointed forward, but they didn't see or absorb. They focused on small cracks in the wall, a smudge of paint, or a chip in the door panel. Her thoughts fastened to those small imperfections to shut out the very big one right in front of her. One she couldn't convince herself was okay anymore, enemies of the state or not.

The victims, and the various ways they responded to fear, always cut Emilia. Some wet themselves and vomited. Some screamed in pain while others stayed stoically silent, shaking and rattling on the floor. A few spilled their secrets, but most stayed locked like a safe.

And yet there was still no pity, even after all this time. Guilt maybe, but no pity. Emilia simply couldn't survive if she let herself pity.

And Emilia had to survive.

She flinched as Heyns's steel-tipped boot connected with that poor Frenchman. He let out a screech as something snapped inside of him. A rib perhaps. Some tissues maybe.

Just as disturbing was Heyns's transition from friend and mentor to Nazi monster. Darkness moved into his eyes. His features looked icy, and his skin turned to slate. His voice changed. It came out in a growl, like a hungry, rabid wolf. A demon moved in the man.

"Tell me where the rest of them are hiding."

"I ... don't ... know."

Another kick, another crunch from the body.

The Frenchman wheezed for breath. "They've moved out ..." He paused to spit up a tooth. "I don't know where they've gone."

"Lies." Heyns grabbed him by his hair and flipped him on his back. He bored his eyes into the prisoner like bayonets. "Don't make me kill you. Tell me where the Maquisards have gone."

“I told you ... they’ve moved out ...”

Heyns balled his hand with the silver Nazi ring into a hard fist. He arched his arm back and brought the ring square into the man’s jaw. Then he did it again. And again. Teeth cracked, blood spattered, and the jaw broke. The Frenchman’s face would never recover. He struggled to breathe through the fluids backed up in his throat. His eyes turned to purple lumps, and a stain appeared on the front of his pants.

Emilia bolted her eyes shut but kept her hands on the typewriter. Her fingers were normally rock solid, but today a tremor had appeared.

She didn’t know what came over her just then. It could have been the bombardment that morning, or the thistle-plant of knowledge that things were about to change. Maybe she just knew that sitting here made her complicit in the torture, and she could stomach it no longer. While the Allies bled into France like that man bled on the floor, complicit was a bad place to be.

As Heyns’s fist crunched against that face for the sixth or seventh time, Emilia sprang from her chair.

“Herr Heyns. Stop.”

Heyns froze mid-punch, and a terrible silence fell over the room.

He turned his chilly gaze on his administrator and got to his feet in slow motion. His crimson-stained hands remained balled into fists. The darkness hadn’t left him, which was evident in the way he glided over to her like a vampire.

Emilia shook under his gaze. “Forgive me.” She put a hand to her forehead. “I’m ... not myself today.”

It wasn’t wholly a lie. Her stomach twisted with more panic than usual, so much that her legs wobbled beneath her and threatened to give out.

She would be punished for this. Perhaps it would be her turn to curl in a ball on the floor, but she didn’t break her gaze from Heyns. Instead, she put as much sparkle into her eyes as she could manage. That serene smile pulled at the corners of her lips, her only chance against that rage.

As she hoped it would, her charm cracked the steel plates of evil encasing Heyns. His features switched back to the man she knew. He stood there a moment, as if he had forgotten where he was or what he was doing.

He beheld the bloody heap on his floor, and the trembling woman at his desk. Then he whipped out his handkerchief and wiped the blood off his precious ring.

There was plenty left to be said, and it hung over them like a storm cloud. But a sharp yell from the bullpen shifted his attention to the office door.

“Emilia, go see what the trouble is.”

She noticed that he didn’t call her angel. “Yes, sir.” She gave a sharp Hitler salute, and then she skirted out of the room, and out of his reach.

★ ★ ★

It wasn’t much calmer in the bullpen. Reports of paratroopers infiltrating the coast had found their way to the office. More reports flowed in of ships crowding the Channel and soldiers pouring ashore all over Normandy. The drumbeats of distant guns thudded through the walls. Airplanes rumbled by every few minutes. Mugs and glasses rolled off desks and shattered.

There was also the yelling. It bounced off every wall and street corner. Officers yelled into the few working phones. They yelled at the people outside, they yelled at prisoners huddled in the corners. When no one remained to absorb their frustrations, they yelled at each other.

Emilia felt the electricity of panic crackle through her bloodstream. What a morning it had been ...

The officer at the desk beside hers slammed his phone into its receiver. “That was coastal defense. They want permission to release the Panzers.”

Another officer frowned. “How the hell is that our concern?”

The door behind Emilia slammed open, and Heyns entered the room, still picking at his ring.

Just behind him, Emilia saw the twisted, broken legs of the unconscious, maybe dead prisoner. She gave a hard swallow to suffocate that damn thistle in her stomach. She had gotten away with one defiant display, but Heyns wouldn’t tolerate another, no matter how much he cared for her. She snapped into another Hitler salute, although it wasn’t as enthusiastic as her previous ones. Her arm didn’t go up as high and she didn’t look her boss in the face.

“What’s the commotion out here?” Heyns asked in a strained voice.

Emilia briefed him. “The coast wants the Panzers, sir.”

“Only Hitler can release the tanks. And I doubt he’s been awakened for the day.”

“It’s serious on the coast sir,” another officer said. “Perhaps we ought to run it up the flagpole.”

“As we are not on the coast nor a part of the Wehrmacht, we will do nothing.”

The harsh, loud tone brought the room to a standstill. Officers exchanged weary glances. Emilia felt her stomach drop to her knees.

Heyns locked his hands behind his back. “Our job in intelligence is to evaluate threats to the state here in Caen, and we take orders from Himmler. The Wehrmacht can worry about the coast, and they take orders from Rommel. So let’s focus on the work we do here, yes?”

One of the officers stood bravely from his desk. He addressed Heyns with a very brief salute. “Sir, Herr Hoffman from the prison has contacted us. He wants to evacuate his charges into Germany.”

“How many?”

“A hundred, give or take.”

“Evacuation requires things we do not have. Soldiers, supplies, trains. The railroad station was bombed this morning, yes?”

“The trains are still running—”

“No evacuation.”

The officer hid the quiver in his shoulders. “Well, sir, a lot of those prisoners are Resistance. Should they fall into enemy hands and talk ...”

That horrible darkness cast its shadow over Heyns’s face again. His features transformed. The monster returned.

“Well, there’s another answer to that problem, isn’t there?”

SHORT AT NOON

OceanofPDF.com

Adelaide

UTAH BEACH SECTOR VARREVILLE

It was close to midday before Adelaide wandered into the vicinity of the coast, with open farm fields and a few gentle slopes all around her. Better than a swamp, but still nothing she considered close to civilization. Not that she was fit for civilization. The bog had destroyed her skirt, glued its stench to her wretched hair and face, and turned her cream blouse an unsightly brown. Her muscles throbbed in pain and her breath came in heavy puffs. Her head throbbed with all she had seen today.

And she'd seen more than she could ever imagine. In just one morning, Adelaide had seen houses and farms across France turned into battlefields. Windows were broken by projectiles, barns were set alight, and women and children sent on the run. Gunfights between snarling Germans, even meaner in their quest to restore order, and fiercely trained paratroopers with deadly amounts of ammo, broke out across every field and orchard. Smoke plumes draped the entire area. Once-empty grasslands transformed into morbid graveyards, with human cadavers, both civilian and military, stretched out everywhere.

The animals suffered too. Cattle with swollen udders lay prostrate in the mud. Horses with missing legs and swarms of flies dotted the terrain. Land mines swallowed plenty of other creatures, leaving entire fields spoiled. Then there were the mauled pigs and the blackened chickens. Even the old farm dogs couldn't escape the battle for France.

It made Adelaide more furious than anything. As much as she hated it, she almost expected humans to tear each other to pieces. They were foolish enough to start all these damned wars. But it absolutely disgusted her to see innocent animals, everything loyal and kind, pulled into the vortex of killing.

And it only intensified the closer she got to her daughter's farm. Endless sky trains of planes had her permanently rattled. Thundering roars from the beaches got louder and more intense, as did the flickers from guns and antiaircraft fire. Just over the horizon, she could make out the tops of floating dirigibles, observation balloons for an unseen behemoth of an army at the beach.

And she had long since spotted infantry soldiers too. Having survived the frigid Channel and fortified beaches, they now moved in droves across her beloved country. Men and boys wearing various patches on their sea-soiled uniforms. Sand and blood dripped from their wet hair.

It reminded Adelaide that she was inching toward the most dangerous, poisonous snake pit of all time, or dancing on the edge of a violent hell on earth. All to get to her daughter, who might not even be there.

And she might not make it anyway. Because she had been shot at more than once already, and she had to duck and cover yet again as a slew of shouts rose up behind her. A round of bullets snapped from guns that sounded too close for comfort. They landed within a hair's breadth of Adelaide's legs, spraying her face with sharp blasts of dust and stinging pricks of grass.

"Hold fire," a voice suddenly shouted. "It's a woman."

Adelaide snapped her body into a ball. She trembled as dozens of heavy footsteps crunched through the grass and straight toward her. She had heard plenty of stories from violated women of France. She didn't figure her age would stop a soldier whose nerves were keyed up enough. In fact, she'd probably been lucky to avoid it so far.

A dark shadow moved over her and sent a shudder through her thick skin. She heard the sound of a gun lifted into position.

"On your feet, Madame."

Her stomach went queasy with fear. There would be no magical portal to save her, no delivering explosive to wipe that soldier, or herself, off the map. She was trapped, and since he had a very big gun, she knew she would do well to not waste his time.

With her joints creaking, she rose to her feet. She propped her head to its most regal position and looked the soldier right in the eye.

He was a boy still, like so many of them. Sand sprinkled his mussed and dirty red hair. Blood and dirt stains smeared his pale face. His uniform pants had clearly spent a long time under water, both in the Channel and in the swampy bogs all through this area. A soiled American flag patch decorated a shoulder that couldn't quite fill out the uniform. The other shoulder bore a patch with an ivy leaf symbol and "4th Division" printed beneath it.

A host of other soldiers stood behind him. Some of their shoulder patches matched his. Others were clearly paratroopers, with two big "As" on their shoulders instead. It confirmed for Adelaide that beach soldiers were indeed linking up with paratroopers, an important step forward in such a big invasion. She wanted to be relieved for her battered France, but too many other emotions surged through her.

Especially when that redhead cocked his gun with a bloodthirsty growl.

Before Adelaide could say a single thing in her defense, she found herself surrounded by a ring of gun barrels all primed to kill. She steadied her knocking knees as best she could. Then she decided to go out in style. She boldly faced the red-headed boy.

"You're full of sand, boy. Have a nice day at the beach?"

He glared. A dangerous one that could kill on its own. "You French dames all speak such smart-mouthed English?"

"Only with such refined company around."

One of the other boys gave a high-pitched giggle, but one dark look from his 4th Division counterpart silenced him.

The redhead turned back to mouthy Adelaide. "And what, may I ask, are you doing out here?"

"Can't an old woman go for a harmless little stroll?"

"Nothing is harmless today, Missy. Maybe you're on a stroll to see your German buddies and tell them our positions while you're at it."

She shook her head. They were accusing her of spying, and she had to put that down fast. “No, sir. I’m trying to get to my daughter.” She reached into her pack, but all the boys jumped and their rifles clicked into position.

The redhead snarled. “If you’re thinking to pull a fast one, don’t bother.”

She nodded to his huge rifle. “Even if I did carry such things, no gun in this bag could take on that one.” Adelaide held one hand up to show she meant no harm. With the other, she slowly reached into her pack and produced the picture of Georgette and the baby.

The menacing soldier yanked it from her and gave it a stern look over. Then he pierced Adelaide with a warrior’s gaze. His eyes became chilling spotlights, running up and down her ravaged frame, her filthy blouse and brown skirt, her sweaty hair, and her shaking hands.

Adelaide felt horribly invaded, but something in her must have satisfied him, because he lowered his weapon and handed her back her picture.

The rest of the guns went down too, and the tension in the air lifted.

Adelaide’s shoulders and knees relaxed as she shoved the photo back in her bag. “So, you boys making good progress?”

“I suppose, if you count landing in the wrong place progress. But at least we’re here and not back in the sea. Just where might you be from, anyway?”

“Sainte-Mère-Église.”

“You should have holed up there instead of running around an active battle zone. Don’t you have any sense?”

Adelaide just rolled her eyes, Georgette’s picture calling to her from just inside that knapsack. Staying in Sainte-Mère-Église might have helped Adelaide, but it wouldn’t have helped her daughter. Which was why she had to keep going.

She took a bold step forward. “Well, it’s been nice serving as your welcoming committee, but I really should be going.”

The redhead stepped in her path. “No way are you going to that coast.”

“I’ve survived this far, haven’t I?”

“By horse shit luck, I’m sure. You can’t go ahead. I’m sorry.”

“How typically American to boss me around on my own soil.” She at least said it in French, but her cheeks still flushed at her own brashness.

The redhead seemed to know she had insulted him too. He let it slide ... for now. "We'll escort you to the nearest aid post. You can wait there until we clear this area."

"I can manage just fine, thanks."

"The hell you can. You're going to the rear, and that's an order."

Adelaide felt her toes curl with frustration inside her muddy shoes. People had ordered her around for the entire last four years. She had reached the end of her patience with it.

She shot the boy her own deadly gaze. "No."

The redhead's eyes turned to ice. "Come quietly or I'll drag you."

She swallowed any fear the comment was meant to provoke. "I'm sorry, but this can't wait. I'm getting to my daughter, with or without your help." She again took a step forward.

He grabbed her by the wrist, not ready to cede his territory. "God damn it, I said no, old woman."

Darkness flashed through Adelaide's eyes and her shoulders went rigid.

Old woman ...

It wasn't the first time someone had thrown that up in her face today. But this time it rubbed her in a spot that was way too sore. Her vision went orange with the fire of her rising blood pressure. There would be no more keeping her thoughts to herself, no more hesitating, and no more quiet obedience. "Old Woman" was one label she wouldn't wear for one more goddamn minute.

She balled her hands into fists and stood her ground before the grisly soldier. "God damn yourself." The roar of her voice almost shocked her. "Do you have any idea what I've been through? What my neighbors and friends have been through? Four years of Germans in my backyard, just to have the likes of you come in here and tear up everything that's left. You want to liberate my country? Well, all you can liberate is a bottle of liquor, from what I've seen out of you so far."

The men all stood aghast at such an unexpected outburst.

The redhead's eyelid gave a dangerous twitch, but again, he checked his anger. "I thought you French girls were supposed to be charming."

Adelaide snarled at him. "Oh, trust me, boy. The time for charm is long gone. Are you going to get out of my way, or do I have to run you over?"

He let out an annoyed grumble. "Look, lady, if you really want to walk through here and get blown half to hell, I guess I can't stop you. But damn it all, I've called myself a gentleman for too long."

"Have you? It doesn't show."

The paratroopers smothered a laugh while the redhead went chilly. "Mind that tone, lady."

"I will if you will."

His cheeks turned scarlet with both amusement and embarrassment. He turned to his boys with a roll of his eyes. "There's no arguing with this one, is there?" They all chuckled, and he faced Adelaide again. "Alright, go to your daughter, but I'm sending a guard with you."

"I don't need a guard."

"Yes, you do. They won't let you set one toenail in that zone without one." He beckoned to one of the boys in the back of the cluster.

This boy, with an ivy leaf on his shoulder, practically drowned in his helmet, with not a trace of facial hair. He was just as skinny as his counterpart, with rosy cheeks and the face of a child. He looked like he could barely manage the gun hanging off his shoulder. He also had globs of sand all over him, and a blood-soaked piece of gauze slapped over his left eye.

"Why me?"

"Because we should have sent you to the medics anyway," the redhead said. "With your eye half blasted out. Take her to her daughter, then go to an aid post."

"It's just a graze."

"Can it, boy. And do what I say."

The boy gulped and his shoulders stooped in obedience. He allowed the angry redhead to shove him next to the waiting Adelaide.

She moved her own spotlight eyes up and down his wiry frame and glared. "Armed guard indeed. Blind in one eye, and a boy who knows nothing, just like the rest of you." She turned her withering eyes to her new guard. "You may as well hand me that gun and let me watch over you."

Without asking permission, she yanked the gun off his quivering shoulder while he stood in complete shock. Then she stormed off without any thanks or apology.

As for her young and now disarmed guard, he scampered to keep up with her while the rest of the troops laughed and moved on. “Wait,” he called out. “Hold on there, ma’am!”

Adelaide ignored him, stomping her way onto the rolling slope of a farm field. Clenching the heavy gun in her tired arms, she pushed through the screaming burn in her calves, protesting such a climb with how tired she was. She tuned out the whiny voice behind her, begging her to be careful with his loaded gun. With her pulse flushing inside of her head, and her determination swelling to new heights, Adelaide reached the top of the slope faster than she thought. And when she did, she froze solid.

The slight elevation provided a perfect view of the gray, sandy coastline, just a little over a mile distant. What she saw there locked her heart in place.

The silvery ocean beyond the tawny coastline had disappeared, obstructed by a tangled web of ships, as far as the eye could see. There were thousands of ships. Mobs of ships. Ships of every size and shape. She could have crossed the Channel and not stepped on water once. Their guns roared as they screeched forward, inching toward the coast like monsters from the deep. Massive observation balloons floated above them, daring any sky predators to give it their best shot.

Adelaide could only stammer one word as her so-called guard staggered up behind her.

“Merde ...”

Mildred

RRG STUDIO BERLIN

Mildred strolled into the radio studio with a swagger, dressed in a black skirt and matching heels. Her scarlet fingernails were polished to a shine. She had also put blush on her cheeks and swept back her jet black hair to show her face. She held her head higher than ever, ignoring the scornful gazes and bitter smart mouths of her colleagues.

They were just jealous.

Sweaty and red-faced Max led her through the studio bullpen with her arm draped lovingly inside his. They looked ready for a stroll in the Tiergarten instead of a grueling day at work.

As for Mildred, she hoped the studio and its hectic routine would provide some normality in a day that had spiraled to anything but. Ongoing invasion news had made a mess of Berlin. While the Nazi propaganda machine tried to keep a lid on the story within the German borders, it was all the rage on their international broadcasts, and it was too big to keep in their nets. Word dribbled out through houses with contraband radios, secret BBC listeners, and even more secret German Resistance members. People flocked out into the streets, whispering to each other in alleyways, putting their heads together at restaurants, and avoiding the stern gazes of SS patrolmen.

It made Mildred sick, and her liquor and cigarettes no longer cut it. Only the studio could help her now. The constant foot traffic, the shuffle of

papers, the steaming mugs, the harried broadcasts. It would distract her from the fears invading her mind, like those ships invading the coast.

Besides, Axis Sally didn't get days off. Goebbels expected her at her post, no matter what happened in her life or the world outside. And he was harder on Mildred than anyone else, because he didn't care for her as much as Max did. He outright detested this American girl, with her outrageously high salary and diva behavior. He threatened to cut off her paycheck all the time, but it was a Nazi-coated bluff. Axis Sally was the highest-rated broadcaster on the entire network. If he chased her from the studio, the entire ministry would howl.

It put Goebbels at odds with his own hatred, which made him extra dangerous. Mildred wouldn't dare provoke his wrath by not showing up on a day like this, even if he was in Berchtesgaden, tucked away with Hitler in his secret little hideaway.

Since Goebbels was the last person Mildred wanted to think about, of course he was right there when she and Max stepped into her recording booth. Not in the flesh, but in the form of one of his most detested underlings. His name was Becker, and he was a fellow broadcaster and propaganda official, who could often be seen practically holding Goebbels's hand when he hobbled on his crooked leg around the RRG. Since Becker so badly wanted the head of propaganda's favor and the top spot at the station, he saw Mildred as enemy number one. He sabotaged her in all sorts of ways, from the subtle—such as stealing pages out of her broadcast notes so she would flub up on the air—to the obvious, like roughly bumping into her and spilling things on her clothes. Now he perched on Mildred's small desktop like a vulture, and she almost collided with his chest full of Nazi medals.

Max jumped back, and Mildred suppressed a shudder, subconsciously ducking her head. She had already crossed the line with this man once, a few years back. She was damn lucky to even be standing here after that little incident ...

Becker's glare bordered on psychotic. "Well, well, if it isn't everyone's favorite broadcaster."

Mildred stiffened into a firm Nazi salute. "Heil Hitler!"

“Indeed. I expect you know where your loyalties are by now, don’t you ... *Axis Sally*?”

Mildred’s blood turned to ice, and brief memories cut through her head like a jerky motion picture—an epic meltdown in the studio bullpen. Her hand slapping Becker’s stunned face. Hawk-like screeches from her own throat.

Her mind flashed again and recalled a vast office. Harsh lamplight cut right into her eyes. Goebbels and Becker sat in front of her with a chilling gaze, sliding a piece of paper across a sprawling desk.

“*Sign this ...*”

Back in the present, Mildred felt her body tense. Max’s arm grew stiff inside of hers. Yes, after that day, she knew where her loyalties were alright.

So did the rest of the broadcasters at the RRG. A glance around the other recording booths showed they hadn’t gone home since the night before. Half-eaten meals littered every table, and disheveled reporters hunched over microphones. Their hands shook with overdoses of caffeine. They had to keep going, even if it took all week. They had to add their thread to the web of Nazi lies.

“... Thousands of dead are stacked on the beaches ...”

“... Talk of withdrawal is already rampant on the coast ...”

“... No break of the Atlantic Wall, and tanks are en route ...”

“.... the Desert Fox will win the day ...”

“Miss Gillars.”

Mildred drew her shoulders up and faced Becker.

His glare could burn through a steel vault. “I understand with your countrymen storming ashore, you might be tempted to repeat some of your ... past outbursts.”

“Herr Becker—”

“It would be most unfortunate should you pull a stunt like that today. I’m not even sure Goebbels would bother with a tribunal.” He took a threatening step toward her. A haunting sneer curved his lips. “In fact, because of certain pieces of paperwork, he wouldn’t have to. Not even as a formality.”

Max drew in a sharp breath beside her. Mildred again saw the image of the large desk in the studio's biggest office. The paper sliding across it. The voice echoed in her head and pulled all her courage from her.

"Sign this ..."

She struggled to maintain her composure, but it was tough. Because Becker, little weasel that he was, had a point. It didn't matter that she was an American citizen. That piece of paper meant a tribunal wouldn't be necessary. Not anymore.

Becker's dark eyes narrowed. "I certainly hope you get my meaning."

"I am here to serve the radio, Herr Becker. Just like you. And you know, I don't recall Goebbels putting you in charge of me or anybody else."

It was clear Mildred had hit a soft spot. Becker liked to throw his weight around, but he also knew his limits. Nobody could do anything without Goebbels's approval. He wouldn't dare, for fear of winding up on the wrong end of that insane temper.

"Goebbels may be gone now, but he'll come back. And then we'll see, won't we?" He shoved past her and disappeared into his own broadcasting booth. The door slammed hard behind him.

Max squeezed her hand, and together they faced the rest of the station.

Countless pairs of eyes in other booth windows assaulted them. Some of the employees clenched their fists and cracked their knuckles.

Mildred was used to it to some degree, but this was different. It didn't seem like it was about her high salary or infamous snobbery. They weren't mad about her fancy apartment, her swanky clothes, and her access to all the liquor. They were mad because Americans, just like her, now invaded their shores. It didn't matter how long she had lived in Germany. As far as this room was concerned, Mildred Gillars was the enemy in every sense of the word.

Which put her in a very frightening position. Because these people weren't the only ones who saw her as a villain. The rest of the country probably would too. As for America, her prospects there weren't any better.

"They've indicted me over there ... you could be next."

Mildred hid the tremor that appeared in her jaw. The familiar lullaby struck up in her head, and it played on a frenzied repeat.

I'm just an actress.
It's just my job.
It's not propaganda.

OceanofPDF.com

Theda

PORTSMOUTH, ENGLAND

For the first time since 1940, the church bells chimed in Portsmouth. The clang practically deafened everyone after four years of silence.

The invasion created other changes too. Crowds of anxious people queued up at chapels for prayers. Businesses shuttered their storefronts and managers went home for the day. Clusters of women flashed V for Victory signs out their windows. Mothers dabbed their eyes with handkerchiefs, and fathers paced their dens, smoking their pipes in a tizzy. A sizzling tension swirled over England like a storm cloud ready to break.

Theda tried to block it out as she and the other VADs, decked out in their blue uniforms and aprons, followed their ward sister down the streets of cool, rainy Portsmouth. The short jaunt from the dorm to the hospital normally slipped by with silly chatter and girlish giggles. Today, something heavier hung in the air. No one said a word or cracked a smile.

Even the streets looked gaping and empty, because the lumbering tanks once parked there had disappeared. Army jeeps no longer swarmed every available space. Artillery guns didn't hang their long necks like an archway over the road. They, like the boys, had vanished to those bloody beaches in France. Their absence made the town streets feel ghostly, and too big for a group of such small women.

Notes that well-wishers scribbled in chalk added to the haunted feeling. "God Bless," read a message between some tank tracks. "Thank you," said another where guns once sat. "Bring my baby home," said one over a pair of jeep skid marks.

Theda chewed her lip as she tried to keep up with the girls. She also slipped a hand into her apron pocket, where a familiar, warm coin nestled in the fabric. She had kept it with her these last few days, imagining that William gave it to her instead of some nameless, solemn boy on a tank. She hadn't spotted her brother in those crowds. Hadn't had a chance to tell him goodbye or get a lucky talisman from him. The soldier in the tank was the closest she had, so his coin would have to do.

As her shoes clicked on the damp streets, Theda turned her nervous gaze to Eliza's rigid back. She remembered when she met the ward sister in church a year ago, and not by accident. She knew that Eliza, with her stern dark eyes, conservative, old-fashioned dress, and rigid, schoolmarm manners, was organizing volunteers to serve the war effort at the big hospital in Portsmouth. Theda was determined to get one of those spots. She begged for one after service on a typical quiet Sunday. Although Eliza felt weary crossing her prominent parents, Theda pestered her every Sunday until she agreed to find her a position with the VADs at Queen Alexandra.

It was only a small victory, because Theda had wanted so much more. She saw the notices all over town for female auxiliary units in the military. The snappy women in uniform set her mind ablaze. Fantasies about her own trip abroad in her own uniform kept her up at night. She knew she had the intelligence and the courage, but there was just one problem.

Mrs. Brown would go to pieces if another child, her daughter who belonged at home, left her for the military. Mr. Brown also needed someone to lean on, with the bombs and raids still threatening England. As much as Theda struggled with the stale air at Number 6, she loved her parents and cared about their welfare. They didn't have anyone else. So, dragging childhood friends Carolyn and Sheila with her, Theda settled for a place at the local hospital.

Mrs. Brown still found it a tough pill to swallow. She tried to keep Theda home with every fiber in her being.

"Your stomach will never keep around all that blood, you know."

"A woman brought up properly should understand her place is at home."

"That harbor is full of crime, now that all the soldiers are billeted nearby."

“You know you’ll grow out of these childish fantasies about leaving home. Why not focus on your family instead, like those nice girlfriends of yours do?”

None of it deterred Theda. After she flew through her training, and once her mother realized she couldn’t stop the inevitable, Theda went to Queen Alexandra three or four times a week.

The hospital wasn’t all that exciting at first. She rolled up gauze in a mindless daze, or cleaned out bedpans with a cloth over her nose. She switched dirty sheets to fresh ones on empty beds. It was a routine that required little fuss.

However, over the last few weeks, her routine had slipped into hurried frenzy. The doctors grew a bit tenser. Mountains of medical supplies and morphine syringes appeared in the storage rooms. Miles of bandages were wrapped and prepared. Extra beds arrived in the wards. Theda’s muscles grew a couple of sizes cramming them into every available space.

Additional staff poured in too. Like the stiff-backed, fully trained, and strong-willed Royal Army nurses, hailing straight from the prestigious medical schools in London. Highly educated and infused with military precision, they burst into the wards, took up the reins, and whipped the lax hospital into a tightly running ship. They implemented basic training programs and troop exercises, even for volunteer detachments like Theda’s. Tasks around the hospital increased. In sharp tones, they reminded everyone that this was no longer a drill. True to their predictions, the hour had arrived.

Theda smoothed her waist-length hair. Too long to tuck completely under her cap, she had at least clipped it in a barrette and swept it away from her eyes. She toyed with the frayed ends to keep her restless fingers busy, and her knees betrayed a slight quiver.

The sudden jitters surprised her. She adored her work at the hospital. She thrived there. While Sheila and Carolyn detested the basic training programs and commands of the Royal Army nurses, Theda ate them up. She dove into her work with extra fervor. She challenged herself to move faster, to be smarter, to go the extra mile whenever she could.

The Royal Army nurses noticed. They began to trust her with more important things. They even let her assist in a surgery. She must have done okay, because the nurse gave her a firm nod of approval when it was over. Theda thought she saw a smile too.

But she hadn't faced real battle yet. The only patients she treated were Dunkirk amputees who needed extra rehab, or a few pilots from the Battle of Britain still lingering in the recovery wards. Some bombing victims made their way to her back in April. It was enough to keep Theda busy, but mostly with faded scar tissue instead of open wounds and severed limbs.

