

The Life and Times of Ace Mathews
By Robert Compton Miller

Chapter 1

Miami, 1954

Maggie sat at a table on the screened veranda which opened onto a large and well-shaded backyard. The grass was sparse, little more than walkways between flower beds. She had never become accustomed to such grass, remembering the lush lawns in Philadelphia. However, the lack of grass was not really a problem. At least there was not a foot of snow covering the yard which was always possible at this time of year in Philadelphia.

It was January, and the newspaper she was glancing at showed that this day was January 5. The temperature on the thermometer near the French doors that opened from the living room onto the verandah claimed that it was a warm eighty-three degrees. The overhead fan and the shade from the porch roof made the heat easily bearable.

She glanced at the front page of the paper, but not with any great interest. There was a story about the growing civil rights agitation that was proving to be quite a problem. In the bottom left corner of the paper there was a story about the French and the fighting happening in some strange-sounding place in Indochina.

Maggie could not push the dream out of her mind. The paper did not help to distract her. The dream had occurred again last night. It was a dream about Ace. She dreamed that she saw him flying an early-style airplane. He was sitting out on the front of the plane. He was flying over a circus but instead of people below, there were great groups of flowers that suddenly appeared and then disappeared. The flowers were red and yellow, but never mixed. She had no idea what the dream meant, but she was worried. She remembered a long-ago recurring dream about Ace and how that dream had predicted, at least partially, what was to come.

This new dream first occurred last August when she and Sebastian were in Paris where they usually spent their summers. Of course, they traveled about Europe each summer, and for the past three years it had been the same battle. She wanted Sebastian to show more interest in his training to become a concert pianist, and he wanted to grow up to be a Grand Prix race car driver. Whenever Maggie thought of the old saying, "Blood will out," she shuddered and told herself, "Over my dead body."

There had been no news of Ace for years. Back in 1947, there was a letter from June. Ace had appeared, out of the blue, so to speak, except this time, he came by bus instead of in his own airplane. He had stayed with June and her son, James. Maggie could still remember the time when she and Ace had stayed a few days with June and Virgil. James was a toddler then. By the time World War II came, he was old enough to serve as a

bomber pilot in the war. When he returned home from the war, he had problems. June feared that he was going to have to spend some time in a veteran's center. As June put it, "He came back without a scratch, but he's not right in the head."

June's letter said that Ace had done some flying as a crop duster, but that he was drinking too much. She thought he was in about as bad a shape as James. There was also some trouble, and Ace had apparently shot and killed a man. It was self-defense, but since Ace was an outsider, the sheriff believed that it was best if he left the area.

The letter ended with June writing that she had hoped Ace would stay and settle down, but it was clear that he was never going to walk down that path.

Maggie wondered if Ace had ever told June about Angelique, and then reassured herself that Ace always lived in one world at a time. She had responded to June's letter, telling June about how she had married and had a child after she became a widow. There was no reply from June.

"Josephine?" Maggie called.

A few seconds passed. A tall woman of color appeared at the French doors.

"Yes, Ma'am?"

"I think we need some iced tea. We'll have it out here on the verandah."

"Yes, Ma'am."

While she waited for the tea, Maggie put aside the past and the new dream.

There were other matters to consider. Something had to be done. Sebastian was not giving his full attention to his piano lessons. She had hired the best teacher in Miami, but the man was threatening to quit. The boy was pleasant and polite, but he just did not want to work. The professor claimed that he was certain the boy listened to truly dreadful music. There was some singer named Cole, apparently a king of something or other, and even worse, there was some young man from Memphis who young people were talking about. Maybe this summer in Europe, she could coax Sebastian into greater efforts, meaning more work on the piano. There was no doubt that he had talent.

Josephine returned. She had a small pitcher filled with iced tea and two glasses, all carefully balanced on a tray. She set the tray down on the table and filled both glasses. She handed one of the glasses to Maggie, who looked up, smiled, and said, "Thank you."

Josephine took the second glass and walked over to a chair by the screen. She sat down, but did not lean back. She sat on the edge of the chair, the glass of tea in her hand. She was uneasy, but Miss Maggie did not seem to notice.

Miss Maggie was an old woman who had strange ways. When Miss Maggie had tea on the verandah, so did Josephine. Miss Maggie clearly believed that when they had a glass of tea, they would drink it as equals. Josephine appreciated the intent, but it was still an awkward moment for her. This was a very good job. Miss Maggie was always kind and never demanding, though there never was any doubt about the fact that she expected the very best. It had taken Josephine some time to become accustomed to this woman's strange ways.

"There she is again," Maggie said as she pointed out beyond the screen.

The house was on a corner lot, and the right boundary of the backyard was marked with a wrought iron fence. On the other side of the fence, there was a sidewalk, a narrow band of sparse grass, and then the street.

Josephine turned carefully in her chair and looked in the direction Miss Maggie had pointed. There was an old colored woman, wearing a long dress. One hand was on a cane and the other held a brightly flowered parasol overhead to guard against the sun.

"This is the third time she's been walking out there in the past two weeks," Josephine said.

"I know. None of your people who work in this area know who she is or where she came from," replied Maggie. "The last time, the police stopped her and tried to find out what's going on."

"She get arrested?" Josephine asked, her voice perfectly even.

"Oh, no, nothing like that. She's apparently down here from Chicago. Claims to have a relative around here, but she can't find him. The poor old dear! Tell you what, Josephine. When she gets to the corner, take her out a glass of iced tea. She reminds me of a woman I once knew a long time ago in Paris."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Maggie looked down at the paper and then out at the woman walking slowly on the sidewalk.

"You know, Josephine. I'm getting the urge to go abroad. Let's start getting ready to go to Europe. I'll have to take Sebastian out of school, but I doubt if that will break his heart."

"Ma'am?"

"Why not?" Maggie said with a shrug. "It would be good to be there, in Paris, in the springtime."

Miss Maggie's sudden decision to leave for France months earlier than usual surprised Josephine. It was not like her to make a big decision without carefully considering every tiny little detail.

Josephine filled a paper cup with iced tea and took it out to the old woman who was standing at the corner. The old woman was grateful for the tea and promised not to throw the cup on someone's yard or in the gutter.

As Josephine walked back to the house, a car pulled up in front and a man got out. He was an older man, and he had a slight limp. She stood in front of the door after he came up the walk. His hair was short but curly and heavily flecked with gray. It was his face that riveted her attention. There was a scar on the left side of his face that ran from near the side of his eye down almost to his upper lip. She thought he was a frightful man, and at the same time, she had the feeling that she had seen him before.

"Hello, is Maggie, uh, Miss O'Malley here?"

The man had a pleasant voice and his eyes showed no signs of guile or threat.

"I'll see if she is inside," Josephine answered. "She may have stepped out."

She turned and entered the house and was careful to lock the door behind her.

"Miss Maggie, there's a man outside who wants to see you. Maybe I should call the police. He's a scary-looking man. He's got this awful scar on his face."

The words were no sooner out of her mouth when Maggie hurried past her and flung open the door after fumbling with the lock.

"Ace! Ace, it's really you! Where have you been? If you say around, I will slug you. Come on in." She quickly turned to Josephine. "Bring some ice, a couple of Cokes, and the bottle of rum out to the verandah."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Maggie took Ace by the arm in what was a near hug and led him out to the verandah where they sat down at the table.

"How are you doing, Ace?" she asked. She studied his face as she asked the question. His eyes were clear, his face fuller than she remembered, and there was the beginning of a smile forming at the ends of his lips. He was a little heavier, but he was still the same old Ace, except a lot older and probably not one bit wiser.

Josephine came through the French doors with a tray. On the tray was a bottle of rum, two Cokes, two glasses, and a small container filled with ice cubes. She set the tray down on the table and turned to go back through the doors.

"Josephine, I'm sorry, I forgot. Could you also please bring an ash tray?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

As he pulled a pack of cigarettes and his lighter from a pocket, Ace nodded and said, "Thanks. It's been a long time since I've had a rum and Coke."

"You're into the heavy stuff now?" Maggie asked.

"Not anymore. There was a time a few years ago that I almost fell over the line, but I was lucky."

"Did June dry you out?"

"You know about that?"

"June wrote me a long letter." Maggie stopped talking as Josephine entered and put an ashtray on the table near Ace.

He lit up a cigarette and looked at Maggie and shoved his pack over toward her.

"No, thanks," she replied as she mixed the drinks. "I gave it up years ago. I see you've still got the lighter. I'm surprised. I would have thought the Croats who were holding you prisoner would have relieved you of that lighter."

"They did," Ace replied. "But as it turned out, the guy who took the lighter gave it to his girl friend. Then when they accidentally shot me, they had to help me recover. The British weren't likely to buy damaged goods, so they assigned this woman to take care of me. Would you believe she ended up giving me my lighter?"

Maggie shook her head. "Ace, coming from anyone else, I wouldn't believe it on a stack of Bibles, but you, oh, yes, I can believe it."

"People tell me that my lighter is a good luck charm. I'm beginning to believe it."

"What name are you going by now?"

"Depends on where I am. Right now, I'm Ace Mathews, but I have retired honorably from the Canadian Royal Air Force as Archibald McFetters. I actually receive a retirement check, a pension, every month that is paid into an account I have in Montreal."

"You sure look like the old Ace Mathews I knew when I was younger. Not much has changed. The white shirt is a little different, and khaki pants instead of whipcord. You are still wearing half-Wellingtons, and I like the broad leather belt. You could stick a sword in it and be a pirate once again."

Ace laughed. "Look who's talking! Walking shorts, sandals, and pretty little shirt! That's the way I remember you when we were down here, and I taught you how to fly. Do you still fly?"

"Haven't flown in years, and I have severed all my functions with my corporations except one. In order for the managers and lawyers to keep me away, they have to pay me quite a sum of money, and they will have to keep paying me until the end of my days, and then they have to pay Sebastian. Someday, he will be quite rich."

"That's part of the reason I'm here now," Ace said. He reached back to a pants pocket and pulled out a folded envelope. "I'm going off on a new assignment, Hanoi, over in Vietnam, wherever that is, and I wanted you to have this. It's not much by your standards, but it will help. It will allow you to take control of my Swiss bank account. I've already signed over my pension from the Canadians to June. She needs the money."

Maggie looked at the envelope lying on the table. "Who are you working for, Ace?"

"It's an outfit out of Washington. They hire old-timers like myself for certain jobs."

"I have a pretty good idea who that is. You be careful."

Ace shrugged. "Not much to it, really. The French are holed up in some place called Dien Bien Phu. All we have to do is fly over and drop supplies. I'll probably be flying the Boxcar. It's quite a plane. Everything gets unloaded out of the back end like a goose with the trots."

"I remember when you thought flying transports was a terrible idea."

"Yeah, look what I've come to. I never qualified to fly these jets. Never really wanted to. I've flown planes with propellers in front, and I've flown planes with propellers in back. I just can't get used to the idea of flying a plane that doesn't have any propellers."

Maggie smiled. "I told you this would happen."

"I guess so. There is another reason why I stopped by. I would like to see the boy before I go. Would that be okay?"

Without hesitation, Maggie replied. "Yes, of course. You are lucky. His school is still out on holiday break. He's next door. They have a swimming pool. Just a minute."

Maggie rose from her chair and stepped to the French doors. "Josephine!" she called.

Josephine appeared. "Yes, Ma'am?"

"Go fetch Sebastian, please."

The maid nodded and headed toward the front door. Maggie returned to her chair. "Can I fix you another drink?"

"I'll have to take a rain check on that. I've got a lot to get done today." He paused, smiled, and said, "You sound like June."

"What do you mean?"

"The word, *fetch*."

"Oh, that. Well, it comes from living here in the South, I suppose."

"I was wondering about that. Is Sebastian accepted here? Have you had any trouble?"

"No, not really. He goes to a private school. I am very rich and some say, eccentric, and maybe a little feared. Then there is the name. Most people think Sebastian is of noble birth, Spanish aristocracy. Would you believe in this day and age that's still important?"

"Having a name is always important," Ace said. There was no need for Maggie to respond to Ace's opinion regarding a name. She knew what he meant. She reached over and tapped the envelope.

"Joe said you do this business with the envelope when you have some concern about your next assignment. Is this going to be a bad deal?"

"I've only done it a couple of times," Ace said. "Actually, this is something I've been meaning to do, but just never got around to it. By the way, have you heard from Joe or Cassie?"

"You didn't know? Joe died three years ago. His heart gave out on him. I don't know where Cassie is. I wouldn't be surprised if she's over in Moscow or maybe some place up north like Chicago."

"I'm sorry to hear that about Joe. I would have liked to see him one more time to patch things up."

"You and Joe were caught up in the times. You both had pasts that could not be overcome," Maggie said softly.

The front door slammed, and Maggie made a face. "He sometimes forgets."

A boy who was tall for his age, slender, barefoot, clad in swim trunks and a large beach towel draped around his shoulders, hurried into the room.

"Josephine says we are going to France in a couple of weeks. We'll be there for the start of the Grand Prix season." He saw Ace, stopped short, and stared at the man who had risen from his chair.

"Mr. Mathews, I would like you to meet my son, Sebastian de la Reyes. Sebastian, this is Mr. Mathews. He is an old friend of mine."

Sebastian stepped forward as Ace did likewise. The two were an arm's length apart. Josephine discreetly watched from the French doors.

Ace and Sebastian shook hands. As they did so, Josephine nearly gasped aloud. There could be no mistake about it. She knew she was looking at a father and son. She noted the similarities between the nose, the chin, but not quite the eyes, and the son was nearly as tall as the father. If this man was the father, then there was no way Sebastian could be Miss Maggie's child, not her with her pale skin and auburn hair. Maybe the man had the child by a Spanish wife. That was possible. Then, before she could block the thought, another possibility crashed through the walls of her mind. If true, it meant that the boy was "passing" and probably did not even know it, but Miss Maggie must surely be aware.

Sebastian and Ace let their hands drop.

"You have a firm hand," Ace noted.

"I know who you are," Sebastian said.

Ace glanced over at Maggie. Her hand moved to cover her mouth. She slowly shook her head.

"You are the man in the picture in Mother's bedroom."

Josephine watched as Ace smiled and Miss Maggie seemed relieved.

"You still have that old picture?" Ace asked.

"It cost a lot of money," Maggie replied. She turned and faced Sebastian. "Well, Mr. Mathews and I have some business to take care of, Sebastian. Please get showered, put some clothes on, and hit that piano. Josephine, please start gathering clothes for the cleaners. I want everything cleaned before we leave for Paris."

Sebastian and Josephine left the verandah. Josephine had at least solved one part of the puzzle. Of course, she had seen this man before. She had looked at him every time she cleaned Miss Maggie's room. He must have been very young when the picture was made, but the scar was surely the same now as then.

When they were alone, Maggie looked at Ace and smiled. "That really rattled me."

Ace nodded. "For a second, I thought you had told him the truth."

"There have been times when I have wanted to, but it just isn't a good idea."

"I understand, Maggie. Well, I've got to be moving along."

He started toward the door, and Maggie came to him and took his arm. "I'll see you out."

At the front door, Ace took Maggie in his arms and kissed her on the forehead.

She looked up at him. “No, Ace, you’ve got to do better than that, at least for old time’s sake.” He did. When they parted, and as he stepped outside, she said, “Take care of yourself, Ace. Come back to us.”

Ace smiled and replied, “Goodbye, Maggie.”

When he was gone, Maggie went to her room, closed the door, lay down on the bed, and cried.

Josephine passed the room and saw that the door was not quite closed. She heard Maggie, shook her head, and carefully and silently closed the door. There was another door in her mind, and she vowed that the door would remain closed forever.

Even so, she did leave the door ajar just a little. She wanted to peek through it to find out about this strange man who did not seem uncomfortable about breaking a harsh law for which only the innocent would be punished.

Chapter 2

May, 1954, Hanoi, Vietnam

It was not Paris, but it was close enough for Ace to be comfortable. The Vietnamese, at least in Hanoi, spoke French. He did not understand them, and it had been the same during the years he had lived in Paris. He had mastered the famous French shrug, but not the language.

He sat alone at a table that was near an alley between the restaurant that hosted the outdoor café tables and another building. It was hot, but the sun was just on the other side of the row of buildings and there was shade. The tea in his glass was tepid. He was fond of the tea, and he thought that tea at this temperature was a treat. He was dressed in his usual khaki pants, boots, wide belt and shirt, on this day a soft, almost pale, yellow cotton garment. His hair was close cropped, but not enough to disguise the tight curly tips.

He had a new name. Most of the other pilots in his group called him Pappy. It was inevitable. He was considerably older. His years stretched back a couple of wars beyond their one or two past wars. He did not approve of his name, but he did not object. He believed that Pappy was marginally better than Archibald. Only the group commander, or executive officer as he was called, referred to him as Ace.

He lit a cigarette and put the lighter down on the table with the pack of cigarettes. He was at peace with the world. It had been a good day. They had not flown a supply mission over Dien Bien Phu because the weather was so bad over that area. There was talk that the besieged post might fall as early as tomorrow, the months-long battle finally coming to an end. This war might be ending, but he was certain that there would always be another flying assignment for him.

A small Vietnamese boy, maybe eight or nine years old, drifted by Ace's table. He smiled shyly at Ace. His eyes did not miss the glint of the gold on the lighter laying near the cigarettes. With a sudden motion, the boy darted around the table, snatched up the lighter, and ran down the alley. Ace was startled. He jumped up and ran after the boy. He soon pulled up. It was a hopeless chase. Ace returned to his table, sat down, and sipped the tea.

Once again, the lighter was gone. He thought of the Countess. Both she and the lighter had come from Vietnam. Maybe now, the lighter had returned home. It had been lost before. Maggie had somehow rescued both him and the lighter. The Croatian girl had returned the lighter to him. Angelique had taken it, but that was different. She had wanted him, not the lighter. He was the ransom for the lighter. Maybe it would once again find its way back to him. The lighter had been good luck, sometimes. He performed the only French expression he had ever mastered. He shrugged. It was a perfectly performed French shrug. The case of the lighter was closed. Besides, it was time for him to attend to business.

The executive officer had called a pilots' meeting for 1600 hours. It would be a short meeting. The officers' club on the base opened at 4 p.m., the same time as the meeting. The French had kindly extended the privileges of the club to the pilots. Jim Cardoza, the executive officer, would not try to hold the pilots very long.

The briefing room for the pilots was not large and it was hot despite the efforts of an old overhead fan that wheezed along in its effort to create a breeze.

"We're all here. Where the hell is Cardoza?" Sam Rutledge, one of the younger pilots, asked.

"Pappy's not here either. He's usually on time," another pilot noted.

"He's probably out beating up on one of our loadmasters," Johnny Catliff said. "Now that he's beat up on Terwilliger and got him locked up in jail, we're shy a loadmaster."

"Sounds good to me. Since he was my loadmaster, I'll just have to stand down. I'll be out on the flight line tomorrow and wave goodbye to you lucky saps," said Al Dolan.

"We won't be flying tomorrow. Hell, the French probably gave it up today," another pilot said.

Someone asked, "Why did Pappy take out after Terwilliger the way he did? So what if Terwilliger was a little rough on that slant-eyed whore?"

Ben Rogers had been silent. He was an older man, though at least ten years younger than Pappy. He had appeared to be dozing, but he opened his eyes and spoke slowly. "It was a twelve-year-old girl."

The room was silent for maybe two minutes. Then one of the pilots said, "Remember what Packwood claimed about old Pappy?"

There was not an immediate response to the question. Packwood had been one of three pilots shot down in the past two weeks. There were no rules governing the mention of the dead, but it was something seldom done.

"Packwood said he had it from a guy who saw Pappy's records. He was wanted in Georgia for the murder of three men. He shot them down in a Wild West kind of shootout. Terwilliger's probably lucky he's still alive."

"Don't want to speak ill of the dead," Rogers said, "But Packwood did have a habit of exaggerating things."

Ace walked in the door and the room again became a silent place. He looked around, took a chair, and sat down. "I thought this meeting would be over by now. Sorry I got here so soon."

There was brief laughter and the men in the room relaxed. Ace pulled out his pack of cigarettes, took one out of the pack and asked, "Anybody got a light?"

"Where's that fancy lighter?" Rutledge asked as he tossed over a packet of paper matches. "Keep 'em."

"Thanks," Ace replied. "Some little kid snatched my lighter right off the table and ran down an alley. If I wasn't about a thousand years old, I might have caught him."

"It's about time you retired to an old folks' home, Pappy," said one of the pilots.

Ace fixed his eyes on the pilot, and blew a smoke ring in his direction.

"I was just kidding, Pappy," the pilot said quickly.

Cardoza came through the door and strode quickly to the front of the room. He was dressed in khaki pants and shirt. The khakis were tailored to fit him perfectly. There were no wrinkles. Although he appeared to be in uniform, there was no insignia on his collar.

"Listen up." He spoke in a sharp but not angry voice, a voice accustomed to gaining the attention of men. "The French have not surrendered at Dien Bien Phu. General Castries has been ordered to fight to the end."

"Which may be tonight or tomorrow," chimed in one of the pilots.

"Be that as it may," Cardoza said. "The French want us to fly a mission tomorrow. This will be a load of 155 artillery shells. One plane, that's all."

"That's crazy!" Rutledge cried out. "Do the French even have any 155's left?"

"The French don't have enough of a perimeter left for us to make a drop," Catliff added. "The Viet Minh will have every damned 37 millimeter ack-ack gun they got covering the air space over what's left of the perimeter."

"It makes no difference," Cardoza answered. "Our top people have agreed to go along with the French on this. I need a volunteer, and if I do not get a volunteer, your names will go into a hat, and I'll draw a winner. That's the way it has to be."

Rutledge, his face flushed with anger, rose to his feet. "I don't care if you draw my name from the hat fifty times, I will not fly this mission. It's just damned near suicide. What the French want is for us to join in their stupidity. They want some American blood on the ground."

Cardoza stared at him, but said nothing. Rutledge sat down.

"We've already lost too damned many people flying out there," Catliff said as he looked over at Rutledge and nodded in agreement.

"Are you sure there's no way out of this?" Rogers asked.

"I tried to get the top boys to back off, but I didn't have any luck," Cardoza replied. "This has to be done, and I want to make very clear the fact that you people are under contract. There was some interesting fine print in that contract."

"What, the Company is going to sue us?" one of the pilots shouted.

The remark brought laughter from most of the pilots. Cardoza waited until the laughter subsided. "The people you work for have some interesting ideas about the words 'termination of contract'."

There was silence in the room. Ace looked over at Rogers. He could see that Rogers was thinking, and he guessed that Rogers was about to speak. He spoke first.

"I'll fly it."

Ace's words cut through the silence like a sharp knife. They all stared at him.

"Are you sure?" Cardoza asked.

"Why not?" Ace answered.

"I'll fly co-pilot," Rogers said.

Ace looked at Rogers and shook his head. "Not necessary, Ben. This will be a milk run."

That was the end of the meeting. The pilots left the room as fast as they could and headed for the officers' club. Ben stayed behind for a few minutes. He wanted to argue the point about flying co-pilot, but Ace would not change his mind. "I can handle it by myself."

After Ben left the room, Cardoza sat down in a chair, lit a cigarette, and asked. "Why?"

"It's no big deal," Ace answered. "As long as there are no other planes in the air, I can slip in there, dump the load as close to the perimeter as possible, and get the hell out before the Minh know what's happening."

"I'm glad to hear that," Cardoza said. "I was afraid there for a minute that maybe you were punching a one-way ticket."

Ace laughed. "That's not my style."

Cardoza blew out a smoke ring. "I thought it would be Rogers. You beat him to the punch."

"Yeah, I saw him," Ace said. "He's gotten in the habit of being a little careless in his judgment. He's making too many mistakes."

Cardoza nodded. "I've heard that. Maybe he doesn't care anymore."

"Something like that, I guess," Ace agreed.

"Now I've only got one more problem."

"What's that?"

"I need to find a volunteer to serve as loadmaster for you."

"That's easy," Ace said. "I want Terwilliger for my loadmaster."

"What? Are you serious?"

"Never more serious in my life."

"Terwilliger is in jail. You put him there. His face is still swollen from the beating you gave him. Why in the world would you want Terwilliger?"

"It's simple enough," Ace replied. "Terwilliger's no damned good. If this job tomorrow is as bad as you think, then he's no great loss to the world."

"And if you pull it off, then what? You will have to deal with Terwilliger. He's the kind who won't let it rest. He will come for you."

"I suppose so. If that happens, I'll handle it."

Cardoza chuckled. "That could be a problem, too. If it comes to that, be careful how you handle it. The boys upstairs take a dim view of personal solutions to problems. Now, there is one other thing."

"What's that?"

"Just how do I persuade Terwilliger to leave a nice safe jail cell to go on this mission?"

"That's easy," Ace answered. "Tell him if he flies this job, all charges will be dropped. And, if you need more, tell him I said he's a gutless coward if he doesn't come along."

"Oh, that will add to his fondness for you," Cardoza laughed, "But it will work. You have a good understanding of men. Why is it that you don't have your own command?"

Ace shook his head. "I couldn't run a forty-mile carnival, let alone a circus like this."

Cardoza was puzzled by Ace's words, but then nodded, "I think I understand. Well, I've got a jailbird to talk to. You need to get some rest. And, remember what I said about Terwilliger. He will kill you if he gets the chance."

"Never doubted that for a second," Ace replied as both men walked out the door.

Outside, Cardoza paused, and watched Ace walk away. He knew Ace was a strange man, a hard man who had actually flown in combat back during World War I. He was a man who could ride out to rescue a twelve-year-old Vietnamese damsel in distress. He wondered if Ace had worn a tassel on his helmet back in that old war a long time ago, back during the legendary time, almost a mythical time, when the last of the knights did single combat in planes instead of from horseback.

After an early dinner, Ace decided not to go to the officer's club. He needed to be alone. He returned to his room and lay down on his bunk. He was not particularly upset about the job to be done in the morning. He knew how he was going to carry it out. It would be a matter of flying low and fast and getting in and out before the enemy could react effectively. It had always worked before, and he had no doubt that it would again.

He dozed, sometimes more awake than asleep. It was hot and stuffy in the room. The fan was simply moving hot air from one side of the room to the other. It was not like that back when he and Maggie were at the little airfield near Miami. The evening rains there provided some relief, but not here.

It was at this point that Ace began thinking about Maggie and Sebastian. He seldom allowed himself to go into that part of his mind. The memory of his visit to see them in Miami was not painful, but it inevitably led to one that was always painful. Sebastian was his son, and like his own father, Ace had produced a son who was alone in the world. It was different, of course. Sebastian was not really alone. There was Maggie. She was the one who had given the boy a name and a home and a future. It was Maggie who had broken the circle. He wondered if Maggie would ever tell the boy about his real father, and then shook his head in the dark. That could never be. There was a great secret that had to be kept. That thought made him queasy, and his stomach churned. He had a brief touch of fear. He recovered but only after he softly said aloud, "Damn this world."

As he spoke, he braced himself for what he knew was coming. Angelique came into his mind. That was too painful to bear. He knew that he would cry if the imagery was allowed to continue. As he always did when this particular problem occurred, he forced his mind back to the circus days when he was young and flying the old Wright above fairs and festivals and his cares were light as a feather.

He was in a small, hot, stuffy room, and he could not sleep. He got up and walked outside and left the past behind.

Ace wandered off the base and into the town that had grown up outside the fence. It was early in the night, and there were people in the street and in the shops along both sides of the street. He soon found himself at the same sidewalk café where he had been earlier in the day.

This was a good idea, he told himself. This was a place where a man could buy a glass of tea, or better yet, a reasonably cold beer, which would taste good. There was only one table open, the same table where he had sat earlier.

He sat in the same chair, drank his beer, and fought with the paper matches while trying to light a cigarette. The humidity made the paper almost soggy and the sulfur tip would not strike a light when scratched across the small emery strip on the packet cover.

A Vietnamese woman approached his table. Ace recognized the woman. She was the mother of the girl Terwilliger had beaten.

The woman came up to the table and bowed slightly. She took an object out of a hidden pocket and laid it on the table. It was the lighter, the same lighter that the Countess had given him, and the same lighter that had been stolen in front of his eyes that day.