Theda almost felt a sting of regret as she followed Eliza down the chilly streets. She wanted a life outside the cold stone walls of Number 6, but everything felt so uncertain now. The world had become a scary place. The cozy den at her childhood home felt like a much better way to pass such times.

But then the regret vanished almost as soon as it arrived. She knew she could do this. Countless medical volumes waited in the vaults of her mind. Months of training resided in her muscles. William's encouraging voice lingered in her memories. Her place was not sitting on a couch at Number 6. Not anymore.

She belonged at Queen Alexandra Hospital now, which suddenly loomed into view. The sprawling complex consisted of tidy, humble brick buildings with white trim and stylish windows. They housed all manner of medical procedures, from surgeries and illness to rehabilitation and recovery. The spacious grounds with lush trees were lovely and green, perfect for lunchtime strolls.

Today, they crawled with personnel instead of chirping birds and squirrels. Some wore sky blue skirts with white aprons like Theda's, each adorned with a big scarlet cross. Some wore neatly tailored military uniforms or crisp white coats. Everyone wore anxious expressions.

Just like outside, inside the hospital was a madhouse of people. Every nurse and volunteer crammed into the wards. The Royal Army nurses stacked supplies and moved beds through the various corridors. Volunteer and regular hospital staff jumped in where they could. The rest huddled in circles and tried to make sense of it all.

Theda felt instant relief to have some familiar faces in the chaos. Sheila and Carolyn stood right behind her, damp and sweaty from their hurried walk from the dormitory. Sheila's lips still glowed bright red, even with everything going on.

Theda winked at her with a smile. "Still that lipstick? On a day like this?"

Sheila grinned triumphantly. "I'll wear the same shade at my funeral, Theda Brown. A woman should never be without lipstick."

Carolyn gave a shudder beside them. "I doubt anyone will notice today, Sheila. I heard the London girls saying the hospital convoys will be here in a few hours, loaded five or six to a bed. They're stacking the dead ones in the ship kitchen freezers."

Theda felt her stomach twist, and she again closed her sweaty fist around the coin in her pocket. "I think we could do without that detail, thank you very much."

Carolyn rammed a loose pin into her luscious yellow hair. "I'm only telling you what they said. And boy have they said. Barely a few hours into this mess and already running this place like an army command center. My word, have you ever seen the likes of these women?"

Sheila let out an obnoxious snort. "No wonder none of them are married. Can you imagine ordering a husband about like that?"

While Carolyn and Sheila giggled, Theda just glared. "Maybe that's the problem."

The girls looked at Theda like she was an alien life form.

Theda didn't wither. "I'm only saying that when men spout orders it's all good sport, but when women do it, they're deemed undesirable and sent to the spinster bin."

Carolyn waved her hand at Theda. "Well, you know men. They need to think they rule the universe."

"Well, they don't rule the universe. And look at the mess they've put us in."

Sheila gave a playful groan and rolled her eyes. "Oh, you've done it now, Carolyn. Here comes the antimarriage lecture again."

"I'm not antimarriage," Theda said.

“But you won’t get married yourself? Think it’s a load of rubbish?”

“Marriage sounds fine if one can find the right person. I’m just ... I’m not sure there’s a right man for me.”

Carolyn huffed. “There’s something we can agree on.”

Theda tried to hide how much the comment stung her. “Women can do other things besides marry anyway. Take this war, for example. Women are building machines, flying planes, shooting guns, cracking codes. There’s a big world outside of Portsmouth, you know.”

“Well, you couldn’t pay me to do any of that,” Carolyn said. “I’m happy to do my bit right here at home.”

“Me too,” answered Sheila. “For pity’s sake, Theda. The world has gone mad anyway. You’d do better to stay here where it’s safe and respectable. Besides which, how do you expect to have babies if you’re traipsing about the world?”

“Well ... maybe not every woman wants babies.”

Carolyn let out an audible gasp. “You really mean to say you’ll never marry or have babies?”

Theda started to give a smart-mouth answer, but Dr. Charlie Davies suddenly swept into the room.

Theda put her hands behind her back, as if they would do something naughty if she kept them out. Her stomach flipped at his gentle smile, framed by a tidy mustache. His rare green eyes, which had a way of dancing in the lights, gave her a midday jolt.

Dr. Davies was an enigma to Theda. He didn’t have the same attitude as the rest of the doctors, who were all born in high circles and loved to brag about it. He didn’t speak sharply to anyone, or say condescending things to the nurses, who worked just as hard as he did. No chore was beneath him, no matter how many other doctors deemed it degrading. Whether it was diagnosing an illness or picking up trash, Dr. Davies just wanted to help.

Maybe because he grew up in the poverty-stricken districts of London. As a young man, he secured a job as footman to a very wealthy family. When the matron of the house almost died of influenza, Davies saved her with ad hoc street remedies. In gratitude, the family provided him a pathway out of the slums and paid for his medical school.

Theda didn't know if the gossip was true. Still, the doctor's kind, humble personality made her wonder. So much so that she often thought about him outside of work. His face kept her company while she lay alone in her dorm bed. Snug in her scratchy wool blanket in the middle of the night, she caught herself wondering what it would be like if he lay beside her.

It was humiliating, thinking about a man that way. It went against everything she felt about romance and marriage. Listening to the other girls talk about men, Theda knew there weren't many like William. They didn't want girls who were too smart or bookish. Yet, in charming Dr. Davies, Theda saw a different kind of man. One she had an awful lot in common with.

Books most of all. When he once caught her snooping through some old medical volumes, she thought he'd read her the riot act about how women shouldn't waste time with books. Instead, his eyes glowed and he said he'd read the same volume. They discussed books a lot after that, and he made sure to engineer time for them to do so. He sometimes joined her for tea. When his busy schedule allowed for it, he took her for strolls through the hospital grounds. They exchanged titles to read, along with shy smiles and awkward glances.

It put Theda into a tailspin.

She gave her head an angry shake to rid herself of such thoughts. She couldn't daydream like that today. She had to keep her focus and prepare for what lay ahead. The boys, and the Royal Army nurses she admired so much, all counted on her.

Dr. Davies gathered all the whispering nurses around him, while Eliza turned to her VAD charges and gave them a "shush" that meant business.

"Alright then," the doctor began. "I'm not entirely sure when the wounded will arrive, but we should get everything ready. Minor wounds will be treated at the beaches. Only critical patients will come here. Most by ship, but especially urgent cases by cargo plane. We could get civilians too."

"Who goes where, Doctor?" Eliza asked.

“Intensive care will go right to the surgical team. The rest will be triaged and put in spare beds wherever there is room. Treat them in any way you’re able.”

“And the dead, sir?”

A rare grimness appeared in his handsome eyes. “Yes ... we’ve made a temporary morgue on site. We’ll do our best to keep up.”

At the mention of the dead, Theda felt a nervous quake in her limbs, and she clutched that coin in a panic. She saw William stacked in a ship freezer, with ice forming over his playful eyebrows and his fine nose. His eyes gaped in horror while scarlet, blood-stained frost slicked his uniform.

She forced her focus to Dr. Davies. Which was hard, because of that annoying flutter he created in her chest.

Dr. Davies continued with his instructions. “Regular staff, you’ll be with me in intensive care. VADs, the London ladies will split you into teams and send you where needed. You’re in good hands. They have extensive battlefield experience and will steer you wonderfully, as they have for many theaters in this war.”

The Royal Army nurses, who were normally all business, couldn’t hide their pride. A few smiled. One of them blushed. It suggested this type of praise was a bit rare for them.

“Theda.”

The sound of her name snapped Theda to attention. She willed herself to look Dr. Davies in the eyes. “Yes, Doctor?”

When their eyes connected, a spark charged between them, but Theda tried to ignore it.

“Celia here would like you to assist her today with on-site treatment and minor operations.”

Celia, one of the Royal Army nurses, gave her a polite nod.

Theda couldn’t hide her grin. Volunteers with no medical training were not usually trusted with intense work like that. Now, on the most important day this hospital would face, these very skilled Royal Army nurses wanted *her* to help them restore life to broken soldiers who couldn’t get into an OR. It was one hell of an opportunity, and she knew she’d better make the most of it.

Entrusted with their orders, the nurses and VADs began shuffling to their various responsibilities. Soon, Theda was the only one left. She and Dr. Davies stared at one another.

The green in his eyes shimmered. “Did you have a question, Theda?”

She looked away before he saw her blush. Yes, she had a question. One she knew to keep to herself. How could she reconcile her desire for independence with her growing desire for this man?

“No, Doctor. No questions.”

The faintest stab of disappointment appeared in his British-mannered face. “Very good then. Off you go.”

With a flip of her long hair, Theda disappeared into the maze of busy nurses.

Flora

CAEN CITY CENTER

Flora leaned against one of the few standing buildings. Her hand shook as she inhaled from a fresh cigarette, and her tired eyes flickered upward.

Another round of planes thundered by, flying high and in tight formation. Their engines kicked up dust from the roof of the building, which rained down on Flora.

It also fell into the hair and faces of the injured. The mostly intact building, out of place among the gaping, charred frames around it, served as a temporary hospital. Men and women in dust-covered clothes were laid out on makeshift stretchers around the crowded doors. Splotches of crusted blood and soot mingled with their layers of dirt. Some people writhed in pain, or gripped rosaries and prayed. Some lay still ... a little too still for an afternoon nap.

Flora had just arrived at the hospital but couldn't summon the courage to enter. Her journey there was arduous enough. She picked through debris-covered streets, puddles of rusty-colored sludge, and messes of downed and spark-spraying power lines. She stepped over countless broken and mangled corpses. She inhaled the toxic odors of sulfur, smoke, and rotting flesh.

She pulled in as much tobacco as her lungs would allow, then exhaled it in a clove-scented cloud. She closed her eyes to shut out the cries of the wounded and the droning of the airplanes.

But when gunshots ripped through the air, her eyes snapped right back open.

She glanced across the street, to another building in the city center. The prison. Within its twisted halls and musty rooms, the Gestapo and SS had locked up spies and resisters. Agitators. People who distributed leaflets, who listened to the BBC, who looked at them funny while buying bread. Anyone who even thought about defying the regime. Sometimes, Flora heard the screams when she flew past on her bike. It was a hideous glimpse of what lay in store should she make a mistake.

When she saw where the shots came from, her eyes narrowed in a mix of fear and fire-breathing anger.

Right away she recognized that son of a bitch Heyns since everyone in the local Resistance knew that crooked face. Flora often saw him strutting about town, or riding in the rear of an open-top convertible. His swastika-stamped cap couldn't hide the sheer evil radiating from his pale, ghostly cheeks. He often had a blonde minx of a perfect Aryan specimen with him. She was too pretty for him, but Flora supposed he got whatever the hell he wanted out of anybody.

He was in fine form today, despite the city burning to hell all around him. Three Nazi stooges flanked him. His black coat hung heavy off his shoulders, and his medals glinted whenever he moved. He barked something at his lackeys, who manned a clunky machine gun.

Against the wall in front of them stood a group of pale, skeletal figures. Most were men, but there were women too. Their clothes were ratty and torn, and they pressed their faces against the bricks. They locked their hands behind their heads. Heaps of blood-soaked dead were piled at their feet, blood still spurting from their heads. It collected in a brown pool that flowed around the shoes of the prisoners against the wall.

Flora froze while her cigarette burned down to the nub. She wanted to look away, but she couldn't.

Under Heyns's watchful eye, the Nazi at the machine gun opened fire.

The yell came a split second before the shots drowned it out.

"Vive la France!"

In a cloud of sulfurous smoke, a handful of the prisoners crumpled to the ground and joined the piles of dead. More shots cracked, and then the rest went down too. Their hearts beat not for France or anything anymore.

But the echo of their cry resounded in Flora's head, somehow giving them an extra couple of seconds of life.

Heyns signaled a man at the prison door, who marched another batch of prisoners out.

Flora's mind suddenly unstuck, and she turned her back on the horrid display. Tossing her cigarette on the ground, she disappeared inside the hospital. It was probably bad in there, but it couldn't be worse than what she had just witnessed.

When her eyes adjusted to the dim light inside the building, Flora took in heaps and piles of wounded. People, medical and otherwise, wound their way through the melee, administering what aid they could.

They couldn't help much because there just weren't enough supplies. There would never be enough bandages for all these open wounds. No amount of splints would fix the masses of broken bones. Nothing could quiet the screams and shouts pounding against Flora's brain. The noxious fumes of blood and sweat practically choked her.

She took a minute to gather her nerves, then her Resistance brain took over. Geraud had given her a job to do. As angry as she was with him, she would comply. Not because he deserved it, but because she cared. Since her parents were gone, the Resistance was her family, no matter how often she complained. She wanted to know if any of them were hurt or killed.

She moved her legs forward into the chaos. Wound after wound, and body after body burned into her brain. She scanned a hundred faces for any familiar features. She looked for hair color that rang memory bells. Hand gestures that jarred something loose in her mind. It was difficult, because the men and women were plastered with dirt, blood, and filth. They stared out in a daze. They didn't seem to notice her, even when she leaned in close to them.

But then she heard a pitiful voice at her side.

"Flora?"

She whirled around.

A battered man on a pile of bloody sheets lay at her feet. Blood covered his hair and chest, and purple bruising puffed out his face. He could barely open his eyes. Breathing seemed anything but pleasant.

It took her some time to register who he was under all that gore. “Oh God ... Bastien?”

Flora felt a horrible stab in her heart, a hard jolt to her already shattered nerves. Part of her didn’t want to know, but she took quick stock of his injuries. She noted the blood, the contorted limbs, and the rattle in his chest. He was in very bad shape.

She knelt at his side and took one of his mangled hands in her own. “Bastien. My God, look at you. Are you in pain?”

Bastien somehow smiled through his misery. “I ... I can’t feel much.”

“Morphine?”

He shook his head. “Not yet. But if you see any lying around, I hear it makes the transition easier.”

“Transition?”

He smiled again, so wide his lip cracked in the middle. A bead of blood escaped. “I’m broken up pretty good. They brought me here to die, nothing else.”

She squeezed his hand and forced a smile. “You always think you’re going to die. Remember when we were kids and you told me you had consumption?” She winked. “Always the theatrics, Bastien.”

He put his free hand on her lap. It smeared her trousers with blood. “No theatrics this time, my mademoiselle.”

“Is there anything I can do?” she asked, suddenly serious. “Name it. I’ll do it.”

His eyes twinkled with an ornery streak. “There’s that caring again. You were always so gentle underneath your hard mask, weren’t you?”

She glared. “You sure you aren’t on morphine?”

“Don’t hide from who you really are. So sensitive and beautiful. It was only when your parents—”

She clamped her hand over his mouth. “Stop talking like you’re dying, Bastien. They can fix you.”

A pink tear leaked from his eye as he gently took her hand. “I got caught in the bombardment this morning, not long after we separated. The wall of my building landed right on top of me.” He coughed. A few drops of red came out. “Bleeding internally, the nurse said. Nothing they can do.”

Flora's stomach dropped, and her hand went cold inside of his. He wasn't playing around this time. "Bastien ... I'm—"

"Don't tell me you're sorry. I gave them hell in the Resistance. I give my life gladly if it frees others from Hitler. And that goddamn Heyns."

"He's outside now," Flora said. "They're shooting all the prisoners."

"Yes, they don't want the Allies getting them first. The only way Nazis know to solve a problem is kill it."

Bastien pulled a painful gulp of oxygen into his crushed lungs. He looked up at Flora with sad eyes, and put both his hands over her frail one. "And now for a deathbed confession, little Flora."

She rolled her eyes. "If it has anything to do with undying love, I'll slap you silly."

He rasped a laugh. "I've always been fond of you, Flora. Maybe not undying love, but undying friendship. And this is a real confession. Something I've kept from you too long."

"What on earth is it?"

He swallowed a wad of blood and fluid. He was going fast. "Flora ... your parents."

Her eyes locked on his. She suddenly found herself paralyzed.

"Flora ... they're still alive."

Emilia

CAEN SS/SD AND GESTAPO

Emilia's fingers whisked over her typewriter. The clack and grind of the keys drowned out all the chaos around her. So did the darkness, since the power was still out, and a blasted-out window served as her only light source.

Glass shards glimmered at the window's base, and the view outside showed a world that had begun to unravel. People in the streets moved like herds of panicked animals. Many were on bicycles, and others hobbled or ran as they were able. Smoke plumes clawed at the red-hued sky like demonic fingers. The only thing to break them up was the swarms of planes still flying over.

Emilia reached for a cigarette and lit up. A long drag gave her a familiar and pleasant burn, but it didn't dull the sharp and frightened voice in her brain. The one reminding her that as time ran out for Germany, it ran out for her too. Fears she had buried for years bubbled hard to the surface, like air pockets in a pot of boiling water.

Of course, the Germans of Hitler's almighty Reich would fight. They would have to; even if they didn't believe in cause and country anymore, desertion meant their families would pay. They would be imprisoned, tortured, and maybe killed. And there were plenty of Germans left who did believe in cause and country. The room she sat in was filled with them. They would die for Hitler—they were that foolish or brainwashed. Sometimes they were just that evil.

She should know. She was once just like them.

Thanks to them, the Reich's end wouldn't be immediate, but it wasn't far away. Screeching, diehard Nazis or not, there was only so much they could do against this kind of might, this Allied army with its endless supplies, manpower, and machinery. They would chip away at the Reich until only granules remained. Once the dust settled, the victors wouldn't play nice.

The end of the cigarette shriveled as Emilia took another drag. She couldn't deny her part in the complicated Nazi wheel. The SD had employed her for multiple years. The BDMs had brainwashed her for years before that. Then there were her parents, who indulged in the scarlet carpets and shiny chandeliers of high-level membership in "the Party."

She also partook in the killing. Her hands didn't inflict the bruises or deaths, but her fingerprints were all over the crime scene. How many of those prisoners looked at her with pleading eyes while they bled on that damn carpet? How many begged her with silent stares to stand up and put an end to the cruelty? Even if she didn't allow herself to pity, she still knew right from wrong, and she just stood by. She even recorded the whole thing on that cursed typewriter. Not just the torture, but also her own complicity. It was all there in black and white for any Allied eyes to see.

The tables would turn now. Some other woman in some other uniform would take the notes. It would be Emilia's turn to look out with imploring eyes and hope for mercy.

Unless, of course, she could escape. She had wanted to flee more than once. On some of the hard nights in her boarding house, she thought of packing a bag and disappearing into the countryside, but she always talked herself out of it. Heyns's resources were vast and deep. He had informers all over the city. Then there were the violent Maquisards. All of it kept her coming back to that office day after day.

Perhaps the invasion would change things. Emilia could use the confusion to her own advantage, just like she did her vivacious charm and beauty. Everyone was so distracted. They had plenty to do without worrying where a lousy typist had gone.

Besides, the Reich couldn't shield her anymore. If the Germans didn't kill her, and if the Allies didn't kill her, the war itself would. There were too

many stray bombs, too many men with rifles, and too many resisters with trigger-happy fingers. And that didn't include the mine fields, artillery shells, strafing, and fires.

Death was on the prowl, and Emilia was still determined to thwart it, at least until she could escape the trap she had walked right into. Starting with a Lebensborn pamphlet, her admiration of the Reich and its people had crumbled. She refused to die under a Nazi flag. The girl who shook the hand of Hitler would cast the swastika from her arm. Her first official act of defiance.

But first she had to escape, and she knew just where to start. Heyns kept things in his office to aid and abet his own escape. He was so much like her in the end, holding survival far above empathy. Perhaps that's why they got along so well. He had long since prepared for his own flight from the Nazi ranks, and he trusted her so damn implicitly he gave her the key to it all.

She slipped her hand into her jacket pocket. She felt the key's teeth dig into her delicate fingertip. It would open his file cabinet that precious few others had access to, where he kept his little goodies. Maybe it was high time she rifled through them.

She smashed her cigarette into her neighbor's ashtray. She had to play this as smooth as the dairy cream civilians no longer had access to. She glued her hands to the typewriter to look busy. Her eyes swimming with false confidence, she took a silent sweep of the office.

Her colleagues, silhouetted against the somber, gray daylight, still tried to wrest control of the devolving situation. Many had worked up a nervous sweat. Their shrill voices cracked with panic, and the keys of their own typewriters slammed in a frenzy. Reports flooded in from the coast. Many beach positions were already overrun. A few swastika-clad SS men howled at each other in the corner, arguing over who should tell Heyns when he returned.

Emilia craned her head to peek into the vacant office behind her. When she was certain no one paid her any attention, she rose up in her smartly heeled shoes. She straightened her uniform and waltzed right into her boss's office without missing a beat.

Nobody in the office even budged. Just like Heyns, they trusted her too much, and they also underestimated her. She was someone they could bed, not someone they should watch.

She closed the heavy office door behind her. Even though Heyns was gone and the lights were out, the place still felt heavy, filled with the ghosts of torture victims past. It was also packed to the gills with Emilia's crimes, ones she knew she could never make right.

She wouldn't worry about that now, though. She had to secure her own survival first.

She willed away the trembling in her legs and took a few steps across the soft carpet. It brushed against the heels of her shoes and cushioned the noise of her movements.

Thank God, because she couldn't afford to take it slow. Heyns may have been busy for the moment. In fact, even in this well-built office, she heard the muffled machine gun fire and the muted screams from the prison, but he could finish up at any second.

She moved to his desk and pulled the handsome oak drawers open. She flipped through files, reports, and paperwork. Words that were all too familiar crossed her eyes. Names of those dreaded camps. Executed resisters. Suspect persons in the city of Caen.

It was all useless.

She slammed the desk drawers shut and went to work on his filing cabinet. She could barely fit the tiny brass key into the lock with the violent quiver in her fingers. Once the lock finally clicked, the drawer slid open with a bang.

She ran her hands over scads of files and heaps of paperwork. It was mostly her own damn notes from all those interrogations. All the evidence to incriminate her piled up in one drawer. A bitter pill to swallow ...

She scrambled through the other drawers, desperate for anything of value. She knew he kept money in this file cabinet. There were also some precious stones he had shown her. Where the hell were they when she needed them?

She was just about to give up when her hands came across a large leather file case. It was one of the few things she had never seen before.

Her eyes darted toward the closed door. When it remained shut and still, she plopped the heavy case on the desk. She worked her fingers through the brass buckles. The aged leather gave quickly, and the file case fanned open before her.

She picked a random slot and pulled out a faded piece of paper. As her eyes moved back and forth across it, her heart went a little faster. “What ...?”

She snatched another file from another slot.

It was almost identical to the first one. A photo of a man with heavy German features covered the upper right corner. The top of the file listed his background, along with military training and education. There was a list of the many languages he spoke, and some mentions of special skills. There were also plenty of notes about undercover names and key positions.

Emilia’s breathing picked up as she pulled sheet after sheet out of the file case. So many specimens of Aryan warriors glared at her from army photos. Foreign language experts, champion marksmen, army elite. Most had backgrounds in the paratroops.

Emilia gripped the papers so hard she left swirling thumb prints on the corners. It slowly dawned on her what she had found. German spies planted in France, England, Belgium, and even America. Spies working from inside enemy countries to foster the Third Reich agenda across the world. Spies in the Allied armies. Planted in the Resistance networks. Some serving in government posts.

“*Mein Gott ...*,” she said under her breath.

Her insides locked up, and her petrified eyes snapped to the door.

It remained tightly closed, the door handle frozen in place. The same muffled shouts came from the other side of it. There was also that one phone jangling every few minutes. But there was one sound she didn’t hear, and that was gunshots. Heyns had obviously finished his prisoner killing spree. Now he lurked about somewhere out there unaccounted for.

She threw the files back into their slots, and she reburied the leather satchel in the same place she found it. She prepared to slam the file drawer shut, but a manila envelope with a series of mysterious bulges found her first.

She went as still as a statue and strained her ears for any approaching footsteps. When she heard none, she decided to risk it. Her escape depended on it.

Like a serpent, she slipped her fingers under the envelope and wrenched it from the drawer. Once it was free, she touched those bulges. They were hard, firm, and heavy in her hand.

They were valuable.

A smirk played with the corner of her plump lips. She pried open the envelope and dumped its contents into her open hand.

Diamonds, each the size of a pea, tumbled against her hot, moist palm. They shimmered and sparkled even in the dim daylight. She tilted her hand back and forth, admiring the reflections they threw around her pale skin.

She used her free hand to turn the manila envelope over.

Reclaimed from family Altschuler—expired.

She glared. Reclaimed was just a fancy Nazi word for stolen. Heyns probably didn't loot them himself. The packing suggested they were given to him. Someone probably used them to save themselves or someone they loved. Then he crammed them in this drawer for his own flight from justice.

She tucked the stones back in their envelope and placed it carefully in her underclothes. She then shifted her uniform jacket to cover up the bulges.

She was almost disgusted. There was a time when, if she wanted a diamond, all she had to do was make misty eyes at her father. Stealing felt so far beneath her. Yet she needed bribe money. A lot of it. If Heyns thought the diamonds could pay for his skin, maybe they could pay for hers.

And she must survive.

As she went to close the drawer, Emilia found one last bargaining chip. A standard issue Luger pistol. It normally sat on Heyns's hip in a fancy leather holster. She had no idea why he had placed it in this drawer.

She took its cool barrel into her warm hands, and popped it open to count the rounds in the chamber.

Six. It wasn't much, but it was something.

With her eyes stuck fast to the door, she slipped the pistol into her pocket. Then she glanced around to make sure the place looked

undisturbed.

It was time to get back to her desk.

OceanofPDF.com

Adelaide

UTAH BEACH SECTOR VARREVILLE

Adelaide never fathomed a force like she saw around her daughter's farm.

It wasn't just the ships, although she saw more of those than she even knew existed. An entire civilization of ships, of every purpose and size, all down the entire Normandy coast. Ships that hemorrhaged even more water vessels—flat-bottomed landing craft stuffed to every corner with boys and men, whom they deposited onto the bloody, debris-strewn beaches.

Although Adelaide wasn't sure where they would go when they landed. She couldn't make out any details from how far back she lingered, with just a few unbroken coastal views now and then. But she could see that those beaches were already completely swamped with men. Dragging themselves out of the water, helping their friends cross the surf. Weaving around the German obstacles—giant, metal versions of the jacks she sometimes saw children playing with.

And some of those obstacles had done their jobs. Plenty of landing craft remained in the surf, partially submerged and buffeted by the waves. Piles of human bodies and chunks of debris and machinery surged in and out with the swelling tide. She knew plenty more bodies probably floated in the water offshore, lifeless and adrift, never to see home again—except maybe in a coffin.

Adelaide had witnessed a lot of grotesque death today, but in this moment she worried more about the live soldiers. Because they had descended in droves upon Varreville. Some wore infantry uniforms, while

others sported paratroop gear. Some had red crosses on their sleeves, and they wrapped bloody wounds, dripped plasma bags into limp, torn-up arms, and sewed spewing, severed limbs back onto their screaming buddies. More soldiers fired at unseen enemies prowling in the nearby fields and houses, lighting up the coast with their tracer bullets, tossing grenades that ripped up the earth. Others watched over groups of scraggly German prisoners, hands bound behind their backs, sitting dejectedly on the ground. The rest busied themselves setting up defensive perimeters, gun positions, and officers' headquarters. Shells rumbled in the distance, and their screeches pierced the air. Trains of roaring, sputtering tanks rumbled across the outlets from the flooded marshlands and sandy beach, whistled along by harried military police.

Adelaide stood agape, watching the madness, while her guard stood behind her.

The scrawny boy, who had only told her his name was Wade, looked just as anxious as she was. He had wrested his gun back from her, but it somehow made him look more pitiful. His eyes flickered back and forth between the medics and the men shooting.

He turned to Adelaide. "We shouldn't tarry too long, Madame. Not in a hot zone like this."

"Georgette's farm is just there." Adelaide had to yell over the noise, pointing to a little farm with an ancient stone silo, set back from the action. Soldiers dug foxholes and entrenchments in the yard among stiff cattle corpses, probably killed in all the fighting and bombing.

Seeing the house so close, so close she could practically catch Georgette's smile and smell her granddaughter's hair, churned her gut instead of healing her heart. Because even from here, she observed that no smoke curled from the chimney. No animals or poultry scampered in the yard. The windows looked at her with a lifeless expression. The house, to her dread, seemed abandoned.

Still, she had to see for herself.

She didn't wait for a say-so from Wade before tearing off in a mad dash for the little farmhouse. On her way, she blasted through mobs of soldiers, hastily erected medical facilities, knots of officers hunched over maps. A

few of them threw confused glances at her when she plowed through, but most ignored her.

One of the officers, leaning on a cane and looking much too old to be there, whipped his head around as she breezed past. “Whoa, lass. Halt.”

Adelaide involuntarily skidded to a stop. She had come to recognize one thing after four years of German occupation, and that was an authority figure. The man may not have dressed the part of a general, wearing only a wool army cap and minimal markings on his coat, but he certainly spoke like one. Creaky old cane be damned.