"Here. Here," she said softly, and then she bowed again, turned, and walked away.

Ace stared at the lighter for a moment, and then picked it up and lit a cigarette. He noted that the flame was stronger than it had been earlier in the day and guessed that the woman had made sure that lighter fluid was added.

He was grateful that the lighter had been returned. He knew that it was the woman's way of thanking him for defending her daughter. He had no idea how she was able to come by the lighter, nor did he spend much time thinking about that aspect.

The lighter had a strange way of always returning to him. When the lighter was taken by the small boy, he had not been overly disturbed by the loss. This is where the lighter

had been made, and maybe it was proper that it be returned to this land. He considered that perhaps he should stay in this strange land with the lighter. He smiled at the thought. Still, he had been here for nearly half a year, and he found the people and the land to be fascinating. It was so entirely different from what he had known in the past, and yet carried echoes of Paris.

* * *

There were clouds in the sky at dawn the next morning but not enough to be a problem. The sky over Dien Bien Phu was at least marginally clear enough for a drop. Ace was the first to arrive on the flight line. He checked the Flying Boxcar and nodded approvingly at the mechanic who held out a clipboard with a paper on it to be signed.

The other pilots drifted in to watch the takeoff. Finally, Cardoza arrived with Terwilliger in tow. Terwilliger was dressed in fatigues with a low-slung belt on which Ace saw a holster with a pearl-handled revolver. Terwilliger was taller than either Ace or Cardoza. He was blond, fair-skinned, and his face seemed permanently set in a scowl, but some of that impression could have been due to the bruises and swollen lip and cheek on the right side of his face.

Ace saw that Cardoza was also armed, which was unusual. He guessed that Cardoza did not want to be around Terwilliger without being armed. As was his custom, Ace wore his gun in a shoulder holster which hung in the open since he was not wearing a coat or a jacket.

As they moved toward the plane, Terwilliger said in a low voice so the others watching could not hear, "When we get back from this, you old son-of-a-bitch, I'm coming after you."

"You do that, Terwilliger," Ace answered. "I'll look forward to it."

Once on the plane, they were separated. Terwilliger was back in the cargo area and Ace was up in the cockpit.

Ace checked the manifest. There were four pallets with parachutes and each pallet held sixteen 155 millimeter artillery shells. That was not a full load. It was a symbolic gesture. He did not know which was worse, the French for wanting this flight, or the Americans who approved it. He had fought in most of the wars in this century, and he was certain that very little had changed, but that was the way it was, and he had his job to perform.

As he guided the plane down the runway and the wheels lifted from the ground, he muttered his usual phrase, "There are no old pilots. There are no old pilots." He repeated the phrase until he was airborne and climbing for altitude. He stopped repeating it, laughed, and then said aloud, "Except for me."

The flight was smooth and routine. Terwilliger kept off the intercom until they neared the besieged position. Ace increased his air speed and at the same time began a quick descent down toward the target area.

Already there were green lines of tracers coming up from fifty-one caliber machine guns below. Bursts of black smoke from anti-aircraft shells exploding appeared on both sides of the plane.

Terwilliger's voice cracked over the intercom. "For Christ's sake, get some goddamned air under this plane, you old fool. We're coming in too goddamned low!"

“Shut up, Terwilliger. You just get ready to do your job when I push the green light.” Ace switched off the intercom. He did not need coaching on how to fly from Terwilliger.

There was a strange sight below that he could see out the side window. There were enemy artillery bursts on the ground. There were red bursts and yellow bursts, and it reminded him of bunches of flowers at first. No, he decided. The colors below were crowds at the circus, and for a brief moment, Ace was sitting out on the wing seat of the old Wright Model B and flying low over the circus crowds.

The 37 millimeter shell hit the thin aluminum skin covering the fuselage, ripped through, and did not explode until it hit a pallet of 155 millimeter artillery shells.

* * *

The dream had come again, and this time, Maggie understood. The bursts of flowers were terrible explosions through which Ace was flying the old Wright Model B plane, which suddenly disappeared, but the yellow and red flames kept flashing through her mind.

She cried out in her sleep, “No! No!” Her cries pulled her out of her dream and she sat up in bed. She knew Ace was dead.

“Mama? Mama? What is wrong?”

It was Sebastian standing at the door to her bedroom. He had heard her cries, even though they were muffled and distorted by the soft boundaries of the dream.

“It’s okay,” she replied. “I just had a bad dream. You should go back to sleep, now.”

Sebastian hesitated and then said, “Maybe I should sit with you for a while?”

“No, I’m okay. You go back to bed. We have a busy day tomorrow.”

“Good night, Mama.” Sebastian said as he turned from the doorway and headed back to his room.

Maggie quickly recovered her balance. Her mind moved from the shock of the dream and the realization that she knew Ace was dead. She began organizing her thoughts into logical processes the way she had always done throughout her life.

Ace was gone. It was his choice of a way to live. The thought would have continued, but the moon over Paris cast a beam through the window and illuminated the picture of Ace. When she saw it logic gave way to soft tears and regrets about the past. Why had she brought that picture with her to Paris? It should have stayed on the wall in her bedroom back in Miami.

The father was dead. He died in Indochina, no, what was it called? Vietnam. She thought of the son. Sebastian must never follow in his father’s footsteps. He must not be sacrificed in some place like Vietnam. Well, that was gone now. Vietnam would disappear into a void and good riddance.

She vowed once again a familiar vow. Sebastian would never know the kind of life his father endured. No, Ace never endured. He somehow floated through life. If he was flying, he was a happy man.

Maggie was sure that she alone knew most about the life of Ace Mathews. Only she knew that his name was Delmar and not Ace. She had actually seen the rural area in Illinois where Ace was born. She had visited the orphanage where he spent his childhood years.

Chapter 3

Clark County, Illinois, 1916

Miss Castor sat behind her wooden desk in the small room that served as her office. She was in charge of running the county orphanage which had been built as part of the reform surge following the war and the arrival of Teddy Roosevelt in the White House. She was the first and only director of the orphanage, and over the years she had been able to successfully cope with the county board of supervisors, although the board members made no secret of their belief that she lacked a proper understanding of the rod and the child and which one to spare. The board members, however, did appreciate that the orphanage accounts were always in order and discipline problems were few and of a not very serious nature, despite Miss Castor's lenient policies.

Today was a different matter. The board was taking a step that Miss Castor found disgraceful, and she had briefly considered resigning her position over the issue. She did not push the matter to such a conclusion, however. She knew she would be replaced by someone who might not have the interests of the children firmly locked into his or her heart.

She glanced down at the two sheets of paper on her otherwise clean desk. She did not have to read the brief document. She would always remember it. The document and a copy said that Delmar Mathews, age sixteen, was to be given over to the custody of Mr. and Mrs. Farmer Jones until Delmar Mathews turned twenty-one. Mr. and Mrs. Jones were to provide a proper home for Delmar Mathews and make certain that he finished high school, if that was possible. What the document and the underlying copy did not show in black and white was that Farmer and his wife, Daisy, could use the labor of the boy at no cost to themselves except for whatever he might eat or wear. This was a normal procedure that had been followed since the orphanage was opened. At the age of sixteen, both boys and girls were boarded out to proper families in the area. The boys became farm hands and the girls became house maids, and in some cases, did actual farm work such as milking and feeding cows. Miss Castor regarded the policy as being little short of an institutional form of indentured servitude. The board members thought otherwise. They saw the policy as a way to introduce the orphanage children into society and as a way to provide the children with a home atmosphere. Miss Castor had good reason to believe that the board members were also very happy about moving the children out at sixteen because it meant fewer mouths for the county to feed.

Over the years, Miss Castor had carried out the board's policy faithfully and without protest, although not without commentary about the policy, but always in theory and never in actual cases. This time, there were problems. First of all, there was the very serious problem concerning the boy's age. He was not yet sixteen. He was born February 23, 1901. Since this sad day was May 14th, 1916, Delmar Mathews was nearly a year away from being old enough to be put out with a family. It might have seemed a small matter to some, and it certainly seemed that way to the board members, but it was very important to Miss Castor. In all her time as a public servant, she had never signed a legal county document that she knew was false.

Another matter weighed upon her. When Delmar had arrived at the orphanage shortly after his birth, he was the orphanage's first newborn child. Miss Castor was single. Moreover, it was likely that she would forever be single and would never have a child of her own. She was aware that she was not young, nor had she been young for quite a few years. Marriage had once been possible. Not long after the death of her mother and father, she had become somewhat involved with the history teacher at the high school. He was an eligible bachelor, and people who knew her hoped that she would be married. When the war came, he developed a strong patriotic fever and volunteered to serve in the army, even though he was thirty-one years old. He served in Cuba where he died of food poisoning caused by eating tainted meat that had been canned in Chicago. He had seemed to Miss Castor to be a lonely man. He had no family. He wanted to be a poet, and had penned an epic poem about the Civil War. She had the manuscript and her memory of him and nothing else. She knew that he regretted not having a son to carry on his family name.

While she was careful to be fair to all her charges, she did find ways to be more than Delmar's custodial guardian. When the boy was eleven, she managed to take him on a day long outing to the county fair. They ascended in a tethered balloon even though the tickets cost a dollar a piece. When the balloon reached its allowed height, Delmar appeared to be completely unafraid. His blue-green eyes shined brightly with excitement. He suddenly shouted, "I am alive!" She responded by saying, "Of course you are." Since that time, she had wondered about what he had meant by his strange outburst. She remembered that he had hugged her and that for a moment, she wanted to hold him forever, and it had been with great difficulty that she kept the tears from coming to her eyes. Even now, the memory of that occasion caused a lump in her throat. As she reached to her belt for her handkerchief, there was a knock at the door.

Miss Castor cleared her throat, adjusted her glasses, sat upright in her chair, and said in a strong and clear voice, "Come in."

The door opened and Farmer and Daisy Jones in came. Miss Castor pointed to the straight, wooden chairs in front of her desk and said, "Please sit down."

Miss Castor peered over her glasses at them, and she was not reassured by what she saw. Farmer was a weak man, both physically and in character. His shoulders had a definite slope. His head was narrow and his eyes close set. There was not a sign of good humor in his eyes. Daisy Jones was a pleasant appearing woman, younger by several years than her husband. She seemed nervous and kept glancing sideways at Farmer.

"Before we turn Delmar over to you, there are a few points that I want to cover. First of all, there is the matter of the boy's education. He has finished his sophomore year in high school. Since he is still fifteen, he must be enrolled in school next fall."

"Now, wait a minute here," Jones said. "The certificate says he's sixteen. As I understand the law, a boy don't have to go to school after he's sixteen."

"Delmar Mathews is not sixteen. He was born February 23, 1901. He will not be sixteen until next February," Miss Castor said firmly. "The document has a slight error."

"Seems slight enough to me," Jones replied, and then to his wife, "Your brother know about this?"

Daisy shrugged her shoulders as if to say that she had no idea what her brother knew. Miss Castor looked up at the ceiling, a way to hide her thoughts from the pair opposite her. Daisy's response was ridiculous. Of course her brother knew. He was the board of supervisors' member who had pushed this matter forward, obviously as a favor to his sister. It was May and Farmer needed help in the fields. Miss Castor then looked directly at Farmer and smiled.

"It is a matter that has already been taken care of," she said. "I have notified the school board that Delmar is to be enrolled this fall for his third year of high school. If he does not attend school, he will be considered a truant, and the sheriff will be notified."

"You didn't have to do that!" Farmer said angrily.

"Oh, yes. It is the law. We must report any change of address in the case of children enrolled in school. Now, there is another matter that needs to be clarified."

"What's that?" Farmer asked, barely able to suppress his anger.

"There is reason to be concerned about your relationship to the boy," Miss Castor said.

"What relationship?" Farmer's eyes narrowed and he cocked his head slightly to the left.

"You were one of the men who testified at the paternity trial. According to your testimony, you were among the men in the area who had an illegal relationship with Delmar Mathews' mother. It is possible that you are the father of Delmar Mathews."

"Now, just a goddamned minute!" Farmer was on his feet, his face red, and a bony finger cocked and pointed at Miss Castor. "You got no right to bring up that business. I didn't father that god-damned bastard. I stood up in court and said what I did because that woman's family brought in a Jew lawyer out of Chicago. They were going to pin it on Hank Sloan. He comes from one of the best families we got in this area. We weren't going to let that happen."

Miss Castor did not approve of the use of curse words, and she especially did not like the word, bastard, but she did not reprimand Farmer for his use of such words. Instead, she asked, "Then, you gave false testimony in a court of law?"

"I said what I said," Farmer answered as he sat down and crossed his arms, assuming an uneasy, but defiant position that seemed best under the circumstances. He felt cornered by this woman opposite him. He was afraid that she might have some clever way of making life very painful for him. Perhaps hoping to distract or guide this woman away from more painful areas of discussion, he asked:

"How did the boy get the name, Mathews?"

This was a question Miss Castor had asked herself. There was no clear answer. She had seen the birth certificate. The father's name had carried the unfortunate word *unknown*, but, someone had scratched out the handwritten word and penned in above it

the name, Mathews. That was most irregular, but sometimes irregular things happened in the courthouse. Too often, perhaps.

"I have no knowledge concerning his last name," replied Miss Castor. "Nor is it of any concern regarding this matter of custody and the..."

"Please!" Daisy interrupted as she stood up, clutching her purse tightly with both hands as if it were a safety rope. "Please, I know some of this don't look good, but we can give the boy a good home. I've always wanted a child, but it turned out that we couldn't have children. It's my fault, I'm sure. But I know I can be a good mother for him, and my husband has his good points. Please. Can't we just get over what was past and try harder in the future?" Daisy ended her plea and sat down. She pulled a handkerchief from her purse and dabbed the tears from her eyes.

There was silence in the room as both Miss Castor and Farmer recovered from their surprise at Daisy's outburst. Miss Castor cleared her throat and then spoke. "Yes, I believe we have come to the point of decision."

"I thought the board had already decided," Farmer said. There was a hint of slyness in the tone of his voice. He was winning this battle, and he knew it.

"Indeed, so it seems," responded Miss Castor as she rose from her chair. "I will go fetch Delmar. It will only take a minute." She walked to the door and left the room.

Delmar was waiting in the entry hall. He was seated on a bench and at his feet was a cardboard box that almost looked like a suitcase. The box was bound shut by two bands of twine. Another band of twine was lashed at both ends to the bands that held the box closed, thus forming a handle.

He rose to his feet and held his cap in his hand when Miss Castor entered the hall and moved to within an arm's reach of him.

"I see you are packed and ready to leave." As she spoke, she noticed for the first time that Delmar was no longer a boy. He was almost a man. He was just two inches shy of being six feet tall. He had dark, curly hair. He weighed nearly one hundred-forty pounds. But his face was still that of a boy, round and full of innocence, and yet, the innocence was immediately brought into question by his two greenish-blue eyes which printed his inner thoughts for all to see.

"Yes, Ma'am," he replied. He started to speak on, but paused. He appeared confused.

"What is it, Delmar?" she asked softly.

"Do I really have to go? This place is my home. Why do I need to be with a family?"

It took all of Miss Castor's self control to keep from bursting out in tears. She could feel the sobs forming in her heart and working their way up.

"Yes, Delmar. You are almost a man now. It is time for you to leave." She paused and tried to smile. "You will like being out in the country. I'm sure the work will be hard, but you are no stranger to hard work. Of course, I hope that you will come back to see us from time to time. After all, it's not like you are moving to another state."

Delmar nodded, and she continued. "I think it is time for us to say goodbye. Goodbye, Delmar."

"Goodbye, Miss Castor."

They stood facing each other, neither seeing the pain in the other person's eyes because of that pain each felt. She wanted to throw her arms around him and hug him, but she did not. Instead, she extended her hand and he very carefully took it in his and their clasped hands moved slightly up and down three times.

After it was all over, Miss Castor returned to her office. She locked the door and then sat down behind her desk. She sat upright as if preparing to do something very important. Her mind was filled with confusing thoughts. How had she missed it? She had always thought of Delmar as a little boy, but now she knew that he was almost a man. She resolved the problem by shutting out reality, which for Miss Castor was most unusual. Delmar would always be a little boy, her little boy. Then an errant thought wandered through her mind. She wondered how many hearts her little boy would break when he became a man.

She put her arms atop the desk, laid her head down on her arms, and wept.

Chapter 4

Life on the farm could almost have been a pleasant time for Delmar. There were the animals, the cows, the horses, and a dog. The dog was a short-haired mutt who was not very friendly to most people, and who obeyed Farmer, but reluctantly so, and that much only to avoid being kicked or cuffed. The dog and Delmar quickly became the best of friends.

There was a calf which was being fed up for slaughter later in the year when the weather was right. Of all the animals, the calf was Delmar's favorite. Daisy once remarked that the calf would follow Delmar like a dog. Farmer took notice of the fact that Delmar was fond of the calf.

What Delmar missed most was the laughter and fun of being with the people at the orphanage. Miss Castor had encouraged her charges to spend a proper amount of time at play. It was one of those strange ideas she had which irritated the members of the board of supervisors. The only time Delmar heard Farmer laugh was one night at supper. He explained why he was named Farmer. "My daddy wanted me to be a farmer, so when I was born, he named me Farmer, and then he gave me this farm to make sure he got his way."

Farmer laughed. Daisy followed with, as she always did after he told the story, which was often, "And, that's the truth." Farmer wished she would not do that, although he never brought the matter up for discussion. He thought her statement somehow brought into question his ability to tell the truth.

Delmar had no complaints about his living conditions. Unlike at the orphanage, he had his own bedroom. It was small, but it had a window by the bed. The bedrooms were on the second floor of the house. Delmar's room was down the hall past the room used by Farmer and Daisy.

There was even a moment when Delmar thought things might work out, and his life with his new family might be tolerable after all. One night not long after he had arrived, there was a storm, and the vane on the windmill was loosened by the wind. It hung down in a position that prevented it from keeping the blades pointed toward the wind. Farmer studied the problem. It was obvious that the bolts holding the vane in place had come

loose and needed tightening. The windmill was atop a thirty-six foot tower, and Farmer was not eager to climb up the steel rungs that led to the small platform to which the windmill was anchored. He called for Delmar.

"Boy, you afraid of heights?"

"No, sir, I'm not," answered Delmar.

"Well, I need you to climb up to that platform and fix that vane. All you have to do is tighten the nuts on the bolts that hold that vane tight. Be sure you got the vane in the right position, though, before you do the tightening up. Think you can do that?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, the people at the orphanage said you were handy with tools."

Delmar found the right wrench for the job in the cluttered tool shed, and began his climb to the platform above. He climbed quickly and easily. Each rung reached seemed to lighten the weight he felt upon his shoulders. After he reached the top and fixed the vane, he stood on the platform and gazed out over the countryside. He remembered going up in the balloon and how good it felt. He wanted to spread his arms and fly.

"You going to come down, or spend the day up there loafing?" Farmer yelled from down below.

At supper that night, Daisy served raisin pie for dessert. She gave Delmar a generous piece of the pie, saying as she did so, "You did good work fixing the windmill. We'd of had to hire someone in to do that job."

Farmer said nothing, but he took note of the fact that he did not get as large a piece of pie as well as the insinuation that he could not do the job.

The corn came up and it was soon time to cultivate the fields. This meant long and hot days of drudgery for man and beast alike. A team of horses pulled the two-row cultivator with its two sets of small plows, one for each row. Farmer rode the cultivator, being careful to keep the plows in the rows between the corn plants. Delmar walked behind with a hoe to chop out whatever the cultivator missed. This particular field was forty acres square which meant that the rows were a quarter mile long. At the west end of the field there was a tall hedge line which provided shade in the afternoon.

Farmer guided the horses close to the hedge where they could rest and cool out in the shade. He remained in the seat on the cultivator. Delmar sat down on the ground.

Farmer pushed back his straw hat and wiped his forearm across his forehead, leaving a faint dirty streak just above his eyebrows.

"Boy, I've been wondering how you came by the name of Mathews? I don't know of anybody around here with the family name of Mathews."

"I don't know," replied Delmar. "They told me at the orphanage that my name was Mathews, so I guess that's what it is."

"Did you ever know your mother?"

"No, I didn't. I guess the orphanage was my father and mother."

"I knew your mother," Farmer said. He smiled as he spoke, but it looked more like a sneer, and Delmar sensed what was coming next. "I knew your mother real good. Hell, half the men in town knew your mother."

Farmer was surprised at the way the boy responded. All he did was look down at the ground and using a finger, traced circles in the dirt. For Delmar, there had been times like this when he was in the early years of school. Then, he had put a stop to it by using his fists. He did not look for fights, but he did not shrink from them, either. Whatever the

other boys might say behind his back was their problem, but when they said something to his face, that was his problem. They soon learned which option did not lead to a bloody nose or a black eye. Now, this was different. He had never faced this situation with an older person. He turned his head so he could look up at Farmer. The man was a weakling. He had no doubt that in a fight, he would beat Farmer, but, then what would happen?

"What're you thinking, boy?" Farmer asked. There was just a touch of fear in his voice. His hand reached for the small buggy whip that he kept in a socket on the cultivator.

"Nothing," Delmar answered.

"That's about what I'd expect from someone like you. Well, enough of this loafing about. We got corn to plow."

Nearly two weeks passed. Delmar did not think in terms of weeks, though. For him, one day followed another. He had one fairly reliable benchmark, however. On Sundays, Daisy complained because Farmer would not hitch up the wagon and take them to church. Farmer's response was always that it was only three miles to town, and if she and the boy felt the need for going to church bad enough, they'd have no trouble making the trip on foot.

The day after that particular church day, Farmer announced at breakfast that they were going to butcher the calf tomorrow. Delmar was stunned. Daisy protested. "You can't butcher now. The meat will taint before we can do anything with it. We should wait till fall when the weather is cooler."

"There ain't no sense arguing about it. I've made up my mind. Tom Hagar is coming over to help. He's a strong man and knows a thing or two about butchering."

"What'll we do with all that meat?" Daisy asked.

"That's easy enough," Farmer replied. "You can boil a lot of it and can it. Then, I've promised Hagar a quarter for his help. The rest we'll load on the wagon and take it to town and sell it to the butcher. He said he'd give me a good price, if the meat's in good shape."

"Hot as it is, that meat will taint before you ever get it to town," Daisy said.

Delmar pushed his chair back from the table, got up and left the kitchen, going out the screen door and down the steps from the porch. He said nothing, not even the polite "excuse me" that he had been taught to say when he lived at the orphanage.

"What's got into him?" Farmer asked, his eyes looking up at the ceiling.

"You know very well what's got into him," Daisy replied. There was more anger in her voice than Farmer had ever heard in all the time they had been married. "You know," Daisy continued, "He's fond of that calf. Butchering it will be hard for him to deal with. Why do you go out of your way to pick at him? He's a good boy."

"For a bastard, maybe," Farmer said. "He's got to learn that farm animals are not pets."

Daisy got up from her chair. "I wonder if you're just butchering that calf as a way to hurt Delmar. My brother said you would never amount to much, and I did not mind that. What he didn't tell me was that you have a terrible mean streak in you!" She hurried out of the room and headed for the stairs leading up to the bedrooms.

Farmer continued to eat his breakfast, and after he finished the food on his plate, he scraped what was left uneaten on Delmar's plate onto his plate and continued eating.

Tom Hagar drove his team and wagon into Farmer's barn lot at dawn the next morning. He had long poles, rope and a pulley in the wagon. There was a pile of short stakes, about two feet long. One end of the stakes was sharpened. Farmer, Delmar, and Hagar began putting the tripod together. It did not take long to finish this part of the job. The stakes held the three long poles in place. There were several stakes left over, and Delmar moved them to one side.

"Works better with hogs," Hagar said, "But that calf's not much bigger than an old hog."

Farmer gave Delmar a short length of rope that had a noose at one end. "Boy, you bring the calf out here. It'll follow you easier than it would me."

Delmar took the rope and opened the gate. The calf quickly came up to him. Delmar slipped the noose over the calf's head and led the animal through the gate and out into the barn lot.

When he got close to the tripod, Farmer said, "That's good enough."

Hagar nodded approval and then said, "That calf's taken quite a shine to the boy."

Farmer picked up the sledge hammer that they had used to drive the stakes in the ground and approached the calf. "Keep a strong hold on that rope, boy."

It was suddenly clear to Delmar what was about to happen. He thought he would throw up. He swallowed hard to keep the bile out of his mouth.

"That sledge hammer's kind of light for this job," Hagar said.

"I know what I'm doing. One good hit and it'll be over," Farmer replied sharply.

He swung the sledge hammer with all his strength, but it was a glancing blow to the calf's head. The calf screamed. Its front legs buckled and it dropped to its knees. The sound of the hammer hitting the calf's head reverberated through Delmar's mind.

"Damn!" Farmer swore as he launched another strike at the calf. The calf screamed again, and then turned its head and looked through pain-fogged eyes at Delmar, who had turned pale white, shocked into a state of being unable to react. Farmer swung the sledge hammer again, but still the calf would not die.

Tom Hagar had seen enough. He ran to his wagon and got a rifle from under the seat and hurried back, cocking the weapon as he ran.

Delmar suddenly came out of his shock. He dropped the rope and pointed at Farmer and screamed,, "Shoot him first!"

For a second, it seemed as if Hagar hesitated. Then he ran up to the calf and shot it in the head, finally putting the calf out of its torment. The two men and the boy stared at each other for a few seconds, and then Farmer broke the spell. He threw down the sledge hammer and picked up one of the unused stakes and started towards Delmar. "Shoot me first? By god, you little bastard, I'll teach you some manners."

"Hold on there," Hagar said, as he stepped between the man and the boy. "You can settle out this family business later. We got to get this job done. I don't want to lose any of my hind quarter to the taint."

Farmer stopped short, "Hind quarter? I thought we'd agreed that you was to get a front quarter."

The next morning as Farmer walked from the barn to the house, he thought about how the day before had turned out. Hagar had his way on the hind quarter, and the butcher didn't pay near as much as he had promised, but still, all in all, it had been a reasonably profitable day. Then he saw the boy standing by the fence where the calf had been kept.

The boy seemed to be staring at the empty pen. The dog sat on his haunches by the boy. Farmer said nothing and kept walking. Let him sulk, Farmer thought. Soon enough he'll have a real enough reason to sulk.

When he entered the kitchen, Daisy was busy stirring a pot on the cook stove. "You know," he said, "I don't think that old dog is worth much. Don't think he's caught a rat this year."

Daisy did not turn around. She kept stirring the pot as she answered, "You better let up on Delmar. You've got no call to be so mean to him."

"I'm not being mean to him," Farmer protested. "It's you who are trying to spoil him."

Daisy stirred the pot with considerable vigor as she replied, "Its Saturday. The county fair starts today and runs through Sunday next. We could make it up a little to Delmar if we took him to the fair."

"That'd be a waste of money," Farmer said. "On the other hand, maybe if we took him to the fair, we could sell him to a freak show. Damn! Maybe we could turn a profit out of the boy."

"You don't need to be cursing here in the kitchen," she replied.

"I'm going back out to the barn," Farmer said.

The next day was spent in silence. Delmar kept his distance, mostly spending time at the fence as if he could wish the calf back to life. Daisy did very little cooking. The beef set aside for her to can spoiled and had to be buried. Farmer spent most of his time in the barn working on a piece of harness.

The silence was broken toward evening of the next day. Delmar was maintaining his vigil at the fence. Farmer approached him, his head a little bowed, and a look of contrition clumsily spread across his narrow face.

"I need your help," Farmer said, and then added, "Delmar,"

Surprised by the use of his name instead of the usual, boy, Delmar turned and asked cautiously, "To do what?"

"Nothing much. There's an old push cultivator in the tool shed. It's caught under some junk. I thought we could get it out and you could fix it up, you being handy with tools and such. My wife could use it in the garden. It would make her work easier."

Delmar nodded yes and followed Farmer to the tool shed. There was only one window in the shed, and it was dirty. Not much light came in from the window, and even with the door open, it was still dark.

"Down there, see it?" Farmer asked.