Her insides seared with impatience, her daughter’s house beckoning, just out of reach. She considered running for it despite the man, but something in his voice made her hesitate. Besides, she knew it would only take one flick of his wrist for all these soldiers to turn their guns on her.

She sighed, and at last looked him in the eye. His age struck her first. Wrinkles had set in hard along the corners of his eyes and forehead. His hair looked mostly gray under that wool cap. His body struggled under its heavy load, wobbling just slightly as it leaned on that cane.

Her eyes widened as she swept her gaze over him, taking it all in. “You’re old.”

The words had popped out before she could stop them. She worried the man would have her shot, but instead he laughed. A jolly laugh. Friendly even. “I would say it takes one to know one, but that isn’t really polite, is it?”

Adelaide was so stunned she couldn’t answer. She had spent the last few years feeling so useless because of her age. Feeling like old people had no voice when these youngsters started up their wars. And here, a man who looked closer to her age than the boys he led had taken his place on the battle line right beside them. He had found a use for himself, flaunting it in the face of that annoying specter haunting everyone—old age.

Adelaide gulped to suppress her grin. It would have been inspiring if he wasn’t the sole obstacle standing between her and her daughter’s farmhouse.

“A strange place for a lady to be waltzing around,” he said to break the silence. It wasn’t condescending like the younger soldier in the bog had

been. It felt more like he was amused or intrigued. His face even lit up with a mysterious smile, as if the two of them shared a secret that no one else could be in on. The secret that maybe, just maybe, the world still had a use for them after all.

Panting with anxiety, Adelaide pointed a shaky finger at her daughter's house. "Please, Monsieur. I've come from Sainte-Mère-Église. My daughter lives there."

"Sainte-Mère-Église?" He raised his eyebrows. "On foot? On a day like this?"

"Yes, sir."

He gave a short laugh. "I heard you French girls were fast, but my word, that's downright brassy."

"Sir, please. My daughter and her child are there. All alone."

As she tried to explain, Wade came jogging up on her heels. When he saw the man with Adelaide, he screeched to a halt and snapped to attention. "General Roosevelt, sir!"

The general looked him up and down. "At ease, son. What's your name?"

"Wade Thomas, sir. 8th Infantry."

"You know this woman?"

"I'm bringing her to her daughter, sir."

"You knowingly brought a civilian into a full-on combat zone? Are you nuts?"

"She insisted, sir."

"If she insisted on jumping off a cliff, would you push her?"

"No, sir."

"And don't you think you have more important things to do today?"

"Yes, sir. But my lieutenant, he—"

While the two men argued, Adelaide turned on her heels and dashed for the cottage. She heard them both call after her, but she didn't care. She didn't have time for soldier spats. She had come too far. Like hell some old man with a cane, or some wiry little boy, was going to stop her now.

When she reached the house, she burst in the door without even knocking. "Georgette?"

Her wail echoed across a dark entry hall. It smelled dank and looked dusty. Unkempt. Vacant.

“Georgette?”

Only the silence responded. A crushing silence that told Adelaide right from the start what she already dreaded. Even so, she frantically ran from room to room, which didn’t take long given the small size of the house. Only the bed remained in the master room, and it looked like Germans had slept there recently. The bureau was gone, the closets were empty. The kitchen was bare too. There was no running water, no sign of life. The same went for the parlor, the basement, and the hallways. Georgette, and her precious baby girl, had fled. From the looks of things, they had fled weeks ago.

Adelaide stood in the middle of the empty parlor, sucking in oxygen and trying to will away the burning sting of tears in her eyes, the searing pain in her chest. The throbbing in her legs and temples. All she had gone through to get here. The bog, the guns, the planes, the mines. All just to find a deserted cottage, without so much as a clue as to where Georgette might have gone.

Just as she was ready to cry all her anguish out into a puddle of bitter tears, Wade and General Roosevelt stumbled into the cottage.

“Just a minute there, Missy,” the general said in a bold, sharp tone. “What do you mean running off on me like that?”

Wade actually tried to come to her defense, which surprised Adelaide.

“Sir, she’s had a hard day of it. This has been enough to wind up anybody, much less an old woman.”

Old Woman. Those damn words again. But the weight of her devastation drowned them out. Held them under. They couldn’t set any spark of determination alight this time. The darkness inside this abandoned cottage had stomped all the embers out.

“Well, there’s no need to mock old age, my boy,” the general said in a mutter.

“Sir, I didn’t mean—”

“She’s gone ...” Adelaide choked out the words in a scratchy voice. It hurt so much to say it, she had to put a hand to her heart. “They’re gone.”

“Well, Christ, that’s what I was trying to tell you before you ran off.”

Adelaide whirled and faced the general. “What do you mean?”

“What do I mean? Look around you! This is a battlefield now. The boys are clearing the whole area, no one’s left.”

Adelaide’s shoulders went rigid. “You mean ... you killed them?”

“For heaven’s sake, no. We’re not Nazis. The boys sent them inland. Although I have to tell you there weren’t many loafing around here in the first place.”

Adelaide’s eyes widened in desperation. “Did you see a woman with a small child?” She held her hand a couple of feet off the floor, indicating her granddaughter’s toddler size. “A small child, Monsieur? Did you see anyone like that?”

“Well, I wasn’t here. But the boys say it was just some local farmers and bakers and such.”

Adelaide’s face fell. More tears threatened from behind her eyes, but she didn’t let them fall. Not yet. As she had done in the bog that morning, she put her hands on her hips and tried to think. Where would she have gone? Where would Georgette go to feel safe?

The general turned to Wade. “Got a little busted up in the eye there, huh? You have the medics check it out?”

“Not yet, sir.”

“Well, why don’t you take her with you? Looks like she could use a little looking after.”

“Yes, sir.”

“St. Germain.”

The general and Wade both turned at the sound of Adelaide’s voice.

She met their gaze head on. The tears had vanished. The resolve had returned. “Her husband’s parents live there. That’s where she has gone.”

The general gave a weary sigh. “You don’t know that. This place is one big dust bunny. Looks like she left a long time ago. Maybe even deported. You should check with the Red Cross. But we can’t have you scampering about a goddamn war zone.”

Adelaide stomped her foot. “No deportation. It’s not possible. I would have heard something.”

Wade's face crinkled, as if he wanted to pull her into a hug, while the general just looked irritated. "I hate to tell you, but that's not always the case—"

"She's not deported!" Adelaide's voice came out in an angry bark. So forceful that even these two hard-trained military men took a timid step back. "Not deported. I know my daughter. She's careful. Cautious. Smart. Too smart for the Germans. I have faith in her. St. Germain. That's where she is. I must get there."

"Madame—"

"Let me go there. If she's not there, I'll go home. No more getting in your way, I promise."

In the bravest thing she'd seen him do so far, Wade stepped up beside her and put his hand on the small of her back. "I'll take her, sir, if you'll permit me. I've seen her this far. I'd like to see her the rest of the way. If that's alright."

Adelaide threw him a surprised glance. He'd barely spoken to her since they got stuck with one another. But then again, she hadn't given him much of a chance to. She'd scorned him more than anything. Perhaps, like her own daughter, she had underestimated him ...

The general looked like he wanted to argue for a second, but then he let loose a boisterous chuckle instead. "Madame, you have some real pluck, I'll give you that." He nodded at Wade. "Take her over there. It's not far, and we've cleared out most this area already. But watch your ass, anyhow."

"Yes, sir."

"And you." The general turned to Adelaide with a wink. "I pray you find your daughter. And when you do, both of you should come join my army. We could use the likes of you."

She managed to grin through her roiling emotions. "What? An old woman like me?"

He winked at her. "You look like day-old bread that still has snap in it. We could teach these youngsters a thing or two."

She laughed, but his bold voice cut her off. "But I must insist on one more thing."

"Yes?"

“You’ll attract every German from here to Berlin smelling and looking like a swamp. You’re going to have to get out of that skirt.”

She glared. “And into what, exactly?”

OceanofPDF.com

Flora

CAEN CITY CENTER

Flora knelt over Bastien in stiff silence. Her eyes were black with rage, and her arms hung limp at her sides. Her thudding heart was the only thing that moved.

Your parents, they're still alive.

A world of emotions washed over her. The strongest two were shock and anger, and both roughed up her stomach something awful. She couldn't discount the sadness, either. The overpowering, numbing sorrow that could drag her into a pit and never let her escape.

All this time ... For months, years, she had mourned her lost parents—the only loves of her life. The soul-crushing devastation kept her awake at night. It barely let her eat, and it turned her into a loose cannon who couldn't check her emotions. Her position in the Resistance, the risks she took, she had done it all to follow in the footsteps of her dead parents and carry their banner. To keep them alive in a spiritual sense, since she had failed in the physical one.

Which reminded her of the guilt. All that guilt, the whippings and beatings she gave herself in the dark nights with a bottle of liquor. All because of a lie ... A horrible, terrible, and life-wrecking lie, so big and so vast she didn't know who else was ensnared in its web. Bastien was bad enough, but there had to be others.

“Flora?”

Bastien's voice sent flames shooting down her body. She couldn't look at him, because he had known her too long. His eyes could penetrate the

mask she always wore, and the one she clung to now. He knew the sensitive and gentle Flora, who was soft and caring, who had held funerals for dead pigeons as a child. Who was capable of loving.

The Flora before the lie ...

“Flora—”

“Does Geraud know?”

Her voice came out like a dagger hurled in a dark pub.

Bastien flinched at it. This time, his lungs let out a strange whistle when he exhaled. The internal bleeding was consuming him fast, like a flooded river spilling over its banks. Still, he looked more afraid of the purple rage tinging Flora’s forehead than death.

He sighed. “Yes, Flora. He knows.”

Flora bit her lip so hard it bled. Her vision went scarlet. She rocketed to her feet and took a few harried paces back and forth. She wanted to scream, kick, and punch. She wanted to beat Bastien to a bloodier pulp than he already was. The urge was surprisingly hard to control. It swelled in her chest and constricted her breathing. Her whole body throbbed as the violence begged for release.

Geraud’s haughty face burned into her brain like a branding iron. In that instant, he became her enemy. She didn’t care if he was friends with her parents, or that they trusted him more than anyone. Their trust was misplaced, because Geraud was a liar and a manipulator, just like every man who only wanted to use her to their own ends. Like every man who underestimated her, pushed her aside, and swept her under their ridiculous ornamental rugs.

Geraud was worse than those, because he knew what her parents’ death had done to her. He watched her transform from gentle Flora into a raging she-devil. He could have ended her misery at any time. He could have given her hope when there was none. Yet he kept his filthy little secrets and just watched her suffer.

And Bastien ... that playful face she’d known since childhood. The one man who always treated her as an equal, at least to her face. Now he too had rammed a knife into her all-too-trusting heart.

Flora glowered down at him, and he shriveled under her shadow. “Flora, you must understand ...” He paused to gasp in some oxygen. “He made me swear not to tell you.”

“I don’t give a shit, Bastien. I thought you were my friend.”

“I am.”

“Friends don’t lie to each other. You know who taught me that? My *mother*.”

“The Germans—”

Flora’s anger reached a boiling point she couldn’t contain. With a mind of its own, her leg jumped out and socked him right in the shin.

His shriek would have pierced anyone, but it didn’t faze Flora. “Don’t you *dare* pin this on Germans. There is still right. That’s what the Resistance is all about. Acting in the cause of what is right. Of loyalty. How can you be a part of that and lie to my face, Bastien? How?”

Bastien clutched his throbbing leg. He wailed, but the pain wasn’t just in his bones. “He made me swear it. He said he’d kill me.”

Flora’s fists clenched so hard her fingernails left cuts across her palms.

Geraud. He swore Bastien to silence, on pain of death, about his lie. That made him not only a liar, but also a killer. How could it matter that much if her parents were still alive? Why would he need to keep it from her? It didn’t make any sense. Nothing did anymore.

She knelt next to Bastien and got right in his face. “You better start talking, Bastien.”

Bastien sucked in another precious breath of air. From the noises in his lungs, he was running out of room in there. “You know I get coded messages from all over the network. Traffic picked up in the last few weeks.”

“I’m not an idiot, I know you work in coding.” Flora flinched at the volume of her voice. She looked around at all the turned heads. Then she took a deep breath to calm herself. When she spoke again, she forced a softer tone. “What does that have to do with my parents?”

“About a month ago, I started getting messages from a concentration camp in Poland. Top secret. The ink can only be read under a certain kind of light.”

Flora gritted her teeth to hold her patience. "Yes, I know that. Go on."

Bastien's eyes went wild with fright. "You won't believe what the messages said, Flora. What the Nazis are doing. Terrible things. Unspeakable things."

A stab of curiosity broke through Flora's anger. Her fists loosened just a little. "What do you mean?"

"They're killing them, Flora. The Jews. All of them. They want ... they want to ..." He had to stop for more air. "They want to exterminate them."

Flora shook her head in anger. "Bull."

"They herded them into big chambers ... like showers. Then they gas them. Hundreds at a time." He let out another miserable cough. "Extermination camps, Flora. Death camps. Camps where people go to disappear."

"Lies!"

"It's true. The letters came from the office of the commandant. Files that prove everything." He wheezed in another breath. "Flora ... they're all stamped with your mother's code pass. She's sending them out."

Flora's mind spun faster than the props on the bombers flying over all morning. So many profound truths slammed into her head it made her dizzy. Her parents were alive. People she thought she could trust had kept it from her. Now there were these camps ...

Of course, she knew about concentration camps. There were few in France who didn't. However, she thought they were just prison camps. People endured a hard life of cold in the winter, heat in the summer, no food, and little water. Death stalked those places in many forms. Disease, starvation, and sheer exhaustion. Maybe stray bullets too. A concentration camp was a harrowing prospect, one that sent people deep into hiding. Yet people could survive there. At least, that's what Flora thought. Were there really camps for the sole purpose of extermination?

Her instincts told her it couldn't be true. No human could be capable of that, even though she had seen the Nazis do terrible things.

But when she couldn't believe her own eyes, she had to believe her mother. The reason was simple. Her mother never lied. Not to her husband,

not to Flora, not to anyone. Her mother's words were truth, pure and absolute. A truth that was apparently still alive.

Flora stomped down her surging emotions. Then she grabbed Bastien by his bloody shoulder. "Where is this camp?"

He shook his head. More blood trickled from his mouth. "I ... I ..."

"Where in Poland? Tell me how to find them."

Bastien leaned his head back. His pupils rolled up to expose the whites of his eyes. A horrible rattle escaped his throat. "I'm ... so sorry, Flora."

"Don't you die now, you son of a bitch." Flora swiped the back of her hand across his face. It made a violent crack and left a horrible red mark, but it didn't revive him. His body seized in her arms, then went limp. A final hiss escaped his throat and he was gone.

Flora was too furious to grieve. Of course he would die right after he dropped a bomb on her chest, a riddle she had no idea how to solve. Her parents were alive in Poland, but he gave her no address, no town, not even a general direction in Poland. She couldn't just walk there and find them.

She got to her feet and took one last look at the crazy hospital. Nurses fluttered sheets over those like Bastien who had passed their final seconds of life. Blood stained every corner. It choked the stuffy air in its terrible stench.

The hospital needed Flora, and Geraud had given her a job to do.

Geraud ...

Her hands balled into hard rocks again. Her eyes turned into a nasty glare. Flushes of red crept up her sweating neck and poured into her cheeks.

He would tell her where her parents were. She'd beat it out of him if she had to.

Theda

QUEEN ALEXANDRA HOSPITAL PORTSMOUTH

Theda, her stomach rumbling, found her way to the hospital tea room.

Black-skirted, white-aproned personnel laid out tired silverware and teapots on the wooden tables. The hanging lights, which swayed, flickered, and creaked with all the planes flying over, frequently doused them with dust. The air felt extra stuffy too, since the large windows lining the wall were closed to keep out the airplane exhaust. Only gray and tired daylight filtered in through the long, lacy drapes.

“Theda Brown.”

Theda turned.

A handful of Royal Army nurses had gathered at one of those tables for tea. The rattling of their china and the tinkling of their silverware made it sound like a pleasant affair.

Theda had to suppress a laugh. She’d never visualized these stern women as the merry sort. They certainly hadn’t been so far. Yet now, as the mountains of invasion casualties raced toward Portsmouth, they acted like regular London women on a very regular tea break.

One of them gave Theda a welcoming smile and patted the empty chair beside her. “Won’t you join us for tea, love?”

Love? Theda had never heard them address anyone so informally. She wasn’t sure why they would single her out like this, but she wouldn’t dare refuse. Especially not after they picked her to assist so much on the floor. She crossed the room to their table and dropped into the empty seat.

As soon as her body touched the chair, her insides shriveled with nerves. She didn't know how to converse with these experienced women without sounding like a total novice.

She was glad when the woman next to her broke the silence. Theda recognized her as the nurse Dr. Davies had paired to work with her. She looked to be in her early thirties, with strawberry blonde locks and a pretty, dimpled smile. Her hazel eyes were tired but sincere. She held out her hand. "I don't think we've been properly introduced. I'm Celia."

Theda shook it. "I'm Theda, but you already knew that."

The women all giggled. Not at her, but with her. They really seemed to like her.

Theda blushed as Celia put a saucer and mug with steaming tea before her. Tea that she knew would be watered down due to all the rationing. But it was still nice to see manners in good supply. What had she done to earn an entrance pass into this smart and worldly circle of women?

Theda reached for the tea with anxious fingers, feeling self-conscious again. Perhaps she ought to slurp this down and return to the other girls. They wouldn't like being excluded, and she felt wrong enjoying a lavish tea break on such an intense day.

Although "Hurry up and wait" was one of the hospital's favorite games. As the morning faded into afternoon, the preparation duties dwindled to nothing, and the hospital grew tense and quiet with anticipation. A lot of the personnel just stood around, with nothing to do but watch the clock and listen to the muffled radio.

Celia seemed to read her mind. "Enjoy the quiet while it lasts, and line your belly too." She dropped a dry scone on Theda's tea saucer.

Another girl laughed. "Indeed. Take it from us, deary, this will be the last food you see all day."

"And night," Celia said with a snort.

Theda took a bite of the soft, warm scone. She didn't enjoy it half as much as the special treatment by these hard-to-impress women.

Celia gave her a nudge. "I hope you don't mind us taking you for ourselves today."

Theda swallowed her tea so fast she almost spit it back up. “Was it your idea? I thought it was ...”

She trailed off as the tips of her ears seared with embarrassment. She had wondered whose decision it really was to pair her up with Celia. She had convinced herself it was Dr. Davies. He knew how much she wanted to work in medicine. And she didn’t think these women would accept her for such important work without a nod from a higher-up like him or Eliza. She had come to fantasize over the idea, thinking it was the handsome doctor’s way of showing he thought about her outside of work too. Hearing he hadn’t come up with the suggestion gave her the faintest sting of disappointment.

Again, Celia read her mind, but this time she did with a distinct smirk. “Well, Doctor Davies didn’t put up any fuss, that’s certain.”

Theda looked around at the sea of smiling faces. “But ... why choose me? I mean, why not one of the regular staff nurses here? Or Eliza, our ward sister? I would think there’s so many people more qualified.”

“They’re needed in the ORs, believe me.” Celia patted Theda’s hand. “We needed someone with us in the regular wards to count on, and pardon my saying so, but you do outshine the others with medical work.”

Theda barely managed to hide a smile of pleasure. They *had* noticed. They saw how much harder she worked, how desperate she was to earn their trust, how badly she longed to prove her worth. She stayed past her quitting time so often, took on so many extra duties, covered for other girls who couldn’t quite grasp things. She had drenched herself with sweat, lagged with lost sleep, and even cried with exhaustion now and then. But it had paid off.

Celia grinned. “You’re very talented, Theda. You deserve an opportunity to really shine.”

“I don’t have any special training or anything.”

“That’s the thing about wartime,” Celia said with a nod. “It opens dead-bolted doors with a cannon bang.”

Another nurse leaned in close to her. “Medicine seems quite suited to you, Theda. If you do well today, we could recommend you for training for a combat medical team.”

Theda's shiny brown eyes practically glowed.

The nurse laughed. "If that's something you would be interested in?"

What an understatement. Theda had wanted to travel the world her whole life. She had read about the women in auxiliary military units with envy. She had longed for her chance to do something outside of Portsmouth, even when the bullets were flying and the bombs were dropping. She dreamed of making her mark on this crazy world, if only she could escape the confines of Number 6.

Yet she met resistance from every angle. Her mother always reminded her that a woman's place was at home. Girls her age couldn't understand her desire to leave the comforts of their small, cozy town. Everyone, save William, always pointed out that men would never appreciate her if she didn't start behaving "more like a girl."

Celia observed her volunteer's troubled expression. "Theda, you are more than capable, if that's what's worrying you."

Theda hid her brewing thoughts behind a sip of tea. "It's not that. It's just ... well, my mother and my friends, they don't ..." Theda trailed off and sighed. "Forgive me, but it's nice to be accepted somewhere, isn't it?"

A still silence met Theda's honest words. She felt the empathy emanate from the other women and land squarely on her shoulders. She knew, in those few seconds of silence, that they understood exactly what she meant.

A rare bit of emotion showed through Celia's professional countenance. She covered Theda's hand with her own. "A very sad truth, Theda Brown. Sometimes the biggest roadblock to women is the judgment and criticism of other women."

The rest of the nurses nodded in agreement. One raised her tea mug in a salute. "Hear hear."

Celia pressed on. "You just have to ask yourself what you really want. Then you have to believe in yourself above anyone else."

Theda smiled at Celia. Really, really smiled at her. These women wanted to help her achieve something no one else believed she was capable of doing. She was about to tell them how much their words meant to her, but the sharp ringing of the emergency bells exploded across the complex.

Theda's teacup went flying, and it shattered to pieces on the hard, wooden floor. An ugly brown stain splotched across her white apron.

In a flash of movements greased with hard training, the Royal Army nurses flew into action. With Theda clamoring behind them, they surged down the hospital corridor, where the shrill emergency bells practically split their ears open. They all arrived at the front entrance, where the doors were already flung open wide. On the horizon, a mammoth ship anchored in Portsmouth harbor poked out of the hazy fog.

Right outside the hospital entrance, an endless line of ambulances had assembled. Navy medics, damp and stained with sea spray, buzzed around the cars like bees in a hive. They herded wounded, limping men toward the hospital. Bloody bandages covered countless limbs and faces. People carted soldiers out of ambulances on anything that could pass for a stretcher—planks of wood, piles of sheets, blankets, and even a few ladders.

Although Theda wanted to travel the world with a combat medic team, her only real gauge of a fight was the condition of the men who had fought it. She had treated lingering exposure suffered by the soldiers of Dunkirk. She had even treated some half-drowned sailors from the U-boat-infested waters of the Atlantic. Through fixing their wounds and calming their nightmares, Theda had learned to make her own battle reports.

On this invasion day, the hobbling men and their vacant stares told her more than she wanted to know. Their dark green fatigues were soaked black with bloody ocean water. Blood and vomit smeared their ghostly white skin. Globbs of sand plastered their hair and clothes. Nasty shades of green in their cheeks hinted at violent seasickness. Rust-colored fluids and slimy water poured from countless open wounds.

Then there was the smell. The thick, choking, nauseating smell of human blood, soggy beach, and discarded stomach fluid.

It was all so horrible, and this was just one ship of patients. There would be more.

Lots more.

The vision in front of Theda may as well have been a black-and-white typed report. The Germans had given them hell on those beaches.

Her stomach sank to the ground, which already ran crimson with blood and soggy bandages. The cries and shouts of the wounded drowned out her own whimper of fear.

The battle on the beaches was in full swing, and Queen Alexandra's would now begin.

OceanofPDF.com

SAW SUNSET'S GLOW

OceanofPDF.com

Theda

QUEEN ALEXANDRA HOSPITAL PORTSMOUTH

In minutes, the hospital was transformed from a pristine place run with military precision to a chaotic madhouse. Beds ran out after the first ship of wounded arrived. But still more ambulances piled up outside, and the hospital staff made room where they could. Order and organization were the first casualties in the mayhem. Many more followed in human form.

The patients who lived didn't have it much easier. Most of them were stuffed into musty cots or tossed onto heaps of blankets on the floor. Privacy was something from a past that felt remote. Medical personnel stripped, cleaned, and treated soldiers right where they lay. It wasn't long before the entire place stank of damp sweat, rotting seaweed, and sour blood. Nurses couldn't escape the sight of open wounds, bloodied limbs, pale faces, and sheet-covered bodies.

The personnel looked ragged from their efforts, too. Tight curls and rigid buns had collapsed into loose strands of limp, sweaty hair. Cheeks became flushed with heat and anxiety. Stiff neck buttons were plucked open for ventilation. Sheila's red lipstick faded to a burned-out pink, while Carolyn had kicked off her stylish heels and strode around in hospital slippers.

Theda spent the afternoon glued to Celia's side, helping with triage and on-the-spot care. She regretted not enjoying the lavish tea break before the casualties poured in. Now, whenever she tried to step out for the washroom, or hunt down a cup of nourishment, a dozen shouts for help pulled her back.

Bloody hands made mad swipes at her. She got tangled in endless webs of ripped-apart patients.

The frenzy mirrored the hell in her soul, more collateral damage from the day. Normally, Theda never cracked under pressure. She kept her heart and emotions entirely to herself. She found witty banter perfect for concealing her real feelings. It only took one day with a big D in front to blast that cover apart.

It wasn't for lack of preparation. Theda had spent months preparing for this day. She had endured hours of training and instruction. Eliza taught her how to tie off wounds, how to stitch up lacerations, and how to give blood transfusions. Her brother's experience made her well versed in shell shock and battle fatigue. Books informed her about the many diseases that could snuff out the life of a soldier. She even assisted in surgery, and it accustomed her to the blood and tissues that made up the human body.

It almost felt like wasted effort, because Theda wasn't sure anything could have prepared her for this. No instruction manuals mentioned the horrible stench wafting from infected wounds. Training didn't cover the emotional toll of so many men in pain. Theda wasn't sure how to clean beach sand from a wound that was already gangrenous. No one told her just how much blood there would be. Rivers of blood—on the patients, on the floor, in her hair, on her face, on her clothes. Blood spurted from tissues that squished in her hands. It poured from open mouths and dripped from operating tables.

They couldn't keep up with the blood flow or the pain. Morphine supplies had to be used carefully, and not everyone got it when they needed it. Sterilization was hopeless, since refuse from the French beaches doused every corner of the hospital. The place had become one giant operating room where Celia and Theda tied off tourniquets and pulled out bullets on the spot.

But what really agitated Theda were the screams. Some patients stayed bravely silent in their pain, but many cried out with no restraint. The shrieks drilled right through her toughest layers, like the animal screams when owls snatched up the creatures around Number 6.

Then came death ... Theda knew soldiers were killed in war, and she knew some would die in this hospital. She just didn't know it would be right at her fingertips, right while she struggled to save them. She wasn't ready for the vise grip of those ice-cold hands around her own. No one warned her about the hopeless look in those gray eyes, and the shallow rattle that escaped their chests.

Theda had to help death in its dirty work too. She told those soldiers, through pursed lips, that everything would be alright. She soothed them with one hand, while her other poked them with a morphine-loaded syringe. A dose to "make him comfortable," as Celia put it. To put him to sleep knowing he probably wouldn't wake up. Because there was nothing else they could do.

Somewhere in the logical part of her brain, Theda knew Celia was right. There were some cases no medicine could fix, and relieving their pain was merciful. Even so, she couldn't stand those fateful words. *Just make him comfortable*. It felt like a death sentence, a choice she had no business making. She couldn't stand giving up on someone's father, son, or husband. Maybe they belonged to some of those quiet houses she had passed on her walk to the hospital this morning. They might have driven one of those missing tanks or flew one of those rumbling planes. They surely had friends, and they probably had sweethearts.

The turmoil rankled and began to show up on Theda's body. Her apron and uniform got lost under layers of blood. Sweat stains bloomed out from under her arms. Sand had dried and roughened her hands. Body fluids of every sort splattered her face, and her long hair grew stringy and crusty with it. Never did she dream of handling so much carnage with her own delicate fingers.

So much carnage ... While Celia snapped commands, Theda cleaned out several gut wounds piled with sand and mud. She rammed her fingers into spraying arteries while Celia frantically sewed them shut. She used flimsy tweezers to pull out bloodied metal hunks from mutilated flesh. She held a man's brain in her hands as it slipped out of his tightly wound head bandage. He somehow stayed conscious while Celia uttered those awful words.

“Just make him comfortable.”

But there just wasn't enough damn morphine for all of them, was there?

The ones who got shorted didn't go quietly. They yelled at Theda if she made one tiny mistake. Swear words commanded her to move faster or slower. Their hands batted her when she got aggressive with the tweezers. One wailed about his brother drowned in the Channel. Another thought he was still on the beach and screeched and kicked accordingly.

It was a day straight from hell, and calm, cool, collected Theda had met her match.

She took a few steps back from her latest dead patient. She threw her bloodied tweezers to the ground, and she took in the panorama of broken bodies and overworked nurses.

“Theda?”