Delmar leaned over and thought he saw part of the cultivator's wheel sticking out from under a pile of junk.

"You'll probably have to get down there on your hands and knees and pull it free." Farmer said. "I'll try to push some of the junk back."

Delmar got down on his knees and bent forward. He had both hands on the wheel and was pulling when the first blow came across his back and knocked him flat on the floor.

"Now, you god damned bastard, you're going to get what you've got coming!" Farmer yelled. He raised the heavy piece of harness with metal studs in the end over his head and brought it down again across Delmar's back. Four more times Farmer laid on with the harness before Delmar could struggle to his feet.

In a panic to get away, Delmar shoved Farmer back and staggered out the door. Farmer ran after him and got in one more blow that landed on Delmar's shoulder.

Delmar headed toward the house and Farmer suddenly realized that his plan had a flaw. His wife would guess what had happened if she saw the welts on the boy's back. "Damn!" he gasped, still short of breath from his exertions.

Farmer soon learned that his concern was justified. When Delmar entered the kitchen, Daisy saw that he was pale and that his shirt was ripped. She could see the spots of blood. She made him sit down, and then she helped him take off his shirt. She cried out when she saw the welts and the cuts made by the studs. She gently cleaned the blood from his back, and then spread a salve on the welts. She then moved around to face him.

"Try not to hate us," she said. She reached out and touched his cheek. Delmar did not flinch or pull away.

"I don't hate you," he said.

"I pray not. Now, go up to your room and lie down and rest. You will be safe there."

Delmar got up and started toward his room. He turned and looked at Daisy. "Thank you for trying to help me."

Daisy was on the porch waiting as Farmer approached the house. She was determined that he was not going to be allowed in his own house until certain promises were made. Not only that, if necessary, she would walk to town and bring that woman, Miss Castor, back to see what had happened. There was even the possibility that she might go to see the sheriff about the matter. And, for a certainty, she would have a long talk with her brother.

Farmer was in a bad position and he knew it. He had not considered what would happen after he whipped Delmar. Somehow, in his anger at the boy, he did not calculate how Daisy would react. He was not worried about the sheriff. It was not against the law to give a boy a few good licks. But he was very concerned about that woman. She knew how to make trouble for a person. Above all else, he did not want to get cross-ways with Daisy's brother. He wondered if Tom Hagar had told him about the butchering of the calf.

He was also worried about Daisy. Since that boy came to live with them, she had not been the same. She had always been like a little mouse, but now she was different. She had never threatened him before. She had never spoken in harsh tones to him. It seemed clear enough to Farmer that the boy must have some power over women. How else could his wife's strange behavior be explained?

The first of all the promises Farmer had to agree to was the county fair. They would go to the county fair on Saturday, and Delmar would be given five dollars to spend however he wished. Farmer did not argue about the money. He hoped that it would come from egg money which Daisy kept. The money had been in a bowl up on a shelf, but when he checked the bowl, the money was gone. She had actually hidden the egg money from him. She had never done a thing like that before.

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The night before the trip to town and the county fair, Delmar laid on his stomach, his head turned sideways so he could look out the window. He had thought long and hard about the county fair. Miss Castor had taken him to such an event when he was younger. He knew there were young men, even boys, who worked for the circus that came to town

during the fair. When he was a small boy at the orphanage, one of the older boys had run away with just such a circus. His mind was made up. It must be done.

It was a perfect day to go to a fair. The sky was clear and there was a light breeze that softened the early morning heat of a mid-summer day. Better yet, Farmer did not even try to fudge his way out of his promise to Daisy. He never once referred to Delmar as boy.

On the way to town, they saw what appeared to be a large bird off in the distance. Then Delmar shouted, "It's a flying machine!"

"It is. It is," said Farmer. "I can see the man driving the thing." Farmer was so excited he almost steered the horses off the road.

Daisy added, "My brother said there was going to be some kind of a flying show this year."

When they got to the fairgrounds and had taken care of the horses, Farmer opened his leather purse and pulled out five one dollar bills and handed the money to Delmar. Daisy watched and smiled

"Go have some fun, Delmar. We'll meet back here about four o'clock. The animals will need taking care of by the time we get home."

For the first time in his life, Delmar was by himself and he had five dollars in his pocket. He wandered up and down the rows of smaller tents that housed the games of chance and palm readers. He took notice of the signs in front of one of the larger tents which promised that inside, and for only ten cents, were the strange marvels of the world. There was another tent about the same size with signs that promised a different kind of marvel, dancing girls from all parts of the world.

The sights and the smells of the circus made him giddy. He passed a tent which was actually a place where food was sold, a place where people could sit down on round stools and eat at a counter. He would have to try some of the food. He had never smelled food like that before.

After about an hour of wandering around the grounds, he came upon a wagon that was enclosed with wood paneling and even had a door and a window. The sides were painted bright red and plastered with posters advertising the circus. Standing close to the wagon were two men. The taller of the men wore a cowboy hat and a large handkerchief tied around his neck. The other man was dressed in boots, whipcord pants, and a gaudy yellow shirt that had straps on the shoulders.

"Pardon me," Delmar said politely. "I'm looking for the man who runs this circus."

The taller of the two men pushed his cowboy hat back on his head, smiled, and said, "Well, now, young man, you have found him. My name is Mr. Basham, and I run this show." He pointed at the other man and said, "This here's Mr. John Griggs. He's the pilot who flies that bundle of sticks and fence wire around over our heads. Now, what can I do for you?"

"I want to join the circus," Delmar said.

"Do you, now?" Basham laughed and then, turning to Griggs, "It's been an average week at that. This is the fourth farm boy who wants to run away from home and join the circus."

"I'm not a boy," Delmar said.

"He's right about that, Basham," Griggs laughed. "He looks nearly full-grown to me."

"No," Basham disagreed. "Look at his face. He can't be more than thirteen or fourteen at the most. Big for his age though, I'll grant you that."

"I can do a man's work," Delmar said.

Basham agreed, "You farm boys are good workers. There's no doubt about that. But, what are your folks going to think if you run off with the circus?"

"I haven't got any folks. I grew up in the orphanage and was sent to live with a farm family."

"They treat you well?" asked Griggs.

"I guess so."

Basham reached out and put a friendly hand on Delmar's shoulder, saying as he did so, "Well, I don't," and then stopped when Delmar flinched and his face turned pale. "What's this all about?" he continued. "You trying to pass off damaged goods on me? What's wrong with your shoulder? You got a bad back?"

"No, sir," Delmar answered. "It's just a little sore."

Griggs moved quickly behind Delmar and pulled up his shirt, exclaiming angrily at what he saw, "Basham, look at this! This young man has been badly beaten. Looks like someone used a heavy belt of some kind, a belt with metal brads in it, if I'm any judge."

Basham stepped around Delmar so he could see what had so upset Griggs. When he saw Delmar's back, he looked at Griggs and said, "If we can find whoever did this, I've got a buggy whip that will be just right to teach him a good lesson."

As he gently lowered Delmar's shirt, Griggs said, "You know, Basham, I've been thinking. My business is pretty good. I could use a helper." He turned to Delmar and asked, "Do you think you would be afraid of flying?"

"Oh, no, sir. I went up in a balloon once. Of course, it was tethered so we didn't go anywhere. But, I was not afraid. I thought it was the grandest moment in my life."

"That's settled then," Griggs said. "I'll hire you, but only after we see how you do up in an airplane. If you don't get too airsick or get too scared, you're hired."

"When do we fly?" asked Delmar.

"No time like the present. The weather's fine, and it's time we reminded the local citizenry that the circus is still in town."

Griggs used a pasture just on the other side of the race track. Delmar could see what Basham meant when he had called the airplane a crate made from sticks and fence wire. It was not a very large machine, and he could not quite figure out where they were going to sit.

"It's kind of like sitting in a chair on the edge of the porch," Griggs said as he checked out the craft. "You better leave your hat here on this chest. The wind'll take it right off your head." He fished around in another chest and pulled out a set of goggles. "Here, take these. They will keep the wind out of your eyes. Otherwise, you will be flying with your eyes closed."

In a matter of minutes, they were strapped into their side-by-side seats. The airplane roared across the pasture and then they were up in the air. Griggs looked over to see how Delmar was reacting to the experience. The young man was excited, but not frightened. His hands were resting lightly on the bar in front of his seat. As they circled the town below, Griggs noticed that Delmar was not looking out over the countryside, but instead was focusing his attention on the movements Griggs made in keeping the plane level and banking into turns or climbing to gain altitude. It was obvious that Delmar was watching and learning. "This kid might be a natural," Griggs thought. An idea began forming in his mind.

After they landed, Griggs asked, "Well, what do you think? Did you enjoy the ride?"

"I'm not sure I know what you mean about enjoy," Delmar said. "But I felt alive, I felt free. There must not be anything as good as flying."

Griggs laughed. "That's the way I felt the first time, and every time I go up. I think you might be a natural born flier. Tell you what. You go take care of your affairs. We break up the circus tonight starting at midnight. You be here by dawn tomorrow and you've got a job. How's that suit you?"

"I'll be here," Delmar said firmly.

By four o'clock Delmar was back at the wagon and had the horses hitched up. Farmer and Daisy joined him. "We didn't see you all day," Daisy said. Her tone of voice was light, but there was an unspoken question in her troubled eyes.

On the trip back to the farm, she asked, "Did you have a good time?"

Delmar smiled at her, "Yes, Ma'am. I got to go up in the airplane."

"Now I know where my five dollars went," Farmer said.

"Weren't you scared?" Daisy asked.

"No Ma'am."

"I would have been terrified," Daisy said, and then added wistfully, "I guess some people are just meant to do exciting things and others are not."

That night Delmar lay awake in his bed and waited. He was dressed and he had already packed his belongings in the cardboard box he had used when he left the orphanage. He heard the clock downstairs chime twelve times at midnight, and then once an hour later. When the clock chimed two times, he got up from the bed. He carried the box by the strings in one hand and his shoes in the other.

He slipped down the hall, pausing briefly to look into the darkened bedroom used by Farmer and Daisy. The door was open, and he could hear Farmer snoring. He went down the stairs, being careful to step over the second stair from the top because it squeaked loudly whenever anyone stepped on it.

He entered the kitchen and found Daisy standing there in her nightgown. She came up to him and whispered, "Take this with you, Delmar. It's not much." Then she reached up with both hands and gently pulled his head down and kissed him on his forehead.

He could feel the wetness on her face and guessed that she had been crying.

"I.."

He started to speak, but she put a finger to his lips.

"Go now," she whispered. "Remember me kindly."

She turned to the side and unblocked the way to the back door. He hesitated for a second and then walked out the door. "Goodbye, my child," she whispered, but he did not hear her.

The dog was happy to see Delmar. With tail wagging, the dog received a brief scratching behind his ears. The dog followed him out the front gate and for about a quarter mile down the road. Then the dog stopped, sat on its haunches, and watched as Delmar faded into the night.

Chapter 5

After they had set up their operation at the next county fair, Griggs took Delmar on a detailed examination of the airplane. "This is a 1911 Wright Model B," he explained. "It's what they call a pusher type aircraft. There's two propellers behind the engine. It didn't come to me that way, but I added the second propeller. Works better with two. The navy's got one that's similar, except I've heard that they're trying to put the propellers on the front instead of behind. We can fly about a hundred miles or so before having to come down and refuel." Griggs looked at Delmar and asked, "What's the fastest you ever traveled?"

"Not much more than when I run," Delmar replied. "Once, the farmer I lived with got mad and whipped up the team of horses pulling the wagon. I was afraid the wagon would tip over."

"Well when you were up in the air with me, you were cruising along at about forty miles an hour."

Delmar was surprised. "It seemed like we were barely moving."

"That's the way it is with flying. When you look down, it seems like it is the ground that is moving and not the airplane," Griggs said. "Oh, I almost forgot. We never settled on the terms of your employment. How about if I pay you ten, no, make that twelve dollars a week?"

"Twelve dollars a week!" Delmar exclaimed.

"Well, I can't really go more than that."

"I wasn't complaining," Delmar said quickly.

"That's as much as most men make if they have a good job."

"True enough," Griggs agreed. "You'll earn it though. And, every time I go up, I have to pay two men twenty-five cents each to wind the propellers. I usually go up five or six times a day. With you working for me, I'll only need one roustabout from the circus. It won't take you but a few minutes to learn how to wind the propeller."

"When I learn that, will you teach me to fly?"

"I thought you would want that. Sure, I will, but there is one problem."

"What's that?" asked Delmar.

"When I bought this airplane, I got it at a junk sale. The army had originally bought it, flew it twice and wrecked it. The army was going to use it as a trainer and had a control stick in front of both seats. I took out the controls in front of the passenger seat because I knew I would be taking people up for rides, and I didn't want them to get scared and grab the stick and cause us to crash."

"You wouldn't have to worry about me."

Griggs laughed. "No, I think not. You've proved that you are not afraid to fly. But, to teach you, we would have to go over every detail with my telling you on the ground or showing you, step by step, when we are in the air. Then will come a day when you will have to sit in my seat and, I will be in your seat. I can coach you, but it is you who will have to take the airplane up, and then land it. And, God help us if you panic or forget what you're supposed to do when we come in for the landing."

"When can we start?" Delmar asked eagerly.

“Soon,” Griggs promised. “Very soon.”

Circus life for Delmar was an amazing experience. He worked hard, but Griggs was an easy taskmaster. The airplane was pushed under a canvas canopy that served as a hangar and was but a few steps from the tent used for an office as well as living quarters. Griggs found a second cot to put in the tent. He also found a small trunk where Delmar could keep his personal possessions. The trunk had a lock. For the first time in his life, he had a truly private place. The trunk was also a handy place to sit.

As Griggs had explained it to him, the circus took care of all their wants and needs. They ate at the circus food tent, washed up at the circus wash tent, and had their laundry done by women who also worked for the circus. When the circus moved, roustabouts packed up the tent, the canopy, and the trunks and loaded them on a wagon to be taken to a train, or for a short haul, to the next fairgrounds. In exchange, Griggs flew three air shows a day, usually at ten, noon and two o'clock. When weather permitted, he flew over the town or city where the fair was going to be held a day in advance, and dropped leaflets from a low altitude. The arrangement between the pilot and the circus was strictly on a barter basis.

For Griggs, his money came from people who wanted to go up in an airplane. He charged five dollars for about ten minutes aloft. On a good day, there might be as many as five or six brave souls wanting to go up and in possession of the required five dollars. Once, he was asked by county officials to go up and look for a fugitive from the law. He agreed to do so, but for fifty dollars cash in advance. The county officials decided to stay with their old methods.

On the fourth day after Delmar had begun working for Griggs, they ate breakfast at the food tent as usual, but afterward, Griggs said he had some business to take care of with Basham. Delmar could go back and start making the airplane ready for the day's work. Griggs did not go into detail about why he wanted to talk to Basham, which was unusual. Griggs made a point of telling Delmar as much as he could think to tell, but this matter was probably best kept between himself and Basham. They were only about sixty miles west of Delmar's home county. Griggs wanted to know if there had been any inquiries from Clark County concerning a run-a-way boy who was probably still a ward of the county. Griggs did not want any trouble with the law, but in the few days he had known Delmar, he had become fond of the young man who still looked like a boy in the body of a man. Griggs sometimes wondered if he had married the woman he was once engaged to marry, maybe he would have had a son like Delmar.

Delmar took his time returning to the airplane. He enjoyed watching the circus come to life in the mornings. It would not be long before the first of the crowds began to arrive. Most of the circus people knew who he was and that he had just joined the family, but not all.

In front of a small tent, there was a man standing behind a table that was covered with a green cloth. On the table were three half-walnut shells. The man was tall. His face was small, but he had a large nose that was very much out of proportion to the rest of the face. Not only was it a large nose, but it had been broken at least two times which gave the effect of a nose that really did not know which way to point.

As Delmar walked by, the man spoke to him, saying, “Hey, boy, come a little closer and look at this game.” Delmar stopped and then moved closer to the table. “Oh, my apologies,” said the man. “I've got bad eyesight. Now, I can see you are a man, and

probably a man of some substance and standing in this fine town. Now, watch what I'm about to do. You see this?" He held up a small pea and then put it under the center shell. Then, using both hands, he quickly moved the shells, changing their position several times. "Now, can you guess which shell hides the pea?"

Delmar had easily followed the motions and pointed to the shell on the left. The man lifted the shell and there was the pea.

"Oh, I knew you were a smart young man. You beat me fair and square. Now, see if you can do it again. After all, it's only fair if we go the best two out of three."

Delmar nodded and the man went through his routine again and again Delmar picked the right shell, much to the man's utter amazement. "How do you do it? It's not often I get beat two times in a row. You must have some gift for this business." The man shook his head and then, appearing to be utterly defeated, said, "I'll tell you what, let's go one more time, but this time, let's make it more interesting. Let's bet a dollar on the outcome. Now, I know a dollar isn't much for a man of your standing, but it's about all I can afford to lose."

By this time, a small group of circus people had gathered around to watch. Standing behind them were Griggs and Basham.

Delmar nodded yes and put a dollar bill on his side of the table. As the man moved to put the pea under a shell and start the game, Delmar said, "Wait, you need to put your dollar on the table, too."

The man stared at him for a second, then smiled and pulled a crumpled dollar bill from his pocket and put it on the table.

"I knew you were a smart young man. Fair is fair, and square is square."

He moved the shells with a much greater speed and dexterity than before. When he stopped, he looked at Delmar and said, "Now, make your pick."

Delmar studied the three shells for a moment. Even though the man had proceeded with greater speed, Delmar had still tracked the shell with the pea under it. The small crowd moved closer.

Suddenly, Delmar reached out with both hands and turned over two of the shells and then in the same motion, pointed to the remaining shell and said, "The pea must be under that one because it isn't under these two."

The man stepped back. "What's this business? You can't play the game that way!"

Someone in the small crowd said loudly, "Digby, didn't you know he's one of us?"

"What? No, I didn't know." He looked at Delmar, took a step forward, and stuck out his right hand. "I'm Elmer Digby. I thought you were the first of the locals today. Here, take my dollar. You earned it fair and square. You taught me a good lesson."

Delmar shook the man's hand. "You sure about my taking the dollar?"

Digby nodded. "Fair and square. Say, how would you like to go to work for me? You got a face that looks as honest as George Washington. I could use you as a shill. When I give a signal, you come forward and play the game. I'll lose five dollars to you, then after the set up, you give me back three dollars and keep two."

"Set up?" Delmar asked.

"Whenever I've got someone who looks like big money watching close, but who is reluctant to take a chance, you come along, a perfect stranger, and make it look like an easy way to win big money."

"It sounds like fun," Delmar said. "But, I've already got a good job working for Mr. Griggs, the pilot. He pays good money."

"Well, if you ever need a job, look me up," Digby said.

Griggs and Basham moved on toward the office wagon. "That boy's got the face of a saint, but he clearly is no fool. By the way, how much are you paying him?"

"Twelve dollars a week," Griggs replied.

"That's a princely sum for a boy," Basham said. "Don't let it get around that you pay that much. I don't want my roustabouts asking for the same amount."

"Delmar's worth the money and pretty soon, he will be worth a lot more. I'm going to teach him to fly."

"He might be crazy enough to become a pilot. He sure was smarter than Digby. As to your question about inquiries from the law, I don't think anyone's likely to come after him," Basham said. "Most counties are glad whenever they don't have to be responsible for orphans. Saves tax payers some money."

The next day, Griggs took Delmar up with him on the morning air show. During the rest of the day, Delmar worked on the plane and took bookings for passengers while Griggs was flying the other two shows. That was the routine they followed the next two weeks. During each of the morning shows when they were aloft together, Griggs explained over and over again each step of the actual flying techniques. Griggs was a patient teacher and Delmar was an eager student.

After two weeks, Griggs told Delmar that the next day would be different. "Tomorrow, you will sit in my seat, and I'll be in yours. You will do the flying, but I'll be there to help."

That night, Delmar was unable to sleep. He asked Griggs if he was awake. Yes, Griggs was awake. "You having trouble getting to sleep?"

"I guess so," Delmar replied. Then he asked, "What made you get into flying?"

Griggs was surprised by the question. Delmar was not one to make small talk. Maybe he was a little nervous about tomorrow.

"I was a Wall Street stockbroker, and I made good money. If I had stayed with it, I might even be rich now. This war in Europe has been good for business. I was engaged to a woman who was pretty well off. She was a real looker, but my, was she snooty, a real society dame. I just couldn't see spending my life being a society monkey, so one night I got drunk as a lord high mucky-muck and came to the conclusion that I had to change my life. So, I decided to do the wildest thing I could think of. I decided to learn how to fly an airplane."

"Seems like a good idea to me," Delmar said. "I didn't know you were a drinker."

"I'm not," Griggs continued, "Except for maybe on New Year's Eve or something like that. So, anyway, I bought this airplane at a junk sale, rebuilt it and took off on a life of flying with the circus. That was four years ago."

"This is a good way to live," Delmar said.

"Maybe so," Griggs replied. "But sometimes I wonder how it will be when I get old."

"There are no old pilots, are there?" Delmar asked.

Griggs was silent for a few seconds and then laughed. "It is a bit silly for a flying man to be worrying about old age."

Delmar saw the point and joined in the laughter. Then both of them slept soundly until first light.

They kept to their routine. The circus people were aware that this was going to be the day when Delmar actually got to fly the airplane. They appreciated the fact that one of their own was about to make a big step forward. The acrobats knew that this kind of step could turn out to be a failure that could cost a life. They also knew that it was something that had to be done.

When it came time, Griggs gave Delmar an old soft leather helmet that he found in his trunk. Delmar put the helmet on and then added the goggles. He was ready.

They took their seats, Delmar in the pilot's seat, and Griggs in the passenger seat. Two circus men spun the propellers and the engine roared. Griggs looked at Delmar and then motioned with his hand, forward! The airplane rolled down the landing strip, gaining speed until Delmar gently brought back the stick and the plane left the ground. Once up in the air, Delmar took the craft into a gentle, climbing bank to the left, gaining altitude, and continuing the wide circle until the airplane was at eight hundred feet in the air. Then he eased into a level flight and on a straight line. He glanced over at Griggs who was clapping his hands. A big grin spread across his face as he nodded approval.

There was no question about it as far as Griggs was concerned. This young man was truly a natural. Then as Delmar went through the show routines, Griggs revised his opinion. He watched Delmar's face. It was as if the young man was in his own world, just the pilot, the airplane and the sky. They had become a single entity. To Griggs, this was something he had never seen before. Delmar was not a natural, he was way beyond being a natural.

As the plane flew over the circus, the circus people stopped what they were doing and watched intently. As near as they could tell, Delmar was doing a fine job of flying the airplane. However, there was still the landing to be accomplished.

When it was time to land, Delmar banked the plane so it was in line with the landing strip. He came down softly, losing air speed and altitude perfectly. The wheels touched the earth, and they were down. There was not one bounce when the wheels touched the ground. Griggs knew that in his entire flying career, he had never landed the airplane that smoothly.

Chapter 6

Within a week after his first turn at the controls, Delmar soloed. It was early in the morning before the crowds arrived for a day at the fair. Circus people watched as Delmar flew low over the fairgrounds and waved. By this time, he was firmly established as a member of the circus family. There were cheers in response to his waving hand.

Griggs and Basham were among the anxious spectators. "He appears to have the hang of it," Basham said.

"He's good, real good," Griggs responded, waving his hands in flying motions, barely able to keep his pride and excitement under control. "Beginning tomorrow, he's going to be flying the ten o'clock show. And, I've got to get him some better clothes."

Basham frowned. "You sure he's good enough to tackle that on his own? I don't want him crashing into the grandstand, or something like that."

"Don't worry about him. He's a better pilot now than I'll ever be. I need to find him a new leather helmet, and maybe a black jacket of some kind. And boots. We'll need a new pair of boots."

Basham laughed, "Sounds like he's going to look more like a pirate than a circus performer."

As Digby happened to pass by, Griggs replied with a smile, "Is there a difference?"

After each of his ten o'clock air shows, Delmar walked through the fairgrounds handing out leaflets advertising a ride in an airplane for only five dollars. This had been one of his daily chores, but now it was different. Now he was dressed in his flying outfit, including the helmet with his goggles up across the front part of the helmet. He was a sight in his half-Wellington boots, brown whipcord pants, and red linen shirt.

Invariably, someone realized that he was the pilot who had just flown over the fairgrounds. When that happened, people crowded around to look at the aviator. Young girls and even some not-so-young girls paid close attention to Delmar. At first, he felt very self-conscious, almost to the point of being embarrassed by the attention. That feeling quickly dissipated, and he actually began to enjoy being the center of attention.

Sometimes people were surprised to find him to be so young. One old farmer looked at him and said, "Why, you ain't much more than a boy!" Delmar nodded and continued on his way through the crowds and passed out his leaflets.

The circus moved ahead of the weather, playing fairs and festivals and big charity events in Kentucky, Tennessee, Georgia, and finally ending up near Miami in Florida where Basham had a spread that served as the winter headquarters for the circus.

By the time the circus was playing in Kentucky, Griggs had moved Delmar's flying assignment to noon, and by Tennessee, Delmar was flying all three shows. Griggs flew the passengers and business was good. There were days when ten or eleven people paid five dollars each for a brief flight. The increased flying time meant that more time had to be spent doing maintenance work on the plane.

Sometimes, the weather prevented them from flying. In Kentucky, there was a three day rain-out, and both Delmar and Griggs worked on the plane, the canopy keeping the

men and the plane reasonably dry, though not doing much to keep a chilly October wind at bay.

"We are putting in a lot of hours on the old girl," Griggs said.

"Old girl? Why do you call the airplane an old girl?"

"People always think of airplanes and ships as women."

"Why's that?"

"Because just like women, airplanes and ships have strange ways that we men just barely understand. And when we don't understand, or when we are wrong, oh my, do we pay a price."

"I never thought of our airplane as being a woman. Whenever I'm flying, I guess I think that we are just about one and the same. I'm the airplane and the airplane is me," said Delmar.

Griggs smiled. "I know that's true. You can fly like no one else I've ever seen. By the way, Basham tells me you have been doing a lot of flying over at the girlie show. He thinks you're spending a lot of time with one of the dancers."

Delmar felt his cheeks beginning to turn red and he moved so his back was to Griggs. "Mr. Basham seems to be keeping a close eye on me."

"Of course he is. He deeply regrets now that he didn't hire you when he had the chance." Griggs continued to probe the subject even though he knew Delmar was embarrassed. "Those women in the girlie show are a lot older than you."

Delmar smiled and quickly recovered. "That gypsy girl, the daughter of the fortune teller, she's probably closer to my age."

"Oh, my, you stay away from that one. You really do not want to mess around with gypsy women. Their men folk are touchy about that kind of thing. They can put a knife through your ribs so slick it takes three days for you to know you're dead."

"So, maybe I'm better off spending time with Lady over at the girlie tent. At least I won't get a knife in the ribs."

Griggs realized that Delmar was having some fun at his expense. He had learned that the young man might not appear to be one given to having deep thoughts. Still, it was a good idea not to underestimate him.

"Your point is well taken," Griggs laughed. "Lady? That's the name of a woman working in the girlie show?"

"That's what she says her name is," replied Delmar.

"That's not her real name, I'm sure of that," Griggs said.

Delmar nodded. "Maybe not, but it's what she wants to be called. Besides, I'm not even that sure about my own name."

Griggs was silent for a few moments and then said, "Well, this is a circus. It's like show business, I guess. Outside of Basham, myself, and maybe you, they all probably have made up names."

"Lady said she wants to learn how to fly." Delmar quickly looked at Griggs to see his reaction. "I could teach her."

"A woman flying an airplane!" Griggs laughed. "That's unthinkable. Why, this past couple of weeks, I've had three, no, four women wanting to pay money for me to take them up."

"I don't see any difference between men and women if the women have five dollars," Delmar said. "Besides, think of it this way. If we had a woman pilot flying with us, it would draw big crowds."

Delmar knew that Griggs would have to think hard about that idea. Griggs did not disappoint him.

"A woman pilot! If we had two planes up at the same time or even three planes.." He paused, shook his head, and said, "No, it's a crazy idea. Still..."

The circus followed the sun down to Basham's country home near Miami. It was located on a lake, and Delmar got his first look at an alligator. Over the years, Basham had put together quite a collection of barns, sheds, and cabins. For the first time in months, Delmar was not sleeping in a tent. He shared one of the cabins with Griggs. There were enough cabins to go around because most of the circus people thought their tents were better than the cabins.

Lady never did learn how to fly. Shortly after the circus went into winter quarters, she visited Miami and never came back. Delmar missed her and was sad about her departure. There was another woman who joined the circus. She was from Atlanta. Her name was Desdemona, but everyone called her Dezzy. Delmar soon found a reason not to be sad about the departure of Lady.

At first, not having to pack up and move on to a new location and then unpack and set up the operation nearly every week seemed a pleasant change, but by the second week in January, Delmar was restless. He looked forward to going back on the circuit and the excitement of circus life.

There was a matter that he wanted to bring up with Griggs.

The cabin had a fireplace, and Griggs had a good fire going in it because the temperature had dropped considerably due to a cold front that swept down from the north as far as Miami.

As he stirred the fire, Delmar asked, "How would I go about sending money in the mail?"

"That's easy enough," replied Griggs. "You take a piece of paper and write a note on it explaining what the money's for, then wrap up the money in the paper and put it in an envelope."

"No one would steal it?"

Griggs considered the matter for a moment and then said, "It could happen, but it's not very likely. Who are you sending money to?"

"I thought I'd send some money to Miss Castor at the orphanage. And, I want to send some money to Mrs. Jones. She was the wife of the farmer where I lived before going to work for you. The night I left, she gave me twelve dollars. I know it was her egg money."

Griggs was impressed. "That's surely doing the right thing. You got enough money to do it?"

"Yes. I've saved most of what you've paid me. I thought I'd send Miss Castor a hundred dollars and Mrs. Jones twenty dollars."

"That's a lot of money! You won't have any left for yourself."

"Sure I will," Delmar insisted. "There's more than enough for me. I figure a hundred and twenty dollars to send out in the mail and the fifty dollars I gave to Lady, and, I'll still have about forty dollars for myself."

"You gave Lady fifty dollars? What on earth for?"

“She said her mother was sick and needed to pay doctor bills. That was just before she left the circus.”

“You fell for that old gag? I thought you were smarter than that. You should have asked me about it.”

Delmar smiled, “I wasn’t fooled. She put on such a good show. She even cried when she told me the story. Besides, she was a good friend.”

“Well, maybe so, but...”

Delmar interrupted, “Look at it this way. You paid me nearly half that much the first two weeks I came to work for you, and you didn’t know whether I’d be worth the money. And, I wasn’t even a good friend.”

“Lord Almighty, son, your mind works in strange ways, and that’s for certain. Well, so does mine, I guess. I’ve got something to show you, and now’s as good a time as any.”

“What’s that?”

Griggs got up and reached behind a trunk and pulled up a large, rolled up sheet of paper. “This is an artist’s drawing of what will be our new poster when we go back on the circuit.”

Delmar watched as Griggs unrolled the paper and held it up. As he expected, the poster was filled with red and yellow colors and big black letters. It was what the letters said that surprised him as he read aloud.

“Ace Mathews. Daredevil Boy Aviator. Magical Flying Machine. Defies Death Every Day. Is that me? The picture doesn’t look much like me, does it?”

“Oh, yes, it is you, or at least close enough. Basham has agreed to have his advance man put up our poster along with the circus poster and it will carry your name as a featured act of the circus as well.”

“My name? I thought my name was Delmar.”

“Well, I don’t mean any disrespect, son, but the name Delmar just isn’t the most exciting name in Christendom.”

“Do you really think I’m good enough to carry this off?”

“I’ve never doubted it since the first time I saw you. And Ace is a good name for a circus star. People are reading about aces every day in the newspapers. The French and British declare any of their pilots who shoot down five German planes to be aces.”

“I haven’t shot anyone down.”

“Never mind that. You certainly are an ace of a pilot, and that’s what counts.”

It took a while for Delmar to become Ace, at least in his own mind, but the circus people had no problem accepting him as Ace. Dezzy said just the name made him look taller and older. She suggested that he should grow a mustache. Ace responded by saying that might be hard to do since he was still waiting for the need to shave for the first time.

The day before the circus went back on the road, Griggs told Ace that he had to go over to Basham’s cabin to take care of some legal matters. Basham had a lawyer in to do some circus business, so he might just as well take advantage of the situation.

“It’s nothing really important,” Griggs said. “Just some personal business I’ve got to take care of.”

The next day, the circus started north. When they were in Georgia on the last day of February, Ace announced that he believed he had become another year older. Griggs asked him if he was now sixteen, seventeen, or eighteen. “I’m probably eighteen,” Ace answered, but with his eyes staring innocently up at the sky.

By now, Delmar no longer existed. The posters had worked wonders. People turned out in large numbers to see the daredevil boy aviator fly. Business was good. Griggs was in the air constantly with paying passengers. Basham was happy. He reported to Griggs that when Ace strolled through the fairway handing out the leaflets advertising the ride in the sky, it was hard to find any of them on the ground.

“People are keeping them for souvenirs,” Basham said. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

There was a pretty young woman who had joined the circus. Her name was Candy. She worked in a tent that held a variety of small items, most of which were billed as coming from far away and strange places such as India or China or the South Seas Islands. Ace bought a yellow scarf from her for fifty cents. They became friends which caused some problems with Dezzy. The problems were entirely owned by Dezzy and Candy. Ace simply went his own way, nattily dressed in his black flying jacket, red shirt, whipcord pants, boots, and now the yellow scarf which was guaranteed to be of the purest silk.

He did not have the scarf very long. While flying his show, the scarf came loose, narrowly escaped the closest propeller, fluttered through the air over the fairgrounds, and finally came to earth. There was a stampede of young women and girls, each one determined to have the scarf.

Griggs saw an opportunity and wasted no time in striking a deal with the man who owned the exotic odds and ends tent. He bought a gross, one-hundred-forty-four scarves in assorted colors, guaranteed to be of the purest silk, at a cost of twenty-eight cents apiece.

“Here’s what you do,” Griggs instructed Ace. “At the end of every show, you fly over the fairgrounds and throw out your scarf. Make sure it clears the propellers. Keep your altitude about three hundred feet. That way the scarf will stay in the air long enough to get people’s attention.”

“That’s the craziest thing I’ve ever heard of,” Ace said. “Why should I throw away a good scarf?”

“Because women love it.”

On Friday, March 30th, the circus pulled into fairgrounds just outside Paris and began setting up the tents. This was Paris, Tennessee, but it somehow seemed appropriate under the circumstances. The newspapers were filled with talk of war. There was every possibility that the United States would join France and Great Britain in the war against Germany. In Paris, Tennessee, many people were flying the American flag, and there were almost as many old Confederate flags flying as well.

The fair opened on Saturday to large crowds. Then on Tuesday people were excited by word that President Wilson had asked Congress for a declaration of war against Germany. The people were not stirred up by the noble words printed in the newspapers. They were angry because there was proof that the Germans were trying to get the Mexicans to declare war on the United States.

On Friday, April 6th, there were rumors that Congress had declared war, but nothing official. After taking a break for lunch, Griggs checked in at Basham’s wagon office to find out if he knew anything. Basham was sitting at his makeshift desk and staring at a telegram.

“What’s the word?” Griggs asked.

"It's for sure," Basham answered. "It's war, and may God help us. I fear that we have made a terrible mistake."

"Why is that?" Griggs asked. "I don't see how the war over in Europe will have much effect on our business."

Basham shook his head. "So much blood, death, and for what? If we win the war, the British and French will skin us at the peace table. If the Germans win the war, they'll skin us and cut off our toes to boot."

This was a side of Basham that Griggs had never seen before now. He was briefly puzzled, but then he spied an American flag on a staff in the corner.

"Do you mind if I borrow your flag for a while?" Griggs asked.

"What for?"

"I just thought it would be a good idea to show it now that we are at war."

Basham nodded yes and Griggs quickly left the wagon office with the flag. He hurried back to where Ace was warming up the plane for the three o'clock show.

"Quick, help me tie this flag staff to the upper wing," Griggs shouted above the roar of the engine. "It's war. We are at war with Germany!"

They quickly rigged the flag. As Ace moved to climb up into his open seat, Griggs shouted again. "Fly your routine over the grandstand and the race track infield. Make as many passes as possible over the infield. Come down as low as you dare, but not too low. Show them the flag!"

Ace looked uncertain for a second and then smiled. Griggs thought to himself that maybe he should not have told the boy to fly as low as he dared.

Ace took off and flew a circle around the grandstand and the race track. Then he came in, a slow, graceful dive, passing over the oval part of the track on one end, and then straight ahead just five feet off the ground, the American flag flying bravely in the wind. He climbed to gain altitude after passing over the other oval end of the track and circled around to make another pass.

The crowd in the grandstand who had come to see the trotters was treated to a different kind of show. They responded with great emotion. There was much cheering. The people were standing. By now they knew they were at war with Germany.

The crowd went wild when the circus band, fifteen strong and dressed in their showy uniforms and shakos marched out in front of the grandstand and struck up the "Star Spangled Banner." People wept. Some sang along, and when the band reached the point in the song where the words were about rockets red glare, Ace swept in for another run.

After Ace landed, he and Griggs took off the flag. "I was scared to death you were going to crack up," Griggs said. "That's a tricky piece of flying, coming in at that speed and that low."

"Yeah, but the crowd loved it," Ace said with a triumphant grin on his face.

He picked up a stack of leaflets and strolled over to the fairgrounds. He was mobbed by the crowd. Men picked him up and carried him about, cheering him as if he had somehow single-handedly won the war.

The circus continued to move north. Basham hated the idea of the United States getting into what he called the mess and murder in Europe, but he made sure that the circus had a plentiful supply of American flags and red, white, and blue bunting. Even the women in the girlie show did their part. After the last show of the night, there was yet another show, the show that would be talked about by those who saw it for several

months afterward. This was a very daring show, and the price of admission was one dollar. At the end of the show, the dancers paraded around the stage waving small American flags which were then tossed out to the audience.

On one occasion, Ace was standing in the very front row of the audience. As they danced, one of the girls saw him and pranced over in front of him and knelt down, kissed the little flag, and then handed it to him. Dezzy glared at the girl and then also moved to give Ace her flag. Even though it was dark in the tent, men standing by Ace guessed that he was the aviator. There was great applause as each of the girls then, one by one, danced over in front of Ace and, with suitable flourishes, presented their flags. After that, Ace wore one of the flags tucked in his goggles strap every time he took to the air.

Toward the middle of July, the circus was preparing to move on to play the county fair at Clark County, Illinois. Both Griggs and Basham were concerned about whether or not someone in the county would demand that one Delmar Mathews be returned to the control of the county, even though a year had passed, and Delmar's name was now Ace.

Basham came up with a solution to the problem that might work. On the posters that the advance man would spread around the county, the name Mathews was smudged over with splotches of ink. As long as the name Mathews was not brought up, surely, no one would make a connection between the orphanage boy who had been sent out to a farm, and the daredevil boy aviator named Ace.

The plan seemed to work. The crowds were thrilled by the daredevil boy aviator, and only one person was not fooled. On the first day the circus opened, Miss Castor was in the grandstand. She watched the air show and nearly fainted, as much from fear as from excitement when Ace made his run the length of the track infield, barely ten feet off the ground, the American flag streaming out behind. It looked so frightful. There were trees near the far end, and the aviator had to make a sharp, climbing turn to keep from crashing into them. "So dangerous, so terribly dangerous!" she cried aloud.

After the show, she made her way through the fairgrounds and continued toward where the plane had landed. Griggs was already up with a passenger. Ace sat at the table that served so well as their business counter. She waited back out of sight behind a tree while Ace talked to two young ladies. When they left, she approached the table.

Ace was glancing down at one of the leaflets on the table when he caught a glimpse of someone approaching. He looked up. "Miss Castor," he said. He quickly got to his feet and doffed his helmet and goggles and held them in his hands.

They stood facing each other. "I thought it had to be. Our Delmar is an aviator. My goodness! And how you look! You've changed so much," she said.

"Yes, Ma'am. I, uh," Ace stammered. He pulled a chair up to the table. "Please, sit down here in the shade. It's a warm day."

"Thank you, Delmar," she said as she gratefully sat down. "I got your letters with the money. It has meant so much to the children."

"Oh, Ma'am, excuse me a moment," he said as he turned and hurried into the tent. He returned a few seconds later and sat down at the table and put a small stack of money on the table. "I was planning to send this, but since you are here, it'll save me having to mail it."

"Thank you so much," Miss Castor said as she picked up the money and put it in her purse. "When I got your three letters, I felt sure that you had run away to join the circus. I looked at the postmarks, you see, and I knew you were traveling. I must say, I could not

understand how you could have come up with so much money. I was very worried about that.”

Ace smiled. He knew she would be concerned about how he had been able to send money. “I did try to join the circus, but Mr. Griggs, he’s the man who owns the airplane, hired me. He’s the one who taught me how to fly.”

“Do you enjoy flying?” she asked. “It looks so frightening.”

“Oh, yes, Ma’am. When I am up in the air, I feel free. I remember the first time I ever went up in the tethered balloon. Do you remember that?”

“Indeed I do. What are you going to do with your flying skills?” Miss Castor asked.

“I’m not sure. Mr. Griggs has some big plans. He wants to put together what he calls a flying circus with five or six airplanes. We could tour the country putting on real air shows.”

“It sounds very exciting,” Miss Castor said. “But, I will always worry about you. Flying must be a dangerous business.”

“I suppose it could be, but we try to be very careful. Mr. Griggs has taught me more than just flying. I can work on the plane almost as well as he can. Even he says I’m better with the engine than he is.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Every young man should have a trade. Everywhere I look now, there are engines. The world is changing so fast. Sometimes I wonder where it will all end.”

Delmar paused, his face clouding with worry. “I hope Farmer doesn’t find out that I’m here. Mr. Griggs was worried that the county might try to take me back.”

“There will be no problem with Farmer Jones,” Miss Castor said firmly. “He’s dead.”

“What?”

“Yes, shortly after you ran away with the circus, one of his horses kicked him in the head and he died.”

A small smile appeared on Ace’s face as he remembered the dead calf.

“You should not take joy in the misfortune of others, Delmar.”

“Oh, no, Ma’am, I was just thinking about how mean he could be to his animals.”

Miss Castor softened, “Yes, I think I see what you mean, poetic justice, perhaps.”

Ace was not sure what she meant by poetic justice. He let it slide from his mind. He was curious about Daisy Jones, however.

“Is Mrs. Jones running the farm now?”

“Oh, no. She sold the farm to her brother and moved to Chicago to live. She was like a changed woman after Farmer was killed.”

“She always tried to be kind to me,” Ace said.

Miss Castor smiled. “Sometimes, I think you have a way of bringing out the best in people. Where will you go from here?”

“On to the next county fair. We have a regular circuit we follow.”

“No, Delmar, I mean, where are you going in your life?”

Ace shook his head. “I don’t really know. Maybe I’ll be flying with Mr. Griggs’ flying circus. I make good money, and I really like being up in the airplane.”

“Well, as long as you have a trade, I suppose a few years flying is not such a bad idea. You certainly do get a chance to travel! Well, I’ve kept you from your work long enough. And, I’ve got to tend to my work, as well.”

She rose from the chair and extended her hand. Ace quickly wiped his hand on his trousers and took her hand in his.

“Goodbye, Delmar.” She tried to smile, but none appeared. She was determined not to cry. “I wonder if I shall ever see you again.”

Ace was flustered as he shook her hand. He had the deepest affection for this woman who had sometimes been like a mother to him, and yet he never really felt comfortable in her presence. He could never bridge the gap that existed in his mind, the gap between a mother and a county official.

Griggs returned from his passenger ride. It was time for Ace to prepare for his next air show. The weather was fair and warm, and the workaday routine continued until the last day of the Clark County Fair.

An army major, tall, well-tanned, and uniformed strode quickly up to the table in front of the tent where Griggs and Ace were seated. He stood rigidly at attention and stared down at them. Slowly, and despite their inclinations, they rose to their feet.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” he said. “I am Major Marlin Horne, United States Army Air Service, and I presume that you gentlemen are the pilots?”

“That’s right,” Griggs replied. “What can we do for you?”

“I am looking for experienced pilots who can train men to fly for the Army Air Service. We are building a flying corps that can be sent to fight in France. General Pershing wants a thousand pilots as soon as possible.”

“Ace, you need to get ready for your air show,” Griggs said. “Major, have a seat.”

“Thank you, I do not mind if I do,” Major Horne said as Ace nodded and hurried off to start the ten o’clock air show.

“Is he your daredevil boy aviator?” the major asked.

“Yes he is, and he’s a dandy.”

“Can he really fly?”

“You just sit there and watch. He will come down low over that track infield, but not too low. We’ve got a row of trees that is near the end of the track. Ace will keep at least fifty feet above the ground so he can pull up over the trees without any problem. In some places we have played, I’ve seen him come down to about five feet and doing sixty miles an hour.”

“Really?” asked the major. “I did not think that old Model B could do more than forty miles an hour.”

Griggs opened his eyes wide, causing his generous eyebrows to rise. “You know about airplanes?”

“Some,” the major replied. “I’m a flier, also, but I just recently learned. We had a couple of airplanes down in Mexico when we were chasing bandits. I was in the cavalry then, class of 1906, West Point. Horses are fine, but I came to the conclusion that the air is the future.”

“There’s no doubt about it in my mind,” Griggs agreed. “But what’s this business about Pershing wanting a thousand pilots? We do not have a thousand men in the entire country who know how to fly, and we surely do not have a thousand airplanes.”

“Pershing wants an air service that is on a par with the French and British. As to airplanes, right now we are depending on the British and the French to furnish us with their modern fighters. We have a few in this country for training purposes. If you were to join up, you would have to qualify in the newer aircraft, of course.”

"There he is," Griggs said, as Ace flew overhead, just beginning his air show.

"He handles the plane smoothly," said the major. "When does he do the low flying part?"

"That comes in about fifteen minutes or so. Now then, as I understand it, you want me to enlist in the army? I'm afraid not. I've been building up my little air business, and I have plans to expand what I've got started here into a regular flying circus."

"Ordinarily, I would bring up the subject of patriotism here, but under the circumstances, I will not," replied the major. "I can see that you are about forty or so, and the daredevil boy is really a boy. Just out of curiosity, how old is he?"

"Well, I'm not over the hill!" Griggs said tersely. "And, as for Ace, he says he is going on eighteen. He's an orphan, and probably does not know how old he is."

"I meant no offense," Major Horne said quickly. "It's just that I noticed from the leaflets that you do not fly the air shows. I assumed that you had reached the age when flying a desk was beginning to look like a good idea."

"I let Ace fly the air shows because it goes over big with the crowds. Believe me, I could fly rings around him, and the people you have flying in the army as well."

"I'm sure you still have your skills, sir," said the major. "If you did join us and begin teaching, you would be working with young men who are not but a year or two older than your boy. I presume you taught him?"

"That's right. But it wasn't hard to teach him. He has no fear of the air, and it's like he becomes a part of the airplane. He was and is a natural-born flier."

"Well, I wish I could sign both of you up. But, you are old enough to be behind a desk, and I am sure the boy is too young, though he certainly looks full-grown."

The major's words about his age and that he was letting Ace carry the burden of the air shows worked hard in Griggs' mind. There were some circus people saying much the same. Basham had even gone so far as to suggest that maybe he should be training Ace to fly the paying passengers.

"Here he comes!" the major said as he stood up to get a better view.

Ace came down from a gliding, banking turn, picking up speed as he descended. He roared a good fifty feet above ground the length of the oval track, and at the other end, easily lifted above the row of trees.

"That was good!" the major exclaimed. "That was damn good flying!"

"He does it three times a day," Griggs said. "You know what?" And, without waiting for an answer, he continued, "I think I'll take the next air show. Do me good to get out from behind the desk."

"In that case, I believe I will wait around to see you in action," Horne said. "In the meantime, I'll go over to the fairgrounds and get a bite to eat."

When Ace returned to the tent, Griggs said, "That army major is a big pain where I sit. But he has at least got the good sense to see that you are a fine pilot. Listen, I've been thinking. I'm putting too much of this flying off on you. I'll take the noon show. Besides, it would be good to fly once in a while without a passenger who's scared to death."

Ace was surprised by Griggs' decision to fly a show. He was not unduly concerned about the suddenness of the decision. That was Griggs' way, after all. He was what Miss Castor would describe as being an impulsive man. He did tell Griggs about occasional stiff breezes at about one hundred feet. He did not stress the matter because they had

worked in much worse, especially during the spring days when the weather was not always friendly.

Major Horne returned to the tent-office and living quarters a few minutes before noon. Ace was sitting at the table and the major joined him. "Is Mr. Griggs off preparing for his flight?"

"Yes, sir," Ace answered.

Major Horne appeared pleasantly surprised at the proper form used by Ace. "Just how old are you?"

"I think I must be about eighteen, going on nineteen," Ace replied.

"Have you been with Mr. Griggs very long?"

"About a year, sir."

"And you have been flying every day, three times a day? You must have about three hundred hours flying time. I do not believe we have anyone in our command who has that kind of flying experience."

Griggs roared overhead and when he was over the little encampment, he dipped his wings in salute. Major Horne laughed and waved a salute back to what was then empty sky.

The major and Ace watched silently as Griggs put the airplane through a series of shallow dives and then banking climbs.

Then with a sharp diving approach, Griggs leveled out at the start of the oval. His wheels almost touched the ground.

Ace jumped to his feet and yelled, "Too low! Too low!"

Major Horne was just rising from his chair when Griggs made a sharp, climbing ascent, the aircraft actually brushing the outer branches of the trees.

At about one hundred feet and while still climbing, the right upper wing broke, the tip falling back into the right propeller. The plane crashed to the ground.

"No! No!" cried Ace as he ran toward the smoking wreck.

He did not hear Major Horne ask, "How old did you say you are?"

Chapter 7

France, 1918

The circus moved on to the next county fair. The death of Mr. Griggs was but a sad moment. Fresh smiles are painted on daily; death was not really a stranger. Basham solved the problem concerning a burial place for Griggs. He had the body embalmed and then shipped back to the winter quarters. He told Ace that the dead aviator would be buried on circus grounds, and that he was going to make a small cemetery for circus people, especially those who had no family or home to return to for funeral services. Ace had not even considered that there might be a problem about the end of life, even though he and Griggs had joked that there were no old pilots.

Ace moved with the circus mainly because he did not know what else to do. He already missed Griggs' humor and especially his ability to quickly turn nearly every happening to his advantage. Ace did not worry about the future. That seemed clear enough. Major Horne wanted him to join the Army Air Service and teach people how to fly. While he was not sure about the army, it was clearly better than the other two possibilities. He could remain with the circus as a roust-about, or he could return to Clark County and be sent out to work on a farm. The army promised flying. The other two most certainly did not.

Ace's future was soon decided at a meeting in Basham's wagon office. Present were Ace, Basham, Major Horne, and a lawyer named Manners. The lawyer read Griggs' will which was very brief. Griggs left everything to Ace, everything being a considerable amount of money, twenty-six thousand dollars, which was kept in a New York bank.

"I get how much money?" an astonished Ace asked.

The lawyer repeated the number, and Ace jumped up from his chair. "I can buy an airplane. Everything can go on just as before."

Basham frowned. "I like the idea, but I'm afraid it won't work. I'm certain that you are not twenty-one years old. If you were to crash, I'd be responsible. I might even lose my circus."

"This problem about your age," Major Horne said to Ace. "This problem just will not go away. It is possible that the Clark County people might demand that you be returned to the county. I can almost guarantee that is what will happen if they find out that you have money."

Basham nodded, "Major Horne is right. The money complicates everything."

Ace sank back in his chair. His mind considered only one alternative. "With that kind of money, I can run a long way."

"No, you must not do that," Major Horne said. "Once a man gets in the habit of running away, he never stops. Besides, that money would not last forever."

"You should listen to these gentlemen, young man," the lawyer said. "They clearly have your best interests at heart."

Basham looked at the lawyer, cleared his throat and said, "Uh, Mr. Manners, we are now at a point here where I think it best if you were not present. There are certain personal matters involved. You understand?"

"Of course, gentlemen," the lawyer said as he rose and left the wagon office.

"He's a good man, but I always feel a little more comfortable when he's on the outside looking in," Basham said.

"So, what's to come of me?" Ace asked.

"We have worked out a plan," Major Horne said, nodding toward Basham as he spoke. "I think it will be the best we can do for you."

Basham explained the plan. "The money will stay in the New York bank until you are twenty-one. It will draw a handsome interest rate and give you an extra amount of income. Major Horne will be your legal guardian..."

"What does guardian mean?" Ace interrupted.

Basham smiled. "Don't worry. Major Horne will have little or no control over you or the money, except to make sure that it is still there when you turn twenty-one."

"The money will be there," Major Horne said. "My word on it."

"All this is legal and proper," Basham continued. "Digby has provided us with a fine document which makes the major your legal guardian. It's good to see a man like Digby put his unusual talents to a proper use once in a while."

After the meeting, Ace took one last tour of the circus and the fairgrounds. He said goodbye to a number of people he had come to count as his friends. He tried not to think too much about the future, but there were some questions that drifted through his mind. Major Horne had told him about the "Flying Jenny," the plane the army used for training pilots. He was not comfortable with the idea of sitting in a cockpit instead of outside perched on the edge of the wing. He wondered how he would be able to see the ground. He looked forward to flying a plane that was much faster and more maneuverable than the old Wright Model B. He missed Mr. Griggs.

He was convinced that in the main, he was lucky. He knew that people like Miss Castor, Daisy Jones, Mr. Basham and Mr. Griggs had done much to make his life better. Now, it seemed as if Major Horne was to take over the job. He owed these people a great debt, and he hoped that he could in some way reward them. "Friends take care of friends," he said aloud, softly so that only he was the listener, but with the conviction that comes out of the establishing of a life-long principle.

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Major Horne began to play a definite part in the changing of Ace's life. He had to persuade his superior officer to approve a commission as a second lieutenant for Ace. Horne knew he was pushing his honor very close to the edge of a quicksand pit.

Brigadier General Owen Clifton had served forty years in the cavalry. He was out of the West Point class of 1877 and served in the west for much of his career. Now, at the end of his long career, he had been transferred to the Army Air Service, and he was not especially happy about his assignment.

Major Horne stood at ease in front of General Clifton's desk. The silver-haired general looked up from the papers on his desk and announced, "I don't like this. I don't like it one bit."

"Sir?" Major Horne said.

"This young man you want me to commission as an officer..."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Mathews. He is a fine aviator. He might seem to be a little young. But, we are at war..."

“Of course, he’s young, and probably too young,” said the general, “And, your guardianship papers are in order, but these matters are not the main problem.”

“The main problem, sir?”

General Clifton sat upright in his chair. “Can he sit a horse like an officer and a gentleman should? My God, I do not know what this army is going to come to! I swear we have officers in this army now who can’t even spell the word horse, let alone sit on one, and God help us all, if the horse moves an inch. I hate the idea of issuing even one more commission to a man who cannot properly sit a horse.”

Major Horne had to work very hard to keep his self-control. He wanted to laugh, but at the same time, he knew that he was on firm ground. He would be able to step back from the quicksand.

“Sir,” he began, “Mr. Mathews is from the Midwest. And, as you know, Custer was able to turn those young men from rural areas into fine cavalrymen.”

“Custer was a damned fool,” General Clifton said with considerable vigor. “Still, he did fine work during the big war, and against the Indians, though, he was a damned fool. Did you know that I led a company of the old Tenth Cavalry, the colored regiment?”

“No, sir,” replied Major Horne.

“Best damned troops in the army. Those kinky-haired colored boys could stay in the saddle longer than the Indians, sleep less than the Indians, and eat less than the Indians. It is too damned bad that they can’t be taught how to fly an airplane; but of course, they don’t have the brains for that. If the old Tenth could fly, this business in France would come to a fast end, I’ll tell you.”