Celia's voice sounded muted and robotic, and it stabbed Theda's innards with a streak of heat. Her lungs clamped down inside her chest. She tried to take deep breaths and calm herself, but it only made her more upset. That stench ... it plugged her nostrils and made her gag. A rumbling sensation took hold of her gut. The hair on her arms stood up, and she got a sudden cold and clammy feeling across her hands and chest.

“Theda? Are you alright?”

Theda looked at Celia with panicked eyes, then she wheeled around and made a break for the hallway. Just as she burst into the corridor, black blotches moved in on her vision.

The logjam of people in the corridor didn't make her feel better. Theda elbowed and jabbed through yelling medical personnel and hobbling, filthy patients. She prayed to everything holy she wouldn't pass out. At least not in front of anyone. But the hallway went blurry and the walls closed in. Theda pushed a few more people aside, and she at last found a side door. She rammed her elbow into it and let herself out into the muddy, chilly exercise yard. Only a few medical and military personnel wandered about, and she'd never felt more grateful for a quiet place.

Gulping down as much of the fresh air as she could, Theda leaned the side of her face against the cool, brick-sided building. Her pores

hemorrhaged buckets of sweat and her vision went in and out of black. She lifted her loose, caramel hair to let the cool spill over her neck.

When a heavy hand dropped on her shoulder, Theda's stress needle exploded. She yelped and whirled to face her intruder.

Dr. Davies. He still sported his white coat, although it was speckled with red and brown. His eyes crinkled with concern. "Theda?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'll go back to work."

She prepared for a hasty exit, but Dr. Davies pulled her back. "Just one moment, there. You look a bit peaked." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a crinkled pack of cigarettes. He held one out to her.

"I don't smoke."

He smirked. "You picked a hell of a good day to start, didn't you?"

Fair point. Theda took the cigarette into her rattly fingers. He helped her light up before he took another for himself. They stood in the yard and puffed on their cigarettes. A bird started chirping nearby, a sharp contrast to all the chaos just on the other side of the brick wall.

The smoke burned and tickled Theda's throat as it permeated her lungs. She had only smoked once or twice before, and she hated both the taste and the burn. She didn't dare cough in front of the doctor, though. That would make her look pretty foolish. Besides, the sweet-tasting tobacco did have a calming effect on her pulsing blood pressure.

She decided to say something to break the ice. "It's a God awful mess in there—"

"Enough, Theda."

His tone was gentle, but she still cringed. The last thing she wanted was to fail him. She had already disappointed Celia. "It's alright, I can handle it."

"Of course you can, but even the best need a break. So enough of that for now. Let's talk about something else."

"Something else?"

He took a long drag off his smoke. "Heard any good jokes lately?"

She gave him a blank stare. This hardly seemed like a time to make jokes, even for someone who never ran out of witty things to say.

He read her gaze with a polite nod. “Something more serious then? I can oblige that.” He blew a smoke ring into the air. “Did you know most doctors around here don’t like me?”

Theda’s heart skipped a beat. No, she didn’t know that, and it shocked her that he would think so. “Doctor Davies, of course they like you. You couldn’t possibly think—”

“Come, Theda.” He winked at her from behind a cloud of smoke. “I come with no pedigree. Why should they like me?”

“Because you are very smart and very nice.”

He leaned a little closer, and a mysterious twinkle lit up his eyes. “I think that’s why you like me.”

Theda felt her cheeks go scarlet, which was actually a relief. It was nice to know the battlefield inside this building hadn’t damaged her human, innocent feelings. Still, he poked a little closer to home than she wanted to expose. She let out a cough that wasn’t from the smoke.

“It’s a thin line to walk, you know.”

She tried to hide the nervous tremble in her voice. “How do you mean?”

“My family won’t have me anymore. They think I’ve risen too high above my station.” He dropped his cigarette in the grass that matched his eyes, and put it out with his boot. “I abandoned them by going to medical school.”

“But that’s ridiculous.”

He shrugged. “Then my colleagues don’t want me because I wasn’t born in their own circle. I sometimes feel I don’t have any place to belong.”

Those dancing green eyes pulled Theda right in, and she felt her heart crack open as wide as the English Channel. How she wished she had the guts to give him somewhere to belong, since they both could use the comfort. She imagined his chest against her cheek. She pictured his arms around her as they swayed to a slow song on a big, cathedral radio. Finding a home in each other.

She took the last pull of her cigarette and felt a deep stab of alarm. It was clear now her crush wasn’t one-sided, but that somehow made it worse. She didn’t want anyone to run her life. She didn’t care to be tied down with a brood of children. It was lovely for the women who wanted that life, but it

wouldn't do for her. Dr. Davies wouldn't like it when he learned that. None of the men did.

At least that's what she'd been told by so many.

Yet Dr. Davies stood before her with a vulnerability that was hard to ignore. He drew an invisible pattern on the ground with his shoe, waiting for her to join him out on the ledge.

Theda couldn't rescue him, though, because she was too afraid. She could never live up to what a man such as he deserved. He would do much better with a woman who was prettier and more likable. Someone he could be proud to hold on his arm in a lavish ballroom. Plain Jane Theda in her polka dot dresses would never do for his wife.

She put her own cigarette out with a tiny sigh. "Well, Doctor, I shouldn't waste time like this. Celia's probably ready to disown me."

Dr. Davies' heart dropped to the ground and shattered into pieces. He covered his grief with a stoic face, then he gave her a polite nod and disappeared through the side door without another word. It clunked shut behind him, leaving a heavy stillness in the air.

Theda's skin chilled the same way it did with an oncoming cold, and she wasn't clear why at first. She thought ending the romance before it started might make her feel better. Yet something felt off inside. Dread bloomed up in her gut, and the root of it became clear despite her cloudy, misty surroundings.

She avoided romance and marriage because she wanted to see the world and make her own way. But maybe that also was a challenge she couldn't live up to. This day had exposed her shortcomings in medicine. It had practically dropped her to the cold, hard floor, forcing her to abandon Celia in a heap of patients.

Perhaps that battlefield combat position would remain out of reach, but she didn't fit the ranks of the country girls either. Life at Number 6 held the least charms of all. Just like Dr. Davies, Theda realized she had no real place to belong. She would never belong to him either, because she'd just slammed the door in his face. He would probably lock it from the other side.

Theda put a hand to her stomach and her knees turned to jelly. She felt as if she might collapse again, but this time no one would catch her.

OceanofPDF.com

Adelaide

SAINT-GERMAIN-DE-VARREVILLE

When it came to certain things, Adelaide loved adventure. Perhaps it was her upbringing closer to the city, or the fact that she had seen so little of the world growing up. Either way, in some respects, she was never afraid to step outside her comfort zone and try something new.

But she had limits. She found it crucial to stick to tradition in some areas, one being that she should always, no matter what, dress respectably. She should cross her ankles politely when she sat down, and wear a skirt that covered up everything but her shoes. She should always comb her hair back properly and pinch her cheeks just right. Looking sharp was her way of being taken seriously as a wife, as a mother, and as a woman. If she dressed the part, no one could ever mistake her for anything less than the regal, high-moral French girl she had always seen herself as.

So when that silly old general handed her a pair of pants and a soggy pair of combat boots, insisting she wear something “more proper for running around a battlefield,” she almost howled right in his face. She probably would have if she wasn’t so damn proper. Risking a battlefield to get to her endangered daughter was one thing. But Adelaide had never worn pants in her entire life. She especially wasn’t keen on taking them from some wounded man, or a German prisoner, or wherever in hell he had managed to scrounge them up on such short notice.

Neither the general nor Wade would hear any protest or excuses, though. They didn’t care a whit about what made her uncomfortable, or what she deemed inappropriate. They at least had the decency to turn around while

she stepped into the horrid things, which were plenty loose on her old frame. The boots felt heavy and unnatural on her dainty little feet.

She continued pleading for her dress even after Wade dragged her away from the general and the battle-swept coast. She still cursed the pants as they walked back through the countryside that had already put her through enough for one day.

And Adelaide got the most annoyed when she noticed how much easier it was to keep her balance in these strong shoes. The deep treads bent the muddy terrain to her will. She couldn't ignore how nicely the pants moved with her body, helping her along instead of constricting her. The deep pockets also allowed her extra room to stash things—Henning's compass, and some rations Wade had given her.

As they ducked into a vast field decorated with a lush, blooming tree, Adelaide had to face facts. They weren't so bad, these pants. She actually kind of liked them.

Wade walked beside her in agitated silence, probably afraid of provoking another "regal" temper tantrum about her attire. He constantly scratched the back of his head. Either because of the tension or the nits infesting every inch of his body. Tapping on the butt of his rifle with nervous fingers, he tried whistling a cheerful tune, but his lips were too dry from nervousness. He broke into a childish grin instead.

"So, where's the nearest brothel?"

Adelaide stopped in her tracks. The vulgar comment didn't shock her. But the sloppy boy's smooth, delicate, and near-perfect French sure did.

She raised her eyebrows. "You speak French?"

"I had a small bit in school."

"Sounds like you had a big bit. Enough to charm a French working girl at least."

A squawk of cowboy laughter emerged from his hairless gut. It wasn't nearly as sophisticated as his French. "You're a little pistol, aren't you? Nobody warned us about that." He gave her a smile that could tame anyone, even an old-fashioned girl like Adelaide.

She fought like hell to hide the grin threatening to burst across her face. After all, bringing this boy along was the last thing she had wanted at the

time. But he had gone out of his way to prove himself, hadn't he? He even stood by her in the face of reprimand or worse from a superior officer. And now he showed a sense of humor, here in a place where nothing felt funny. It was refreshing in a way. None of the soldiers she had encountered in the last four years had cracked a smile. Throughout the German occupation, a sense of humor had become the rarest treasure in France.

"So tell me about this charming accent of yours, Wade. What part of America is that from?"

"Southern."

She nodded. This time she couldn't stop the smile from poking through her prickles. Before he got the best of her, she turned her back on him and pressed through the field.

Wade followed close on her heels. "So what's your daughter like?"

"She doesn't work in a brothel, so don't get any ideas."

Wade giggled. He swung his rifle over his shoulders and hung his wrists over each end. It was another sign of his loose army discipline, and a terrible way to carry a loaded gun.

Adelaide prepared to give him a lecture on the subject, but he beat her to the punch. "Well, you must be a pretty darn good mother, given what you're putting us both through to get to her."

It brought Adelaide to another abrupt halt.

She had been a mother all her life, ever since her own had neglected her. Day in and day out, all Adelaide did was mother. But no one had ever called her a good mother, at least not to her face. She couldn't even say the words to herself in the mirror, because without the validation, she didn't know if they were true. She could only do her best and pray that it was enough. Through every sob, every heartache, every argument, and through every motherly lesson, Adelaide yearned to have someone tell her what she so badly needed to hear.

Those precious words were hard to come by, though. Georgette certainly didn't pay her many compliments on her motherhood. Neither did her husband. Lord knows her own mother had nothing to say on the subject. Even those German boys never used those words.

It was one of many things about motherhood that made it so hard. The only performance notes Adelaide ever got were the angry ones.

A good mother ...

While she let the words soak into a vulnerable place, the boy shuffled his feet. He reached into the ether for something to encourage her. “You mothers are braver than any soldier, and that’s a fact. I think my ma would do exactly what you are if the boot was on the other foot.”

Adelaide kept careful guard of her heart as she took a step closer to him. “And what would you do for her, Wade?”

The question startled him. “I ... well, what do you mean?”

“Do you love your mother?”

He didn’t need more than a split second to answer. “Well, shoot. Of course!”

“And when is the last time you told her so? Or told her she was a good mother?”

Wade’s face turned pinker than the flower blossoms in that nearby tree. He heaved a gusty sigh. “You’re right, Mrs. Paquet. She annoyed me some. The looking over my shoulder, the watching my every move. It’s why I joined the Army. I wanted to be my own man. I didn’t even tell her I had signed on ... I should have been better to her.”

Adelaide felt a familiar, sharp blade inside her. “Yes, you should have. Mothers mother, Wade. It’s our job.”

He sniffled to hide his shame. “I know that alright, believe you me. I wasn’t here five minutes before I horribly missed what I had all along.”

Any remaining bitterness against this boy crashed into the cellar. For the first time since she had met him, Adelaide gave Wade a gentle smile. She stroked his smooth cheek with her fingertips. The gesture she always used to give its receivers a simple message.

If you need a mother, here I am.

Before they cemented their bond, a flurry of gunshots broke out from a tree. They sent up a frantic puff of flower petals, clawing the green grass into mud.

Adelaide yelped as a sharp blast hit her wrist, and a painful sting penetrated her skin.

Wade knocked her off her feet and into some undergrowth nearby. Then he reached for his rifle and got down to business, exchanging hurried shots with the mystery enemy up in the branches. Fizzling tracers flew everywhere and slashed at the flowery beauty of the tree.

Adelaide cowered and watched from her hiding spot. She was impressed by how agile that scrawny little boy was, blind in one eye or not. He had every command over that rifle. The full fury of his bulging muscles popped out. His pleasant, childish face molded into a very serious and menacing man. Wade certainly wasn't the weakling she had taken him for.

He was also a pretty good shot, because the gunfire up above them soon fell silent. The branches cracked in the tree, and a body thudded to the ground.

Wade kept his gun ready, making sure the German-uniformed body wouldn't move. Then he spit into the grass. "Damn snipers. Brass warned us they'd be a menace." He turned to Adelaide. "Alright, darlin'. You can come on out now."

Adelaide crawled from her hiding place, cradling her bloody wrist against her bosom. It wasn't a lethal wound, but bursts of pain still blasted through her entire body. She also had nothing to stop the bleeding.

When he saw the wound, Wade's warrior face dissolved back into the gentle American farmer. "Oh, you poor little thing." He wrapped his strong arm around her stooped shoulders, and he helped her sit down on the grass. He knelt next to her and rummaged through his kit bag. One by one, he pulled out medical supplies.

With all the tenderness in the world, Wade took her injured wrist into his oil- and mud-stained fingers. He ripped open a little packet and dumped a strange powder onto the bloody laceration. Then he bandaged it up with slow and careful movements so he wouldn't cause her any more pain. The entire time, he cooed and whispered that everything would be alright.

Adelaide bit down to hold her tears in place.

Wade saw them anyway. "Don't you worry none, it won't kill you. This powder here will keep it clean and the gauze should stop the bleeding. You'll be just fine."

Adelaide just nodded in reply. She knew she would be fine. Fear hadn't started the tears rolling. Wade had. He couldn't have known it, but he gave her something no one else in this world ever had.

He mothered her.

Adelaide absorbed the tender way he dressed her wrist. She reveled in his gentle whispers and comforting words. Her insides tingled from his maternal touch.

She remembered how many times she had fallen as a child, but she never got kisses from her mother. When someone broke her heart, her father never comforted her. Her husband was all business and no romance. She yearned for all of them to love her and be proud of her, and perhaps they were, but they had never shown it to her.

Wade only needed one pack of powder and a single strip of gauze to tend a soul wound she feared would never heal. He also taught her something she should have known all along. A good mother didn't have to be around all the time. She just had to be around when it counted.

Georgette's desire to have a life outside her child didn't mean she would fail as a parent. It didn't make her any less of a mother. When that baby was hurt, when she burst into tears, Georgette was always the first to scoop her into her loving arms. She dropped everything when her child cried for her. Georgette couldn't be there all the time, but when she was there, she was there all the way.

Adelaide couldn't stop the tears this time. They spilled down her cheeks, and one dripped onto her fresh gauze.

A good mother ...

Adelaide may not have gotten everything right, but she must have done pretty damn well overall. She had raised a courageous, fiery, and very strong daughter who rose to every challenge. Georgette handled the changes of this crazy world a lot better than Adelaide ever had.

Wade put his hand on the back of her hair. "There, all better." With a wink, he leaned in and kissed her wounded wrist.

Adelaide managed a girlish giggle through her tears. "Lucky you. Not one day in France, and already you kiss a French girl. Too bad I'm not better looking."

He laughed and got to his feet. He reached both hands out to help her too. “Nonsense. Women are like fine French wine. They only get better with age.”

Adelaide stood on legs that felt stronger, and she brushed some loose grass blades off her heavy army pants. Pants that, make no mistake, she had grown terribly fond of. Wade walked her safely through the field, and she looked up.

A familiar little church spire, surrounded by farms, peeked out from the horizon. Although it swarmed with U.S. troops and even an army tank or two, it gave Adelaide a second shot of badly needed relief.

“Georgette ...”

Flora

CAEN

By the time Flora returned to Geraud's building, she had worked up a sticky sweat.

A lot of it came from the fires still raging through the city. More buildings had collapsed under their weight. Smoke choked out every town square. People still alive walked about with damp cloths over their faces. They stacked more corpses in every corner. In the rippling hot temperatures, the bodies released a noxious odor. It was incalculable damage, and it would take the city decades to recover. Still, it didn't compare to the devastation that rocked Flora's own heart.

Your parents ... they're still alive.

The words rang loud in her ears. Louder than the shouts and wails of Caen's battered citizens, or the gunshots in the streets. They drowned out the waves of cargo planes and bombers still flying over intermittently in droves. With each step through shattered bricks and broken glass, the words hit Flora harder and faster. Her muscles tightened, and the urge to rip Geraud apart moved through her like a drug and flooded her senses. She didn't know how she would make him pay for this, but she swore to every living and dead saint that she would.

She swept up to Geraud's door and slammed into his cramped little flat.

It was the same madhouse as earlier. Some dust-covered men tended to injured people propped against the peeling kitchen wallpaper. They handed them cigarettes and filthy water. They used old shirts to stop their bleeding. Other men huddled in corners and discussed the latest messages coming

through the crystal radio set. Some still argued this wasn't the actual invasion.

She threaded through the tangle of people to reach her so-called protector. Her eyes darted every which way, and her nose struggled for the familiar scent of his particular brand of home-rolled smokes. She nudged a few men rambling around.

"Have you seen Geraud? Where is Geraud?"

None of them answered her, although a few pointed in haphazard directions.

In her frustration, she prepared to turn her temper loose on the next person who crossed her path, but then she heard an awful crack from Geraud's closed office door. A distinctly female cry followed it.

Flora's legs grew heavy. That sure as hell didn't sound good ...

She shoved through the crowd toward the office door. Once she reached it, she barged right in.

The sight that greeted her did nothing to calm her nerves. Two men had cornered a frail French girl behind Geraud's desk. She looked no older than eighteen. She curled into a ball on the splintered wooden floor, shivering from head to toe. Even her golden-colored, curly locks trembled in fear. She screamed again as one man whipped a hard slap across her pale cheek.

Everything happened so fast. Before Flora could think, or question, or shout any objections, the second man wrenched the girl by the shoulders and sprawled her on her stomach. While she struggled against her attacker, the other man hurled himself onto her back.

The girl roared in a feral panic beneath him, but he only mocked her with a cruel sneer. He grabbed a fist full of her hair and yanked her head up.

The girl screamed like a wounded animal, while the man who slapped her scratched a bold, black swastika on her forehead with a piece of charcoal. Meanwhile, the man on her back grabbed a pair of shears and slashed them across her wriggling head. That beautiful curly hair came out in bloody clumps.

Shock hit Flora in waves so strong she wanted to throw up. Yet anger and fright paralyzed her. She searched desperately for Geraud.

Geraud, who had always touted himself as a humanitarian. He spouted countless platitudes about how much he cared for his fellow Frenchmen, how he wanted to free them from Nazi oppression. He would give his life for it if he had to. It made for fine speeches over a sparse dinner table, but in the end, his inaction spoke a lot louder. He did nothing to stop the savage behavior unfolding right in front of him, antics no better than the Nazis he hated so much. He just stood there, with his hands in his pockets. Something like an arrogant smirk pulled at the corner of his lips.

Fireworks exploded in Flora's head. Her vision went white and sparky with them. She stormed over to Geraud and shoved him to get his attention.

He barely kept his balance. When he met her eyes, he glared. "What are you doing here? I sent you to the hospital."

She pointed her shaking finger at the violent display. "What the hell is going on?"

"*Collaboration horizontale*. She slept with a German."

"Did she give information to him? Betray anyone?"

He shrugged. "No. She just fucked him."

To keep herself from punching him, Flora locked her hands over her hips. "That's it?"

"Isn't that enough?"

Flora turned to the girl. Tears swelled her face, and bloody scratches covered half her bald scalp. More scarlet streaks dribbled down her cheeks.

She didn't strike Flora as a collaborator. Collaborators wanted to hurt France, betray people, or help and hide the Nazis. They did it on purpose, because they wanted the wrong side to win. The woman's heartrending sobs, and her painfully young years, painted a different picture. She wasn't a criminal. She just had a relationship with the only man at her disposal. Perhaps not the smartest thing she had done, but it wasn't criminal.

As the woman's cries reached a crescendo, and the men around her laughed like hyenas, Flora snapped inside. She'd had enough. These men had had their chance to run the show. All it got them was a second world war that killed more people than the first one. Then they made the women pay for their mistakes. They treated them like war spoils or property to pillage. They beat them down, took away their rights, abused them, and

threw them out of their homes and onto the streets. Then they ripped their hair out and painted swastikas on their faces for nothing but silly, schoolgirl romance.

Flora turned to Geraud with eyes aflame. "Make them stop. Sex with a German was stupid, but not collaboration."

"Sleeping with the enemy is wrong."

"Tell that to all the German girls you fucked in the first war."

The remark caught Geraud like a slap in the face. He straightened to his full height and glowered down at her. "Mind your tone."

"She's a young woman with a bunch of virile young men around. Did you always use your best judgment when it was your turn? Make them *stop*."

"Flora, I said *mind your tone*."

Flora growled and shook her head. "To hell with you. If you think you can treat women like something to pillage, you're fighting on the wrong side, Geraud."

Flora moved toward the trio in fast, angry strides. Then she lunged at them.

Once again, everything happened fast. Her knuckles connected with a fleshy face. Her nails swiped a stubbly cheek. Her shoe busted open a lip. Drops of blood sprayed the wooden floor. Shouts and squeaks of pain erupted from the pile of violence. Someone lost a tooth over it, as Flora felt one crunch under her foot.

The two men scattered to the winds, holding their freshly bruised faces as they ran.

When they were gone, Flora stood in the center of the room, and she let the savage, violent instinct retreat back into the shadows. The red hue over her vision dissolved. Her limbs stopped quaking. Her breathing relaxed. Her eyes, still a bit blurred with emotion, turned to the floor.

The poor girl remained curled up like a possum. Her backbone poked out of her thin blouse, and her shoulders heaved in sobs.

Flora put a gentle hand on the girl's waist.

The girl flinched fiercely. Her terrified eyes fell on Flora, and she saw that her tormentors had fled. With the most pitiful cry in the world, she fell

into the arms of her rescuer and bawled her eyes out. Her tears soaked the sleeve of Flora's filthy shirt.

Flora cradled the girl's bloody head into her own clothes, stroking her back to calm her down. Using a filthy handkerchief from her pants pocket, she mopped up the blood and scrubbed the swastika off her face. Then she helped her to her feet.

Flora leaned to whisper in her ear. "Go home. Pack a suitcase and get the hell out of here."

The girl gave a grateful nod and bolted from the room.

Flora turned her slanted eyes back to Geraud, and her anger found a fresh charge. She reached for one of her last two cigarettes and her lighter. Her hands shook so badly she couldn't get the desperately needed spark.

Perhaps afraid of what her fists and boots could accomplish, Geraud quickly offered his own lighter.

Like a cat, Flora swiped her paw and slapped it from his hands.

He drew back and rubbed his wrist while his lighter clattered across the floor. "Flora, what the hell has gotten into you?"

She wrapped her hands around his tired collar and gave him a rough shake that meant business. She put her face right in his. If looks could kill, he would be dead.

"Listen to me, you son of a bitch. When were you going to tell me my parents were alive?"

Geraud's eyes turned to dinner plates.

Emilia

CAEN SS/SD AND GESTAPO

By the time Heyns stomped into the office, Emilia was back at her desk. She had tucked the pistol in her lower drawer and the diamonds into her bosom. She typed a few paragraphs of nonsense with her typewriter while setting her features in deep focus, trying to look too busy to be disturbed.

Heyns stepped right up to the side of her desk anyway. He stood so close his frigid aura penetrated her protective space. He wiped blood off his hands with a handkerchief already soaked in it.

Emilia glued her eyes on her fake task. From the corner of her eye, she glimpsed the monster shadow that had engulfed his face. There was an evident disdain there too, which frightened her. He usually reserved that look for the “enemies of the state” he brought in for torture and imprisonment. Before now, he only ever looked at her with friendliness, even respect.

She supposed he had reason to lose his temper. Reports of paratroopers all over Normandy had reached his desk. He knew it was equally bad if not worse on the coast. The planes kept up their stream over Caen, violence reigned in the streets, and resisters were on the prowl. Heyns had plenty of reasons to teeter on the brink. Yet something darker lurked in that scathing stare.

Emilia felt pinpricks of a nervous sweat under her hairline, and fear clenched her stomach. Still, she didn’t break her concentration. She couldn’t, because her life now depended on her ability to keep her cool.

“Emilia.”

His tone sounded different, like a lethal snake rattle.

She pretended she didn't need to be scared. He couldn't know that she had snooped in his office, but one thing was crystal clear: Something had stoked the flames of his anger, and she would have to absorb that. She got to her feet and raised her eyes to his.

It took all her energy not to shriek, because that look in his face dripped with evil, pulsed with it. She stared at Heyns, this man she once looked up to, who gave her the shining role in the German Reich she'd always wanted, and paved her a permanent pathway out of Lebensborn.

Somehow, in the course of this terrible day, the man had become her most dangerous threat.

But his transformation had probably started well before the shells that morning. The Allied invasion had just blasted away any pretense. Only raw emotion remained, out in the open for the first time. Who would survive was anyone's guess.

On legs threatening to give out, Emilia stiffened her back and raised her arm up. "Heil Hitler."

He glared in response. "Sit."

Emilia complied, but something felt very wrong. Perhaps the escape thoughts in her head had ruptured the energy field around him. Perhaps he now sensed the secret underneath her surface, sniffing out her intentions like the bloodhound he was. Or maybe he had just slid further into the depths of his own hell and wanted to take her with him.

He certainly looked like hell. His face had turned to gray plywood, and his lips were stretched so thin they almost vanished. He was strung out, and when Heyns was strung out, someone would pay.

He sat on the edge of her desk and folded his hands in his lap. The interrogation of Emilia Wagner had begun. All that was missing was someone to take the notes.

"What times we live in, Miss Wagner."

"Sir?"

He wiped a spot of blood off that silver ring. Then he dropped his putrid, stained handkerchief into her waste basket.

She felt her whole body tighten at the sight of it.

“I knew your father, you know.”

Emilia gulped. That was a surprise. If he knew her father, what else did he know? “Did you? I didn’t realize.”

He forced a smile that failed to brighten his hard features. “He had real charisma in those early days. So rich and powerful. All those fawning, younger party members wanted every little piece of him, especially his beautiful daughter.” Those dry, flaky lips stretched to their limits.

“Yes, sir. My father is a remarkable man.” Emilia practically choked on the words, but she had to tell him what he wanted to hear.

His fingers twitched ever so slightly, detecting the rancor. “You think that, do you? Is that why you ran away from home, Emilia?”

Emilia tried to ignore the painful jab in her gut. Yes, he knew some of her secrets. It was crucial now to determine exactly which ones. She faced the same situation so many of those torture victims wound up in. Heyns was reaching for something, but she wasn’t sure what. If she didn’t know, she couldn’t provide it. There was no way out.

She took a deep breath and gave it her best. “It ... wasn’t that I wanted to leave him, sir. I just found more of a mentor in you.”

A flicker of something human cracked that stony façade. She thought her answer was right in some form or another ... until he spoke again.

“Or perhaps you just wanted a ticket out of Lebensborn?”

The heavy, cold weight in Emilia’s stomach dropped to her toes. The quiver returned to her fingers, but she forced herself to hold his gaze. This was a direct challenge, a test of her loyalty. Her life depended on what she said in the next few seconds, on the resolve she showed.

She opened her mouth to answer, but he reached his claw-like hand out. With the back of it, he stroked her smooth, Aryan cheek. “Why, Emilia? Why not Lebensborn?”

Her legs began to quiver. “S-sir ...”

“You could have made beautiful babies with strong German men. Certainly stronger men than the boys you dally with around here.” He glared. “Don’t think I don’t know about your exploits. I miss nothing, Emilia. *Nothing.*”

Her brain wheels spun so fast they almost tumbled from the tracks. She clamored to say something, anything, but panic froze her. No matter how many alarms went off in her head, her voice remained smothered. Her eyes stayed wide open. The quiver kept up in her fingers, even when she shoved her hands under her thighs.

“You can tell me, Emilia. Why not Lebensborn?”

He leaned in close. His hot breath landed on her neck like a blowtorch, and she shrank underneath it. She also shriveled under his hand, which slid from her face and landed on her shoulder, brushing the side of her arm. It felt like spider legs crawling down her uniform.

“Nothing to say, Emilia, my angel?” He finally withdrew his hand, only so he could look her dead in the eye. “It’s because you saw greater things for yourself, yes?”

Emilia didn’t know if it was a lifeline, but she still grabbed on with all her might. “Yes ... Greater things, sir. Like working for you.”

He laughed then, a soft cackle of a laugh. “That’s why I took you under my wing, Emilia.”

“Sir?”

“When we first met, I saw right through you. Your pretty face couldn’t hide what was in your soul. Because you were me.”

She shook her head. “I ... don’t understand.”

“You *are* me, Emilia. Ambitious, tenacious, and strong-willed me. You believed you were destined for greatness, something better than the rest. So did I. You and I, my angel. Both of us heard the call to feed our ambition. To *survive*. And that’s just what we did, isn’t it? We survived.”

Emilia struggled to keep her thoughts up with this rabid dog. She could tell he wanted something from her. His eyes practically begged for it. Maybe he wanted her to confess she had dug through his files and stole his things. Yet the desperation in his eyes didn’t match that theory.

Like the voice of reason in mass chaos, it suddenly hit her. Validation. He wanted his lucky charm to work her magic, to absolve him of what he had done. The countless beatings, roundups, tortures, imprisonments, and executions. He wanted her to say it was all necessary. Paramount to the Reich’s security. A man just doing his job.

He needed to hear it from her and only her, because their paths were the same. In another life, they both had a fierce craving to be a part of something legendary. Something they believed in, that gleamed gold and red while adorned with flowers and swastikas. A horrible war, extermination camps, and blood-soaked streets were just the temporary, hellish road leading to that far greater thing, the reward they were promised but that was never delivered. Instead, they got a monumental army banging on their door, hanging ropes at the ready. Heyns needed to hear that he had done nothing wrong, that he had just followed orders.

That's what he wanted, but Emilia knew better. It was why she had tucked away that pistol and those diamonds poked at her breast. Nothing she said would make their crimes forgivable. She couldn't help him. It was everyone for themselves now.

Heyns's skeletal hand returned to her frail shoulder and locked her in a steel grip. His thumb pressed inches away from the stolen diamonds. He forced her to look into his ice-coated, wild, unhinged eyes. "You know what your father said of these times?"

Emilia tried to keep steady. "What, sir?"

"He said survival belongs to those who will reach out and squeeze it from the undeserving. Because we are the master race. Above everything, we must survive."

Emilia swallowed hard. Yes, that sounded like her father.

"So I'm asking you, my *angel*. What will you do in these times we live in? Will you survive?"

Emilia struggled not to roll her eyes in agony. In addition to validation, he wanted to know her intentions when push came to shove. And it would come to a big shove very soon. Instead of rifling through her desk drawers, he would rifle through her soul to find out where she stood.

She mustered up the most sympathetic face in her arsenal. She turned her magical charm to its highest setting, and she leaned in close enough for him to get a whiff of her perfume. The tender smile that had once melted Hitler went to work on Heyns. She placed her warm hand over his.

As soon as her silky skin touched him, it was as if he had woken up from a drug-induced stupor. He removed his bony fingers from her shoulder

and gave her a bob of his head. Then he lumbered into his office and slammed the door behind him.

Emilia stared straight ahead and felt the storm clouds thicken. Any sanity he had left was rapidly crumbling. If she indeed prized her survival, she would have to take it for herself.

She would have to take it from Heyns.

OceanofPDF.com

Flora

CAEN

Flora occupied a fancy, plush chair that didn't fit the surroundings in Geraud's dingy office, kind of like the girl who sat in it. She blew through her last cigarette while Geraud supplied her with a rare bottle of spirits. She dodged his comment that it looked almost empty.

"Your precious Allies have landed. Shouldn't you look at that bottle as half full?" she said with a snarl.

He crossed the room to close and lock the office door. He didn't do it because he cared about her privacy, and he didn't give her liquor out of the kindness of his heart. He just wanted to save his own skin, because now he knew the capabilities of her rage. After all this time, Geraud was at last prepared to take her seriously. At least, that's what the petrified look on his face suggested.

Once he had buttoned up the office, he went to the corner behind his desk. He poked the tip of his shoe around his tattered Oriental rug. His shoe found the sweet spot, and he flipped the rug over to reveal a barely noticeable cutout in the wood. He pushed away a knot of wood, then twisted a tiny key into a lock and took out a tattered black file case.

With the case tucked under his arm, he pulled up a lanky wooden chair and sat down across from Flora. He watched her final lifeline dissolve to its nub. He tugged his own cigarettes from his pocket and laid them next to her on the chair.

She flicked them off. "Like hell that will make up for anything."

“Don’t be stubborn, Flora. Bastien is busy. You won’t get any more for a while.”

Bastien. The name dropped like a heavy stone into the waters of her soul. She managed to pull one more puff from the used-up cigarette butt. Then she smashed it in the ash tray by her feet.

“He’s dead.”

Geraud hid his feelings with a crack of his old knuckles. “Where did you hear that?”

“I saw him at the hospital. Got crushed by his building this morning.”

Geraud gave her a slow blink that betrayed his surprise. “I’m ... sorry.”

“Are you?”

He was taken back. “Flora, you know how much I care about my boys.”

“Just your boys.”

“Flora ...”

“You ask people to put everything on the line for you and your cause. And how do you repay them? You lie to their face.”

“It’s not as easy as all that.”

“Then how hard is it, Geraud? Enlighten me.”

His knuckles went white and he tried to crack them again. Not a single sound came from them this time, and it further ruffled his calm exterior. “Alright, I’ll level with you. Your mother and father are in a concentration camp in Poland. They arrived there shortly after their arrest. Last I knew, they both were still alive.”

“When’s the last you knew?”

“A week or so. Two at most.”

Flora eyed the cigarettes she had slapped to the floor. She hated taking cigarettes from anyone, especially men. She didn’t want to give them any reason to expect favors from her. Even the ones Bastien gave her were paid for with hard-earned money. However, she made a timid reach for the cigarette box. At the last minute, she yanked her hand back.

She hit Geraud with a fiery gaze instead. “You going to get to the part about why you kept it from me?”

“It’s a long story.”

“We’ve got all day.”

He guffawed. “No, we don’t. This country is falling apart as we speak.”

“Your lies won’t put it back together again, will they?”

He ran a hand through his graying hair. “You make me out to be a monster, Flora. You might try thinking that we all just wanted to protect you.”

“We?”

He looked her dead in the eyes. No more knuckle cracking or beating around the bush. “You remember your mother had excellent German.”

“Of course.”

“Well, the Germans gave her a position in the commandant’s office at the camp. And you know her. She has the ability to charm anyone. The commandant warmed up to her so much he offered to pay her, but she asked for just one thing. Your father’s life. So yes ... both are still alive in the camp.”

Flora’s eyes lost a touch of their fire. That sounded like her mother, alright. She always put the safety of everyone else above her own needs. The reminder of that put a sharp blade of steel into Flora’s shattered heart. How she missed her mother.

“The position did more than save her life. It gave her access to a cache of information. Things we can use in the Resistance.”

“Like what?”

Geraud opened up the file case and handed a stack of papers to her.

She took them and gave them a scan.

A lot of it was in code she couldn’t make out. Bastien’s handiwork. It sent another bullet of pain radiating through her.

Some of the code had been translated by Geraud, and he wrote his notes in the margins. Things about mass murders and gas chambers, and lists of the wounded or killed. He had noted prisoner numbers and surviving family members to contact about their whereabouts.

That alone was valuable information, but Geraud knew things about the Germans too. He had notes about pending military actions, neighborhoods targeted for Gestapo raids, names of Resistance members in danger of arrest, and Nazi spies who had infiltrated the Resistance. All right there in solid black and white.

Flora's eyes went wide as she leafed through the papers.

She was no fool, and she knew what she held in her hands. A strategic gold mine. The person who held these papers may as well have keys to the nearby Gestapo and SS headquarters. So much power, all in a beat-up leather bag under the floor in Geraud's office.

And all because of Flora's mother. She had put her coded signature in bold at the bottom of every sheet. Flora knew it was her mother's, because the smudges made it unmistakable. Her mother was left-handed, and she always smeared the ink when she wrote.

It made everything more real than it was a few minutes before. Flora's mother was alive and well. So well she risked life and limb to smuggle this information out of the camp. Her mother had to trust in a place built on lies and deception. She relied on people who were sketchy at best, whose allegiance could change at the drop of a bomb. Every day, the specter of death smashed her under its oppressive thumb. Yet none of that mattered as much as the right thing. Not to Flora's mother.

Geraud gently took the papers and put them back into his file case. He knew already what her questions would be, and he didn't stall in answering them. "We have a flipped German in contact with her. He carries the letters and correspondence for the guards. She sends everything out through him."

Flora wasn't soothed. "Sounds risky as hell to me. He flipped once. He could flip back at any time."

"He could, but this is war. We're all taking risks."

"Except you. You just sit here and order people about while the bombs fall and the bodies stack up."

"Jesus, Flora. Is that what you really think of me?"

"How could you lie to me about this, Geraud?" Flora couldn't halt the tears in her eyes. It was the only outlet for her flood of emotions, yet it was also why everyone said she was unreliable.

She fiercely wiped the tears away and tried to focus her energy. "I thought you and my parents went too far back for lies. They trusted you above anyone else. How could you make me think they were dead?"

"To protect you."

She rocketed up and cowered over him. "Don't give me that."

Geraud also got to his feet. His fingers wrapped around the decanter he had provided. He poured a healthy helping into a chipped tea mug.

She snatched it and downed the contents in one swallow.

He frowned. "That's for sipping, Flora."

"Go to hell."

He slammed the decanter on his desk. "Alright, I understand you're mad. But there's a bigger picture here. Your mother is privy to terrible things at that camp. The Nazis are monsters, Flora. They're mass murdering people there. Herding them into gas chambers and killing them by the thousands. Every single day. She has to go in there and collect all the valuables off them once they're gone. Even their goddamn gold teeth. It's destroying her."

"Then why don't you get her out of there? Or are you more worried about your precious bigger picture?"

"She won't let us get her out."

Flora had started a nervous pace, but the words stopped her dead in the water. She whirled to face him.

"The information, Flora. She knows its value."

Flora sniffed another falsehood. "Cause and country were never my mother's priority, Geraud. The people she loves maybe, but not the Resistance. She wouldn't endure all that for any cause of yours."

A chuckle escaped his weary lips. "*Au contraire*. Your mother's always been passionate about building a better world. She joined the Resistance with every intention of preserving cause and country, even to the death if she had to." He paused and let out a very sad sigh. "Things changed after she was captured. The hard look at the German death machine, and all the infighting in the Resistance, well, she doesn't give a shit about a cause anymore. She doesn't give much of a shit about anything. She only has one thing left to fight for."

Flora felt her heart screech to a halt. "Me."

He nodded. "A lot of people are ready to give up, Flora. This has been a hard fight, a hell of a lot harder than we ever imagined. But I won't give up on France. I won't give up on it because of the people it has borne. People like your mother."

“What does that have to do with those files?”

“She tipped me off early about the information she could get back to me. I knew right away I needed to have it. I alone.”

“Why you?”

“Because I can see further ahead than this war. Once the fighting with Germany stops, the battle for France will begin. Someone will have to take the reins.” He pointed to the file case. “Those files will give us countless victories in this bloodbath. Those victories will be a powerful card to play when the war to lead France is upon us. I wanted them at any cost.”

“So my mother just gave them to you?”

“For a price.”

Flora raised her eyebrows. Saving lives sounded like her mother. Extorting money from someone did not. There had to be more to it than that. “What price?”

With one timid flicker of Geraud’s brown eyes, Flora suddenly saw it all. She saw why he never threw her out of his house, no matter how much she grated on his nerves. She knew why she always got her way, why he pretended not to know she stole his liquor. Why, no matter how much he might want to, he could never get rid of Flora Babineaux.

His voice cut into her raw feelings like the scratch of a record player. “She agreed to feed me the intel, but I had to keep you safe. If I didn’t agree, or if anything happened to you, she would sell the information to someone else.”

Flora felt a familiar and dangerous tremble in her fists. The picture, so hazy just minutes ago, became crystal clear. Those crystals jabbed at every vulnerability in her body. “That’s why you gave me those menial, piss-ant posts. You didn’t want the ace up your sleeve to be hurt, possibly killed. And you told me they were dead so I wouldn’t go looking.”

He put his hands in his back pockets and smiled. “You always were pretty shrewd. Especially when you’ve had alcohol.”

It was clearly a joke meant to smooth things over, but it was by far the wrong answer. In a blind rage accompanied by a furious roar, Flora dove at Geraud. She swiped at him with her nails and kicked at his shins.

He anticipated her and locked her in a death grip with his arms around her neck. “You never did know how to control your emotions. Come, Flora. It was an easy bargain to make. I would have looked out for you either way. This just gave me extra incentive.”

The words didn’t stop the waterfall hemorrhaging from her system. She sobbed and screamed behind clenched teeth. She wriggled her arms and managed a punch to his gut.

The blow sucked the wind out of him, and his arms loosened just enough for her to spring free. Then she kicked him hard on his kneecap.

He released a string of curse words as he fell to the floor. “Goddamn it, Flora.”

She ran for the door and pried it open with shaking hands.

Geraud, hobbling on his hurt knee, tried to go after her. “Flora! Stop right there.”

She made a mad dash through the chaos in his overcrowded apartment. She kicked open the front door and went to barrel outside. But she skidded to a stop.

Hundreds of Royal Air Force bombers converged on the city like a swarm of vultures. They rumbled so loud the entire building quaked. As she watched with bulging eyes, their bomb bay doors dropped open. The bombing those leaflets promised had arrived.

So had Geraud. He stepped up behind her and grabbed her by the shoulder. He had to yell over the roar of the plane engines. “Flora, we have to get back inside.”

She wheeled around with her hand outstretched. Her palm landed right on the pink of his cheek. The hard slap reeled him back through the doorway.

“You’re a bastard. Rot in hell.”

She scampered into the madness.

Geraud recovered from the slap, but not in time to stop her. As the bombs screeched to earth and began their reign of terror over Caen, his bargaining chip disappeared into the smoke and fire.

Emilia

CAEN SS/SD AND GESTAPO

The bombardment was like no other.

It started before they even knew the planes were inbound. The whistles cut through the air like shards of glass, and then came the violent flashes. Puffs of smoke and towers of flame erupted from the heart of the city. Vicious claps of explosions came next. They blasted out windows, blew apart structures, and opened gaping holes in the middle of crumbled streets. They buried people alive and broke apart hospitals. Another raging inferno started, although flames still burned from the last one.

Black smoke poured into every open window. The whole room shook and rattled. The ceiling came down with a crash and knocked everyone off their feet.

The men scrambled to find shelter. One tried to use a phone and call for help, but he was blasted across the room. The collapsing wall took out another. Metal beams and debris impaled a few more. The rubble coming down in a heap snuffed out the rest.

With the ceiling and walls gone, the room became exposed to all of Caen, although it looked more like Dante's inferno. There was a wall of roaring, scarlet fire as far as the eye could see. Billowing smoke choked everything else from view. A hellish glow descended on the headquarters, as did a toxic cloud of heat and fumes.

Emilia crouched under her pitiful desk. Burning embers stung her skin and black smudges appeared on her uniform. She barely recognized the animal-like shrieks as her own.

The bombing didn't let up. The violent thuds from the falling missiles hammered into her skeleton. The heat burned a lobster hue into her pale skin. The tips of her hair curled, her eyebrows and lashes seared. She wrapped her head in her arms to protect herself, but the cloth of her uniform singed her cheeks. Out came another blood-curdling scream.

Perhaps it was the end she deserved. Really, they all should burn.

Her eyes narrowed into fierce determination. Her fingers, with the nail polish melted from the heat, slithered into her drawer.

They wrapped tight around the Luger.

Six bullets were more than enough.

Mildred

RRG STUDIO BERLIN

Buried deep in the studio recording booth, with its bunker-like atmosphere, Mildred poured a cup of coffee.

It wasn't real coffee. Rationing had put an end to that ages ago. Even high-level people like her did without. She wasn't sure what made up this brown imitation, but it tasted like garbage. Another reason to grab the flask in her handbag and dump a healthy helping into it.

Besides, her hundredth headache had flared up. The flask and coffee combination was her only hope for a cure. There would be no returning to her soft bed and her quiet apartment. Not tonight.

Maybe not at all. Becker had made it clear she shouldn't bank on that. One slip up, one murmur of the wrong thing whispered into that microphone, and he would blab to their boss and her goose would be cooked. America wouldn't intervene to save her, either. Not after all she had done.

Her own voice blurted from an editing bay across the tiny recording booth. Max hunched over it with earphones on his head. His fingers flashed over various knobs and switches.

"Tell me, soldier, how do you find your treatment here in the Reich?"

The response came back garbled, with obvious splices here and there. *"We're treated well enough ... The Germans let us put on plays sometimes ... the Red Cross sends in packages ... morale is very high ... we don't starve ..."*

Mildred's voice came up again. *"So what would you say to your fellows and ladies back home?"*

There was a telling pause before the soldier's voice responded. *"We just want the fighting to end ... Leave Germany alone."*

Max clicked the recording to a stop. He pressed some buttons and tweaked a few switches. Bursts of voices and ear-splitting screeches emerged from the editing equipment. Strips of audio tape piled up at his feet, pieces he had cut from the original tape. Vivid, heartfelt pieces that told a completely different story than the one in that recording.

Mildred glared as she watched Max work. She recalled that visit to the German stalag all those months ago. The filthy mud had practically destroyed her fancy shoes. Her insides recoiled from the terrible stench. Hauling more recording equipment than her delicate frame was built for, she made a beeline for the U.S. prisoners, boys captured in the African and Italian campaigns.

They had led rough lives in the war and even rougher ones in prison. Uniforms were in rags, faces downcast, and mud covered every square inch of their hunger-ravaged frames. And the barbed wire. Their skin and hands were scarred from it. Their eyes looked tragic behind it. The rusty, snarled wire reduced fierce Americans to pale, pitiable creatures.

Getting them to open their own barbed wire and trust her was a task, so Mildred dressed in her finest dresses and her snappiest heels. She conveniently forgot to put on underwear. She commiserated with the boys and handed them cigarettes and parcels of goodies. She bent over to offer them a sneak peek down her shirt. She petted their hands and stroked their cheeks.

When they did finally open up, she flipped on her equipment. She positioned a microphone in front of their dirty, cracked lips. She promised she just wanted to get their stories back to the States. She wanted people to hear the truth about how they were being treated. Roosevelt ought to know what it was like in those prisons.

"Don't you agree, soldier boy?"

The GIs she interviewed didn't paint a pretty picture of their prison life. They were starved and beaten. They froze in the winter and boiled in the

summer. Guards used them as forced labor. People were shot for the slightest infractions.

The public would never hear those stories, though. They wound up by Max's feet in the studio. Only their answers to the next question would be broadcast.

"But something must keep you going. What do you cling to, soldier? What keeps your hope alive?"

The soldiers conceded that one or two things provided relief, such as putting on a play here or there, or extra rations for a job well done. The Germans allowed in occasional packages from the Red Cross. They robbed the packages of their most valuable goods, but the soldiers still got some supplies they could use.

"Would you like to leave a message for your sweetheart? She'll want to hear your voice."

The soldier's jaw would stiffen at that question. His eyes would mist. He leaned in close to Mildred, close enough for her to smell the rot under his clothes.

In the heart of Berlin, in this cold and drab recording studio, one soldier's answer emanated from Max's editing equipment.

"I don't want her to worry. I love her too much. So tell her I'm okay and I'm treated well. It's really not bad here. I don't want her to be scared about the fighting, so tell her that it will stop soon. We all want it to stop soon. We'll all come home ..."

Max snorted at the heartfelt words while his hands spliced and cut. The equipment played and replayed clips and snippets. He kept up his fevered pace until the altered recordings sounded perfectly natural.

Max and his edit bay transformed the precious words those soldiers had entrusted to Mildred. He made malnourished, battered GI prisoners sound like they were well fed, content, and safe. They were glad to be done with the war. They just wanted the fighting to stop. Those interviews were then played on the radio, on a frequency stretching all over the Reich.

It was a dirty trick, but it wasn't Mildred's fault. She was an actress, and she had to do what they told her. No matter how many slurs the soldiers slung at her when she returned to those prisons for more. Because they

heard the broadcasts and found out what she had done, how she had betrayed them. One even left her a cigarette box crammed to the gills with horse manure.

“Traitor,” they hissed at her as she walked by. “Filthy German. Scum. Slut.”

A screech from the edit bay brought Mildred back to the studio. She rubbed her temple and took another long sip of her drink.

The stalag interviews grated on her nerves. It wasn’t the emotional harm done to those poor boys. She had long since convinced herself that wasn’t her problem. They would understand if they knew what Goebbels and Becker had made her sign, and the fragile thread that everything hung on. They would sympathize with her then. They would do the same if they were in her shoes.

At least, that’s what she tried to tell herself, but the lullaby didn’t work this time. She had known what RRG would do with those tapes. She went to the prison with the express purpose of manipulating those boys. To aid the Germans and the image they projected to the Reich and eventually the States. She helped them spread the lie of healthy, happy prison camps where GI prisoners were treated like royalty. She aided Goebbels in putting out Nazi prop—

Mildred bit down on her lip. The sting in her flesh distracted from the sting in her mind.

I’m just an actress.

It’s just my job.

It’s NOT propaganda.

Her hand trembled as she topped off her half-empty drink. That lullaby wouldn’t work forever. Hell, it might not even work tomorrow. Not with how today had turned out.

“Any news from the coast?” She tensed after the words escaped her throat. She almost didn’t want to know.

Max pretended to be extra focused on his edits. “Nothing definitive.”

She glared. “My ass.”

“That language isn’t becoming to you, Axis Sally.”

“Go to hell, and tell me about the coast, Max.”

His smile faded, and he let out a long sigh. “Some of the beach attackers have advanced inland, and there’s been parachute drops all over Normandy. It ... It seems like they’re here to stay. Or at least they intend to be.”

Mildred squeezed her liquor glass so hard it almost broke. “And the defenses?”

“Hitler has released the elite Panzers and other crack defensive units.” His eyes went dim, as if he had a hard time believing what he was about to say. “They will stop this, Midge. The German Army is the finest in the world. You’ll see.”

Mildred turned away. She didn’t want Max to see the red in her cheeks, the sweat on her hairline, or the horrible fear in her eyes. “And Goebbels? What’s his plan?”

“He’s still in Berchtesgaden, but the boys across the hall have a nice piece for the big broadcast tonight.” Max forced a smile and rubbed his hands together. “And as for you, our little propagandist—”

It happened in a millisecond, before he could finish the word. Mildred whirled around. Her arm slung back, and her glass soared across the room. It crashed against the wall. Ice and liquid splattered the floor of the small recording studio.

Her head seared with pain, and her breathing whirled into a frenzy. She balanced herself on the soundproof wall beside her.

Max jumped from his seat to avoid the shards of glass. “Midge?”

She took a moment to regain her composure, then she straightened her back to a rigid, fierce stance. Her lips curled into a dangerous snarl. “I told you not to use that word, Max.” She towered over him in her heels. “*Never* use that word. Do you understand me?”

Max took a timid step back. “Y-yes, Midge. Of course. Whatever you want.”

Both froze when a microphone in the neighboring booth crackled to life. In a rapid-fire report, the broadcaster breezed through mentions of enemy paratroopers, waves of planes, fighting on the beaches, and towns up in smoke under fleets of bombers. Still, the German armies, the finest in the world, would respond. The Allies would never breach Fortress Europe. The

Wehrmacht had already felled thousands of soldiers. Germany would stop them ... you heard it here first.

Mildred balled her hands into fists. Her mind flung back to just a month before, when she sat in her glowing living room with Max, going over that horrible play. Back then, she was the voice of reason. She assured him the invasion would fail. They had done nothing wrong anyway. The words came easy then, before the planes and the ships actually arrived. A part of her thought they never would. Now that they had descended, the lies and the lullabies wouldn't hold water. Everything she said, all she believed in, began its terrifying descent into the murky deep.

Max saw his turn had arrived to be the strong shoulder. He slowly moved to her side. "Midge ... You know the invasion will fail. The Wehrmacht is too strong. Hitler's net is cast too wide. No one can break that up. It's ... it's nonsense."

She slapped him away from her, and Max stuffed his hands in his pockets. "Alright, then. What do you think we should do?"

Mildred kept her back to him, because his question was stupid. Foolish.

The Allies had landed. Rommel was right. Germany had to stop this on those beaches. If the hordes were punching inland already ...

They've indicted me over there ... you could be next.

America. Indicted. Treason.

Scary words, and Mildred Gillars was no dummy. She knew the punishment for treason. It was one instance where her womanhood wouldn't matter.

Emilia

CAEN SS/SD AND GESTAPO

After hell came down and almost swallowed Emilia whole, the sky's own fireball began its merciful descent over France. It was a spectacular show, a garnet and orange sky enhanced by the billowing brown smoke. The colors matched Caen as a whole, the fires bathing it in a demonic glow.

Emilia stood outside the building that was once her office. Only a pile of concrete and a few skeletal foundations remained. Fires crackled over the ruins. Raven black smoke gated off the oxygen, while valuable papers fluttered in a vortex. Human hands and feet poked from mounds of ashes.

A ghastly sight, just like Emilia herself. Her once pristine uniform had torn along the shoulder seams. Soot smeared the rest of it. Her hair was a tangled rat's nest of charcoal and confusion. A bloody scrape slashed across her cheek.

Even so, she was alive. She had survived. Somehow, she always survived.

She wasn't happy about it this time. She just felt gutted, like the building before her, or the entire destroyed city. The cries and screams echoed above the roaring flames. Random spurts of gunfire flashed through the fire glow. Haggard SS and gaunt Wehrmacht soldiers struggled to restore order. Another part of their grand delusion, because order had vanished for good. This felt like the worst parts of the Bible come to life, the Apocalypse so many saintly people warned about. All that was missing were those four damn horsemen. Maybe they could commandeer some German tanks instead.

Emilia's eyes fell on a filthy child with burnt hair and clothes. She gripped a blackened teddy bear and screamed next to the stiff corpse of her mother.

Soot-covered women yanked a crying man from a pile of bricks.

A fire brigade of boys too young for service, sickly bomb shelter guards, and men too old for the factories ran an impromptu bailing line. They shouted as they sloshed water out of steel buckets. It was a pathetic drop of water, compared to the waterfall needed to quiet the blazes. Yet it was the best they could do with no power or utilities.

Emilia turned back to her former office and watched her colleagues try to collect themselves. A few made grabs for the papers swirling around like snowflakes. Others sifted through the bricks for the latest round of bodies. The rest of them formed a perimeter. They fired a stream of lead at anyone who ventured too close.

Heyns stood in the rubble without a scratch to show for his troubles. He had removed his heavy jacket and hat. It made him look frail and used up, like he couldn't hide his shortcomings behind Nazi regalia any longer. Not that he cared. He didn't give a damn about his failings, or the injured people around him, or even the dead. He only cared about rescuing anything of value from the office remains. His precious file cabinet topped the list. He had every man available hunting for it.

Emilia watched them scramble to salvage something so obviously lost. They could never put this back together again. As the sun set on France, it descended on the Third Reich too.

Yet through Emilia's riled-up emotions, she couldn't help seeing a faint glimmer of opportunity. The city's unparalleled hell could possibly be her salvation, because all those boys were too busy with their own little trifles. She had offered to help, but they practically ridiculed her. A woman pawing through this mess? Forget it. They failed to appreciate her strength, or notice the Luger-shaped bulge in her pocket.

For once, being underestimated could come with a huge advantage.

With slow movements, Emilia pried her cap from her tangled hair. She tossed it into the ruins along with her frayed jacket. Her fingers moved to the German eagle above her breast pocket. With one hard pull, it tore loose

from her shirt. It left a small peek at her brassiere, and the diamonds tucked in there. Finally, she slipped the Nazi band off her arm. She held it in her ash-coated hands, and the regret tumbled like a rogue wave over her shoulders.

That damn armband and that sharp tangle of a swastika. They had ruined her life and countless others. They pushed her into terrible choices and left blood on her hands. The blood of Jews, of civilians, and of countless innocent people who fell into this symbol's evil talons. She would have to live with that, if she even survived today.

Emilia drew a sharp breath to keep her tears at bay. She was still too proud to cry. For now, anyway. She made sure no one saw her before she tossed the armband into the flames. A grim satisfaction filled her as snares of fire pulled the swastika apart.

One down, a million to go ...

After another look around the frantic Gestapo and SD officers, Emilia took a few steps from the building. She kept her hands locked behind her back. Her eyes stayed glued to her coworkers while she turned on that irresistible charm, just in case she needed it.

When she managed her first few steps, she chanced a few more.

Then some more ...

Once past the perimeter, Emilia bolted into the chaos of Caen.

After Heyns, Lebensborn, the BDM, and a beaming handshake from Adolf Hitler, Emilia Wagner was done with the Third Reich.

THE WHISPER OF DUSK

OceanofPDF.com

Adelaide

SAINT-GERMAIN-DE-VARREVILLE

After one of the most tumultuous days in France, after an army of hundreds of thousands descended on the continent, countless bombs were dropped, and thousands of people breathed their last, the sun disappeared behind a curtain of ashen clouds. Darkness took over the sky, as did another round of Allied airplanes, coming in from the coast like a swarm of angry wasps.