“Yes, sir. I am sure, sir,” Major Horne responded dutifully.

“Well, Major, those are matters above our pay grade. Now, to the business at hand. We need trainers. I get a constant stream of telegrams from Washington and they all want something yesterday. It takes time to build up from nothing.”

The general picked up a rubber stamp, inked it, and stamped ‘Approved’ on the application and then signed it. “There it is, Major. I hope to God this newly minted second lieutenant can climb up on a horse.”

Second Lieutenant Ace Mathews was not posted to a flying base in Texas or Oklahoma as Major Horne had thought likely. Instead, he was sent to a new air field in central Illinois called Chanute Air Field. It was there that he flew the Jenny for the first time. As he had expected, he was very uncomfortable sitting in the cockpit, a small and confining space from which he could see very little of the ground below. But he quickly got over the feeling of being stuck in a hole in the ground that could be taken up into the sky. The Jenny was almost twice as fast as the old Wright. It could climb and maneuver at a speed that made his senses sing.

The pilots he was training were not much older than he was, and in not a few cases, looked even younger. He had few problems, and was soon rated as a good instructor as well as being a truly gifted pilot. The army life posed no problem for him. He thought it not unlike being in the circus again. In one respect, he was a trainee as well as being an instructor. One of the training planes was equipped with machine guns. He quickly became proficient at the use of the guns.

At the end of the first training cycle, there was a levy that came down from on high. Some of the new pilots he had trained were on orders for France. They would soon be up in the air flying against the Germans. He knew that he was a better pilot than the men he

had trained would ever be. He wondered how he would match up against the Germans who had been at this game since 1914. He volunteered for duty in France. His request was denied on the grounds that he was too valuable as an instructor. Month after month, he requested a transfer to France. Finally, early in October of 1918, his request was approved.

On October 27, Second Lieutenant Ace Mathews joined his squadron which was located not far from the front held by American troops. His squadron commander took note of how young Ace appeared, but was not surprised. He told Ace that the squadron was down to seven pilots. Twelve was considered to be the best operational level for the squadron.

The squadron had recently received the new French fighter, the Spad 13. For two days, Ace flew practice and familiarization missions, always deeper into France instead of over the front. The Spad was much faster than the Jenny and nearly three times as fast as the Wright Model B. It was a little slow to respond. Other pilots called it "stiff." The first day Ace flew the French plane, he was uncomfortable. The second day, he and the plane became close friends.

On November 1, Ace flew his first mission over the front. He saw two German planes, but the squadron was unable to close on them. The next day, the Germans met the squadron head-on. To Ace it seemed like a crazy mix up of aircraft climbing and diving and cutting sharp turns. He suddenly found himself behind a German plane at close range. He fired three bursts from his machine guns and the German plane burst into flames. He overtook and passed the German plane so closely that he could feel the heat from the flames. He saw the German pilot put a pistol to his head and then the head jerked hard to one side. The German plane careened off and down to the right. Ace watched with a horrified fascination as the flaming plane with the dead pilot headed toward the ground.

After the mission, Ace was called into the commander's small office. The commander congratulated his young pilot for his victory. Ace asked him about the German shooting himself.

"Two minutes, maybe even three of burning to death is not a good way to die," the squadron commander said as he reached into a desk drawer and pulled out a small revolver and handed it to Ace. "It's loaded."

The next morning, Ace walked slowly toward his waiting plane. The squadron commander watched him climb into the cockpit. He knew that this would be a hard day for his young pilot. He knew that Ace probably did not sleep well after his first kill.

Ace settled into the cockpit. As he moved his hands to pull his goggles into place, he noticed that both hands had a slight tremor. He pulled the goggles into position and then let his hands rest in the sides of the cockpit. Then he suddenly remembered a discussion with Griggs. It was a long time ago, but somehow, he remembered it, and just when he needed it the most. Through clenched teeth, he muttered, "There are no old pilots."

The next day, he repeated the phrase just before take-off. This time, he smiled. The phrase, said aloud, became a part of his pre-flight ritual.

On the day he smiled, he got his second victory in the air. Then came a day when he shot down two German planes. The squadron had taken losses as well. Since Ace's arrival, the squadron went from eight pilots down to four. Then they heard news that the rumors which had been circulating were true after all. The squadron commander received

notice that as of 1100 hours, tomorrow, November 11, the war would end. There would be an armistice, a cessation of war. The notice also contained an order that called for a minimum air patrol during the morning hours. The patrol was to stay on the Allied side of the front line and under no circumstances to penetrate into German controlled airspace. The purpose of the mission was to observe and not to fight.

The squadron commander and his adjutant had a brief discussion about how many planes to put up for the mission. The adjutant suggested that only two of the four pilots were enough. The commander thought only one was sufficient. "It is an observation flight. There is no point in risking any more people than necessary, especially on the last day of the war. Mathews will fly the mission."

"Mathews? Why him?"

"There are a couple of good reasons," the commander said. "He's flown fewer missions than the other three. And, he is the best pilot of the four. If there is any trouble, he will have the best chance to survive."

"You do remember that Mathews has shot down four planes? He might be tempted to go for one more just so he can be called an ace."

"I wonder how many men have died because of that business. Whoever thought up that nonsense about being called an ace after five kills? Besides, Mathews is already an ace. That's his name."

On the morning of November 11, Ace climbed up into the cockpit of his plane. This would be his last flight of the war, one way or another. He went through his ritual, and then repeated the words, "There are no old pilots."

Chapter 8

As he took off, a thought concerning his future entered his mind. The end of the war would certainly bring a change in his life. The thought got no further. He concentrated on his tasks of flying and searching the sky for German planes.

It was a good day for flying. The sky was clear. Periodically, he tipped the wings ever so slightly so he could easily look down at the ground below. He could see the Allied trenches which were not much more than ditches connecting shell holes. By tipping to the other side, he could see the German trenches. They looked similar, but not quite so haphazard in design, and there were several lines of trenches, about two hundred or so yards apart. The Allies were on the offensive. It was the Germans who needed back-up trenches.

He decided to drop down in altitude in order to get a better look at the Allied line. He believed he was probably over a part of the line held by the French. He was partly correct. The line was under French control, but the troops in the trenches were not French. Holding this position was the American 369th Regiment, (Colored). It was an African-American regiment that had been assigned to serve with the French and under French command. Ever since the Americans had joined in the war against Germany, the French government had pleaded for the Americans to augment French forces with the fresh American troops. The Americans wanted their own formal army operating on the front, and consequently, stoutly resisted the French requests. However, there was the 369th which was not in much demand. So, it was graciously given to the French. Both sides were happy. The Americans got rid of an awkward problem, and the French got a regiment that performed its duties with considerable distinction. The French did not appear to have a problem with the fact that the 369th was led by African-American officers.

The troops in the trench line watched as the American plane came down to two hundred feet over their heads. They saw the American insignia on the plane and cheered.

"It's one of ours," Sergeant Joe Washington said aloud. Washington had been with the unit since its arrival in France back in 1917. He had survived one hundred sixty-seven days on line. To the troops in his platoon, he was known as the "Old Man," both because he had survived so many battles and because he was twenty-eight years old. Most of the men in the platoon were barely twenty. He was popular with the men. He was friendly; his wide face framed an easy smile. He was not tall, and his chunky frame, the heavy clothing, and the equipment he carried on a belt, gave him the appearance of a small bear. His method of leadership was quiet and simple, and usually came down to two words, "follow me."

Joe saw them almost as quickly as Ace. Four German planes, well on the Allied side of the line, and flying at about two thousand feet, were closing fast on the American plane.

Ace saw them and knew he was in trouble. He was too low. He pushed the Spad's engine hard in an effort to gain altitude. That problem he could solve if the Spad could take the strain. But he could not see how he was going to solve an even larger problem. The Germans were between him and his base. He had a good idea of what was coming next.

At about eight hundred feet he found himself flying side by side with one of the German planes. The other three were also flying parallel, but about a mile away and a good two hundred feet higher.

He glanced over at the German pilot flying alongside, and saw him emphatically pointing toward the German side of the line. He knew what the German wanted. The choice was clear. Either he would fly with his escort to a German base and land, or the escort would shoot him down. The German pilot would probably get a medal for capturing an American plane and pilot. Being a prisoner of war for a couple of hours was better than going down in flames. When that thought hop-scotched through his mind, he became conscious of the pistol in his pocket. What if the war did not end? How long would he be in a prison camp? This was, after all, the fourth year of a war that some had predicted might never end.

Joe watched the drama unfold. He, too, had guessed what the Germans were trying to accomplish. He had a feeling about this American up there in the air that was facing four Germans. "I got five dollars that says he goes for 'em!" The men in the trench laughed but none offered to take the bet.

Ace looked over at the German again. The German repeated his motions. Ace shook his head back and forth in an exaggerated fashion so the German would have no trouble understanding.

Starting with a slow and graceful banking move, Ace suddenly accelerated his speed, spun the plane into a violent dive and then pulling up hard in what was a near flipping of the plane, the end of which brought him almost at a right angle to the German plane. There was only time for one quick burst of machine gun fire. He saw the stream of red tracers smash into the German's fuselage and into the pilot. The two planes crossed, Ace above the German.

"Damn! Look at that!" Joe shouted. "I knew he'd go for them. He's got one. Still three of them, though. That's awful hard odds."

Ace did not waste time trying to check on the German plane he had just ripped with gunfire. He was watching the three other Germans who in the first seconds of the action seemed indecisive. Then they came down after him. He flew at top speed right at them. The closing speed between the planes was only a matter of a few seconds. He had one hope and that was to fly by them and keep going until he was deep enough behind his own front line so that his pursuers would have to break off their attack lest they end up being attacked by a swarm of American fighters.

Hope quickly faded away as Ace found himself caught in a dogfight with the three Germans. He used every trick he knew, but evading or driving off one or two of the Germans still left one and that one was now on his tail. He could feel his Spad shuddering from the impact of the German's bullets. Then, his engine died. As he fought to keep control and maybe glide down and make a crash landing, the other two Germans hosed the Spad with bullets.

That was the end of the fight. The Germans left and Ace discovered that he was coming down in no-man's-land between the two lines. His wheels hit the ground, and the plane bounced. Ahead was a large shell hole. He tried to swerve to avoid it. One wheel broke off as he caught the edge of the hole and swung crazily head on into a tree stump, the remains of a tree that had been sheared off by an artillery shell.

The plane nosed down, the propeller smashed, and the tail stuck up in the air. Ace's head rested on the front of the cockpit. He appeared to be dead.

As the American plane was caught and killed by the Germans, Joe watched. He kept muttering, "No. No. No." When the plane crashed, tail up, in front of the line held by Joe's platoon, he did not hesitate. With his rifle in his right hand, he awkwardly climbed out of the trench and ran toward the plane. After the first ten or so strides, he remembered his training and experiences past and began moving in jerky bursts, zigzagging and crouched over in order to present a difficult target for the Germans in the not far off trench they occupied.

Joe noted a shell hole not far from the plane that was big enough to hold several men and protect them from any grazing gunfire as long as they did not stand up. When he reached the plane, he found that the pilot was still alive, but injured. He saw that the pilot looked almost like a boy, but was certainly big enough to be a man. Joe pulled out his trench knife, a wicked-looking knife whose handle was actually like a brass knuckle. He cut the safety belt and pulled the flier from the plane. As he did so, the man moaned, and it was then that Joe saw both legs had been broken, parts of bone protruding from the pilot's pants.

"Sorry about this," Joe said softly as he pulled the man from the plane and dragged him to the safety of the shell hole. He raised the pilot to a sitting position, gently straightened his legs as much as possible. Then Joe set to work on a nasty cut on the young man's face. The cut was wide and deep and started less than an inch from the side of his left eye and then down in a slight curve to just left of his upper lip.

Joe pulled a bandage from the small container attached to his belt and covered as much of the cut as possible. He wound the bandage around Ace's head, pulled it tight, and then tied it.

The pain from the lips of the cut being pulled together caused Ace to moan. Joe took his canteen and spilled water on Ace's lips. As he did so, a German machine gun fired a burst of bullets that zinged overhead. Joe realized that in his efforts to put the bandage on Ace, he had raised up a little too high. He wished the shell hole was a little deeper.

Ace suddenly opened his eyes. His lips moved, but at first no words came out of his mouth.

"Easy, there," Joe said. "You're going to be okay."

"Where?" Ace said feebly.

Joe smiled. "In the middle of the wrong place. You got shot down and landed between the lines. Take it easy. You're going to be okay. We're safe here for the moment, at least."

As he spoke, Joe could hear German bullets striking the tail of the plane which made an inviting target. "The Germans are having some fun shooting at your plane. The tail's sticking up in the air."

"Do you have water?"

"Yeah," replied Joe. He crawled close to Ace and held the canteen to his lips.

The drink helped revive Ace, but Joe was still concerned. He had seen other men who had been wounded go into shock and die. He knew there was very little he could do to prevent it. He could not lower his head and raise his feet because of the broken legs. He could keep the pilot talking and give him an occasional drink. If the war really did come to an end in an hour or so, then he would call for stretcher bearers and a medic to come

out and take the pilot back to where he could be treated. If the war did not end, then they would have to wait in the shell hole until dark, and he would have to drag Ace back to the trench. He wondered how it was that a war could end on time, and then dismissed the thought as being silly.

“What’s your name?” Joe asked.

“Ace, Ace Mathews.”

“That your real name? You probably are an ace, the way you went after those four German planes. You got one of them, you know?”

“That’s my name; at least it’s been my name for a couple of years now. My legs!”

“They’re busted up pretty bad,” Joe said.

“They hurt something awful.”

“It’ll get worse,” Joe said. “You just have to hang on until we can get you back to the hospital.”

“Some of the pain is from my pistol. I’m sitting on it and I can’t get my hand around to get it.”

Joe crawled around to the other side of Ace and gently lifted him enough so he could push his hand under and into the pocket. He pulled out the pistol and held it up and looked at it. He laughed.

“You going to take on the German army with this dinky little thing?”

Ace tried to shake his head, no, but the effort brought an instant flash of pain that was even worse than the pain coming from his legs.

“No, the pistol’s for me.”

“What? You mean...”

“If the plane starts burning.”

“Oh, I get it. Never thought about that. We always watched you pilots up there and thought you had it easy.”

“You speak good English for a Frenchman,” Ace said.

“I’m not a Frenchy,” Joe replied. “I’m an American the same as you.”

“But the helmet? And, unless my eyes have gone as bad as my legs, you are a colored man.”

“You’re seeing real good. I’m with the 369th Regiment, all colored, even officers. The army assigned us to the French, and that was a damned good thing for us. Otherwise, we’d have been made into a labor unit digging ditches somewhere.”

“I didn’t know the army even had a colored fighting unit.”

“Sometimes, I wonder if the army even knows,” Joe said bitterly. “I like the French. They treat us like men. When this war’s over, I’m not going back to the States, and if I’m forced to go back, why, I’ll just turn around and come right back.”

“What will you do in France?”

“Been thinking about that. I’d like to get me a job in one of those bistros in Paris. I could be a bartender.”

“Bistro?”

“That’s what the French call a saloon. You must not have been over here very long.”

“Almost three weeks, I think,” said Ace.

“It’s a shame you haven’t been to see Paris. The war will be over and you’ll probably go home without seeing Paris.”

"I don't know what I'll do after the war. Maybe get me a plane. I did circus flying before I joined the army. I've got to find some way to keep flying. You got anymore of that water left?"

"Sure, I do," Joe said as he handed Ace the canteen. He was relieved to see that Ace was not going into shock. Joe had no doubt that the pilot named Ace was a tough young man. Joe also noticed that Ace appeared to be able to talk to him with a natural ease. He had never talked to a white man, and American, in this way before. But then he considered the matter from another angle. The white man was hurt. Maybe when a white man is hurting, he gets real friendly. There was also the possibility that this young man was like the French. Maybe he had somehow escaped the lessons taught early and often.

As he handed back the canteen, Ace said, "You saved my life. I won't forget that."

The war actually ended promptly at eleven o'clock, probably because the soldiers on both sides paid close attention to their watches and were more than happy to declare the slaughter to be over.

Joe heard cheering from both sides and cautiously raised his head to peer over the edge of the shell hole. He saw his platoon standing up in front of the trench. He turned and looked under the wrecked airplane and saw Germans standing up and cheering. He stood up and yelled to the members of his platoon to send out a medic and stretcher bearers. He was alive and so was the pilot.

A team quickly appeared and Ace was gently lifted onto the stretcher. When the party reached the trench line, Ace reached out and grabbed Joe's coat sleeve. "I won't forget," he muttered hoarsely. Joe wondered if he would ever see the young pilot again.

Before the 369th was returned to American control, the French held an honors formation. A representative group from each company in the 369th Regiment was drawn up in formation. Joe Washington stood out in front facing a line of French officers. A French general presented him with a medal for saving the life of an American pilot.

The only Americans present were members of Joe's regiment. There was no official delegation from the American army. That did not bother Joe. If there had been a delegation present, he would have believed strongly that the affair was a staged diplomatic event that had nothing to do with him.

* * *

The early days after the war were different for Ace. The cut on his face healed slowly, and it seemed as if the time would never come when the casts could be removed from his legs. The doctors assured him that he would have no problem walking again, but it would take time for him to fully recover.

In February, he was moved to a hospital in Paris. He thought it was a hard, though funny, joke on him. Here he was in Paris, but trapped in two plaster casts which prevented him from enjoying the experience. Worse yet, he might be shipped back to the States before he ever got a chance to see the city.

The cut on his face finally healed, but the scar would never go away. The nurse, who held up a mirror for him after the bandage was removed for the last time, assured him that the scar did not make him appear to be ugly or disfigured. She told him to think of it as a beauty mark, a mark like women had once used as a contrast to their beauty.

"It makes you look a little older, a man of the world, and a dangerous man, perhaps, especially for women," she said, her hand gently smoothing an errant black curl near the side of his head.

Then one day a week before the casts were to come off and he began the process of learning to walk again, he had a visitor. Colonel Horne was standing by his bed when he awoke from a brief nap.

"How are you doing, Lieutenant?" Colonel Horne asked.

"Major Horne! It's really good to see someone I know. Oh, I see you've been promoted. Congratulations."

"Yes. My promotion came through three days before the war ended. How long are they going to keep you here in this hospital?"

"It seems like I've been here forever," Ace said. "The casts come off in about a week, but they told me that last week. I really would like to get a look at Paris before I get shipped back home."

Colonel Horne moved around and sat on the empty bed next to Ace. "What are you going to do when you get home?"

"I don't know. The only thing I know how to do really well is flying. Maybe I can find a circus and an airplane."

"There are a lot of pilots wondering the same thing," Colonel Horne said. "You could stay in the army. We are going to build a flying force that will be permanent. It will be a hard job, though. Most people still do not understand the need for it."

"Stay in the army? I don't know," replied Ace. "The army is kind of like the circus, in a way, but with lots more regulations."

Colonel Horne laughed. "I've heard the army compared to worse. When you think about it, there are certain comparisons, I suppose."

Ace nodded and smiled and then said, "Somewhere, there must be a way to make a living by flying. Being up in the air is the only time I really feel free."

"I thought you would not be interested in staying in the army," Colonel Horne said. "But I wanted to be sure. I've got some good news for you."

"What's that? Have the doctors told you when these casts come off?"

"Better than that. First of all, your kill on the last day of the war has been confirmed, and you are officially an ace."

Ace shook his head. "I'm sorry about that. I didn't want to knock the German down. He died on the last day of the war."

Colonel Horne replied softly, "It could have been the other way around. You did what you had to do."

"I know," Ace said. "But I wish there had been another way out of it."

Colonel Horne cleared his throat and continued, "Well, this next piece of news is much more pleasant. I got a letter from Basham..."

"Basham? How's the circus doing?"

"Fine. Basham wrote that your birth certificate has been found."

Ace looked puzzled. "I didn't know it was lost. What's this all about?"

As he responded, Colonel Horne stared up at the ceiling. "It seems that somehow, the Clark County Courthouse lost your certificate. When it was recovered, it seems that the certificate stated that you were born in 1898. By my calculation, that makes you of legal age. I am now your ex-guardian."

“This is some of Digby’s work,” Ace said with a laugh.

“I would not be surprised,” Colonel Horne agreed, his gaze returning from what for him was the border between honor and necessity. “Basham and Digby make quite a pair. They must have had some inside help as well, someone who knew how to make certain changes in the records.”

“Anyway,” he continued, “Basham sent a legal copy of the birth certificate. You need to take good care of that. Also, what do you want to do about the money?”

“I’d like to buy my own plane,” Ace said quickly.

“I thought that would be your choice,” Colonel Horne said. “It just happens that I know where there are six Jennies, still in crates, that the Army is going to sell rather than ship them back home.”

“Jennies? Here in France?”

“Right. Someone in Washington got the bright idea that we should train men already in the army to fly, and that the training could be done here in France. The war ended before the program could ever get started. You might be able to get your plane for a couple hundred dollars. If you wish, I could have the money transferred to a French bank here in Paris.”

Ace sat up as straight as he could and all but shouted, “Yes!”

At that point a nurse entered the ward and announced that visiting time was over.

“See?” Ace said. “Regulations! I’m the only person left in this ward, but visiting hours are over.”

“Yes, well the army is still the army,” Colonel Horne replied. “I’ll get on this business and everything should be in order by the time you are up and walking again. By the way, I’m sorry about that scar on your face. If you ever get over into Germany, people will think you are a university student. They are fond of dueling, and a scar on the cheek is a sign of honor.”

Ace shook his head. “Sometimes I don’t think the Germans are playing with a full deck of cards. But talking about the Germans and the war reminds me. I need to find a soldier in the 369th Regiment. He saved my life when I crashed.”

“The 369th? I do not believe I know about that regiment.”

“It’s a colored regiment, American, but it served under French command.”

“I did not know we had those people serving in combat. I’ll see what I can find out. Here comes the nurse again, so I’ll take my leave. Keep your spirits up. You will be flying in no time at all.”

After Colonel Horne left, Ace stared up at the ceiling. He knew every inch of that ceiling from the dreary weeks he had spent recovering in the hospital. Colonel Horne had stared at the ceiling, too, when he was explaining about the discovery of a new birth certificate. Colonel Horne had sought to use the ceiling as a protective boundary. Ace searched for openings in the boundary.

He thought it odd that Colonel Horne seemed to know nothing about the colored outfit, but then, it was a very large war. No one could possibly know everything about the war and the people who fought it. Ace also found it interesting that Colonel Horne thought Basham and Digby had someone in Clark County who helped them make their scheme work. The only person he could think of who could have made the necessary changes at the courthouse was Miss Castor. He could understand Basham and Digby.

They lived in a different world even if they pretended to be conforming to the laws of the established world.

Ace could find no answers to questions he barely understood, and so he turned to more pleasant thoughts. He would have his own plane, and actually put it together with his own hands. He would know every nut, bolt, wire, and engine part. He would fly again and soon!

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The casts came off a week later. Ace learned to walk without lurching or stumbling. Colonel Horne kept his word. The money was transferred to a French bank. The American Embassy in Paris was most helpful. Ace got his passport and his discharge from the army. He even got the cooperation of the Embassy, the bank, and the army in his successful effort to buy one of the surplus planes. The bank obtained the necessary papers for him to own and fly an airplane in France. Ace was classified as a tourist. The purchase of the airplane was accomplished with a remarkably quick movement of the necessary paperwork through the proper channels.

It was spring in Paris, and Ace was a young man with an airplane and while not rich, he had quite enough money to meet his modest needs. It did not take long for him to become a part of a circle of young people who found him to be interesting. He had an airplane which was much more exciting than even the most exotic motor car. They found his naiveté and casual disregard for mannerisms and stylish dress to be refreshing. They did not see the scar on his face as a disfigurement. They saw it as an adornment. Some even thought of him as another Santos-Dumont, and hoped he would not meet a similar tragic end. The more adventurous young women paid generously for rides in the Jenny. Ace knew that Mr. Griggs would be turning over in his grave. He had never understood why his mentor had been so opposed to women flying.

It was this circle of friends who led him into a darker side of Paris night life. On a whim, they would go to establishments that catered to a clientele whose names and pictures were of great interest to the French authorities. The regulars in these places were considered to be dangerous people. Curiously, there was no trouble when the outsiders came in to enjoy the atmosphere. Ace found that he was comfortable in these surroundings. The people were not unlike those he knew from his time with the circus. Eventually, he became a regular, also. He was accepted. The scar on his face gave him a cachet with the others who were certain that the scar was the result of a knife fight. Among themselves, they referred to him as "*Balafre*" even though he insisted that he got the scar as the result of a plane crash.

An unfortunate incident served to greatly increase his standing within this darker circle. Early one evening, a man attempted to rob him at knife point. It so happened that the event was witnessed by one of the regulars who quickly informed the others of the outcome. As he saw it, *Balafre* took a slash across his left arm in order to grab the man's knife arm. In one swift motion, he took the arm in both his hands and then brought it down across his knee which he was raising at the same time. The witness said he could hear the bone in the arm break. Then, as part of the swift motion, *Balafre* hit the man's jaw a hard blow with his fist. The witness also claimed that he could hear the jaw break.

Then, holding a handkerchief around the cut on his arm, *Balafre* strolled away. He did not seek the assistance of the authorities! Obviously, this was a man who should not be taken lightly.

The story got back to Ace's friends in the more upscale circle, only it was not quite the same story. The one would-be robber had multiplied into no fewer than five or six, all armed with knives. There were also interesting revisions in the number of Germans he had shot down. The new numbers varied between twenty-five and thirty. His efforts to tell the truth simply added substance to the revisions.

It was while Ace still had the bandage on his arm that his young friends informed him that he was in for a treat, a taste of life that he must find terribly interesting. They were all invited for an evening at a chateau outside Paris where a certain Countess du Chane was, on occasion, in residence. By the time they arrived at the chateau, his friends had informed him that the countess was an older woman, a Eurasian, her mother being Vietnamese and her father, French, and that she was extraordinarily beautiful. Some of the younger women in the group did make the point that she was no longer young, but the men came quite quickly to the defense of the Countess by saying that she was not old, but her experiences had obviously been of an Old World nature.

Ace thought himself prepared for whatever was to come, but when he was introduced to the Countess, he was wide-eyed, and he stuttered badly. He bowed awkwardly. To his eyes and mind, she was surely the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She was nearly as tall as he, and her face had a slightly oval quality and was framed by long black hair that sought freedom by tumbling down over her shoulders. Her skin was a pale yellow, but the least turn of her head seemed to make the yellow deepen but only for a second before finding again the softness of ivory. Her eyes were surprisingly large, but narrowing where the ends of the eyes bent back toward the sides of her face.

Ace could not keep himself from looking down from her face. She wore a shimmering blue, close-fitting dress that was floor length. There was a high collar, but from the bottom of the collar to her waistline, there was a narrow opening, and shadows barely seen played across the thin line of visible skin. She smiled and turned ever so slightly, thus exposing the long slit in the dress that came up from the floor almost to her waist.

The young people thought it was great fun. Ace was painfully flummoxed. After all, they had promised him an experience of the first order, and they had delivered upon their promise. The moment was only of the very briefest time, but to those in that time, it easily seemed to be forever.

The Countess smiled at Ace, and then reaching out with her hand, she slowly traced her finger over his scar. Her smile quickly faded away, and for a moment there was a look of pain in her eyes, a look that suggested she could somehow feel the pain that he had felt when he was hurt.

"So much pain," she said softly. "So much pain and buried so deeply." She gave her head a gentle shake and the smile reappeared. She took his hands and said, "Come." She led him to her boudoir. Now it was the turn of the young friends to be surprised. They were fond of Ace, but he was a bit of a bumpkin, after all, airplane notwithstanding, and the Countess was probably one of the most sophisticated women in all of Paris, and that was saying a great deal, indeed.

They stayed at the chateau for several hours, but neither Ace nor the Countess rejoined them. By that time, Ace and the Countess had tasted champagne and each others lips. He

was no longer a bumbling young man. Before the night was over, she would teach him much more. By the time he left three days later, he was still Ace. Three years, not three days, would be the minimum amount of time that he might need to be polished to a reasonable level of suaveness that might be passable in better circles. In other matters, he was a natural student, an eager student who was blessed to be instructed by a master.