The throb of their engines reverberated in Saint- Germain-de-Varreville, a tiny village that, up until this morning, was just a speck on the map of Normandy. Now it controlled one of the few viable exits off the U.S. invasion beach. Because the Germans, true to Adelaide's suspicions, had opened the river locks all around the low-lying Normandy marshlands. It flooded the entire area, washing out roads, drowning paratroopers, and clogging hordes of traffic in the sand. Without this tiny, seemingly inconsequential village, the American advance would have stopped dead on that beach.

But at least the U.S. troops had cleaned out the major German resistance rather early in the day. While the dead bodies of both men and animals spoke to the ferocity of the fighting, the town was mostly an overnight bivouac now. Soldiers with U.S. Army patches and paratroop symbols loitered about in yards, on side roads, in farm fields. They ate funny-smelling meals out of tin cans. They smoked cigarettes from boxes with "Lucky Strike" printed on them. They whispered while they looked over maps and battle plans. They tended to the wounds on their buddies. One of

them even milked a severely overloaded cow, sharing the goodies with anyone who would take it.

As for Wade and Adelaide, they approached a tiny, splintered door on a small cottage with a thatched roof, wooden shutters, and a tilted foundation. It looked well kept and maintained, yet no one came out to greet Adelaide and Wade, standing at the end of the front walkway. There were no signs of child's play or baby cries. No lights came from within. The house was so silent Adelaide feared it was already abandoned. Strike two for getting to Georgette.

Wade accompanied Adelaide up the little walkway. She sucked in a nervous breath and cast a fearful glance at this strange, almost demonic war world all around her.

Even in the coming night, Adelaide could see the smoke plumes all around Normandy. Cracks and thunder rumbles, accompanied by ominous white flashes like lightning, seemed to surround this tiny village. As she watched the flares and distant screeching shells, it dawned on her that she had no idea what had become of her home. The townhouse she had shared with her husband, where she raised Georgette, where so many memories were made and lost—she had no clue whether it still stood. Even if it did, by the looks of things, she didn't figure it would for much longer.

Wade gave her an anxious pat on the shoulder. "You'd best hop to it. It could get rough around here tonight."

"And you?"

He shrugged with a lopsided grin. "Off to the nearest dressing station to see about my eye."

"You can't go out in the middle of the night. You should stay here."

"I wish I could, ma'am, but my boys need me. Faster I let the medico patch me up, faster I can get back to them. So let's see if your daughter is home, huh?"

Adelaide sighed with apprehension at the splintered, aging door. She brushed up the sleeves on her mud-stained, wrinkled cream blouse. She smoothed her ragged gray hair and gave a gentle knock that became her regal personality, but not the hardcore pants and boots.

She waited on the doorstep in the stillness that enveloped her. While the plane engines pounded in her ears, her heartbeat pounded in her chest. She didn't think she could take it if Georgette wasn't home for the second time. Against her will, her mind formed a list of all the unpleasant reasons why her family wouldn't be here. The painful seconds turned into almost a minute, but nothing moved on the other side, and the list grew terrifyingly long.

Imprisoned, in hospital, in hiding, evacuated, deported ... DEAD ...

Adelaide let out a whimper as she knocked again, this time much harder. More forceful. Like a soldier would do it. "Georgette?"

A slight commotion came from inside the slanted walls. The door creaked open, and a beautiful young woman peeked out into the night. She looked like a much younger Adelaide. She had the same regal brow, and her determined hazel eyes suggested she had the same spark to her personality. She also had a similar and delicate beauty about her smooth, pale skin, her wavy dark hair, and her full, red lips.

She squinted at the figure on her doorstep. When she recognized her mother under the splattered clothes and haggard appearance, her eyes flew open wide.

"*Mère!*" She pulled Adelaide to her and burst into tears on her shoulder.

Emotions flew through Adelaide like the waves of planes overhead. Emotions that flowed out her eyeballs in a gushing, salty stream. Relief, fear, anger, exhaustion, starvation. All of it poured down her cheeks and dripped into her precious daughter's hair. She wrapped Georgette in her strong arms and closed her eyes to savor every moment. She drank in her scent, a mix of farm musk, cigarette smoke, and stale dairy. A better smell than the finest French perfumes.

"I heard on the radio Sainte-Mère-Église was attacked," Georgette said. Her French words were muffled by her tears and her mother's shoulder. "I heard there was fighting and even bombing. I thought you were dead!"

"I'm very much alive, and I'm here now, my beloved." Adelaide kissed her daughter on her tear-smeared cheek. "I ... I went looking for you at the farm. Why didn't you tell me you were here?"

Georgette tried to explain between sniffing and sobs. "I tried. A few weeks ago, some Germans came and kicked us out of the house. No notice. Commandeering it for coastal defense, they said. They had guns and kept yelling. I barely had time to get clothes for us. They wouldn't even post a letter for me, the bastards. I kept trying when I got here, but they got suspicious. Thought I was trying to sneak code out to the Resistance. They've been watching my every move. I'm so sorry, *Maman*."

"So Francine is alright?"

"Yes, of course. She's inside."

"And Jean's parents? Where are they?"

Georgette shook her head. "They left months ago. Headed inland. They didn't want to get caught up in the German defense. I would have come to you but they sealed off the village."

Another deep sob escaped Georgette's throat, and Adelaide pulled her even closer. "There now, my sweet." While she stroked her daughter's bouncy curls, she whispered prayers of thanks to a God she hadn't spoken to in years. Her family was safe and sound. Warm and well fed. Away from the danger ... for now, at least.

Wade watched the affectionate display with a nervous shuffle of his feet. His nerves only increased when Georgette's firm eyes fell on him.

She glared. "And who is this? What does he want?"

Adelaide squeezed her daughter's hand. "Now, now. He's on our side. He went through a lot to help me get to you."

Georgette cast a surprised glance at the soldier, and the faintest smile cracked through her strong demeanor. "For my mother you did this?"

He gave a polite nod of his head. "Yes, ma'am."

Georgette snickered. "And you got her to wear pants? Now I've seen everything."

Adelaide laughed before turning to Wade. Joy now flushed her cheeks in place of the day's exhaustion. No medicine cured as much as the embrace of her daughter, but this charming American boy had also healed plenty of her hurts. As she tried to find a proper goodbye, more concussions from falling bombs somewhere inland cut off her thoughts. There were more violent flickers, along with beaded bright lights from airplane tracers.

Adelaide pierced Wade with a knowing gaze. “And you insist on going out in a mess like that?”

He gave her a sheepish guffaw. “It’s what I trained for.”

Georgette’s breathing quickened at the sight of the chaos. “*Mère*, we must go in now.”

Adelaide stepped up to Wade. She ran her hand down his bandaged cheek, then she pulled his face close to hers and kissed him on the lips. The same kiss she gave Lieutenant Henning on a morning that felt like ages ago. Yet it was under the same sun that was quickly sinking off the coast.

Two kisses for two different men with different flags, different leaders, and different ideals. Because for Adelaide, motherhood was a universal language.

“Stay alive, Wade. No matter what. Promise me?”

“Well, now, Miss Adelaide, I don’t know if I can—”

She put her fingers to his lips before he could say more. “Stay alive. When you do get home, tell your mother how much you love her. Tell her every single day, and always hug her like it’s the last time. Do you promise me?”

Wade didn’t take his eyes off of hers, even when they filled with moisture. “I promise.”

Mildred

BERLIN

It was well past dinner time when Mildred escaped the RRG studio and walked down the Berlin streets alone. Although the night air was clear over the city, her head clouded over with something she hadn't known in years.

Fear.

She wasn't the only one, either. Her heels echoed through emptying streets, and her eyes saw a city in the midst of transformation. Cafés bubbled with rising tension. Buildings leaned in closer than they used to. Nazi flags and "Verboten" signs felt like they could suffocate someone. So did the countless newspapers splashed with Hitler's face, and the bold headline promises of victory for the Reich. None of them breathed a word about the thousands of Allied troops spilling ashore.

Mildred wished the victory promises were true, but the chaos at the studio said otherwise. So did Max's mood swings. He had started the day frothing at the mouth about Nazi prowess. By lunch, he had paced back and forth while his temple dripped with sweat. He hurled insults at everyone, even one or two at Mildred. By supper, he had buried himself deep in that confounded edit bay, as if that would somehow save him from the wolves howling at his door. She got so sick of him she demanded to take a walk for something to eat. When he offered to join her, Mildred told him no.

She watched lingering groups of soldiers huddled together. Their sharp whispers ushered in the dark shadows of doubt. Alarm distorted the beautiful faces of Aryan mothers with their baby prams, hurrying to get home before curfew. Even the Hitler Youth, always robust in their salutes,

their marches, and their constant activities, were subdued on this chilly summer evening. Their uniforms didn't look as crisp. Their movements weren't as sharp.

Swarms of Gestapo and SS henchmen underscored it all. Their increased presence signaled a rough change in the wind. Their shiny boots clunked on the pavement and they heckled curious onlookers. Their gloved hands stayed close to their holsters. Hard eyes gleamed out from under SS caps, penetrating every gathering of people.

The message was loud and clear. If they heard so much as a murmur of so-called "defeatist talk," the arrests and beatings would begin.

For the first time in over a decade, the Germans looked scared to death.

Mildred glued her eyes to her path, but her thoughts swirled and fizzled with the strain of the day. Unwanted images played through her mind again. Pictures from December of 1941, and a day not unlike the one unfolding this very minute.

This is what her homeland was probably like on that horrible day, when bombers moved in on Pearl Harbor. When the Japanese ripped the secure rug of "impregnable" out from under the arrogant American feet. Over two thousand personnel were killed in a single morning. U.S. citizens were shocked and scared, just like the Germans today. They probably hugged their loved ones tight and panicked over their fate, just like those mothers with their prams. They pictured horrible invasions of their homes and towns. They waited for another terrible shoe filled with blood to drop.

It rankled Mildred when she heard the Pearl Harbor news. Even back then, she was a rising star at RRG. She felt plenty of loyalty to Germany. They had been so good to her, much better than her own country. Yet the image of bombers attacking Hawaii hurt her. Germany was her new home, but she hadn't forgotten her old one. Nor had she forgotten her family back in Ohio, and what that attack might have meant for them.

She tried to bury her anger that day under sleek dresses and sexy shoes. She painted over her fear with lipstick and rouge. She blanketed her emotions with expensive perfume. Then she arrived at the studio with her same seductive smile. All went well until she overheard colleagues, including Becker, making fun of the Pearl Harbor victims. Celebrating the

bloodshed with cigarettes and violent banter. Laughing about the bodies and the wounded.

Everything Mildred had tried to cover that morning burst from her in a rage. She flew at those men like a hawk after prey, targeting Becker, who had never made life easy for her. She screamed at him and swiped her claws across his face. The slap resounded across the room and left scratch marks on his cheek. She swore the Germans would pay for their laughter. They wouldn't dare be as foolish as Japan had been. Hitler ought to think twice before he tested American wrath.

She blacked out after that. Partly from anger and partly from fear. She couldn't hide what she had done. The entire RRG witnessed the spectacle, and Becker was the vengeful type even on a good day. Everyone talked about it all evening. Many steered clear of her, in fear of another outburst. No doubt Becker had told Goebbels. It was only a matter of time before he called for her ...

Next thing she knew, she sat in his spacious office crammed with everything but a soul. Max stood helpless in the corner behind her. High-ranking and formidable Nazis surrounded her on every side. Their faces were stiff and formal, but their eyes seared. Becker sat right next to Goebbels, his scratch marks swollen and angry.

She knew these men just had to snap their fingers and everything would be over. She would disappear, shipped off to one of those camps no one ever returned from.

And that was if they went easy on her.

Max tried to speak for her. "She's upset. Hysterical. You know how women are. So emotional and irrational sometimes."

Goebbels responded with a look that could kill on its own. Then he slid a piece of paper across the smooth, polished wood of his desk. He placed it right before Mildred, along with a fountain pen probably worth more than her entire apartment.

"Sign this," Goebbels said.

Mildred took the document into her shaking hands. She read a few sentences. Her jaw dropped and she stared at her boss. "I ... I can't sign this."

He sneered at her. “Why not? Is your hand broken? I can arrange for that if you wish.”

Mildred’s face went white. “Herr Goebbels, I swear this morning was just an outburst. A fluke. I will work harder than I ever have. I will do anything to prove my loyalty to RRG. To Germany and ... to you. But I can’t sign this.”

Goebbels didn’t break his stare, but a small movement came from his hand. It floated to the holster of his pistol. He wrapped his fingers around the shiny handle.

Max squeezed her shoulder. “For Christ’s sake. Sign it, Midge.” The hiss in his voice alarmed her. A potent mix of horrible fear and extreme displeasure.

“Sign it,” Goebbels said again. “Sign it ... or face a tribunal.”

★ ★ ★

A squeal from a baby in one of those prams brought Mildred back to the present. The harried mother, cooing away, disappeared around a dark corner. The knots of soldiers and Hitler Youth had begun to break up too. The Nazis were in a sour mood tonight, and no one wanted to provoke them.

The streets grew quieter as Mildred started her return to the broadcasting studio. The harsh wind whispered as it funneled through narrow streets, rolling a deep chill through her entire body. She shoved her trembling hands into the pockets of her coat and tried to will away her growing nausea. Then came the lullaby ...

I’m just an actress.

It’s just my job.

It’s not propaganda.

But wasn’t it?

Perhaps Mildred had lied to herself for too long. She knew what she was doing, right from the very beginning. Max didn’t sugarcoat what the radio station expected of her. She knew what it meant to work for a man like

Goebbels. She had done it with pleasure. She had supported Germany through it all, the good parts and the ugly ones.

How could she not? The Reich was a haven when she arrived. The streets were draped with bright flags and flower boxes. Everything was so clean. So sparkling clean to hide the filth underneath. It concealed the arrests, the disappearances, the beatings, the murders, and every other rotten thing she still knew was happening right under her nose.

Yet Mildred did nothing, because Germany gave her fame and fortune, where America gave her scandalous headlines and terrible scorn. Germany fed her, while America starved her. Germany transformed her from a nobody into an icon.

And Max ...

Nazi Germany gave Mildred Gillars everything she wanted, so she threw in her lot where she shouldn't have. She traded her soul for fame, for money, and for a lusty affair with a handsome ex-professor. Now the bloom had fallen from the rose. The Allies were here, and they wouldn't stop. They would come for Max, and they would come for her.

And they would find her. Mildred already knew that, and that's why she couldn't stop the shivers from slipping under her coat. Once the GIs got their paws on the famed and despised Berlin Bitch, they wouldn't have to work hard to make their case. Between those lousy stalag interviews and the *Vision of Invasion* play, they had more than enough to paint her as a traitor.

They also had that document. That terrible piece of paper Goebbels made her sign back in 1941. The loyalty oath to Germany, with her signature right there in black and white. It was buried somewhere in the Nazi files, where Goebbels held it as ransom against her. By signing the oath, she had disavowed her American citizenship. She made herself a slave to Goebbels and everything he wanted. Because without American citizenship, she had no protection. No one would intervene if she was arrested. No diplomats or ambassadors would investigate if she vanished in the night.

Goebbels and Becker could punish her however they wanted. They could imprison her, torture her, or kill her. They wouldn't need a tribunal.

Mildred Gillars had waived that right when she signed the loyalty oath. The oath that felt a lot more like a death warrant.

Of course, it hadn't back then. On that horrible day, it was a reprieve. Goebbels could have done so much worse after her Pearl Harbor tantrum. Her signature was a pittance in exchange for crystal decanters and satin sheets, high heels and silk stockings, scarlet carpets and fancy flats. Everything she had ever wanted, just for her name scrawled on a piece of paper.

Now, on this cold night with enemies closing in, the price for all that became much bigger. The signature meant a lot more, and it burned into Mildred's chest like hot coals.

In a sinister whisper, a new lullaby started in her head.

Treason.

Indicted.

Death sentence.

Theda

QUEEN ALEXANDRA HOSPITAL PORTSMOUTH

Even though night had long since descended, there was no reprieve at Queen Alexandra.

Theda released a breath of pent-up nerves. She slipped a white sheet over the corpse of another dead soldier, and she looked up just in time to catch a glimpse of Dr. Davies.

She had managed to avoid him for the last several hours. It wasn't hard, since he remained locked in the OR most of the day. Now he emerged looking sunken and pale. His hair was in shambles, as were his clothes. He walked on legs unsteady with exhaustion.

Theda knew she had no place to judge. She had snapped earlier. When she returned to Celia after her panic attack, she had braced for a dressing-down about ditching her partner and abandoning a post Celia had pulled a lot of strings to give her. Yet Celia didn't say a word. She just pulled Theda back into the vortex of ad hoc treatments as if nothing had happened.

It made Theda even more afraid. Celia had to be angry, even if she was too polite to say it out loud. She had probably told all the other Royal Army nurses how Theda had failed her. They would never toss her a lifeline again. There would be no more promotions, no more chances, and certainly no combat medic team.

Deep dread invaded Theda as the night wore on. They would probably let her stay with the hospital until the war was done, but after that the picture looked hazy. Nothing felt right anymore. Marriage, kids, world

adventures, medical careers, independence ... the lines blurred between the two different lifestyles. She thought she fit one so well instead of the other, but now both felt painfully out of reach. Along with bombarding the French coast, D-Day had shattered Theda's convictions and her sense of where she belonged. She wasn't sure what would become of her now.

Theda's eyes flickered again to Dr. Davies. He stood over the battered body of a shaking soldier, and he hurried through a consult with one of his staff nurses. He didn't see Theda watching him, or if he did he ignored her.

Theda wasn't sure which was worse. She wiped some sweat off her forehead and buried her urge to cry.

Celia came up behind her and looked over the body she had just covered. With a shaky hand, she wrote "Deceased" on the patient's paperwork, then she slammed the clipboard back into place.

The noise got Theda's attention. "Celia?"

"They just keep *dying*." Celia ran her hands through her frazzled hair. "No matter what we do, no matter how many things we ..." She trailed off. Her face turned red while her lips pursed with anger.

Theda dropped her eyes to the floor. She blamed herself entirely for Celia's fragile state. Perhaps if she hadn't run off earlier, Celia wouldn't be so tired now. And she wasn't the only person Theda had let down. She took another long glance at Dr. Davies.

This time Celia caught her. She actually looked grateful for a distraction from her own brewing meltdown. She moved to the next patient, an unconscious man with a plasma drip in his arm. A smile tugged at her while she nudged Theda with her foot.

Theda jumped. "I'm sorry." She looked down at the new patient and picked up his evacuation tag to scan it. "What do we have here?"

Celia just suppressed a giggle.

Theda looked up from behind the tag. "What's got into you?"

"Oh, nothing's got into *me*." Celia nodded toward Dr. Davies. "Theda Brown, why don't you just admit it? You've got it for that doctor."

Theda slapped the tag down. "What in the world are you talking about?"

"Oh, please. You practically swoon when he sets foot in a room."

“Swoon?” Theda gave an overly exaggerated roll of her eyes. “Celia, I’m so exhausted I could faint. Is that what you call swooning? Besides which, this is the last thing we should talk about with all these men lying around here.” She checked the patient’s stitches to make sure nothing had come loose. “Lord knows I’ve failed enough for today.”

The words came out mumbled, but the shame in her face spoke plenty loud.

It brought Celia to a standstill. “Failed?”

Theda stayed extra focused on the stitches. “The way I took off earlier, left you on your own to deal with this madness. And after you gave me every chance in the world to really shine, as you said.” She shook her head. “Just because you’re too good to pan me in public doesn’t make me any less disappointing, I’m sure.”

Celia blinked her eyes in befuddlement. “Theda, are you talking about your little meltdown all those hours ago? You’ve been beating yourself up all this time?”

Tears brimmed in Theda’s eyes, but she quickly wiped them away. She wouldn’t dare humiliate herself a second time. She had once prided herself on her ability to master her emotions. She wished above anything else she could recapture that talent right now. “It was unpardonable. I’m terribly sorry, Celia.” She at last looked up into her mentor’s face. “I promise if you’ll only give me another chance, if you would let me prove to you—”

Celia held up her hand and shook her head.

Theda grew desperate to spew out every excuse in the book. Instead, she just sighed and closed her eyes. She deserved every bit of the tongue-lashing that was about to come her way.

Celia put a sympathetic hand on Theda’s shoulder instead. “A failure ... Theda Brown, you listen to me. What I thought this morning is still true now. You’re going to do incredibly well in medicine.”

Theda dared to look at Celia. “But ... I couldn’t handle it. I ran off. I almost fainted.”

“But you came back. That’s all that matters, love. We all have our little moments. Hell, that precious doctor of yours looks one step away from Bedlam.”

Theda smiled. “Celia.”

“I’ve had plenty of breaks myself over the years. I was ready for another before I found a reason to poke fun at you instead.” She winked.

Theda felt her face get hot, but she decided silence was best.

It was the right choice, because suddenly, all playfulness disappeared from Celia’s face. Her voice dropped to a low and solemn murmur. “Theda, war is a terrible, dreadful thing. What humans are capable of doing to each other, the cruelty and violence ...” She made a final adjustment to the man’s plasma bag, then she turned back to Theda. “People like you and me, we’re asked to sew all that brokenness back together, and it’s a very tearing thing. We all melt down in the face of it sometimes. It’s a human response to such pain. I’d be more concerned if you didn’t lose it once in a while.”

Theda found herself craving a deflection, but she couldn’t cover the truth in Celia’s words. Not with sarcasm or anything else. Not on a day like this. Perhaps never again, after the things she’d seen in this hospital. Besides, she couldn’t deny the relief pouring through every vein in her used-up body.

A temporary meltdown didn’t make her a bad nurse. It just made her human.

Celia gave Theda’s hand a matronly squeeze. Her eyes made the quickest gesture to Dr. Davies, still consulting with the other nurse. “You know, it really helps if you have someone to lean on.”

Theda pulled away from Celia like she was a hot stove. “He wouldn’t want to follow me around while I decide what to do with my life.”

Celia’s eyes twinkled with mischief. “So you’re a mind reader, are you?”

“What?”

“How can you possibly know what he really wants, Theda? Seems to me he thinks well enough of who you are now. And you can absolutely have both, you know. You can be a wife and your own woman too. You just have to find the right person.”

Theda huffed and tried to focus on the patient again. “I have yet to meet any woman who has both.”

“What about me, then?”

Theda raised her eyebrows. "I don't know, what about you?"

Celia's fresh smile said it all. It carried a special secret she shared with just one other. Hers was a look that knew love, passion, and romance too. Someone had captured steely Celia's heart, and he absolutely let her have both.

The truth smacked Theda's face like a cold, blustery day. Most of her friends had deemed the independent types as spinster-worthy. They were too bossy, too controlling, too in command of every situation. Boys didn't want that, according to girls like bouncy Sheila and beautiful Carolyn. They didn't want women who were bookish, who had designs outside of motherhood.

Yet here stood Celia, one of the toughest women Theda knew. She stood in all the glimmer of a woman in love, and it didn't make her any less powerful. She wasn't weak in the knees, she didn't have to swoon or surrender to anything. On the contrary, she seemed stronger because of the love in her life. The right person to lean on, as she had just said, actually helped her be the woman she wanted.

Celia grinned and moved a lock of Theda's long hair from her eyes. "I promise you can have both, Theda Brown. You just have to do what I told you."

"What do you mean?"

"You have to believe in yourself above anyone else. Once you are true to yourself, the right man will stop at nothing to get to you." Celia gave her a sly wink and turned back to their patient.

Theda whirled around to spot Dr. Davies, but he had vanished. His patient was now being carried to the operating room.

When Theda turned back to Celia, the Royal Army nurse had shifted back to business. "The wing across the hall is getting prepped for another transport arrival."

Theda nodded. She took a deep breath to refresh herself. "Right. Let's go to it then."

Emilia

CAEN

In the fire's red glow, the only light on this dark, bone-chilling night, Emilia stood over another pile of ruins. It used to be a building that housed small businesses and flats. Now it was a graveyard among smoldering concrete and bricks.

Emilia dug through the wreckage in search of survivors and bodies. The job tore at her from the inside out. The searing concrete and rough edges scraped her hands and knees, while the heat scorched and burned her skin. The smell could make anyone toss the scant food in their stomach. To make it more bearable, Emilia tied her soot-covered blonde hair with a piece of fabric from her filthy uniform. She also covered her nose and face. It was feeble, but it provided at least a little protection from the thick odor of death and burning flesh.

She shifted her eyes to the guards overseeing her efforts with guns.

Her earlier attempted escape was one hell of a clumsy failure. She didn't even make it half a block. She was so concerned about being followed she didn't bother to make sure the path ahead of her was clear. When she did finally look ahead, she barreled into a trio of her charcoaled office mates. They noted her missing insignia and caught the nervous twitches in her hands and face. Their eyes went hard and their posture grew stiff. One put a hand to the holster of his pistol.

She thought they would shoot her on the spot, but they held off for some reason. Maybe they knew how valuable she was to Heyns. Or maybe they just remembered how luxurious she had looked between their sheets in

fonder times. Either way, they didn't kill her. They just shoved her into the ranks of impressed laborers to dig corpses out of the rubble.

A lucky reprieve, but their newfound mistrust was just as frightening as bullets. These men had once admired her, flirted with her, and mooned over her. They hid their envy and traded so much for just one shot at her body. One kiss. One embrace. All that was gone now, peeled away with the layers of Caen. Years of jealousy and simmering tension burst into the open. The worst of it came from the ones she had spurned. They kicked at her legs and barked insults while she worked.

This brutal new treatment closed Emilia's escape route, exploded it into fragments just like the rest of France. These angry men would watch her like a hawk and probably report her to Heyns. In his frazzled state bordering on insanity, he wouldn't take it well. He might even throw her to this pack of wolves and let them have their way.

She shoved a heap of hot debris in a fury, while Hermann snapped at her to go faster. Hermann, the same guard who had so recently offered to guide her home on a dark night. How chivalrous he was then, with his outstretched hand and protective gaze. But the invasion and fires of Caen released the devil in him. His face was burned scarlet and his eyes bulged from their sockets. Scalded skin peeled off his hands. He yelled with all the fury of a Nazi scorned, and he shoved the gun in her face with a nasty grin. He knew the tables had turned, and he seemed to enjoy it.

The rest of the men were equally vile, and not just to Emilia. They were an utter menace to civilians who had already endured enough. They sprayed bullets to break up panics and shot forced laborers who couldn't comply with their impossible standards. They let out mocking screams when a woman cried over the dead. They pushed a helpless old man into a pile of smoking cinders.

Emilia swallowed her disgust and tended to her beat-up hands. She also managed a feel inside her brassiere. The diamonds were safe, and the Luger still pressed against her thigh, although she wasn't sure how either could help her now. After all, what would six bullets do against the craziness of this world?

The desire to cry wrapped around her throat and made her eyes burn, but she locked her jaw in place. A thought rose from somewhere deep in the debris pile of her soul. If she couldn't break from the Nazis, there was still another way out of the mess. An escape that only required one bullet.

She resisted the urge to touch the hidden pistol, flicking her eyes skyward.

Darkness had descended, and the sky glowed orange from the fires, but planes still came over in swarms. Every few minutes, the rumbles picked up, the anti-aircraft thuds commenced, and the whole city rattled. Sometimes the planes moved on to other cities, sometimes they dropped a few greetings on their way. On they came, in every size and shape, in numbers greater than Emilia ever imagined.

The endless might of it was inspiring in a way. It made her realize she wasn't ready to give up yet. So much had been destroyed today, but Emilia's need to survive had not.

She tilted her head and watched a glider force drone over the city. Hundreds of tow planes, silhouetted in the firelight, each pulling three or four wooden gliders behind them. An aerial force of thousands, looking like a horde of giant bats, the windshields their menacing eyes. The thudding of their engines shook the debris at Emilia's feet.

Her eyes slipped again to the guards. They all looked at the gliders like harbingers of doom.

Hermann fired a round of bullets that blasted the concrete next to her. The chips sprayed into her face, and she slapped her palms over her eyes.

When her vision cleared, Hermann's angry face was inches from hers. His immature, childish face. A boy handed too much power when he was way too young to know how to handle it. His eyes sizzled with evil as he glared at her.

"Back to work, Fräulein, before I *really* lose my temper."

In the face of his gun, which she damn well knew he could use, Emilia obeyed. She moved aside a large piece of concrete.

Underneath, she found the face-down body of a woman crushed to death. Her legs were smashed into bloodied ribbons. They looked like raw,

red meat mixed with sludge. Soot and dirt blackened her clothes. Blood and debris crusted her frizzy hair. An atrocious stench emanated from her.

Emilia sucked in a breath, but that only made her gag harder. She reached out her shaking hands and flipped the corpse over. Shock punched her hard when she recognized the face.

It was that same girl from earlier. The rough and ready French woman who always rode by on her bicycle, and who proudly owned a razor-sharp tongue.