At the end of three days, the Countess said that she had to go away for a while. She would return and they would be together again, someday, perhaps soon. As a parting gift, she gave him a gold cigarette lighter. It had a design worked into one side. Ace saw it as an ivory dot and an ebony dot, both somehow intertwined. When he looked puzzled, she smiled and said that it was a Tao symbol and that at first, she thought it might be the two of them, but now she was certain that was not the case.

As she pressed the lighter into his hand, she again traced the line of his scar with a finger. "No, my love. It is not us, but it is you. You have two faces, one with a scar and one without, but both are you. Never let one deny the other, for with only one, you will be a half a man." She paused and laughed. "Even a half...well, that is understood." She kissed him and they parted.

Ace knew he was in love with her, but he also knew that there was no future in this love. He thought Paris could be very cruel. He rejoined his friends and resumed the excursions into the other Paris that was filled with the night and interesting people. He was young and if Paris could be cruel, it was also wonderfully effective at healing what had broken.

Then one day not long after the attempted robbery, several of Ace's friends on the darker side came to ask his help. They had a crisis. They needed to get a small package to Calais that day. It was very important. Could he fly their messenger with the small package to Calais?

Ace quickly agreed to do them a favor. He had never been to Calais and this would be a good reason to go. They insisted that he would be amply rewarded. They went to the small air field outside of Paris where Ace kept his Jenny. When it came time to climb up into the front cockpit, the messenger collapsed from fright at the thought of going up in an airplane. None of his other three associates were willing to take his place. The need was urgent, and they decided to trust the young American to do the job for them. They made it quite clear that the reward would truly be ample, and the consequences for not performing would also be ample.

Ace understood very little of the awkward English used by the Frenchmen, but he did comprehend the general thrust of the one-sided and excited conversation.

Ace smiled and nodded. He took the package and climbed up into the cockpit. The trip was uneventful. The package was delivered on time. Word of the arrival was telegraphed back to Paris, and the little group stopped worrying and began celebrating what they believed was a new asset to their business activities. When Ace returned from Calais, he was truly among friends who by the simple act of passing to him a well-stuffed envelope, became what Ace called his business associates.

It was summer now in Paris. The air was warm, and the sun was bright. Ace was in good spirits. One morning as he stepped out from his apartment, he said aloud and to no one in particular, "Paris is the grandest circus in the world!"

Chapter 9

Paris, 1921

Two men stood in the shade of the main hangar which was the largest structure at the small air field just outside Paris where Ace kept his plane. They stood in the shade even though the day was pleasantly cool. They were the kind of men who saw the shade as a substitute, a poor substitute at that, for darker shadows in which they could find comfort.

There were several other buildings, none of which were much more than sheds, each capable of giving cover to a single plane. The large hangar was used mainly as a place where a plane could be worked on by mechanics and pilots. There was seldom more than one plane in the hangar at any time.

It was not long before the two men saw a speck in the sky. The speck became a dot and then slowly became an airplane. They moved out of the shade and shielded their eyes with their hands as the plane circled, landed, and taxied up to the front of a small shed. The two men hurried over to the plane.

Ace climbed out of his plane. He had a small satchel in one hand. As always, he was dressed in his whipcord pants, cuffs falling out of his half Wellington boots, a yellow shirt, red scarf, leather jacket worn open, leather helmet, and goggles.

There was no small talk. Ace smiled as he handed over the satchel to one of the men whose name was Gaston. He took the satchel, opened it, and took out a small package that was sealed. He broke the seal, opened the package and carefully scanned what was inside.

He nodded, snapped his fingers, and held out a hand to the second man, whose name was Paul. He pulled an envelope from his coat pocket and handed it to Gaston. He then transferred the envelope to Ace.

"Thanks," Ace said as he stuck the envelope in his hip pocket without opening it.

"In two days we have a package for you to fly," said Gaston. He spoke in English, but even so, Ace had to ask him to repeat the message.

"Another package," the Frenchman said. "This time for our people in Marseilles. A long trip."

"No problem," Ace replied. "The weather looks good for a few days. Have your people had any luck finding the colored man?"

"Not yet, but we will find him if he is in Paris. We could even find him in your country now. We have new friends in New York."

"If you find him, you know where to call me?"

"*Oui*. Remember, we meet here in two days. At dawn."

Ace smiled. "Dawn patrol!"

The Frenchmen departed and Ace went about his routine work. Two mechanics helped him push the plane into a small hangar. They watched as he rolled out a motorcycle from the hangar and rode away. The motorcycle was Ace's favorite means of travel on the

ground. It came close to being up in the air. It was a British machine that had served hard duty during the war. The man who sold it to Ace assured him that it had been the motorcycle that Paul Maze had used and therefore was worth far more than the asking price. Ace had heard of the Frenchman who, despite lack of training and credentials, had become a valued member of a British Army staff. He wondered how many such motorcycles Digby could have sold if he had been in the right place at the right time.

His first stop once in Paris was a small florist's shop where he knew the people spoke English. The woman behind the counter was not young, but neither was she old. When Ace entered, she smiled, and her hand instinctively pushed a lock of hair so that it fell gracefully toward her right eye brow.

"You are back. Red roses as usual?"

"Hello. That's right. I've already got a bottle of wine and chocolates."

The woman carefully selected the roses "Flowers, wine, chocolates." She looked up at him for a second and smiled. "You probably do not even need them. After all, you are a flier. You move across the sky while other men crawl about on the ground."

"Maybe someday I'll take you up for a ride."

"I think so, but maybe I would be too afraid." She handed him the carefully wrapped bundle of roses. "Here, and enjoy."

With his other hand, Ace reached into a pocket and pulled out several bills and put them down on the counter. "That should cover the cost."

"It is too much. Why do you not ask how much so you do not overpay?"

Ace had reached the door as she spoke. He turned and smiled. "I never have to ask."

As he left, the woman said softly, speaking aloud to herself, "No, you would never have to ask."

The flowers were for a woman named Rochelle. She was in her late twenties and tall. She was almost as tall as Ace, and if she wore heels, she would have been maybe an inch taller, but she never wore heels. She was a photographer, a model, and sometimes a student. Her hair was blonde, but not successfully so. Her natural hair color was dark brown, and she hated it. She and some friends were together one evening, and they decided to transform her into a blonde. There was too much wine and too much peroxide. The result was a near disaster. Professional work achieved some results, but she often wore large hats or carefully tucked scarves when out in the public.

She and Ace met at a sidewalk café on a cloudy, but warm day. They drank and laughed, and when the rain came, they moved indoors and continued to drink and laugh. That night, Ace moved in with her.

The apartment was small, two rooms, and they were modest rooms. There was a much appreciated touch of luxury. The apartment had its own bathroom. Rochelle had turned most of the place into one extended darkroom which sometimes reeked of developing chemicals. Ace did not mind the inconveniences. He was seldom there for more than two or three days a week at the most.

Ace offered to pay the rent and food bills, but Rochelle refused his offer. "It is true that sometimes I have been rented, but I have never been a kept woman."

They agreed to split costs, but Ace managed to pay more than his share. They drank a better wine, and the cheese was the best he could find. Sometimes, he left a small amount of money on a counter or table. It was not an act of carelessness. He had learned to combine generosity, which came to him by instinct, with a caution that was learned from

experience. The robber who gained a broken arm and a broken jaw could testify that Ace was not careless with his money.

It was because of Ace that Rochelle had made a career breakthrough with her photography. She made a character portrait of Ace that proved to be very successful. A Paris magazine printed it, and she got a showing in a small but important gallery as a result. For the portrait, she posed Ace at the small table they used as a dining table. She was able to use a candle which gave extra light to the side of his face that was boyish and innocent, leaving the side with the scar on the darker, but still discernable side. She added a burning cigarette in an ashtray, the smoke curling up and adding to the mystery of the photo. The result was a very dramatic black and white photograph. She had printed under the photo, "One Man, Twice." She had recently seen a revival of Rostand's "Cyrano de Bergerac," and remembered Roxanne's last lines about loving one man and losing him twice. There were other people who saw the photo in the magazine. The photo was clipped from a magazine and added to a thickening dossier.

Rochelle was waiting for him. She opened the door before he knocked and helped him with his flowers, the wine, the candy, and a bag of bread, cheese, and onions. She was dressed in a gown that he had purchased for her during one of his trips to Marseilles. It was a delicate gown, and the color was that of a pale sunrise, a shade of yellow almost impossible to duplicate. There was embroidery of a color bolder than lavender, yet more subtle than plum. It covered everything from the high stiff collar about the neck and down to the tops of her feet and concealed nothing.

She handed him the cork screw and while he opened the bottle of wine, she put the roses in a vase. "How long will you stay this time?"

"Two days."

"That is not long."

"I know." He poured wine into the glasses on the table. "I thought about you on the way here. It made the trip shorter. I knew you would be wearing that gown."

"I like wearing it. When I put it on, I know you will be here soon."

He put down his glass and took her empty hand in his and pressed it palm up to his lips. The tip of his tongue found a life line and delicately traced it. She shivered and then they locked in an embrace that meant the wine would have to wait. It was a red wine and really needed to breathe.

At the wrong time, the phone rang, and Rochelle held Ace tight and would not let him move. "There are supposed to be bells ringing, let them ring on in celebration."

"I better answer," Ace said. "There might be a change in plans." He pulled loose from her embrace.

Rochelle quickly rose from the bed and hurried to answer the phone. "It could be for me, you know. I live here all the time. You live here some of the time."

Ace smiled. He watched her move with great interest for she was a very attractive woman. At the same time, he wondered who called when he was not in residence and put the thought out of his mind. Rochelle was a free woman. Neither he nor she could be owned.

She answered in French and he understood because she said "*Oui*," and then after a pause, repeated the word. She turned to Ace and held out the phone. "For you."

Ace took the phone. He recognized the voice and knew who was speaking, even though the caller did not give his name. The conversation was brief. The colored man

named Joe had been found. He worked in a bistro in Paris. Then followed the address and a reminder, "Remember. In two days we meet."

He returned to the bed, stopping on the way to bring the two glasses of wine along.

"Who was that?" Rochelle asked as she took a glass from his hand. "He had the coldest voice I've ever heard."

"It was one of my business associates. They found a friend I've been looking for since the end of the war."

"Oh! Who is she?"

"It's a he, and he's the colored guy who saved my life on the last day of the war. He risked his own life to save me."

Rochelle reached over with her hand and softly traced the scar on his face with a finger. "When you got this?"

"Yes, he's the one who pulled me out of the cockpit. Risked his own life to do it. I haven't seen him since. I ended up in a hospital for several months. I really didn't know if he stayed in France like he wanted, or if he got shipped back to the States."

"So, he is in Paris? Sometimes I think all strange Americans come to Paris. There are so many since the end of the war. Does he fly?"

"No. I think he was a bartender before the war. He ended up in the army, an all-colored regiment that wore French helmets and served with the French."

"Maybe he is now more French than American?" Rochelle said. "Can he speak French?"

"Well, after all this time and working in Paris, he's probably learned," and then he realized that Rochelle was smiling at him. "In my case, it is different," he protested.

"Why did he not want to go home?"

"Life's kind of tough for colored people in the States. He said that here in France, he was treated like a man."

"Why are you people so mean to Negroes? I never understood that."

"I've never been mean to anyone! Hell, when I was young, I got treated almost like I was colored. Maybe that's why I never felt an urge to return."

"Sometimes, I think you can be mean to women," Rochelle said, and then hastily added, "But, you do not mean to be mean."

Ace laughed. "I mean to be mean or not mean. Sometimes your English is like my French."

She threw a pillow at him. "You have no French!"

He rolled half out of bed as he dodged the pillow and knocked over his wine glass which was still half full. The wine made a pool on the floor and his foot stepped in it as he rolled back on the bed and took her in his arms.

Later that afternoon, he left the apartment. He was just about to start his motorcycle when he noticed that he had left one of his saddle-bags unbuckled. As he pulled the belt tight, he saw out of the corner of his eye a small man standing on the sidewalk two buildings away. As Ace finished securing the saddle-bag, he watched as the man worked very hard to appear normal, a casual bystander perhaps looking for the proper address. Ace smiled as he considered the problem police in any country have when they try to appear inconspicuous.

He started the motorcycle and rode away on his quest.

Chapter 10

The address given to Ace by his associates took him to a part of Paris where tourists seldom visited. The streets were narrow. The buildings were worn down, gray with age, and in a state of disrepair. There were no flowers, and the air was heavy with the smells from nearby factories.

The bistro was no exception. Ace pulled his motorcycle up on the sidewalk in front. He paused before entering. Doubt had entered his mind. Was this a good idea, after all? Maybe it would be better to allow the past remain the past. As he usually did, he pushed the doubt aside and took the first step toward the door with no hint of any hesitation.

Inside was a narrow room with four tables along one wall and three more on the other wall. Toward the back of the room was a small bar with four stools and behind the bar was a partition that shielded the room from what was obviously a kitchen. Ace could smell food cooking. There was something different about the odors. He was not overly fond of most of the dishes prepared by French cooks in the city.

There were two old men sitting at a table in the corner formed by the right wall and the front wall. They were men who were old enough to remember two wars against the Germans and a ghastly war between French people and French people, and some of that war was fought in the street outside the bistro. They nursed almost empty glasses of red wine.

“Something smells good! Anybody at home here?”

Ace called out.

From behind the partition, a voice answered, “Be out in a second. You sound like a Yank!”

“No hurry, I’m here to have a drink with an old friend.”

Joe came around the partition, wiping his hands on a towel. “What are you and your old friend going to have?” He paused and looked at the man on the other side of the bar. “Well, I’ll be goddamned! It’s you, the kid who got shot down!”

“That’s me,” Ace replied. “But I’m getting older.”

As Ace spoke Joe hurried around the bar and picked him up in a great bear hug. “It’s good to see you. I haven’t seen anyone from the old days.” Joe then remembered that Ace’s legs had been broken in the crash and he gently set him down and backed away a step. “You get healed up okay? Your legs were really busted up.”

“I’m fine. Let’s uncork a bottle and celebrate.”

“Damn right.” Joe hurried back behind the counter and drew out a bottle from a rack below.

“Good stuff and it’s on me.” Joe uncorked the bottle and got two glasses and joined Ace at a table. He poured wine, and then looked over at the two old men. He walked over to their table and filled their glasses for which they were grateful.

In bad French, Joe explained to the old men that his friend with the scar was a war hero. He had shot down five *Boche* airplanes. The two men looked over at Ace and raised their glasses in salute. Ace did the same, acknowledging their gesture of respect.

When Joe returned, Ace said, "You've learned how to speak French?"

"Had to, but I'm not very good at it, but I get by." Joe looked at Ace and said, "That cut on your face was really nasty. I figured the docs would have a hard time with it. What about your legs? You must have been in casts for a long time."

"Too long," Ace said. "But it turned out okay. By the time I got out of the hospital and up and around, everyone else had gone home. I was able to get discharged here."

"I wasn't so damned lucky." Joe said. "I had to return to the States with the regiment. I probably wouldn't have made it back if it wasn't for my sister, Cassie. She pulled some strings and got us to Paris and a job in this bar."

"Your sister?"

"Yeah, Cassie. She's three years younger than me. It was a good thing she got out of the States when she did. The government thought she was a Communist."

"I read something in the Herald about the government raising hell about the Reds. They are probably rounding up a lot of people who aren't Reds."

Joe laughed. "That's the problem. Cassie really is a Communist, or at least she thinks she is, always spouting slogans. She's always got a meeting to go to here. She has a lot of friends, but she's a good help for my wife."

"You got a wife?"

"Damn right," Joe said as he got up and gave the old men another splash of wine in their glasses, and then refilled the glasses for Ace and himself. "Prettiest little French woman you ever saw. Course, right now, she's about to have a baby."

"How about that! That's great!" Ace said. "Looks to me like you've about put it all together. You know, what we talked about that day in the shell hole. Remember?"

"I sure do," Joe replied. "Everything about that damned war is just like it was yesterday."

"That's true, even though I was only in the war for a couple of weeks. Remember how we talked about what we were going to do after the war?"

"Yeah, I remember that. It took some doing, but I did get back to Paris and I'm working in a bar. I don't own my own yet, but maybe someday."

"I got lucky, too," Ace said. "I got my own airplane. I have it parked out in a small air strip just outside the city. Hey, we've almost killed off this bottle. Mr. Bartender, let's have some more bottles. Get me one, you one, and the old-timers over there; get them a bottle, too. And make it your best. I'm buying."

"You sure about that?" Joe asked. "You must be in the money! How about two more bottles? I've got to work tonight so I better go a little easy."

"Okay, two of your best, then," Ace agreed as he pulled out a wad of francs and put it on the table. "Take whatever you need to pay the bill."

Joe carefully selected the right amount. "Whatever it is that you do, it must pay well."

Ace laughed. "I'm a glorified delivery boy. I run errands for some business associates here in Paris, mainly. It was my associates who found you. I looked all over Paris for you without any luck."

"So that's what all the buzz on the grapevine was about," Joe said. "Man, I was worried."

"I don't follow you. What were you worried about?"

"What you call your associates. Word was out on the street that they were looking for a colored American in Paris. I don't know how much you know about your friends, but they are like those people in New York and Chicago, only instead of a one way ride in a car, they can arrange a one way ride in a boat on the Seine."

Ace pulled up his shirt sleeve and showed Joe the scar on his arm. "There's always a little danger everywhere in Paris. A guy tried to rob me, but it didn't work out very well for him. He wasn't one of my associates."

Joe nodded agreement. "We get some bad ones in here, but not very often. It's a tough neighborhood, but people here are mostly honest and hard working. They just don't have a lot of money."

"I know. These are good times, but there's a lot of people who barely make it. That's why I like my work. I fly, I get paid. They don't ask very many questions, and I'm damned careful not to ask any questions."

Joe brought two bottles from under the counter and opened them. He took one over to the table and presented it to the two old men. When they realized that the bottle was a gift, both stood up and raised their glasses to Ace. He stood and bowed slightly in return.

When Joe sat back down at the table, Ace said, "It's too bad you have to work tonight."

"Yeah. Listen, I've got an idea. I get some time off for dinner. Why don't you come over to my place for dinner? You can meet Elaine, my wife, and Cassie."

"I don't know about that," Ace said. "Your wife might not appreciate having to set another plate at the table. Why don't we go out for dinner? It's on me."

"It would take too much time coming and going," Joe said. "Most of these French restaurants don't serve anyone for at least an hour. They sell more wine that way."

"Then we should eat here. I smelled some good food cooking when I came in."

"Oh, damn! I forgot all about the food! Oh, well. Can't hurt barbeque, anyway. Got my own special sauce. The French love it."

"I knew when I walked in the door that the food I was smelling wasn't French," Ace said. "It reminded me of the circus cooking."

Joe got up from his chair and turned to go to the kitchen to see what could be salvaged. He stopped and picked up his glass, raised it, and said loudly, "To the goddamned war!"

Ace stood up and raised his glass. "I'll drink to that!"

They drank and Joe refilled their glasses. He raised his glass and blurted out in his version of the French language, "*Morte the goddamned Boche!*"

Ace laughed and said emphatically, "I'll drink to that every time."

They did not toast alone. The two older Frenchmen were able to understand Joe's version of French and shared the sentiment. They rose and saluted with their glasses. One of them started to sing the "Marseilles," but stopped when his friend shook his head, no.

* * *

Joe had to return to work. He was able to send a boy with a message to Elaine. The owner of the bistro took over behind the counter while Joe worked in the kitchen. Ace watched as the owner, a tall, thin man with a droopy mustache, and a way of looking at

people as if they were about to cheat him, served the handful of customers who were coming in for a drink and food. Ace looked at the bottle on his table. It was nearly half full, but he decided that he needed fresh air more than he needed another glass of wine. He got up and pointed to the table. The owner saw him and nodded. He understood that Ace had already paid his bill.

Outside, Ace was quickly reminded that this part of Paris had not experienced fresh air for a long time. He checked his motorcycle. It had been untouched. He strolled slowly for two blocks, crossed the street, and came back on the other side. It had been a good day, but a long one. He would sleep late tomorrow and then be ready to fly the next day. He thought about calling Rochelle, but decided that it would not be a good idea. She needed her own time, although he knew that her idea of her own time was part of a way of living that had little room for him. She was going to be successful, and he did not see how he could be a part of her world and still fly. There was only one freedom and that was up in the air like a bird. He could not imagine himself spending an evening in an art gallery with people whose words did not really give a hint to the thoughts behind the words. He understood that Rochelle's idea of freedom was, for her, the same as flying was for him. He was fond of her, but he knew that the time was coming, maybe even had already come, when they would follow separate paths. It was a sad thought, and this day was not meant for such thoughts.

Joe had found his path and was a happy man. Ace thought back to the people he had known. Each had succeeded, in a way, just like Joe. Horne had the Army Air Service, Basham had his circus. Griggs had never quite reached his dream, his own flying circus, but he had been his own man. He smiled as he remembered that there were no old pilots. He could not picture himself as an old pilot and that, he concluded, made the here and now even more important. He thought briefly of Miss Castor and the orphanage. There were still drafts of money being sent to Miss Castor. He wished he knew where Daisy was in Chicago. He would send money to her, too, but he did not know where to send it. He also remembered that she had given him twelve dollars. Sometimes, she appeared in his dreams when he slept.

When he returned to the bistro, Joe and his family were waiting at a table. Three other tables on the other wall were occupied. There was the low murmur of discreet conversations. The owner stood behind the counter and watched closely.

Joe rose from his chair. "I thought you had gone off somewhere and forgot to come back. I saw the motorcycle outside and figured it was yours, so you must be around here somewhere. Elaine, Cassie, this is my friend, Ace. Ace, this is my wife, Elaine, and Cassie, my sister. Sit down. I'll bring out the food." He hurried off to the kitchen.

Ace sat down and for a few seconds there was a silence during which time the strangers tried to find something to say to each other.

Cassie broke the thin silence. "Joe says you are a pilot." It was a statement that implied a question as a means of opening a door to further conversation.

"Yeah, I've been flying since I was sixteen years old."

Elaine said admiringly, "You were a hero in the war like Joe."

Ace smiled. Elaine was a pretty woman with large, soft eyes and a dimpled chin. She was very pregnant, and he noticed that the wine glass in front of her was empty. "I was not in the war very long. Just a few weeks. It was people like Joe who were there for months who were the heroes."

“Did you know Joe was decorated for bravery by the French for saving your life?” asked Cassie.

“No, I didn’t know that. Joe never mentioned it earlier.”

“He doesn’t talk much about the war,” Elaine said, “Except when he talks about you taking on four *Boche* at one time.”

“That wasn’t very heroic,” Ace laughed. “I was trying to get away.”

Cassie smiled. “You’re saying you ran the wrong way and became a hero!”

“Something like that.” Cassie was shorter than Joe, but not quite of the same stocky build. She was probably close to being an attractive woman, but she obviously worked hard to present a more stern countenance than was warranted.

Joe returned with a tray and placed dishes of food and silverware on the table. “Here’s a little extra serving of my homemade sauce. It’s good for about everything.”

As he set the table, he looked at Ace and continued, “After I went back into the kitchen earlier, when I thought I had ruined a batch of cooking, I felt a little woozy. We drank too much too quick. But, a good slug of this sauce cleared my head. It must burn up the alcohol.”

As they ate, Cassie asked Ace, “Do you ever fly to Berlin?”

“Never been there. I’ve flown to Brussels, Rotterdam, and Amsterdam, though.”

“I’d like to go to Berlin, but the Party says to stay here and wait.”

“For what?” Joe asked. “We ain’t going to have any Spartacus business here. The French are having too much fun getting all the money they can out of the crowd of politicians here in Paris making a treaty. Wish we could get in on some of that money.”

“They better have their fun while they can,” Cassie warned. “There’s going to be a big change.”

Joe waved his fork like a scepter. “Let’s not get on this revolution stuff. This is a happy time, and by god, I’m going to be happy tonight. I got family, friend, wine, and a full belly.”

“Not as much as mine, I think,” Elaine said.

After the laughter subsided, Ace said, “You speak good English.”

“Joe and Cassie teach me,” replied Elaine. “And I teach them the French. Sometimes I think Cassie learns better than Joe.”

“That’s for sure,” Joe nodded and then turning to Ace, “Do you speak French?”

“Not very much, I’m afraid. I guess I’ve always been lucky enough to meet French people who speak English.” He turned to Elaine and asked, “How soon will the baby be here? When it comes, we’ll really celebrate.”

“Oh, I do not know for certain. Maybe next week, maybe tomorrow. It will be a girl, I think. I will name her Angelique or maybe Roxanne.”

Joe shook his head. “It’s going to be a boy. We might even name him Ace after our friend here.”

“That sure deserves another bottle of your best,” Ace announced and then to Elaine, “After the baby comes, we will have a grand party.”

“I don’t think we should do another bottle tonight,” Joe said. “The old boy who owns this bar is starting to look at his watch. We better wait for another time for the next bottle.” He smiled as he looked at Cassie. “It’ll be different after the revolution, right?”

“You’ll see. The revolution could come anytime,” Cassie answered.

Ace put his glass down and looked at Joe. “Does this joint make any money?”

"A little. It could do better, but old Pierre there isn't very fond of work. He's been talking about selling out and moving to the country."

"What would it take to buy him out?" Ace asked.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe twenty-five thousand francs."

Ace laughed. "What's that mean in real money? I never could get the exchange rate right. It's like the language, I guess."

"About seven thousand dollars," Cassie said.

"Is it worth it?" Ace asked.

Joe thought for a moment and then replied, "Yeah, probably. The kitchen's pretty good. There's an apartment upstairs that goes with it. It's got a bathroom and there's a small toilet room downstairs here for the customers. The doors for both toilet room and the stairs are part of the kitchen, though. Old Pierre could put a couple of small tables outside. He's not exactly Mister Personality. He doesn't draw trade in the door."

Ace stood up. "Then let's buy the place!"

Joe laughed, "Where are we going to get that kind of money?"

Ace pulled out his checkbook and laid it on the table. "Right here. I've had a very good year." He winked at Cassie, "I made some very good investments."

Cassie was not amused. She edged her chair back from the table and folded her arms across her chest. "This is just great," she responded. "Joe gets a different person to exploit his labor. He's traveled three thousand miles to get an American white man for a boss."

"You don't understand," Ace argued. "I'm not going to be the owner. Joe is. This is not a loan; it's a gift from me to Joe."

Elaine looked at Ace, "A gift?"

Joe leaned over and whispered in her ear. She struggled to her feet and reached across the table with both hands and pulled Ace's head toward her and then she kissed both his cheeks, her lips brushing lightly on the scar.

Ace stepped back and laughed. "That was worth seven thousand dollars anywhere on the globe."

"You must be some kind of a plutocrat," Cassie muttered. "Waving money around like that. And a gift? Anyway, it won't work. Joe's not French. It would be against the law!"

Cassie's triumph was short-lived. Ace replied, "No, Joe's not French, but I don't think Elaine here is from Patagonia!" He looked at Joe, "You can own the bar in Elaine's name. She will be the owner of record." He then smiled at Elaine and said, "You will be the owner."

Elaine understood. Her hand touched her cheek, and she exclaimed, "I am a bourgeoisie!"

Cassie shook her head slowly. "Just what we needed, another enemy of the people. Poor Elaine." She turned to Ace and in a sharpened voice asked, "Why you doing this? What's in it for you? There's got to be a hook in this someplace, a big, shiny, seven thousand dollar hook."

For a second, a flash of anger crossed Ace's face. Then it was gone. However, when he spoke, there was an edge to his voice.

"There's no hook. I was a dead man waiting to die that last day of the war. Your brother risked his life to save mine. He could have been killed trying to save me. Don't you understand? It was the last day. We all knew it. All he had to do was play it safe and

stay in the trench. I'm alive and I'm doing what I've always wanted to do, and I'm making money doing it. It's like making a dream come true. Joe wants his own bar in Paris. What the hell! Why not? I've got the money, and I owe him a blood debt that I can never really repay."