Emilia had long suspected Flora was up to no good. She was clearly some sort of message carrier for the Resistance, and she never bothered to keep it a secret. She almost flaunted it in everyone's face. She rode right by German intelligence instead of taking alternate routes. She glared at officers when they ventured outside. Once in a while, she even spit in their direction when she thought no one was looking. So much fire and bravery, it made Emilia secretly admire her.

Emilia smoothed some of Flora's hair from her glassy eyes. Something rumbled in the pit of her stomach like a volcano threatening to blow its top.

Anger.

It had nestled in Emilia for so long, buried in the thorns and thistles of life under the Nazi regime. It pulsed unchecked through her system now. Flora's death reminded her that women were always punished in the end. They were spoken over, trampled on, and batted around. They worked twice as hard for half the pay. When they tried to stand up and prove their worth, people punished them with silence, control, and Lebensborn. And the outspoken ones like Flora, who weren't afraid to stare that injustice in the face, they were punished hardest of all.

The anger curled Emilia's fingers into fists. She slowly got to her feet. She closed her eyes to steady herself, but that damn Hermann was merciless.

"I said get back to work," he screeched at her. He kicked her in the back.

She tumbled to the ground and landed right on top of dead Flora, her hands squishing into blood and human debris.

Emilia couldn't stop the tears this time. They were the only outlet for the torrent of emotion history's biggest invasion had unfurled. While the guards

laughed at her, tears streamed down her filthy face. They smudged soot down her cheeks, which dripped onto Flora's mangled body. It was just a trickle at first, but the dam soon burst, and suddenly Emilia was sobbing. Cries poured from her as she locked her hands around Flora's frozen wrists. She tried to drag the limp body to the nearest corpse pile, but her tears had sapped her strength. She pulled and tugged, inching Flora along.

With a scream of fury, Emilia finally tossed Flora into the mess. The lifeless Resistance courier landed with a splat on top of the pile. She became another nameless corpse in a mountain of them, a story vanished to the winds, a lifetime of sacrifices up in smoke.

Emilia collapsed in a crying fit while the Hermann and his cronies leveled their guns right at her.

The rest of the impressed laborers kept on with their digging and salvaging. No one wanted to be on the wrong side of those guns. However, one of them dared to pause and look up. A rumpled, middle-aged man with soot stains on his stubbly cheeks and dust in his dark hair. Geraud.

He looked at the corpse pile. When he recognized the broken remains on top, his mouth dropped open in horror.

Theda

QUEEN ALEXANDRA HOSPITAL PORTSMOUTH

Around midnight, Theda and Celia pushed through the doors of another crowded ward. Wounded packed the entire place, with hardly any space to walk between their beds.

Theda tried to will away the burning pain in her exhausted feet and legs. She ignored the scream from her bulging bladder. All she got was a breath to gather her courage, then she and Celia went to work.

Their first patient was a mangled young man in critical condition. One of his feet was missing. His abdomen had been wrapped in bandages. They could barely see the rest of him under all the lumps and bruises. He wheezed for breath with his puffy eyelids closed.

Celia checked the tourniquet, while Theda leaned over to address the boy. “You’re in a hospital in England. I’m Theda, and this is Celia.”

The man could only choke out a whisper. A tortured croak quieter than the rustle of a tree in a breeze.

Theda leaned in closer to make it out. “Sir, can you hear me?”

That’s when his eyes popped open. His clear, sharp, aquamarine eyes.

Theda jumped back, putting a hand to her chest to calm the jolt that slammed through her.

Celia glanced at her from the side. “Theda? What is it?”

Theda couldn’t answer. Those aquamarine eyes remained fixed on her, and she had begun to recognize other features as well. The wavy hair and

serene face, even despite all he'd been through today. Somehow, he twisted his lips into a smile. A painfully familiar, somber smile.

"You, lass," he choked out. "In the polka dots."

The world around Theda went mute for a moment. All she heard was the hammer of her heart as she flashed back to that day. When masses of troops had loaded into their ships in the harbor. Somehow, standing in this hospital, it felt like a lifetime ago, even though less than a week had passed. Tears stung her eyes as she reached her hand out to him. She took his cold, bloody fingers into her own.

It wasn't William, but he looked so much like him. Had almost taken the place of him in her mind since that day. Now, looking down at him on a stretcher, his body broken in so many ways, it made her scream inside.

William ...

"Theda?"

Theda looked up at Celia.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes," she said with a stammer. "Yes. I just ..."

The boy squeezed her hand, pulling her attention back to him. He still wore that smile. He had surrendered to his fate again. One he had already accepted when he saw Theda near the docks, as he leaned out the hatch of the lumbering, brand new tank. A day when two complete strangers somehow connected with one another, through a shared understanding of loss and what was to come. Two people who were, Theda had begun to sense, very much alike.

She reached into her apron pocket and felt his coin there. As she clutched it, Celia's words from earlier beamed through her head like a spotlight.

How can you know what he really wants ...?

Her eyes blurred with tears. There weren't many men like William in this world. Perhaps this man was one of them, and perhaps not. But it became clear to her, looking at this doppelgänger of her beloved brother, that Dr. Davies was. And who was she to write anybody off like that? All she knew of love was what the other girls told her, other girls who expected completely different things.

How foolish Theda had been, how blind in her convictions based on nothing but whispers. Dr. Davies went out of his way to spend time with her, specifically because she was bookish. Because she wasn't like the other girls. It had drawn him to her before he knew anything else about her. Just as her stern gaze, not her flirtatious banter, had prompted this man to toss her his last coin. How could she have been such a coward?

Theda heard a sharp breath beside her, and she looked over at Celia.

Celia had slipped part of the boy's abdominal bandaging to the side. It exposed a dangerous web of sepsis lines branching up his entire torso.

"Oh, Christ." Theda reached for his evacuation tag and scanned it through watery eyes. She struggled to decipher the notes written by a doctor in the middle of a war zone.

They didn't paint a pretty picture. The soldier had lost his foot and had his abdomen gored. He had many broken bones. He had received minimal treatment, and his ticket across the Channel might have actually been his death sentence, because the rough seas had pitched him about and jostled his insides ... and turned his wounds septic.

Theda knew what that meant.

Celia let out the most exhausted sigh. "Theda ... just make him comfortable."

Theda grimaced. She knew the order was coming, but she still recoiled to hear it. She ran her finger down his ice-cold hand. Took in his serene smile. A smile that told her without words—"*don't worry about me, I'll be okay.*"

An image of William Brown suddenly flashed into Theda's head. That golden boy with his hedgerow crown. Who handed her books with a sly smile after some secret adventure, some illegal outing when he was supposed to be at his studies.

"*Won't you get in trouble?*"

William would just smile. "*Don't worry about me, I'll be okay.*"

How delicate and fragile a string fate rested on. Not just across the water, where war had ripped this boy and her brother all to hell. But right here in England too. No one was really safe. If one bomb fell in the wrong place, or a plane flew too close to Number 6. If there was one misstep in

this massive invasion, if the right German unit held while the wrong British one collapsed, Theda could die too. So could Dr. Davies. So could all of them. Nothing felt guaranteed anymore, not the next few days or even the next few minutes. And she had been careless enough to toss aside something that could provide a ray of happiness in such a shattered world. Something that this dying blue-eyed boy, and her brother, would have given anything to have more time for.

Theda forced the weight in her stomach down and reached for a syringe. She loaded it up with enough morphine to take away his pain. Which was indeed all she could do. She buried the needle into his limp arm.

Another flash of William invaded her mind. This time, he lay on a beach in a heap of other bodies. His uniform was torn to ribbons, and his glassy eyes stared into nowhere. Bloody water swirled and lapped around his chest, tossing his corpse in the surf. Up ... down ... up ... down ...

Somehow, Theda knew. She couldn't explain how she knew, but she was certain William had died, just like this boy would die. Just like so many others in this hospital, in France, in the bombings, and beyond. She felt the severed cord in that moment, the ripping out of a root she thought she would always have to hold her steady.

Up ... down ... up ... down ...

Theda's chest split in two. This was the only chance she would get, the only goodbye she could ever have, for the one person she never had to doubt.

She pulled the coin out of her apron and put it in the boy's soggy, blood-stained palm.

His eyes widened when he looked at it. The recognition set in, and he glued his puppy-dog gaze to hers. The first hint of sadness appeared in those twinkly eyes. His lips trembled ever so slightly. He wasn't as ready to go as he thought. He didn't want to leave all this behind. Yet he hadn't been given a choice. None of them had.

Up ... down ... up ... down ...

Theda closed his fingers around the coin, then cupped his fist in her hands. She smiled through her quickly brewing tears.

No more words were necessary. She just held his hand, not looking away, only nodding at him once in a while, promising she would see him through to the end. She stroked his hair as his breathing slowed down. She felt his fist loosen around the coin. His eyes sparkled one last time, catching one last, sad glimpse at what might have been. Then came that gentle smile.

Theda let out a single, breathy sob. She kissed his dead hand, and then pressed it to her chest.

“Goodnight,” she managed to whisper. “Dream sweet.”

OceanofPDF.com

Adelaide

SAINT-GERMAIN-DE-VARREVILLE

Adelaide and Georgette huddled in the cottage's dank cellar. Empty glass jars lined the decrepit shelves along the walls. A few burlap sacks bulged in a corner, overflowing with tiny, barely edible potatoes. Rusted tools hung everywhere, and other odds and ends peppered the dirty floor. Everything rattled and jostled as the latest wave of bombers rumbled over.

On Georgette's lap, something else got very jostled. Her four-year-old daughter, Francine. The girl screamed and cried, and it wasn't the first time she had done so today. Tears had turned her puffy cheeks scarlet and swollen her eyes. She squalled so loud Adelaide was certain the pilots of those planes could hear her.

The shrieks also drowned out the broadcasts murmuring from Georgette's clunky, battery-powered, dust-coated radio set. She had no idea how her son-in-law's parents afforded batteries, but she still adored seeing it. Radios, like so many other things in Sainte-Mère-Église, had been strictly "verboten" for years.

A woman's voice came over the waves and interrupted Adelaide's thoughts. It was husky yet sensual, and spoke very solid English.

"This is Berlin calling. Berlin calling the American mothers, wives, and sweethearts. And I'd just like to say, girls, that when Berlin calls it pays to listen ..."

Georgette glared at the radio. "That Berlin Bitch."

She swatted at one of the dials. Static poured from the set, and then BBC reporters and their hurried updates filled the room.

Georgette next tried to soothe her frantic daughter. “Hush, Francine,” she said in a voice scratched with fatigue. “You hush now. Your mother is here. Hush now.”

She clutched her daughter to her bosom and feverishly stroked her hair. She bobbed the child on her knee and made silly noises and faces. She tried every trick in a mother’s handbook, but nothing quieted her child.

Georgette and Adelaide both froze as a brazen male voice took bold command over the radio.

“This is the BBC reporting. We have some special greetings for our friends overseas tonight. Listen carefully. From Tommy to Jean, my wife has sharp eyesight. Acid makes litmus paper turn red. From Martin to Maybelle, Matthew likes spinach. The turtles are on the road.”

As the reporter continued to speak utter gibberish, Adelaide threw a befuddled glance at the radio. “What in the world is all that nonsense?”

Georgette tried patting Francine’s back to settle her down. “They’re codes. For the Resistance.”

Adelaide blinked in confusion. “Well, how can anyone make sense of any of that?”

Georgette let out an annoyed grunt, as if her mother’s question was foolish. “No one knows exactly. Except the people who sent them and the people who receive them. They can’t have the Germans knowing what they’re up to.”

Adelaide nodded and toyed with her hands. “A clever bunch, that Resistance. But I found it much safer to keep my head down and stick to my business.”

“And look after the Germans who probably killed my husband.”

It was a shot across the bow if Adelaide ever heard one. She swallowed a horrible sticky sensation in her mouth before she continued. “We ... all do what we have to, my girl.”

Georgette gave her mother a curt nod, but it was clear she wasn’t convinced. It was also clear she had some chips on her shoulder when it came to her aged mother. No matter how happy they were to see each other alive and in one piece.

While Francine's shrill cries bounced off the walls, Adelaide twiddled her hands. A whole different battle simmered in this basement. She knew it had started because of her, and well before she billeted any Germans.

When Wade bandaged the cut on her arm, it soothed Adelaide's troubled past, but it also brought some painful realizations to the surface. She had tried her best as a mother, but wrapped in her own upbringing and ideals, there were some key things she missed. She had been too hard on her daughter. This basement hung heavy with the tension of those mistakes.

Outside, the world kicked up just as much turmoil. The cracks and thunders of falling bombs echoed across the farm fields. The dim lamp above them swung and creaked. Streams of dust poured from the shelves into the hair of the occupants below.

Francine panicked first. If the two women thought her screams were loud before, they were nothing compared to what came out of her now. She also began a frantic attempt to break from her mother, flailing her arms and kicking her legs.

Georgette fought the good fight for a few moments, but tears soon stung her own spent eyes. She turned to her mother, holding squirming Francine out. "You've always thought I was a terrible mother. I'm sure you're glad to be proved right. Quiet her. For all our sakes."

Adelaide folded her hands and smoothed her own filthy clothes. "You believe I think you're a terrible mother?"

Heavy tears rolled down Georgette's flustered cheeks. "I wanted to do right by you, *Maman*. I wanted to be a good mother, but I wanted to be my own woman too. I thought I could do both. My husband always said I was the smartest woman he knew, and the farm would be worthless without me." She gulped as an emotional collapse threatened her composure. "It made me feel strong, like I could depend on myself and not just a man. And in these uncertain times, that was important to me." The floodgates opened, her shoulders caved in, and the sobs began. "You're right, Mother. I can't do both. Maybe I became my own woman, but I failed my daughter. Please ... take her."

Adelaide stayed put, and a smile tugged at her dry, windblown lips. Although the child's cries escalated enough to rival any bomb siren, she

didn't take her. "I can't help you."

"This is no time to rub it in my face."

Adelaide gave a gentle shake of her head. "It's not me she wants. You are her mother. She wants you."

"Well, I can't quiet her."

"Yes, my darling. You can."

Georgette's trembling jaw suggested this wasn't a normal response from Adelaide. "But ... I'm not a good mother."

At last, Adelaide moved. She didn't take the baby, but she scooted so close to Georgette their bodies touched. She put her arm around her daughter's tired shoulders. "*Au contraire, ma fille*. You are the strongest mother I know."

Georgette gave her a blank stare. "But ... you've always said ..."

Adelaide almost burst with laughter. "It's not the first time I've been wrong, my sweet, and it won't be the last, no matter how old I am." She rubbed Francine's shuddering back. "You have worked your hands raw for this baby. You've carried on without a husband to feed and clothe her. You've taught her that a woman alone can be enough." With her thumb, Adelaide wiped a tear from Georgette's eye. "It's something you taught both of us, actually. You, Georgette, are a wonderful mother, and I know you can quiet that baby."

The tension in the cellar blasted into a thousand pieces. With a newfound resolve, Georgette took her screaming child back into her arms. She cradled her as she had when she breastfed her, rocking her back and forth. In a quiet voice barely above a whisper, she began to sing.

*"... Allons enfants de la Patrie
Le jour de gloire est arrivé!
Contre nous de la tyrannie
L'étendard sanglant est levé ..."*

Perhaps it was Georgette's newfound confidence, or the gentleness of her voice, so different from the panicked squeak of a minute ago. It also could have been the shining patriotism, even as the world fell apart all around her. Whatever it was, Francine picked up on it, and she began to

settle. She let out some final, gasping sobs. Her legs and arms went limp. She tucked her head into the crook of her mother's arm, and her breathing slowed to a sleepy rhythm.

Adelaide smiled. She couldn't picture a more perfect song, or a more perfect moment. As the planes and bombs rocked the cellar, she snuggled up next to her daughter and joined in the singing.

*“Entendez-vous dans les campagnes
Mugir ces féroces soldats?
Ils viennent jusque dans vos bras
Égorger vos fils, vos compagnes!”*

Mother and daughter made peace, while the rest of France went to war.

GOODNIGHT, MOON

OceanofPDF.com

Emilia

CAEN

As the predawn hours approached, Caen transformed. A red and orange sea of snapping fires consumed the city, billowing with the smoke of everything that burned. Hot, dry breezes whipped at the scalded skin of survivors. Mountains of bodies piled up on street corners. Frantic civilians and auxiliary personnel tried to sew up the streams of wounded.

So many wounded, and hurt, and lost. Everyone still alive cried for someone they couldn't find, one of thousands who never came home that day. A beloved family member or cherished friend, another soul snuffed out in those ungodly fires. All of them entombed in burned debris and bones crunching under weary feet and half-flat bicycle tires.

There wasn't much anyone could do but dig, for the living and the dead. Emilia dug too. There was no escape anymore, not with the machine guns of her former friends and lovers at her back. For hours, on her hands and knees, she pawed through the remains of all the buildings on the block. She stacked dozens of bodies into piles. The heat picked her apart from the inside out, as did the dreadful carnage. She wondered how much more she could take when a lanky, flickering shadow fell over her, and a gruff voice commanded her to attention.

Emilia's hands sank into the ashes. The sound of her panicked breaths swirled in her head like a wind tunnel. The man behind her, Harald Heyns, sounded very angry.

He knew. There was no way he didn't.

In slow motion, Emilia forced her bent legs to straighten. Her slumped shoulders went rigid. Even though the hot wind blew her hair every which way, she didn't flinch. She faced the man she had once admired, who steered her through so many twists and turns. He shared blacklisted books with her, his job, his advancement, and sometimes his friendship.

Now he scared her half to death. It wasn't just his appearance, although that was plenty scary. He had lost his cap in all the chaos. Glassy eyes stared out from hollow sockets, and his gray skin made her own crawl. His thin lips trembled with the onset of a psychotic break. Soot stains smeared across his cheeks and forehead, and his teeth looked crooked and yellow in the firelight.

But his energy chilled Emilia the most, even in the dreadful heat. The transition to monster was utterly complete. And she didn't know what all he had discovered, so she had no idea what to say.

She at least knew she should be afraid. This man had the power to kill her and he wasn't ashamed to use it. But she wasn't scared, because burning anger still prowled through her like ravenous wolves. Anger that had lain dormant for too long, now released by Flora's death. Fury at her parents who threw her in the path of sweeping evil. Rage at the BDM for encouraging that evil, implanting it into her vulnerable mind and trying to abandon her to Lebensborn. And at Heyns for sucking her further into the Nazis' strong vortex, pulling her so deep there was nowhere to run.

Emilia had a long list of people to be angry at, but enemy number one was her own foolish and stupid self. She was so savagely angry that the stars in her youthful eyes had blinded her. That her high-ranking Nazi parents, and their sparkling balls and parties, cast a spell she couldn't break. One that hid the terrible skeletons in the Nazi closet behind glittering chandeliers and golden eagles.

She should have listened to the screams in her gut, heeded the changes around her. All those damn changes that happened so fast. The censored newspapers and press gag orders. The scaling back of freedoms in the name of "safety." Invasions of her privacy, mountains of burned books, youth leaders who said her only purpose was making more Aryan babies. If only

she had seen the monster behind those thousands of hands raised in Nazi salutes. She really should have. After all, it shook her own hand.

She could have avoided all this if she had trusted herself instead of men like Heyns. Her hands could be pure, her heart unburdened of guilt. She almost wished she had gone to Lebensborn. She would have been used by countless men, she would have wrecked her body with too many babies. But at least she would have been spared her share of the guilt. This hideous man and his henchmen had poisoned Germany, poisoned Emilia. She couldn't hide or fix her complicity in any of it.

Emilia looked Heyns right in his unstable eyes. If it was indeed time to die after everything she had done to try and stay alive, she decided she would do it like a lady. Restore the last vestige of pride in her swastika-tainted veins.

“Herr Heyns.”

He pierced her so deep he saw into her soul and caught whiffs of all her secrets. “Emilia, I know what you’ve done.”

Emilia stiffened. Her moment of truth had arrived.

Heyns’s eyes narrowed. “I know everything you have done for me. For Germany.”

That still didn’t reveal much, so Emilia held her ground. “I don’t understand.”

“You’re being withdrawn.”

Emilia allowed some faint relief to unshackle the chains in her stomach. Only faint, though. Withdrawn didn’t mean he trusted her or exonerated her. In fact, it had a lot of nerve-racking question marks attached to it. Still, if he wanted her dead, he would have seen to it already. Withdrawal meant that even if he did know of her attempted escape, he would let her live.

For now.

She straightened her shoulders. “Withdrawn?”

“It’s only temporary, of course, until we beat back the invasion.”

The words felt like a slap in her very tired face. She had known since dawn what these Nazis still refused to believe. They wouldn’t beat back the invasion. The Allies and all their vast numbers were here to stay.

Heyns ground his teeth, and the noise was maddening. “Just for safety, the female auxiliaries will leave Caen.”

As he broke down the details of her new orders, with all the flair of a propaganda professional, the growling engines of tanks drowned out his voice. A squadron of German Panzers had arrived in the smoking city limits. Their treads smashed everything the bombs hadn’t already demolished.

These weren’t just any old Panzers. It was the famous and elite 21st Panzer Division, one of Hitler’s most prized forces. His advisers probably had to beg him to release this special unit. Even in this crisis, they still had to claw it out of their deranged leader’s unstoppable hands. If this favored unit had been let out, it meant the Germany Army now faced much more than “just a precaution.”

Emilia shuddered. The hell of June 6 had finally stripped her bare. “You’re going to battle for this bombed-out hole?”

“We have no choice, Emilia. We cannot let the enemy inland.”

Emilia’s laugh dripped with newfound venom. “Oh, the fighting. You can fight, Herr Heyns. You can fight and fight. You can kill, since it’s all you know how to do. But you won’t win. You won’t beat back anything, not this time.”

The glare settling on his countenance meant business. “Emilia.”

“You and my father, your ideas about survival and who deserves it, the Allies will use them on you now. There is no escape. Not for you or for me. Withdrawn or no.” She took a menacing step closer to him. “You know that, don’t you?”

The words were like alcohol on a festering wound. Heyns grimaced, and his darkness enveloped her like an icy cold blanket. His hand slid to the holster at his waist.

Then came a crack in that façade. Confusion moved in as his fingers traveled over an empty holster. He broke with Emilia to examine the void where his Luger should have been.

Emilia didn’t move. She didn’t even blink, keeping her gaze locked on his.

When he looked back at her, a small glimmer of the man he used to be emerged. Just a tiny flash of humanity. The monster may have won, but the real Harald Heyns was still in there somewhere, and he couldn't kill Emilia. It didn't matter what he knew or what she had done. She was still his angel Emilia, his charmer, his comfort.

His stance weakened just a little. "Emilia, my angel, you're not yourself."

She glared. "None of us are. We haven't been for a long time."

His eyes dropped to the ground. "For better or worse, you're all I have left. The only one I can depend on."

"For what?"

"There's a very important favor I need. And please do it, my angel. I kept you out of Lebensborn. I got you a good job. There was some good, wasn't there Emilia? Before all this?"

Emilia didn't let that soften her. That little bit of good wouldn't wipe away either of their misdeeds. "What is it you want?"

"My files, Emilia."

"They're probably destroyed like everything else."

He shook his head. "They found the cabinet in the rubble. The satchel inside ... it's very valuable. It can't fall into enemy hands. It must leave Caen even if I can't."

Emilia realized what this meant. He was about to hand over his only remaining card. The files she had seen that very afternoon, detailing the dirty dealings of the Caen Nazis and the placement of their most dangerous spies. He had kept them under lock and key for the entire war. Now he would give them to the girl who had almost abandoned him. Not because he trusted her, but because he had no choice.

"A car will arrive to evacuate you. Bring them with you. If you get them safely to Germany, we will bury the past, Emilia. I can keep us both safe with the things in those files. And we must survive above all else, mustn't we?"

It wasn't a hard code to crack. The boys had told Heyns everything. He knew she had tried to escape, and he had come prepared to punish her for it.

Perhaps fatally. However, he would offer her a bargaining chip instead. His files for her life.

Emilia turned it over in her mind. She loathed being involved in helping Heyns escape from the vengeful Allies. It wasn't as if they needed another excuse to hang her. Yet her wheels turned as the images of those files flashed in her mind. Everything the Allies would need to know about SS intelligence activities in Caen and abroad. In the folds of that file case, lives hung in the balance. It all depended on whose hands that leather satchel fell into.

She gave a slow nod. "Yes, sir. I will take the files."

He gave her a statue-like Hitler salute.

This time, she didn't return it.

Adelaide

SAINT-GERMAIN-DE-VARREVILLE

Midnight had long since come and gone. June 6 was over, but the real war had just begun. Rumbles and flashes on the coast served as a constant reminder. So did the scattered pops of gunfire all through the night. From the air, it looked like hosts of lightning bugs. Perhaps little sparklers that kids used on holidays. On the ground, it was fierce. It was bloodshed, life or death. This was the new France. This, and the tangled webs of vapor trails crisscrossing the raven black heavens.

Georgette, Adelaide, and Francine stayed hunkered down in the little house. A few hours ago, they had ventured into the upper levels. They munched on some stale bread and canned jams. There was little to say with their working jaws and hungry stomachs, but there was plenty to hear. The radio kept spewing out updates, and the war symphony outside grew ever louder. After eating as much as they could, the women knew they should try to sleep.

So passed the predawn hours in Georgette's humble little bedroom. It had only a small double bed with a ratty quilt. A little bureau with a cracked mirror occupied the corner. The floor was splintered, with plenty of knotholes to stub unwitting toes. Georgette snuggled under the bed's dusty blankets, and her tired shoulders rose and fell with sleep. Francine burrowed in the crook of her arm, quiet as a mouse, with her plump little thumb tucked between her lips.

Only Adelaide remained awake. She sat on the end of the bed with her knees drawn up to her chest, rocking back and forth with her eyes glued to

the window. She would keep the vigil all damn night if she had to.

Of course, Georgette had kicked up a dainty little firestorm when her mother insisted on taking the first watch. Adelaide had hiked across the entire war-torn countryside, with multiple threats to her life. If anyone needed some shut-eye, it was the frail old woman in the room.

Adelaide just laughed. Her day wasn't so bad in the end, because she got her daughter back. And those bombs and soldiers chased away the shadow that had scared her for too long. Even though time had grayed her hair and wrinkled her skin, she would always have a purpose. She was Georgette's mother, no matter how many years passed. No matter how much her daughter grew up and went on with her own life. No matter how many wars there were or would be. An all-night vigil to protect Georgette was exactly what Adelaide wanted and needed.

"But mother—"

Adelaide cut her off. "Enough out of you. I have struggled across the country for one day. You have struggled to keep your family afloat for four years. Go to sleep now. I'll wake you in a few hours."

It was one promise Adelaide had no intention of keeping, but Georgette was too tired to argue.

Now Adelaide perched on the bed and watched the night outside. Despite all the chaos out there, it felt so still as dawn began its slow creep toward them. She glanced over at the dusty radio.

The BBC continued to whisper and murmur some updates. A prerecorded message from a man named General Eisenhower played over and over again.

"People of Western Europe, a landing was made this morning on the coast of France by troops of the Allied Expeditionary Force. This landing is part of the concerted United Nations; a plan for the liberation of Europe made in conjunction with our great Russian allies. I have this message for all of you: Although the initial assault may not have been made in your own country, the hour of your liberation is approaching ..."

Adelaide hugged her knees a little tighter.

Liberation. What a novel concept after four years under Nazi rule.

As she contemplated it, a loud KA-BOOM, followed by a horrible shriek, suddenly cut the still night air. The reverberation shook the whole room. The furniture bounced, and the mirror on the bureau wobbled precariously back and forth.

Georgette rocketed upright, her eyes wide with fright. “*Maman!*”

Adelaide tried to reach it, but for the first time on this crazy day, her joints and muscles failed her. She couldn’t get there fast enough. The mirror tilted a final time, then dropped to the floor with a terrible crash, shattering into hundreds of pieces.

Both women flinched, turning their eyes to Francine.

As only a child could in the midst of such times, she remained fast asleep.

Georgette heaved a gusty sigh. “That’s seven years bad luck.”

Adelaide sat beside her on the bed. When she remembered the broken mirror from her own bedroom in Sainte-Mère-Église yesterday morning, she couldn’t help but laugh.

Georgette giggled too. “You don’t believe in that?”

“Oh, I sure do. I just think we’ve paid that bill already. With today alone.” With that, she pulled Georgette in for another hug. Wrapped in each other’s arms, they watched the dizzying light show out the window. Flares, antiaircraft fire, bullets, and shells.

Liberation.

Emilia

CAEN

While twists of smoke and loose papers whipped about the ruptured streets, the metal monster Panzers rumbled all over town. They herded people into what was left of their homes and ransacked open paths through the rubble. The tank hulls belched Wehrmacht soldiers who scrambled to take their positions. They were joined by the battered SS and Gestapo, both primed to kill.

Emilia didn't know when the British hosts would arrive. From the looks of things, she didn't have much time. She wouldn't dare be caught in the firestorm, because it wouldn't be random explosions from bombs. This time, the guns would target her. Although she felt as if she would collapse with exhaustion, she stuffed supplies in the back of a rickety old car to hurry her escape.