Ace realized that he had made quite a speech and was suddenly embarrassed. He finished by mumbling, "Or something like that," and then sat down and took a long drink from his wine glass.

They laughed. Even Cassie smiled.

"I didn't know you knew so many words," Joe said. "There is something that worries me, though."

"What's that?" Ace asked

"Well, it sounds like a great deal, being a gift and all, but I don't want to get involved with those guys you call your business associates. You must have figured out a way to keep them out of your life, but a bar is different."

"Yeah, we could be in something like they got in Chicago," Cassie added.

Ace thought for a moment, and then replied. "I don't think there's anything to worry about. There's no problem with my doing a little business on the side. They all have their extra sources of income that doesn't involve their big business. And that's another thing to consider, Joe. While this is a big deal for you, it wouldn't be for them."

Joe still had his doubts, but he looked at Elaine and saw that she was still in a state of barely suppressed excitement. It would mean so much for her. If there was trouble, he would just have to deal with it. With Ace to help him, he was reasonably sure they could handle any problems.

He stood and raised his glass, and from his seat across the table, Ace stood and raised his glass.

"Let's buy the goddamned place!" Joe shouted and then quickly looked around to see if old Pierre was watching.

"I'll drink to that," Ace responded.

The deal was done, and even Cassie took a sip of wine at the conclusion of the toast. "What are you going to call this new place?" Cassie asked.

"I've got a name," Joe said. "I've had it since I started work here in Paris. We'll call it Joe's American Bar, and we'll have the best barbeque in Paris."

Elaine looked troubled, but quickly recovered. "Joe's American Bar," she said softly. Then she laughed and said, "Maybe we have the only barbeque in Paris, yes?"

Later that night, Ace walked Elaine slowly back to the small apartment she and Joe shared with Cassie. She seemed troubled. Ace asked her if there was a problem about buying the business, and she responded "no." Then she added, "It is the little one inside me. I think she wants out."

As they cleaned up after closing the bistro, Cassie told Joe that something was bothering Elaine. "I think it's got to do with the name for this place. I like it, but it does seem strange, though."

"What do you mean?" asked Joe.

"You being here in Paris because you don't want to go back to the States where you get treated worse than a dog, and then you turn right around and tell everyone in Paris you're an American. It just doesn't figure."

Joe looked at Cassie. He was puzzled by what she said, but then replied, "Lord, Cassie, there ain't nothing easy when you're around."

After Joe locked up, they walked the short distance to the apartment. They walked in silence until Cassie said, "Maybe it's not such a bad idea after all."

"What do you mean?" Joe asked cautiously.

"Ace might just as well spend that money on the bar," she replied. "He will still have enough for what he needs." She stopped walking, thought for a second, and then said, "Does he even have a place to live in Paris?"

"I don't know. He stays out at the air field, I guess. He never mentioned any place."

The apartment was small, two rooms. Cassie had the bedroom and Joe and Elaine had a bed in the larger room that served as a bedroom and a kitchen. Between the bed and the kitchen were a table and four chairs that functioned as both dining area and living room.

Joe was glad when the lights were out and he was in bed snuggled up to Elaine. He could tell that she was not asleep yet.

"It's been a long day," he whispered.

"*Oui.*" Elaine said nothing more, but Joe thought he heard a snuffle.

He reached over and gently touched her cheek with his stubby fingers. There were tears.

"What's wrong, baby?" Joe asked as he propped himself up on an elbow and tried to see her face in the darkness.

"Nothing."

"Is it the bar? Cassie said she thought you were unhappy about the name."

"I am happy about the bar. Joe's American Bar is a good name. You must frame your medal and hang it in the bar, though. You will be both French, then, and American."

"Then why are you crying?"

"When you said the name, I was frightened again."

"What? What are you scared about? I'm here. There ain't nothing going to hurt you."

"That is it. That is what I am frightened about. I am afraid you will go back to your home in America and leave me behind. I am not pretty now."

"Oh, baby, I'm not going to leave you! Don't think that way. I was in love with you the first time I saw you. I don't know what I'd do if you weren't with me."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"Oh, Joe!" As she spoke, Elaine tried to roll over into his arms, but it was impossible for her to make such a move because she was so heavy. She sank back. There was a moment of silence and then they both giggled. The tension was broken.

"We'll move from here," Joe said.

"What? I do not understand? What are you speaking?"

"We'll move to the apartment above the bar. It's got three rooms and its own bath."

"We will have our own bedroom?"

"Yeah. I got it figured out. We will have a bedroom and the baby will have a room."

"What about Cassie?" Elaine asked.

"That was part of my figuring. We'll make enough profit on the bar so we can keep this place for Cassie."

"I will have my own home!" exclaimed Elaine.

"That's right," Joe replied.

“Now I am happy. I have you and my own home. Joe, you should be sleeping. Tomorrow is a busy day.”

“Goodnight sweetheart,” Joe whispered as he leaned over, brushed her cheek with his lips, and then sank back on the bed. He knew much had happened, but he was confused about it. When sleep came, it carried a large load of relief for Joe.

* * *

After he had walked Elaine back to her apartment, Ace returned to the bar and rode off on his motorcycle. It was a pleasant evening, and he easily gave in to an urge to ride. It was not like being up in an airplane, but it was similar. The wind blowing against his face was good. His mind rapidly cleared. It had been a long day, but much had been done, and he knew he had finally set in motion a payback for the great favor Joe had done him. No matter how long he rode, though, there remained one small part of his mind that resisted the cleansing effect of speed and wind.

He rode past Rochelle’s apartment. There was no light. Either she was not home yet, or she was in bed.

He knew he was weary and needed sleep, but for some reason which he did not understand, he kept on riding. Finally, he could ride no longer, and stopped at a small hotel where he spent the night.

The next morning he got up and had coffee and croissants at a nearby café. There was a young woman at the next table, and she joined him for breakfast. She spoke very bad English, and he did not understand most of what she said. Her name was Charlene, and she was a student.

He left the café and rode to Rochelle’s apartment. He let himself in and found that she was not there. He saw a letter on the table addressed to him. The letter was brief. It said that she had gone to Cannes for a while with Armand. He was arranging to have one of her photographic portraits made into prints which would be sold all over Europe and even maybe in the United States. Rochelle claimed she owed so much to Ace, because it was her portrait of him that would be made into prints. She was not sure she agreed with Armand. He wanted the prints to be in sepia instead of black and white like the photograph. She was a success because of Ace and that is why she had to go to Cannes with Armand. Rochelle wrote that she hoped to see him when she returned.

Now Ace understood why he could not clear his mind while riding in the night on the motorcycle. He could sense that there was a message about what to expect, but he did not pay close enough attention. Curiously, for a moment, as he stared down at the letter, his thoughts were not on Rochelle, but instead he wondered if Daisy was still in Chicago. His affair with Rochelle was over and he knew it. There was a touch of sadness but no pain. He laid the letter down on the table and started to walk away. He stopped, returned to the table, and turned the letter over. There was a pencil on the table. It was probably the same pencil she had used to write the letter. He wrote a brief note on the back explaining that if she needed to reach him, she could leave a message at Joe’s American Bar. He printed the address and then signed it “Ace.” He would remember Rochelle, just as he remembered other people in his past.

He quickly took advantage of the bathroom to clean up, and packed the few clothes he kept at the apartment. Then he left. He had much business to take care of before his flight the next day.

Chapter 11

Buying old Pierre's bistro was not as simple as Ace and Joe had imagined. Pierre was willing, and they went to see Ace's banker, a short man with a bald head neatly decorated with a fringe of hair around three sides. But the banker threw his hands up in the air and exclaimed that it was impossible to make such a transaction in just one day. He used the French word for impossible which was close enough to English for even Ace to understand.

"How long?" asked Ace.

"Even for such a valued client as yourself, it would take at least a week. For anyone else, maybe even a month or two. There are forms. There are papers to be signed. There are legalities! But, for you, I can put it together in a week."

Ace knew that he would need three, maybe four days for the trip he was scheduled to begin the next morning. He would easily be back in time for the formalities, the signing of papers, and the transfer of ownership to Elaine. They could wait a week before making Joe's dream come true.

They could wait, but Ace was concerned about old Pierre. He would have a week to think about the deal he had made. On the day the papers were to be signed, he might suddenly announce that he could not possibly sell at the agreed on price. He would need several thousand more francs or he might not sign. How would Basham and Digby have handled this situation?

They returned to the bistro and had lunch. Old Pierre reminded Joe that he was still an employee and must continue to work until the deal was signed. After lunch, Elaine returned to their small apartment to wait. Now, she had two events to wait for, and she wondered if both could happen on the same day. Cassie had a meeting to attend and Ace returned to the small hotel and rented a room for the rest of the month. After taking care of that detail, he rode his motorcycle to the air field and began checking his Jenny in preparation for the trip.

Ace returned from his trip after three days. He had time to go over details with Joe who was worried about having enough money to open the door once he was the owner of the bar. The price for the business did not include the building, and the rent would be due soon. Ace took care of the problem with a generous gift. "I owe you for my life," Ace said. "There's no point in just paying half a debt."

"No," protested Joe. "We at least have to pay you back for this money."

"I'll tell you what. When I'm in town, you and Elaine cook me up one of your barbecue meals. I got a taste for that cooking when I was flying with a circus. For me, that's real gourmet cooking. With this Frenchy food they serve here in Paris, I never know what the hell I'm eating."

Joe laughed. "That is damned true. But don't expect much in the way of cooking from Elaine for a while. She's going to have that kid any day now."

There was also time for Ace to continue his new relationship with Charlene. They spent a night in Ace's room and breakfasted the next morning at the café where they had met. The second night was not so successful. She proclaimed that she was an anarchist, and she spent several hours explaining the theory of anarchism to Ace. He had a problem understanding that a lovely young woman was sitting naked and cross-legged on his bed, but talking what to him was utter nonsense. There was wine, of course, and maybe he drank too much. He fell asleep and when he awakened in the morning, she was gone. It was a short affair.

At the appointed time, Ace, Joe, and Elaine were in the banker's office. Cassie did not come along. She did not want to go into a capitalist temple. She said that after the revolution, the banker would be lucky if he got a job sweeping streets, and she hoped there would be lots of horses. She watched the bar while everyone was gone.

The banker's office was a large room with a large desk. Joe sat at one end of the desk and old Pierre at the other. Elaine and Ace sat in front of it and the banker sat behind it. Atop the desk were papers. There were ink wells, pens, and blotters. The overhead light shone down on the banker's bald head, and Ace barely suppressed a smile when he thought how like a landing strip the bald head looked, a landing strip with a fringe of brush on either side.

The banker pulled glasses from his pocket. He hooked them securely to his nose and was about to begin when two men entered the office and sat down in chairs along the back wall. Just as the banker was about to ask them their business, Ace raised a hand.

"These gentlemen are business associates of mine. I asked them to be present in case witnesses are needed." He glanced over at old Pierre to see what effect the arrival of Gaston and Paul had on him.

Old Pierre was very nervous. He might not know the names of the two men, but he was quite aware of who they were and how they made their living. He quit twisting his droopy mustache and stared at Ace. The look of craftiness in Pierre's eyes had been entirely replaced by a look that told everyone that now he understood.

The banker cleared his throat, adjusted his glasses, and then spoke to Ace. "*Monsieur Mathews*, I see that you have an understanding about the importance of ambience in a business transaction." He smiled briefly, and then continued. "The offer is a generous one." He then turned to old Pierre and repeated in French his judgment on the offer.

The proceedings were interrupted again. A man entered the room and moved quickly to huddle with the two men at the back. There was a brief, whispered conversation, after which, the newcomer quickly exited.

After that interruption, the business at hand moved to a conclusion. After all the papers had been signed, the banker told old Pierre that he would now receive a deposit slip on an account in the bank for the purchase price. Old Pierre protested. He wanted the money in cash, all of it. The banker looked at him and inquired if, under the present circumstances, and here he paused and glanced over at the two men in the back of the room, Pierre really wanted to walk out of the bank carrying that much money on his person. Old Pierre caught the drift of the banker's words and quickly changed his mind.

The deal was done. Joe and Elaine stood, and Joe leaned over and kissed Elaine. They then each grasped one of Ace's hands and held tight. They both had tears in their eyes. These were tears of gratitude and happiness.

"I'll never forget this day," Joe said.

Ace replied, "And I have a day that I'll never forget."

"We are like a family, now," cried Elaine. "We will have a party tonight, only I think I shall have to watch the party."

Gaston motioned to Ace. He nodded and moved over to where the two business associates were standing. In a low voice Gaston said, "Most important that you fly to Marseilles."

"When?" Ace asked.

"Tomorrow. We meet at the air field at ten o'clock." The man paused and then added with a smile, "Do not party too much tonight."

"Don't worry. Flying with a hangover is no fun."

When they returned to the bar, Joe announced to the handful of customers present that now he was the new owner. He poured generous amounts of free wine for everyone. At the same time, old Pierre was moving his personal belongings down the stairs just off the kitchen.

"We will move in tomorrow morning," Joe told Ace.

"I wish I could be here to help you, but I've got to fly tomorrow."

"I figured that when I saw you talking to your associate back there in the banker's office. I think you scared the hell out of old Pierre when those two guys came in. I have to admit, they made me a little nervous."

"I was worried that old Pierre might try to jack the price up at the last moment. Those two guys are my contact people. They always meet me at the air field. One of them speaks pretty good English."

Joe shook his head, "Lord, the life you must be leading. When you get back, we'll have a real blowout!"

The next morning was a good time for flying. The sky was clear and blue and the sun was warm. Ace stood by his plane which was parked near the front of the large hangar. Gaston and Paul were with him.

"I'll be on my way as soon as I get my plane warmed up," Ace said.

Paul held a small satchel. He handed it to Gaston who then passed it to Ace. "This is important. You know who will be waiting when you get to Marseilles. Make all speed possible."

"No problem," replied Ace as he took the satchel. "The weather looks good. Oh, my thanks for the work you did yesterday for me. And thanks again for finding my friend. I've cleared up a big debt."

"We understand. It must have been like a blood debt. Honor must be satisfied. I think our friends in America would have been impressed by what you did yesterday."

Ace laughed. "Who knows? One of these days I may be flying across the Atlantic for you."

As he spoke, he could see men running from behind the row of small hangars. There were whistles and shouts.

"Run! Run!" shouted Gaston, "We are betrayed!"

They ran for their motor car, but Ace could see that police coming from behind the big hangar were going to get to the car first. He glanced around and saw several police coming after him. He turned and ran toward the big hangar. He carried the satchel close to his body like an American football player. He could hear an engine running in the hangar, and he remembered that a mechanic had been working on a small, single-seat plane.

The doors to the hangar were open, and he ran into the hangar and toward the plane. He knocked the mechanic aside and swiftly pulled the chocks from the plane's wheels. The mechanic was screaming at him, but he could not hear him over the roar of the engine.

As he started the plane rolling toward the open doors, a policeman made a desperate leap and got one foot on the wing and a hand on the edge of the cockpit. Pulling himself up and hanging on with one hand, his face was only inches away from Ace's. He had a revolver in the other hand and he waved the weapon wildly as he screamed at Ace to stop the plane.

Ace turned as much as he could and with his right hand, struck at the policeman, trying to knock him from the plane. As he did so, the policeman fired two shots and the bullets hit Ace in the left shoulder. With as much strength as he could muster, Ace hit the officer again and this time, the officer fell from the plane.

The plane picked up speed as it cleared the hangar doors. Once clear of the hangar, there was a gauntlet of police to run. As the plane sped by, they emptied their revolvers at it. Not being accustomed to shooting at a fast moving target, most of the bullets hit the tail of the plane.

Ace felt his left arm go numb, but he was able to keep control with his right arm and hand. The controls did not respond very well, and the engine sputtered as he pushed for as much speed as possible.

He barely cleared a low hedge at the end of the field, but he was airborne. He coaxed as many feet of altitude as he could out of the engine, but barely reached two hundred feet. By this time, the controls were almost gone. He found himself flying low over the part of Paris closest to the air field. The engine sputtered again and again. He was losing power and altitude. He had to land. He saw a street and wrestled with the controls until he was lined up with the street.

The landing was hard and the plane bounced and then came back down again. The right wing was ripped off by a telephone pole. The left wing came off as the plane erratically swerved to the left against a stone column supporting a roofed-over entry way. Ace now had a motor car whose engine was sputtering and back-firing, but the wingless plane was still moving at considerable speed, and the speed kept it moving in a straight line down the middle of the street.

The street led to a circle and in the middle of the circle was a fountain with a low stone wall. Ace tried to brake the plane to a stop, but there was no response. He was still trying when the plane hit the stone wall, nosed over, and splashed down in the pool of water that surrounded the fountain. With its tail up in the air, the plane looked like some large animal getting a drink of water.

Ace had seen what was going to happen and held the satchel tightly in his right hand and braced himself for the impact. In his haste to escape, he had not fastened his seat belt and when the impact came, he was thrown out of the cockpit and over the fountain. He

landed in the pool on the other side. The cool water quickly revived him, and he painfully climbed the low stone wall and crossed the street and disappeared between two buildings. A large and excited crowd gathered around the plane, but no one noticed the man moving slowly away from the scene and down a narrow alley between the buildings.

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Joe turned out all but one small light after the first day of doing business at Joe's American Bar. He sat at the table near the kitchen entrance and looked at the stack of francs and the coins on the table. He had counted the money carefully three times and each time he came up with a different total. He glanced through the kitchen entrance at the open door that led upstairs to the apartment. It had been six, or eight hours ago that Elaine had gone into labor.

He put the money in a small metal box and locked it. Whichever number was right, it had been a good first day. Now, it was this first night that worried him. There was a bottle of wine on the table and several glasses. He filled a glass for himself. As he did so, Cassie came out the stairway door and wearily walked to the table and sat down. She reached for the bottle and poured herself a drink.

"Well?" Joe asked.

"Well, what?" Cassie answered.

"Has the baby come yet?"

"You need to take it easy. You can't rush these things. Babies come when they get damned good and ready to do so."

"How's Elaine holding up?"

"Pretty good, I'd say. She has that sweet and soft woman look about her, but underneath, she's pretty tough."

"Does the midwife know what she's doing?"

"I guess so. She looks old enough to have delivered half the kids in Paris." Cassie poured another glass of wine and got up from the table. "I'll take this upstairs for the midwife. She needs something to eat. I'll make a sandwich for her."

"Elaine could probably use a drink, too."

"Later maybe. The midwife says pregnant women shouldn't drink. Makes their babies runty."

"Yeah, we don't want any runty boys in this family."

"Boys? It could be a girl, you know. And it may not look much like you and me."

"What do you mean?"

"Just that it might be a girl and it might look more like her momma than you." Cassie turned and proceeded to the kitchen to make the sandwich.

Joe shook his head. Cassie had a way of making everything upside down. It had been a good day. Business had been good and sometime soon, he hoped, he'd be a proud father. Trust Cassie to bring rain to a picnic.

"Joe! Come quick!" Cassie's voice was high-pitched and carried the sound of fear. Joe shoved his chair back from the table with such force that the chair flipped over backward as he rushed into the kitchen.

Cassie was standing over a man on the floor. She had a large butcher knife in her hand.

“What the hell?”

“It’s Ace,” Cassie said. “I thought he was a robber trying to break in through the kitchen door.”

“You cut him, girl?”

“No! I might have, but he fell down before I could do anything.”

Joe bent down and rolled Ace over on his back. “Damn, he sure looks like he’s been through hell. I see two bullet holes in his shoulder. Cassie, get me some water and some towels. Then get a glass of Cognac out of our private bottle under the bar.”

Cassie quickly brought a pot of water and towels. While Joe gently rubbed a wet towel over Ace’s face, Cassie stood by with a glass of Cognac.

The cool, wet towel on his face revived Ace. He opened his eyes just as Joe was ripping the bright yellow shirt with bloodspots on it.

Joe saw his eyes open and reached up for the glass of Cognac in Cassie’s hand. He lifted Ace’s head and put the glass to his lips. “Just a sip, now. That’s good.”

The sip had its effect. Ace spluttered and coughed. Then he tried to sit up, but Joe put his hand on Ace’s chest and gently pushed him back down. “What happened?”

“We were ambushed by the police at the air field,” Ace said weakly. “I got away. Get my wallet out of my back pocket. There’s a card behind the money. Get the card.”

“Take it easy,” Joe said as he wiped the blood from the two bullet holes.

“I got away, but the plane crashed. Get the card. Call the number on it.”

“You crashed again?” Joe asked.

“Yeah, bad habit. Call the number. They’ll come and get me. Tell them I got the package. They’ll come.”

“You can’t do that, Joe,” Cassie said angrily. “You going to have police and gangsters coming here? Poor Elaine up there having a baby. And with all this going on down here.”

Suddenly, both Joe and Cassie were aware that there was another person in the room. It was the midwife, a short, old woman, frail-appearing, slightly bent, but with strong hands that held a baby wrapped in a blanket. She stared down at the man on the floor, but when she saw that she had Joe and Cassie’s attention, she raised the baby up in front of her face.

“Girl! Girl!” She cackled loudly, whereupon the baby awakened and began to cry.

Joe rose to his feet and quickly stepped closer to the old woman. She thrust the baby into his arms, and he awkwardly, but carefully cradled the infant.

“Look, Cassie. My daughter! She’s the most beautiful baby in the world. My daughter!”

Cassie stepped forward and looked at the baby. She was right. The baby would not look quite like her and Joe, but neither would she look quite like her mother.

Cassie stepped back, glanced down at Ace, and then said, “She’s real pretty, Joe. I’m happy for you.” Cassie then turned and pointed a finger down at Ace. “But there’s something bad wrong here. The devil’s in this room, and he’s laying here on the floor!”

Chapter 12

Philadelphia, 1925

“Iron” Mike O’Malley earned his nickname by working his way up from a hod carrier to become boss of a very large and profitable construction company in Philadelphia. He had friends in city hall, made generous contributions to the Catholic Church, and was on the must-call list of Democratic Party politicians in both state and national governments.

He was a successful man, but his success and money could not buy him entry into the more snobbish circles in Philadelphia. He had two daughters, by two wives, and by some stroke of bad luck, which some, jealous of his success, claimed was his due, both wives were dead. Now he had a daughter by the first wife named Mary Margaret, age 25, and a daughter, 17, named Kathleen. Mary Margaret called herself Maggie, and insisted that her friends do the same.

Michael Patrick O’Malley was called Iron Mike by his associates, but he was like putty when it came to Maggie. He had spoiled her. She had a college education, but she was not even close to being married, despite his best efforts to provide a pool of likely and approved suitors. She gave ample evidence of being one of those liberated women. He had no problem handling tough construction gangs, politicians, and even lawyers, but Maggie was a problem. He couldn’t threaten to punch her with one of his strong fists the way he could a union organizer.

Kathleen was younger, but showed signs of following in Maggie’s footsteps. A wife of one of his friends suggested that he should hold a coming out party for Kathleen. They happened to have a daughter of the same age. If there was a coming-out party, a debutante’s ball, then there would be a goodly number of eligible young men on hand, and maybe Iron Mike could avoid having yet another unmarried daughter.

The only problem with such a social event was that he would have to be prominently present. The rest was easy. He owned the Palladium Hotel, one of the finest in the city, with its aging, but still elegant ballroom just waiting for such an event. It would be a night for the Irish gentry to put on the grandest airs and provide a useful showcase for their daughters.

So it was on a splendid night in May of 1925 in Philadelphia that the lights were burning brightly at the Palladium Hotel, and the sounds of dance music drifted out into the night.

Maggie refused to wear a floor length gown for the event, choosing instead to wear an outfit her father found to be disgusting, as expected. She wore a white, deeply cut, blouse on top that merged into a heavily pleated short skirt bottomed with a fringe. A broad blue sash, white silk hose that ended in rolls just below the knees, and blue pumps with two inch heels, made up the rest of the costume. She wore her auburn hair bobbed short and very little make up. For this particular evening, she did decide to try to be a little understated with the beads. There were only three sets of beads, and they were all blue.

The debutante’s ball proved to be as irksome as Maggie expected. She had a good friend, Trish, with her and that barely made the event tolerable. Trish was two years younger than Maggie, but somewhat more experienced in worldly matters, or at least so she claimed, and Maggie had some reason to believe.

They drifted out of the ballroom and into the hotel lobby. "I need a drink," Trish said. "Are you sure?" Maggie asked. "You've reached the three giggles to one hiccup stage already."

"Maybe so, but I need a drink. I had a sip from Chuck Reidy's flask. It tasted like kerosene."

"Okay, I know where we can get some good stuff," Maggie said. "Let's go to the hotel bar."

"You sure about that? Do they serve women at the bar?"

"No. But they will us. Daddy owns this joint."

"Sounds good to me!"

The hotel bar was a room off the far side of the lobby. It was not a large room and had its own door leading to the sidewalk outside. In days before Prohibition, it had been a place of convenience for men who wanted a drink and a cigar. Since the start of Prohibition, the bar served only coffee and soft drinks. There were no seats, and women were discouraged from coming into the room. Not all the coffee cups held coffee. Men drank from the cups in front of them and smoked cigars. There were two shiny, brass spittoons, one in each corner of the room opposite the bar.

There were two French doors leading into the bar, and they were open wide. The bar was not long, but capable of serving eight good-sized men who were strangers and preferred to keep the relationship intact.

The room was dimly lighted by several fixtures hanging down over the bar.

Maggie started to lead the way into the bar, but stopped suddenly, and murmured, "My God, look at that!"

Trish asked, "What?" as she stepped from behind Maggie and peered into the bar. "Oh, Maggie, be careful, that is not a plaything!"

At the end of the bar, there stood a man. He was seemingly posed carelessly, his left elbow resting on the bar, his left foot on the brass rail. He had black, curly hair, wore a black leather jacket open which revealed a red shirt, unbuttoned at the collar, and another button down as well. He had a large brass buckle and leather belt. His pants were light-colored whipcord, and the cuffs hung half in and half out of his calf-high boots.

His unusual costume was not where Maggie's gaze lingered. It was on his face. The side toward the light showed a scar that curved from near his left eye down close to the left upper lip. The other side of his face was shadowed, but appeared to her to be almost boyish in appearance.

"Maybe we shouldn't go in," Trish whispered.

"Oh, yes. We have to go in," Maggie replied. "Come on."

The man at the end of the bar had been watching Maggie and Trish. Maggie knew this and decided to make a fine entrance. She tried to combine a touch of extra hip movement with an attempt at nonchalance. She stumbled.

"You okay, Maggie?" Trish whispered.

"Sure." She tried to see if the man at the end of the bar was laughing.

Maggie and Trish stood in front of the bar. Maggie rested one foot on the brass rail. "George, we'll have a double coffee with a touch of soda and some ice."

George, the bartender, stood on his side of the bar. He was a short man with a flattened nose and one ear considerably larger than the other. His hair was sparse, but he had two magnificent eyebrows that nearly met in the middle. He placed both hands on the

bar as if pushing the bar away and said, "Aw, Miss O'Malley. You know you ain't supposed to be in here. Your daddy would fire me if he knew I served you drinks, uh, coffee."

Maggie smiled sweetly. "It's okay, George. Didn't you know there's a special dispensation for tonight?"

"A what?" George was puzzled.

"That's right." Maggie continued. "Just for tonight, the church said it would be okay, and Daddy would never go against the church. You know that's true!"

"Well, I don't know."

"Oh, and while you're at it, give tall, dark, and dangerous down at the end of the bar another of whatever he's drinking."

"Maggie! What are you doing?" Trish whispered.

George leaned over the bar and whispered, "You girls don't want to get near him." As he spoke, George tried to look very serious. He put his finger to the side of his nose, and said, "You understand?"

"No," Maggie answered. "What's with the nose business?"

"Not so loud," George warned in a low voice. "That guy's not exactly what you call legit. I think he's with some mob."

"Maybe we better leave, Maggie," said Trish.

"Not on your life," Maggie replied. "This is fun. Come on, George. We're dying of thirst here."