That car itself was a sign of the times. When Emilia first arrived in Caen, it was in a sleek, black, shiny convertible. All the fanfare of trumpet blasts and swastika flags had accompanied her. Soldiers marched in tight formations down the picturesque cobbled streets. French people lined the sidewalks with angry faces and tears. Emilia came to this city with all the triumph of a conqueror.

She would leave it in a car that barely held itself together. Mud caked the wobbly tires. Dents and scratches slashed through the doors. The paint was chipped, and the engine coughed in protest. Thanks to the strictest oil and fuel rationing, it probably hadn't been driven in years.

As the first crack of dawn came up along the eastern horizon, Emilia tossed a few things into the back of the car. Heyns's precious papers waited to be loaded too. The familiar file case lay on its side in a heap of ashes.

She heaved her shoulders in disgust. She didn't understand why Heyns wouldn't throw them on a fire and have done with it. No paperwork, no evidence, no trial, and no hanging. There was only one valid reason to keep them. Her boss didn't just have diamonds to pay his way out of prison cells. He had ransom files too, information on more prominent Nazis he could trade in exchange for leniency. The spies alone were valuable currency, and he knew the Allies would want them.

Emilia blanched at the thought, but she reached for the file case anyway. Just as she went to grab it, a filthy hand came from nowhere and snatched it out from under her.

Emilia snapped upright in a fury. If she could keep up with a thief in her exhausted state, she would pound him into the dust.

The hand belonged to a fatigued and muddy Frenchman, with graying hair frizzled to a frenzy. Soot framed his steady brown eyes. Something else gleamed there too. A sort of recognition or anger, as if he knew Emilia's place in this mess. He looked down at the leather file case in his hands. He ran weathered fingers over its rough surface.

Emilia fought to settle her pumping heart. "Sir, may I have that back, please?"

At her German accent, the man cut her with a stern gaze. His hands gripped the leather case a little tighter. Just when it looked like he would abscond with the precious files, his face fell. A tear dribbled from the corner of his eye. Underneath his rumpled clothes lingered a broken spirit, too tired for stealing. He gently set the files in the back of the car and turned away from her.

"Thank you for your help." Emilia gestured to the tanks. "This city will be a war zone soon. You should seek shelter. You have somewhere to go?"

He shook his head. "My building was leveled."

"Any family to stay with?"

"I had someone for a while. A daughter of sorts."

Emilia noticed the past tense. "She's dead?"

“Today, actually.” The man’s lower lip trembled. His face looked as if it would collapse on itself. “My God. I just wanted to keep her safe through it all. And not just because ...” He cut himself off, sobs gathering steam inside him. “What will I tell her mother, Mademoiselle? What will I tell her mother?”

Then came the flood of tears. They flowed down his cheeks and smeared the soot on his face. His shoulders shook with them, his lungs contracted, his body trembled.

So many tears.

They pricked Emilia’s heart like a sharp needle. Deep down, in a place she had forsaken for years, she felt something stir.

Pity. Real, honest to God pity for these French people. They had lost everything and everyone they cared about. They were weathered yet scared, tested yet strong, beaten yet always ready to fight. There would be a hell of a fight too. A lot more friends and daughters would die before it ended.

Finally, after years of shutting it off, Emilia felt so sorry. It soaked down to her bones. It threw a black, suffocating blanket over her soul. A cold, cloudy sorrow that would always haunt her, even if she did survive. One this man could never understand, because he stood on the right side of history.

She put her hand on the man’s burnt sweater. “What’s your name?”

“Geraud.”

Emilia gave his bicep a squeeze. “Listen to me, Geraud. This will end, you know. Your city will be rebuilt. I know you can’t replace everything. My God, do I know that. But you will sleep well at night. Because you did everything you could. You ... fought on the right side. You understand?”

The man struggled to check his sobs. “*Oui. Merci.*”

“Good.” Emilia slammed the car door shut and turned back to Geraud. She mustered up her last, fragile bit of charm and became the angel one more time. She touched Geraud and flashed him that heavenly smile.

For once, it was charm well spent. His rigid muscles relaxed, and he even managed a weak smile.

“Be well,” Emilia whispered.

Theda

QUEEN ALEXANDRA HOSPITAL PORTSMOUTH

In the predawn hours, Theda finally found some time to duck into the washroom. She only stopped to tell Celia she was having her second “human meltdown” and needed a ten-minute break. This time, Celia nodded with a knowing smile.

“Take your ten minutes, love. I know you’ll come back.”

The simple sentence implied a lot. *Remember, you only fail if you don’t come back. And I believe you’ll come back.*

It was nice to have someone believe in her. And she felt even less guilty when she realized it wasn’t the worst time to take a break. As dawn made its slow approach, a slight lull came over the hospital. A fight still loomed ahead, but the day—that very long, bloody, deadly, terrible, and unbelievable day—the day that took months and years to plan for, that they destroyed their nerves waiting for, that was the beginning of the end ... that day was at last behind them.

Theda locked herself in a tiny stall in the washroom. Finally alone, the tears poured from her like water fountains. Her cheeks and eyes grew puffy. No one could comfort her. Not even the king of England’s calm voice had settled her down. He had addressed the whole nation several hours before, and many of the hospital personnel listened over a blaring radio. His royal majesty laid bare the monumental importance of the day, and he implored them all to stop what they were doing, join hands as one nation, and call on the Almighty for help in their endeavor.

“At this historic moment, surely not one of us is too busy, too young, or too old to play their part in a nationwide vigil of prayer as the great crusade sets forth. If from every place of worship, from home and factory, from men and women of all ages and many races and occupations, our supplications can rise, then, please God, both now and in a future not remote, the predictions of an ancient psalm may be fulfilled: The Lord will give strength unto his people; the Lord will give his people the blessing of peace.”

The speech had moved many. People willing to obey the “stop and pray” order packed the chapels of Portsmouth. But the hospital personnel at Queen Alexandra, VADs, Royal Army nurses, doctors, or regular staff, had no time to stop for anything. They had no time for meals, washing their hands, or relieving themselves, much less heading to a chapel across the grounds and dropping to their knees. Theda was sure the king, and the Lord, would understand.

Theda sat on the loo and took a vicious chomp at her fingernail. She froze in place when the washroom door suddenly squeaked open. Footsteps clopped against the tile floor, moving ever closer to her small refuge.

“Theda? Are you in here?”

Theda hadn’t seen Dr. Davies all night. She didn’t really expect to, either. A line of patients still waited outside the operating rooms. He hadn’t had a meal since breakfast that morning, and he had barely stepped away to attend to the calls of nature. She didn’t think he would go out of his way to see her. Especially after the way she brushed him off earlier.

Yet his voice pushed through the walls, and not just the tiny ones of her washroom stall. Theda wasn’t sure why he had come, but she didn’t want him to see her tears. She huddled in her stall and prepared to stay silent, but those aquamarine eyes flashed in her mind. The vision of William on that bloodied beach. Celia’s warm and knowing smile. Fate’s fragile thread.

The day taught Theda that everything could snap at any moment. There were no promises, no convictions that couldn’t be reshaped, and no excuses to not listen to her heart.

Her eyes hardened with determination. She hopped off the toilet and cracked open her stall. She revealed herself, in all her haggard D-Day glory,

to Dr. Davies.

Like her, he was an absolute mess. He had ditched his white coat and rolled his bloody sleeves up to his sweaty elbows. He had undone his top shirt buttons to expose a chest caked with grime and perspiration. The two let the tension of their day swirl and pop above them. Words became unnecessary.

She threw herself against the doctor's hard chest and wrapped her arms around his hot, damp shoulders. She slipped her tongue between his lips and ran her hands over his face.

He wrapped her in his arms and pressed her against the stall. He propped his knee to hold her in place while they smothered each other in kisses. Kisses that sent months of caged attraction up in smoke. Kisses that reminded them there was no time to be shy. They had to reach out for what they wanted and grab on for dear life.

Kisses that made such a horrible day worth living.

DELTA DAWN

OceanofPDF.com

Adelaide

SAINT-GERMAIN-DE-VARREVILLE

Adelaide stirred awake after a few hours of sleep. Beams of daylight through the dusty window glared in her face. She squinted and sat up in the squeaky, tiny bed.

She noticed right away she was alone. A few indents pushed down the feather mattress where Georgette and Francine had once slumbered.

“Georgette?”

No one answered, and Adelaide slipped out from under the blanket. On her tiptoes, she crept out of the bedroom. She passed through the humble cottage while morning stillness pressed on her back.

Outside, she heard the shouts, boot stomps, and grumbling engines of an army setting up permanent shop. A sound she was all too familiar with, but one that had a different tone to it this time. It somehow felt less mean. Less menacing. The seamless, gray precision and steel of the Third Reich had been replaced with green wool, white stars, and laughter. So much laughter despite their horrible surroundings.

Adelaide smirked as her eyes drifted to an empty, dusty mantel above the fireplace. It made the house feel hollow and somber, unused and unloved. And that wouldn't do for her daughter. So she rifled through the bag she had carried across the countryside, and she took the photo of Georgette and the baby out. She wiped some mud specks off its face and held it in her withered hands.

For all she knew, this photo and those damn pants over her legs were all she had left in the world. She stepped up to the mantel and placed the

picture on its dusty surface. It wasn't much, but somehow it brightened the entire room.

Adelaide nodded in satisfaction, and she crossed to the front door of the cottage.

It sat partially open, and a child's cooing came from outside.

"Georgette?" Adelaide wrapped her hand around the cool door handle, and the wooden door creaked the rest of the way open.

She saw Francine first. The toddler played in the damp grass with flaps of her arms and kicks of her legs. She held a giant chocolate bar in her hands, given to her by the two American soldiers kneeling next to her. She giggled in that delightful, high-pitched way that only toddlers can, while the soldiers tousled her hair and played imaginary games with her.

Adelaide let herself into the chilly, gray morning. "Francine," she said with a smile. She greeted the American soldiers with a nod.

One of them looked her up and down with a wink. "Them pants and boots is quite becoming on you, Madame."

She responded with a hearty laugh. "You know, I'm beginning to think so myself." She knelt down next to Francine. "And just what are you doing, silly? Where is your mother?"

"Mama ..." Francine pointed. "*Vive la France.*"

Adelaide grinned. "Say that again, love."

"*Vive la France.*" Francine laughed and pointed again.

Adelaide followed Francine's chubby finger.

It pointed at Georgette, who leaned on a ladder propped against the cottage. Across her filthy gutters, she had unfurled a large tricolor flag that now flapped in the wind.

Vive la France ...

Georgette turned from her work. She managed a bold wink and a smile for her mother. Then she went back to weaving the banner through the gutter, displaying the emblem across the battered fields for all the country to see, while the two American soldier boys clapped and cheered her bravery. Or her good looks. Either way, Georgette seemed to revel in it.

Adelaide had half a mind to scold her. There was no telling whether the Germans would reclaim the town. If they did, punishment for flying the

French colors would be severe. But she couldn't ignore the surge of pride in her veins, and the burn of moisture in her eyes. How long it had been since she had laid eyes on that precious emblem.

Adelaide started to laugh. It was quiet at first, but then it burst from her like an explosion. Her eyes wept with it, her shoulders quaked. Her stomach loosened. For the first time in years, the knots in her body vanished.

In the grass, Francine burst into giggles at the sight of her hysterical grandmother. Georgette threw Adelaide a befuddled and almost worried glance. However, the boisterous laughter was infectious, and it soon claimed Georgette too. All three women, and their new soldier friends, doubled over with laughter in the lovely, morning light, while the French flag billowed behind them.

Adelaide's war was finally over.

Emilia

CAEN

The morning faded the fires of Caen into an unnatural, smoky gray. Along with the sun came the vision of sheer destruction the Allies had wrought. Very few buildings stood any longer. Smoke climbed into the upper atmosphere. Ash and dust covered the entire landscape. It coated the people too, many of whom hadn't slept all night.

Emilia certainly hadn't. She was too busy trying to stay alive. Between the breakdown in Heyns, her peers turning on her, and the Allied planes flying over, it was one hell of a task.

After hours of assembling all the supplies, and waiting for final clearance from Heyns, Emilia had finally climbed into the rickety car that would evacuate her from the city. Behind her rested piles of junk that Heyns had deemed worth keeping. The most precious was his file case, which she tucked under her seat.

Emilia did her best to smooth her sooty clothes. She also brushed back her blonde hair, almost black from grime.

She turned to the driver and put on her sternest face. "How much fuel?"

"Not enough."

"Humor me."

"We can last the day. Beyond that, I make no promises."

Emilia cursed under her breath but waved her hand at him. "Well, off we go then."

The driver started the car. It coughed some alarming sputters, but eventually fired on all necessary cylinders. It bumped, jostled, and jolted

over the broken streets. The driver grasped the wheel as he sought the clearest path from the city.

It was a good thing they headed out, because fighting had erupted with the dawn. The tanks blasted their first shells and machine guns clattered to life. The battle for Caen would be long and bloody, and Emilia wasn't sorry to miss it. She took one last look out the car's back window. Caen, her home for so many months, disappeared in a cloud of smoke behind her.

As Emilia turned back to the road ahead, her face morphed. Her eyes turned to blazing hot Prussian coals. Her jaws became firm and her brows turned down. She reached into her skirt and took a long, hard look at the driver.

An old German knocking on the door of his seventies. Just like her parents, he probably remembered those terrible times between the wars, but it looked like he took responsibility himself instead of pinning his rage on a scapegoat. A uniform was the last thing he needed or wanted. Yet here he was, pressed into service like so many others. He might be as sick of all this as she was. He might cooperate.

Then again, he might not, and Emilia couldn't take that chance. She had been through too much to bank on humanity. She whipped the gun from the folds of her skirt, cocked it, and put it right to the driver's temple.

He gasped with shock and the car skidded off the road.

Emilia pressed the cool gun barrel even harder into his sweaty face. "Get this contraption back on the road or I'll kill you and do it myself."

The driver let out a whimper but got the car under control. "Please, Fräulein. I don't want any trouble. You can count on me."

She smirked. "Is that so?"

He turned his eyes from the road just long enough to give her a befuddled glance. "Of course you can. I'll get you back to Germany. I swear it."

She rolled her eyes. She was so exhausted it came off as malevolent. "Oh, like hell we're going to Germany."

"Well, my orders—"

"You take orders from me now, and I just said we're not going to Germany."

He gripped the wheel so hard his knuckles went white. "Then where are we going?"

"Into hiding. To wait."

"For what?"

"For death ... or for the Allies."

"The Allies?"

"They just love presents. Those files would do nicely, don't you think?"

The driver's face went pale. "Herr Heyns made it very clear that the files —"

"Heyns can burn in hell, and someday soon we'll join him."

"Why would you hand over the files?"

Emilia's eyes went electric. Yes, why would she hand over the files? It was simple, really. She knew she'd burn. The whole world would burn. She may as well take the devil's minions out with her.

She ran her pale finger over the Luger's trigger. "There's no way out of what's coming. There will be so much retribution. For me and you and all of us. The likes of Heyns pulled the whole country under. If we go down, we're at least taking him down with us."

The driver didn't look convinced. "You would have to hand those files to some high-level brass. You need leverage to see people like that. Something to barter."

"The files aren't enough?"

"They may not believe you."

"They'll believe this."

Emilia reached into her bra. She pulled out a filthy, crinkled, but still intact envelope. She dumped the precious stones into her still lap. They sparkled in the smoky daylight.

The driver's gaze sank as he saw them. He instantly knew their worth, their power. "*Mein Gott*, lady, who the hell are you?"

Emilia smiled. "An angel. Or the devil. You choose."

Theda

PORTSMOUTH, ENGLAND

A new day had long since arrived in England. The sun gleamed high in the sky, and its golden rays sizzled into a cramped, dusty room in Portsmouth. It was part of a small flat right near the hospital, where she had retreated for a few hours of rest.

In a double bed, with no clothes except the soft sheets wrapped around her, Theda slept. Her long bronze hair fanned out over a fluffy pillow. A smile pulled at her lips. Still half in slumber, she turned on her side.

And he was there to meet her. He pulled her into his warm, naked body. He kissed the top of her head.

Her shimmering, coppery eyes fluttered open, and she reveled in her doctor's dazzling smile. The war had destroyed a lot of things, including all their barriers.

"You look lovely in the morning," he whispered. "Angelic, really."

Just the day before, Theda would have thought it was the cheesiest thing she ever heard. Not so this morning. She leaned into his embrace and let him hold her as tight as he wanted.

She hesitated while the words bounced around her stomach and fought to escape.

She again thought back to her old self. The polka dot-clad Theda who never shared her heart because she wanted to have her own life. Who found better friends in books, and who wrote off marriage as something not meant for her.

That Theda would never approve of using these words so soon. That Theda was long gone, though, another casualty of war.

“I love you.”

As soon as the words popped out, she cringed. The doctor’s silence made her whole body clench. She waited for the hammer to drop and take away everything.

Dr. Davies turned her on her back instead. He climbed on top of her and held her nervous gaze on his.

She grinned. “The most sentimental nonsense you’ve ever heard, isn’t it?”

“Theda, I love you too,” he whispered. “But promise me one thing.”

“Oh Lord, ultimatums already?”

“Always be your lovely self.”

Theda’s eyes went wide. Celia was right after all. She just had to believe in herself, and the rest would fall into place ...

He leaned down to kiss her, and their sweaty bodies pressed against each other. They kissed, they moaned, and they panted, moving in rhythm with each other. Theda, a perfect stranger to sex, found that it came easily to her. There was no pain, no discomfort, only passion.

Celia’s glowing smile of yesterday became Theda’s today. She was let in on the secret, and her place in the world of women finally clicked. Marriage and motherhood, a career, her own way. It didn’t matter which path women chose. They didn’t have to lose themselves or give up anything.

Theda Brown could have both.

Mildred

RRG STATION BERLIN

“Axis Sally” arrived at the radio station in Berlin. Her black dress hugged her curvy hips and pressed up her impressive bosom. Her shiny black heels clicked on the floor. She had washed her hair and piled it on her head. Her crisp red lipstick could slay any man in the room.

At least it would have the day before.

Today, Mildred arrived to an office in shambles. Frantic announcers, some of whom had been up all night, still leaned over microphones. In harried voices, they whipped up tales of thousands of casualties, of armies turning back, of repentant Allied generals. No one had made it over the Atlantic Wall. No one would take down Fortress Europe.

Lies. All of it. Any idiot knew that.

Mildred’s mascara-lined eyes crinkled. Her white skin flushed scarlet. She took a few steps into the carpeted office, scanning the sea of rattled men for a familiar face. A friendly face. The face that brought her here to begin with.

“Max ...”

He was barricaded in a suffocating broadcast booth. In the same clothes from yesterday, he flipped pages for a sweat-stained and exhausted reporter. Dark rings had moved in on his eyes. In one night, he had aged ten years. He looked up from his work, and he caught Mildred’s somber gaze.

The glance said it all. The denial of yesterday had vanished into the wind. He knew the Americans would come for them. Or worse—the

Russians.

There were no lullabies to comfort her this time.

It was propaganda.

You knew what you were doing.

Treason. Indicted. Death sentence.

Mildred crumbled under Max's look. It punched her so hard she whirled away from him and barged into her own broadcast booth.

She was greeted with the rainbow of atrocious Nazi posters and prop slogans adorning the walls. Slurs against Jews. Pride in pure Aryans. Praise for the mighty Führer.

Propaganda—right there in front of her all those years. A treasonous diatribe she had spit into a microphone, which went into a recording, which went into permanent records. Records that would no doubt fall into the hands of so many who hated her.

It was propaganda.

You knew what you were doing.

Treason. Indicted. Death sentence.

Mildred's eyes drifted to a desk calendar resting in her booth. No one had torn the previous day's page off. It bore into her eyes and burned right through her skull.

June 6.

D-Day. The beginning of the end. For Mildred, for Max, and for everyone else.

She savagely ripped the page off and tore it into tiny pieces. She threw them to the floor. She stomped on them in her perfect little heeled shoes. Then she let out a scream.

Axis Sally had just been put on notice.

Author's Note

When creating a work of fiction, I find the best place to start is with the truth. And while the truths of history are always up for debate, empathy is one of my best tools for examining them. Putting a human face on the trials of long ago can help us better connect with what happened. It can also help us understand that all of us are human, and none of us should dare presume that it can't happen to us. And the more we understand about our human past, the more we can steer our future in a better, more enlightened direction.

This book was based on a carefully and extensively researched hour-by-hour account of the actual D-Day. Many of the faces seen in this story are straight from the pages of history. As with any work of fiction, some creative adjustments had to be made. But a large portion of what is written in this book happened in some form on D-Day itself.

Mildred

Mildred Gillars, or Axis Sally, is a real historical figure. Many of her scenes in this novel were taken directly from her real life, including the suicide publicity stunt for her film *Unwelcome Children*. Her radio career as Axis Sally gave her the fame and fortune she had scrambled around New York City for, along with the factual affair with Max Otto Koischwitz, also a real person. In the end, none of it saved her. Mildred Gillars was captured in Berlin shortly after the war, taken back to the United States, and put on trial for treason. The play cited at the beginning of this book, *Vision of Invasion*, ended up being a star piece of evidence in the prosecution's case. Using that and other broadcasts, along with statements from some of the U.S. prisoners

she actually interviewed at the German stalags, Mildred Gillars earned another infamous distinction when she became the first woman convicted of treason against the United States in 1949. She received a thirty-year prison sentence, most of which she served at minimum security facilities. She was released in 1961, and died in relative obscurity in her native state of Ohio in 1988, at the age of 87. Joseph Goebbels, Mildred and Max's boss at RRG, was also a real person. Head of propaganda for the Nazis, he quickly earned a reputation as one of the vilest figures in the Third Reich. He was in Berchtesgaden with Hitler on D-Day itself, but his presence still loomed large over everyone in German radio, film, news, or the arts. Becker is a fictional character created to illustrate that environment.

Emilia

While Emilia and most of the people she encounters are fictional, her boss, Harald Heyns, was the actual head of the Caen SD—an intelligence wing of the SS—at the time of the D-Day invasion. The massacre at the Caen jail was a real event, ordered by Heyns, resulting in the deaths of over eighty people. Much of his personality and movements are imagined, since little information exists on him today, except for the legacy of his terrible actions on June 6. As for the events Emilia deals with, such as the bombing of Caen, both in the morning and afternoon, these were taken from the real D-Day timeline.

Adelaide

Adelaide herself is fictional, but a large portion of her story is based around actual events in the Utah Beach sector on D-Day, starting with the parachute drop over Sainte-Mère-Église in the predawn hours of June 6. Almost every detail in this scene is a re-creation of what actually happened that night—a building did catch fire from a stray bomb, the mayor did start a bailing line to put it out, and paratroopers did drop right in the middle of that. Paratroopers also dropped in an old woman's garden, on the church roof, and, unfortunately, some did come down in the flames of the burning building. As for Adelaide's hike through the marshlands, the Germans did open the river locks all around the Utah Beach sector, which flooded the

naturally low-lying areas. This condemned a great many paratroopers to death by drowning, as the thick mud and algae made the flooded areas look like land from above. General Roosevelt, encountered by Adelaide as she approaches the coast, was a real general, the son of President Theodore Roosevelt. Given his age (56) and high rank, he inspired his troops when he not only personally led the first wave at Utah against the wishes of his superiors, but he also walked along the beach with his cane, while bullets flew all around him, to rally his troops to action. He died just a few weeks after D-Day of heart complications.

Theda

Theda, her friends Sheila and Carolyn, Dr. Davies, and Celia are all fictional. However, the Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs) and Royal Army nurses, along with general hospital staff, provided critical help all along the British port cities as D-Day casualties made their way back to Britain for treatment. Queen Alexandra is a real hospital that is still in operation today, and the local historians of Portsmouth were incredibly helpful in providing me with photographs of what it looked like at that time, in addition to letters and pictures from people who served there in 1944. The best I can tell from both source material, and talking to local historians, is that the first casualties began arriving late in the afternoon/early evening on D-Day.

Flora

While Flora and Geraud are both imagined, the French Resistance was very real, and played a critical part in the Allied successes of D-Day. The code that Flora hears (“The dice are on the carpet,” although a few accounts have it as “The dice are on the table”) was the actual code broadcast by the BBC to alert Resistance members that the landings were imminent. The Maquisard activities around Caen that morning are also true—and the many disruptions they caused, such as cutting phone wires and barricading roads, produced significant delays in the German defense. Madame Vion, working at the Bénouville maternity hospital, was a real figure, relaying intelligence back and forth from Bénouville to the bigger networks in Caen.

The events in and around Bénouville as portrayed in this book are pretty much a play-by-play of the real capture of the Bénouville bridge, known today as Pegasus Bridge, just after midnight on June 6. General Howard was the actual leader of this small glider-borne force, and with their solid training and the element of complete surprise, they captured their objective within fifteen minutes of landing. They also really did blow up a German tank with a Piat gun, which caused even further snarls in German traffic trying to reach the coast, since the wreckage blocked the road for hours. The area is still in use today, although the bridge had to be replaced for safety reasons. The original Pegasus Bridge sits on display at a nearby museum.

Although Flora's movements around Caen are mostly imagined, the executions at the Caen jail were real (see above), as was the bombing that takes Flora's life.

General D-Day History

Most major military actions in this book (bombings, bombardments, parachute drops, etc.) were written in conjunction with how things unfolded on D-Day itself—including the glider drops in the countryside, the linking up of paratroopers and infantry inland of Utah, and the horrific bombing and fighting around the city of Caen. While I did my best to stick as close to the history as possible, slight adjustments had to be made in certain areas to serve the story.

All in all, I wrote this novel, both the real and the imagined, with the intent of helping us remember the vast scope of the D-Day invasion and the countless everyday lives affected by it. It's easy to think of it only in terms of the beaches, which involved the height of sacrifice and bravery from all who landed, fought, and died there. But the D-Day invasion stretched far beyond those beachheads, and the ripple effects continue into the modern era. This book is for the people of that time, in and out of uniform, who directly dealt with this monumental invasion and its monumental legacy, who did the best they could with what they had, and who, with nothing more than ordinary human prowess, stood up to deal with the extraordinary.

Acknowledgments

Let me assure you that my own mighty endeavor, this book, was no solo effort. While writing is often seen as a lonely profession (and sometimes it is—luckily I have cats), it actually takes a village to make a book.

I'd first like to thank my fantastic agent, Lindsay Guzzardo at Martin Literary, for taking a chance on this little debut writer and believing so much in the story I wanted to tell. Her deciding to walk this journey with me brought an incredibly bright spot into the otherwise very challenging year of 2020. Then there is my editor, Tara Gavin, who fell in love with these five women just as hard as I did, and the entire team at both Crooked Lane and Alcove Press who helped me carve my raw story into a real book. It has been an honor and a privilege to work with all of these talented people. I am truly humbled by the time and effort they all gave to make this happen.

I also have to thank all the historical writers, past and present, who provided mountains of research materials for me to consult in writing this novel. And the book sellers and librarians in Los Angeles (especially the Burbank Buena Vista library, Bart's Books in Ojai, and North Hollywood's Iliad Bookshop) and Indiana who guided me through piles of dusty old volumes with a smile, helping me find the best materials. I also thank the various educators over the years, especially from Alburnett in Iowa and the University of Iowa, who have had a tremendous impact on me, who fed my interest in history and writing, and who gave me nudges and nods of encouragement when I needed it.

And where would I be without the incredible safety net of love and support of my family and friends? Especially my husband Joel Henry, who

never stopped believing in me even when I wanted to stop believing in myself. He has read multiple drafts, given me countless pep talks, and has been the absolutely perfect partner in crime to have by my side. My friends Meagan, Liz, Erin, and Jim, who took time out of their busy lives to read early drafts, listen to practice pitches, and give me so many tips, suggestions, and general support. Not to mention the laughs, which always help! My large and awesome family, parents, siblings, in-laws, and twenty-one nieces and nephews, who always encourage my imagination and always told me “It’s when, not if.” I also have to give a shout-out to the many readers and other writers out there, especially in the online communities. My friends and followers on Wordpress have encouraged me every step of the way, and the online writing communities are always so supportive of other writers and their work. Keep that up—it truly makes a difference.

Last, I thank God—for making me just crazy enough to give writing a try.

OceanofPDF.com

Author Biography



M.B. Henry is a lifelong student of history, especially military history, having visited battlefields and historical sites all over the world. She has a degree in cinema and comparative literature, and has served as a historical consultant and researcher on films and television in Los Angeles. She lives with her husband and two cats in Indiana.

OceanofPDF.com

This is a work of fiction. All of the names, characters, organizations, places and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to real or actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2022 by Melinda Burns-Henry

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Alcove Press, an imprint of The Quick Brown Fox & Company LLC.

Alcove Press and its logo are trademarks of The Quick Brown Fox & Company LLC.

Library of Congress Catalog-in-Publication data available upon request.

ISBN (hardcover): 978-1-64385-962-0

ISBN (ebook): 978-1-64385-963-7

Cover design by Lynn Andreozzi

Printed in the United States.

www.alcovepress.com

Alcove Press
34 West 27th St., 10th Floor
New York, NY 10001

First Edition: May 2022

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

OceanofPDF.com