George nodded and started preparing the drinks. Maggie put her purse on the bar and fished out a pack of cigarettes. She pulled one from the pack. It was a long cigarette, a Turkish import. She turned and faced the man at the end of the bar and held the cigarette to her lips and stared at the stranger for a long moment.

"Well," she said, "How about a light?"

Trish gasped and put her hand to her mouth as if she was the one who had said the words and was trying to pull them back. George stopped mixing the drinks for a moment, shook his head, and then continued his work.

The man smiled and said, "Sure." He walked not too fast and not too slow, taking a lighter from his pocket as he moved. When he was very close to Maggie, he held up the lighter, flicked it and held the flame to her cigarette.

She reached up with her other hand and put it on his hand holding the lighter. She gently held his hand while puffing the cigarette into the dull red, beginning ash that would burn until the cigarette was consumed. She could see his eyes. They were more green than blue. Maybe they were almost gray. It was hard to tell in this light. The scar was even more terrible than it had appeared when he was at the end of the bar. She fought down a sudden urge to reach out and touch the scar, to trace it with her finger from the top to the bottom.

She let go of his hand. "Can I see that lighter?"

He nodded and handed her the lighter. It was an expensive piece of equipment. The heavy lighter had a gold case, and on one side there was an ancient symbol, ebony and ivory somehow attached to the gold. As she examined the lighter, George put two cups on the bar in front of Maggie and Trish. He made a point of walking to the other end of the bar to put down the cup for the stranger.

“George,” Maggie said sharply, “Bring that cup over here.” He hesitated and then brought the cup back and set it down in front of the stranger.

“That’s a beautiful lighter. Where did you get it?” she asked.

“In Paris. I took a woman up for a ride in my plane. She gave it to me as a gift. She’s a countess and claimed the lighter came from some place called Vietnam.”

“You’re a flier? What are you doing in Philadelphia?”

Oh, and hi. My name’s Maggie. That’s Irish for Mary Margaret.”

“Hello. My name is Ace.”

She smiled. “Of course it is. You couldn’t have any other name.”

“I’m just passing through. I had some business here, and I thought I’d stop in for a drink before I go back to the air field. I’m flying back to Miami at first light tomorrow.”

“Miami! You have a plane here?” Maggie took a quick sip from her cup and turned to Trish who had mixed listening to the conversation with rapid sips from her cup. It was almost empty.

“Trish,” Maggie said, “Why don’t you go back to the ballroom and cover for me? If anyone asks where I am, just tell them I drank some bad booze and went home sick.”

“And miss this?” Trish protested.

“Do it as a favor for me,” Maggie insisted.

“Well, okay. I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“And, Trish, don’t tell on me. If you do, I’ll tell everyone about you and the Yale football team on the beach last summer.”

“Maggie! You wouldn’t dare!” She paused, saw

Maggie was staring at her, and decided that Maggie was very serious. “Okay, I’ll go. You be careful.” Trish turned to leave, stopped, and looked back over her shoulder. She giggled, hiccupped, and said, “Besides, it wasn’t the whole team. It was only the backfield.” She then continued on unsteadily through the doors and into the hotel lobby.

George had seen enough. He was not sure how a special dispensation worked in this case, but he was sure about how Iron Mike would react. He slipped out a door behind the bar.

Maggie saw him leave. “George has gone to tell Daddy on me. Listen, there’s a speakeasy a couple of blocks from here. It’s down a side street, but it’s safe. The booze isn’t as good as here, but we won’t go blind from drinking it.”

“I know where it is,” Ace said. “I was there earlier this evening on business.”

“Oh, I’d like to hear about that business,” Maggie said with a smile. “Come on. By now George has probably found my father and is trying to tell his story.”

“Okay. We can ride my bike. It rides double.”

As they hurried out the door and onto the sidewalk, Maggie asked, “You ride a bicycle?”

“Lord, no. I’ve got a motorcycle.”

The night air was becoming a little damp and chilly. Ace took off his jacket. “Put this on. That wind will go right through that dress.”

When they reached the motorcycle, Maggie wanted to know how he was going to keep warm. “It’s easy,” Ace replied. “You put your arms around me and hang on so you don’t fall off. That will keep me warm enough.”

Just as Ace kicked the engine alive and over the roar, Maggie said, “That ought to help motorcycle sales.” She was not sure he heard her.

The speakeasy was close enough for them to have walked, but Ace was not comfortable with the motorcycle being too far away. Since that day in Paris, he was careful to have a reliable form of quick transportation at hand. The wind blew through Maggie's dress, and her legs were cold. The same wind also chased away some of the alcoholic haze in her mind. The leather jacket helped keep her arms and shoulders almost comfortable. The jacket had a faint odor that seemed to be a combination of leather and gasoline. She held on tightly with her arms and could feel only muscle.

The evening crowd was somewhere else and would not begin to come in for several hours. There was a small bandstand with some chairs. Much later in the evening when the dance bands in the better hotels stopped playing the music they so intensely disliked, the small bandstand would be crowded with musicians who played for free as long as there was anyone present to hear them.

There were tables and chairs for the customers and a bar. The lights were subdued, and later would be dimmed down even more. When Maggie and Ace came into the room from the guarded entrance, she saw that there were only three people in the place, and they were seated at the same table. She definitely did not like the way they stared at her and Ace.

Ace picked a table and sat down. When Maggie hesitated, he thought she was hinting that he should rise and pull out her chair for her, but he did not move. Maggie was slow to seat herself because she realized that she would be facing the three men. Even though the lights in the place were dim, she could tell that they were still staring at her. She sat down and tried to keep Ace between her and the three men, but the table was at an angle that defeated her best effort.

Once seated, she pulled out her pack of cigarettes and lit up. Ace laughed. "What happened to 'how about a light'?"

Maggie's face reddened. While she fumbled in her mind for something to say, the cocktail waitress came to their table and Ace ordered drinks. When he gave the order, he smiled, and added, "Take it from my bottle."

"You keep a bottle here?" asked Maggie. "I thought you said you were just passing through?"

"I was here earlier on business. I always carry a bottle with me. Since I'm flying out in the morning, I thought I might as well leave the bottle." He could tell by the expression on her face that she was not at all comfortable with the situation. "Listen, kid. If you want, I can take you back to the hotel. It's okay. It's getting late, anyway, and I've got to be up before dawn."

"Don't call me kid," she fired back. Her blue eyes now seemed to take on the gray tones of flint that was hitting steel somewhere in her mind and making sparks. "For that matter, I'm probably older than you."

She almost accepted his offer to take her back to the hotel, but when he laughed at her embarrassment at forgetting her routine back at the hotel bar, she decided that there was no damned way she was going to run away from this man, at least not yet.

The waitress brought the drinks and set them on the table. Before she could say how much, Ace put several bills on her tray. "I'll be back with your change," she said. Ace shook his head and flicked a finger at her and she understood. "Thanks, mister. I hope you stay around for a while." She smiled and winked at him and then returned to the bar.

"You are generous," Maggie said. "She's going to be really disappointed if you aren't back here tomorrow night." As she spoke, she noticed that two of the three men were laughing at something the third man said.

"Those guys over there in the corner, they keep staring at us," she said.

"Are you showing some leg?" Ace asked.

"What?" She instinctively reached down with a hand to check her hem. "No," she answered.

"You are a good looking woman. I'd stare, too, if I was over at that table. As for what they're saying, it's probably something like 'Who's the doll-face with our friend, Ace?'"

"Friend? You know those guys?"

"Sure. They're the ones I met here earlier tonight. They work for the people who own this joint."

"Now, I begin to understand what poor George was trying to tell me," said Maggie.

"I caught that finger to the nose bit. That was funny," replied Ace.

"What in the world does that mean, the finger to the nose?" Maggie asked.

"Have you ever heard the expression, 'keep your nose clean'?"

"Sure. Daddy uses it every now and then."

"The finger to the nose means a dirty nose. George was trying to tell you that I'm a mobster."

"Are you?"

"No. I do business with people. I'm kind of like the U.S. Post Office. I fly from one place to another and sometimes deliver mail and sometimes packages. I've even flown people, mostly from Miami to Cuba, and sometimes Cuba to Miami."

"Don't you ever ask what's in the packages or the letters?"

"Nope. It's none of my business. That's the way I operated in France, and that's the way I work here."

"France? Yes, of course," Maggie nodded. "You were a pilot in the war, right? And that's how you got the name, Ace. You shot down a lot of German planes."

Ace shrugged. "I was just there for the last couple of weeks of the war. I got tagged with the name before the war, when I was a kid."

She wanted to ask him about the scar on his face. Was it the result of being wounded? But then she decided that she might be intruding into something he might not want to remember. Instead, she changed the subject by asking, "What do you do when you're not being a delivery man?"

"Work on the plane, mostly. Sometimes I take people up for a joy ride."

"Like the woman in Paris? The countess who gave you that beautiful lighter?"

"Yes..."

"Those men," Maggie interrupted with an anxious whisper, "They're coming over here!"

Ace turned in his chair. One of the three men moved up close to Ace and said, "Don't forget. Tomorrow at dawn. We'll be there with the package."

"Another dawn patrol," Ace responded with a smile and a thumbs-up motion with his hand. "No problem."

After the three men left the room, Maggie stared at Ace. "You really are going to fly down to Miami?"

Ace laughed. "You are finally beginning to understand? Yes, I am flying down to Miami."

Before she could even consider a second thought, Maggie surprised both Ace and herself. "Take me along. To Miami." The words acted to chase doubts from her mind. It was impulsive, and she knew it might be dangerous, but it could also be the greatest adventure yet in her otherwise short and often dull life.

"No, I don't think so," Ace answered. "It's a long trip. You should go for a few short rides before trying something like that. Besides, I fly for pay. I'd need, oh, say, one hundred dollars."

"What?" Maggie exclaimed. "You are already being paid for the trip."

"No, it's like a train. Everybody who gets on board has to have a ticket. Every piece of freight has to be paid for, and in advance."

"Damn!" Maggie emptied her purse on the table and began counting money. She had eighty-nine dollars and fifty-three cents.

"Not enough," Ace said.

"You take a check?"

"No. And besides, even if you had the money, you couldn't go up dressed like this." He waved at her with his hand. "Your feet would get cold. Those shoes are pretty, but they wouldn't be worth much at two thousand feet in the air. You need warm clothes and a pair of boots. I've got a spare helmet and goggles you could use. And maybe we could put together some reasonable flying clothes out at the air field."

"Okay, I get the picture," Maggie said. "Now, here's my final offer. Take me back to the hotel. I'll get the money and some clothes. Is it a deal?"

"That could be a problem," Ace said. "If someone like George looks out the door and sees me, I might have your Daddy to deal with." He paused and then added, "I'll give you fifteen minutes. If you aren't out of the hotel by then, I'm gone."

"You're on! Let's go."

When Ace pulled up in front of the hotel, Maggie jumped clear of the motorcycle and ran toward the hotel entrance.

"Remember, fifteen minutes," Ace shouted after her. He checked his watch and turned off the engine. After what he thought had been the passage of ten minutes, he checked his watch again. It showed that she had been gone for twelve minutes. He waited and then checked again. Almost fifteen minutes had passed. He smiled. At seventeen minutes, he was standing up and had his foot on the starter, ready to stomp on it, when Maggie came running out the hotel door.

She was dressed in baggy pants, a sweater, wool jacket, muffler, and a pair of men's work shoes.

"You look like a hobo," Ace laughed.

"I love it! A guy, who dresses like he just escaped from a circus, throws rocks at me. Come on, let's go. I think Daddy's got people looking for us."

"The money?" Ace asked.

"Oh yeah, the money. Here you are: five twenties."

"Thanks." He stuffed the money in a pants pocket.

"Aren't you going to count it?"

"Later." Ace started the motorcycle and they roared off into the night.

The air field was not much more than a long pasture with two hangars, each capable of holding three small planes, a storage shed, and a building not much better than the shed that was used as an office. By daylight, the spread would not have been very impressive. Maggie was seeing it for the first time and at night. There really was not much she could see since the only light came from a window in the office and a small light hanging down from a metal arm fastened to the top of a pole. There was a small reflector above the bulb. Moths played around the bulb and the reflector.

As they dismounted from the motorcycle, Maggie asked, "This is it?"

"I'm afraid so," Ace replied. "Come on in. They have a bunkroom behind the office. We can sleep there."

Maggie followed him into the office. An old man sat at a desk littered with sheets of paper and parts of a newspaper. There was an ashtray that was filled to overflowing, and a coffee cup that had been filled with many gallons of coffee since the last time it had been washed. The old man said nothing because he was sound asleep, his arms on the desk and his head on his arms.

"That's Old Ted," Ace said in a low voice. "He's the night man here. Keeps watch on things."

"The only thing he's watching right now is somewhere in dreamland," Maggie said. "Where is this bunkroom, and is there a bathroom?"

"Follow me. It's just on the other side of that door." Ace led her through the door and into a room. It was not a large room. There were four bunks, steel rod frames, and thin mattresses over flat metal springs. There were several blankets on each bunk. There were no pillows or sheets.

"The bathroom?" Maggie asked.

"That door there." Ace pointed toward a door that was between the ends of two bunks.

Maggie started toward the door. She was in a hurry, but stopped and froze. What she had thought was a pile of blankets on the bunk near the door was a man, curled up and asleep on the bunk. She turned and looked at Ace and pointed toward the bunk. The only light in the room was what came through the open door to the office. She could barely see Ace raise a finger to his lips, a gesture which she correctly interpreted as being a request for silence.

She hesitated for a second, but her need was urgent. She shrugged her shoulders and marched into the bathroom. She could not find the light switch. She ran her hands over the walls on either side of the door. She found a string hanging down when she took a step forward and bumped into a little bead. She pulled on the string and there was light. She almost wished that she had not turned on the light. Several bugs scurried across the floor. The toilet looked like it had not been cleaned since it was installed. There was a lavatory that was in similar condition, and the tub was disgusting. There was a shower. It consisted of a length of hose that was fastened to the water spout. The hose had a nozzle on the end, and it lay coiled like a snake in the bottom of the tub.

She did not have time for further inspection. She did what women have been trained to do ever since there were bathrooms used by the public. She layered toilet paper on the seat before sitting down.

When she returned from the bathroom, she found that Ace had made up a bunk for her. They would sleep in the bunks across the room from the bathroom door and the sleeping guest.

Ace was already in bed, but awake. He lay on his side with his head propped up with his hand.

“Crawl in and go to sleep,” he said. “I rolled up your jacket so you would have a pillow.”

She saw that he was still wearing his shirt and guessed that he was fully dressed except for his boots. She slipped her feet out of the brogans and got under the covers. The mattress was firm, but not uncomfortable. She realized she was very tired. Ace had done a good job with the blankets. She was sleeping on a blanket and had a doubled up blanket on top. She was warm.

“Ace?” she whispered.

“What?” he asked sleepily.

“Thanks.”

She could hear him chuckle as he replied, “For these accommodations?”

“No, for taking me to Miami.”

“Go to sleep.”

She closed her eyes, but she could not sleep. She knew that what she was doing started out as a crazy whim. Was she trying to show Trish that she could also be bold and do crazy things? They had been friends since high school days, had gone to the same college, and had frequently double-dated. Usually there were poor results because her date knew what was going on in the front seat, and wanted to do the same in the back seat. She wished she was as wild as Trish, but that had seemed impossible until now.

Then sleep came, and while she was asleep, she had a dream. In her dream men were marching. There were guns. There was more, a terrible part of the dream that was unfolding. She felt herself shaking and suddenly awoke.

Ace was touching her shoulder. “It’s time to get up.”

Chapter 13

Breakfast was a plate of doughnuts and hot coffee. The doughnuts were a little stale, but the coffee was strong, and Maggie was grateful for that. Ace poured the coffee into two white mugs and smiled as he said that he had washed them out first.

She noticed that he was wearing a different shirt. Instead of a gaudy red shirt, he wore a gaudy yellow shirt. "You used the shower?" she asked.

"A real quick shower and a shave," he replied. He glanced out a window and said, "I'll be back in a second."

Maggie saw the headlights of a car pulling up to the office. As Ace went outside, she guessed that he was about to receive the package that he was flying to Miami. She wondered what was in the package, and then shook her head and told herself that there were some things she did not need to know. Still, she was curious.

Ace returned. "It's time to go. Stuff a couple of those doughnuts in your purse. You might get hungry later on."

She got up from the table, and they hurried out the door. As they walked to the plane, she asked, "What about the motorcycle?"

"The people I'm flying for will take care of it for me."

At the plane, he helped her climb up and into the first cockpit. It was cramped because several small sacks were strapped to the sides. The seat was a little damp.

"Here, put these on," he said as he handed her a soft leather helmet and goggles. Ace reached down with both hands and secured the safety belt. "I've never lost a passenger yet. Pull that muffler around your neck and tuck the ends down in your jacket. You'll keep warmer that way."

"Are we going to take off in the dark?" she asked.

"It's no problem," he laughed. "There's only one way to go and that's up." He climbed into the cockpit behind her.

Maggie caught a glimpse of a man walking toward the front of the plane, and then the engine coughed and roared. The wind from the propeller hit against the windscreen in front of her cockpit. She quickly put on the helmet and snapped the strap. Once she had the goggles in place, the wind folding around the windscreen was not so bad.

For two or three minutes the plane did not move, and she was starting to worry that something had gone wrong. Then the plane began moving slowly until some point unknown to her was reached. The plane turned and the engine's noise greatly increased, and Maggie could feel that they were accelerating. She could see nothing ahead or out the sides but the black night, and she wondered how Ace, in the cockpit behind her, could know where he was going.

The speed increased. She had ridden in fast cars driven by careless young men, but that was nothing compared to this wild hurtling along in the dark on unseen and sometimes bumpy ground.

The nose of the plane lifted. They were airborne. She was actually flying! Maggie braced herself as the plane banked slightly, pushing her shoulder over against the cockpit wall. After a minute or so, the plane leveled off for maybe another minute and then banked the other way, sending her other shoulder against the wall on that side. The plane

was at an angle, not parallel to the ground, and she hoped the safety belt was secure. Then she discovered that she could look out over the side of the plane and what she saw was a treat. Below her were the lights of early morning Philadelphia. It was a sight she had never imagined, and she told herself that whatever happened on this trip, dirty bathrooms and all, it was worth it.

The plane resumed level flight. She settled back in the cockpit. Maggie realized that the night was not as dark as it had been. Dawn was coming. If they were going south, she should be able to see the sunrise by looking to her left. She was right. The sky was turning gray and then in a few minutes, there was the beginning of light and that was soon followed by the emergence of a large orange ball. The sun was coming up, and she thought it was the most beautiful sunrise she had ever seen.

She was able to see what else was in the cockpit. She discovered the altimeter. They were flying at two thousand feet. There was what looked like a speedometer. They were cruising along at eighty miles an hour, but strangely, it seemed as if they were not moving at all. She could see land out to the right or the left, but she could not see what was below. The land appeared to be moving.

Then Maggie saw that the control stick in front of her was moving ever so slightly. She guessed that the controls were somehow linked to the controls in Ace's cockpit.

With the sun now fully up above the horizon, the air seemed a little warmer, and she was comfortable. She tried to think about what was to come. When she got to Miami, she would wire Trish and have her send money. Then there would be the train ride back to Washington and Philadelphia. It would probably take a week for her to get back. Daddy would be furious. She had better send him a telegram saying that she was all right and would be home soon. He was really going to yell at her, but not for long. In some ways, he was like Trish. Once his anger had been burned up, Daddy would want to know every detail of the trip. Maggie smiled as she considered just which details to tell and which should remain fodder for a secret diary.

Another thought kept poking into her brain, and finally she allowed it to have center stage. That strange dream she had last night both puzzled and disturbed her. She had dismissed the dream at the time as being something that had been conjured up by the fact that Ace was a pilot in the war. Daddy had followed the war closely, and especially the Easter Rebellion in Ireland. It was not the images in the dream that disturbed her. It was the part that was so terrible she had blocked it from her memory.

Maggie closed her eyes to concentrate on trying to recall the dream in its entirety. Suddenly, there was a bumping sensation like in a car when it hits a pothole. She awoke in a panic only to discover that they were on the ground and heading toward a hangar and several other smaller buildings.

The plane came to a stop. Ace was beside her cockpit and reaching down to unbuckle her seat belt. "How was it?" he asked.

"I loved it! Where are we?"

"Virginia, a little north and west of Richmond. Come on; let's get something to eat while the hired hands gas up the plane."

She climbed out of the cockpit, and jumped to the ground. The air was warm and soft and her jacket was far too warm. She pulled off the muffler, shed the jacket, and tossed both up in her cockpit. She pulled off her goggles and helmet and shook her head, bouncing the short auburn hair. "Which way is the bathroom?" she asked.

It was a good start. There was a small restaurant, and the bathroom was almost clean, and the food smelled good. As she ate the salty ham, eggs, and trifled with the grits, she asked, "How in the world do you know where you are going? This is a big country, you know."

"I've flown this route a number of times now. The first time I made the trip, I had to use a road map of the eastern United States."

"You took off on a thousand mile trip with just a road map?"

"Well, I do have a compass. You've got one in the front cockpit, too."

After they finished and had a cigarette and a second cup of coffee, Ace paid the bill and they walked outside. "I don't think you'll need the jacket now," Ace said. "Have you got a shirt on under that sweater? Another stop or two and you won't need that sweater."

"The shirt is as ugly as the sweater," she replied. "I'll be glad to get some clean clothes and a bath."

As they strolled to the plane, Ace said, "You're a tough woman. When we landed, and I climbed up to get you out of the cockpit, I wasn't sure what I'd find. Maybe a quivering mass of jelly."

Maggie laughed. "The takeoff was a bit scary, but after that, it was great. I do have to confess, though. I'm afraid I went to sleep."

"That's really good. Sometimes people don't do so well their first time up. Listen, you wait here with the plane. I've got to check in the office and pay for the fuel."

Maggie stood by the plane and put on her helmet and cocked the goggles up on the top edge of the helmet. A pilot passed by. He was dressed in riding breeches, boots, and shirt and jacket. He was carrying his helmet and goggles.

"Where you out of?" the man asked as he passed.

"Philly," she replied.

The man nodded and said, "Good day for flying."

Maggie knew then that she had entered a new and exciting world that she was sure she would never leave. How many women pilots were there? She would have to know the answer to that question.

When Ace returned, he moved to help her up to the cockpit, but she shrugged off his help. "I can make it," she said as she climbed into the cockpit, put the jacket under her, and buckled up the safety belt.

"Are you buckled up?" he asked.

"I'm fine. Let's go," she replied.

Ace hesitated and then said, "Okay."

When they were airborne, she smiled as she thought about Ace's concern. She ran her hand over the belt just to make sure. She stayed awake during the next leg of the trip. She learned that she could lean to the left or right and get a better view of the ground. The wings blocked much of the view, but she could still see the small towns below. Most of the ground was either green or brown and sometimes black where it was being prepared for planting.

The next stop was at a meadow. It was a large meadow hedged by trees. Ace brought the plane in for a landing and taxied up to a small shed at the opposite end and shut off the engine. She unbuckled her belt and climbed out and joined him on the ground.

"I don't see any bathroom," she said as she took off her goggles.

“Over behind the shed,” he replied. “There’s a little box that should have some toilet paper in it.”

“I hope you are kidding me.”

“I’m afraid not. Air fields in these parts are rare. I’ll refuel while you take care of your business.” He walked over to the shed, pulled a ring of keys from his pocket, picked one, and unlocked the padlock.

When Ace came out of the shed, he was carrying a five gallon fuel can. Maggie decided that he was indeed serious. She walked around behind the shed and found nothing. There was nothing. She saw a box that looked like a birdhouse nailed to the shed wall. It had a door and a latch. She opened the box and found a half roll of toilet paper. She laughed and muttered softly, “When in Rome.”

They were back in the air and heading south once again. Maggie checked her watch. It was noon, and she was beginning to wish she had not just toyed with the grits when they ate breakfast. Then she remembered the doughnuts she had stuffed into her purse. She had stored the purse by poking it down the front of her sweater. It was not very comfortable, but she did not want to lose it somewhere in the countryside below. The doughnuts had not improved since leaving the ground, but her appetite had grown with time.

The control stick in front of her moved. She could feel the pedals by her feet move and the plane banked to the left and then leveled out again. She could see a town to the left. When they were moving steadily in a straight line, the compass said the direction was southeast, but a little more to the south than east.

She reached out a hand and lightly grasped the control. Maggie could feel a slight vibration from the engine. Then she felt a slight pressure to the right. Her eyes could not have tracked the motion of the control. She looked at the wings. They seemed parallel to the ground. She smiled and put just the slightest pressure on the control. There was an equal and countering pressure that followed her effort. She eased back just a touch on the control and the nose rose. There was a countering pressure and the nose of the plane eased into level flight.

Maggie heard a thumping noise, more of a vibration than noise. It seemed to run along the left side of the cockpit. The thumping stopped when she squirmed around in her seat to look back at Ace. He waved his hand back and forth in front of his face and made a great show of shaking his head, no. She smiled and settled back in her seat. She told herself that she could learn to fly. She looked at the dash in front of her. It was not much different than a motor car. Better yet, there were no gears to shift. She was sure that God had invented motor car transmissions as a punishment for women. Still and all, she had mastered the gear shift. An interesting question occurred to her. Would Ace teach her to fly?

There was another landing and refueling stop. The accommodations were not any better than at the last stop. They were on their way again. Maggie looked at her watch. It was almost three o’clock and by her calculations, they probably were not more than about half way to Miami. This would mean an overnight stop somewhere, and she hoped that they would not be sleeping on the ground behind some shed. As the hours wore on, she was becoming more concerned about the night. She could see dark clouds to the east and wondered if they were coming in off the ocean.

The novelty of being up in the air was fast wearing off. Maggie turned her mind from the landscape below and began somewhat aimless conjectures about the man in the cockpit behind her. Ace had flown this trip a number of times. Even if he had a passenger in the front cockpit, he was still alone. What did he think about? All those hours in the air alone, he must think about something. Maybe he thought about women in his life. She remembered the cigarette lighter. A woman who possessed such a lighter must be an interesting woman, even a countess. She was probably sophisticated, a Parisian woman, a beautiful woman. Well, at least he must not be a fortune hunter. Daddy was always on the look out for fortune hunters. Claimed he could spot one a mile away. Daddy was going to be furious about this little caper. Her mother had not been a fortune hunter. Both mother and father were poor when they got married. Daddy was reasonably well off in the years following her mother's death, or at least it seemed that way. Was Jillian a fortune hunter? She was much younger than Daddy. Jillian was a good person. Kathleen was a sweetheart even if a bit stuffy. Poor Daddy! What rotten luck. Two wives, both dead. Two daughters, one obviously destined to marry one of the lawyers in Daddy's business, and the other pissing behind country sheds while running away to Miami with a man she barely knew. Ace had a last name. What was it? Men have last names, and so do their wives, and oh, my god, is he married? She had to resist an urge to twist around in the seat and look back at him. Is he married? That thought was followed by an equally disturbing one. Why should she care?

It was nearly five o'clock when the plane began descending. Maggie could see a farm house close to the meadow where they were going to land. The landing was smooth enough. Instead of stopping at the end of the field, Ace taxied the plane through a wide opening in the fence that separated the field from a barn lot and barn. He did not stop until he was only a few feet away from a shed roof coming off the barn.

A man, woman, and a small child watched the plane from a safe distance between the farm house and the barn. When the plane stopped, they moved forward. The man was lanky, taller than Ace by maybe a head. His hair was brown and combed over to one side. His face was narrow. His eyes were close-set, and for reasons that Maggie could not grasp, she instinctively knew that this man should not be crossed. He wore bib overalls and a blue work shirt and heavy work shoes. His sleeves were rolled up to just below his elbows. His hands were large. Maggie had seen men like this who worked for Daddy. These were men who could work hard from sunup to sunset.

The woman was much younger than the man. She was shorter than Maggie, but not by much. She had stringy light brown hair that had been combed straight back and pulled into a bun. Maggie knew that if the woman pulled the pins holding the bun, her hair would fall down her back and well below her shoulders. She wore a straight dress that came down nearly to her ankles and shoes but no socks. She had a round face and Maggie guessed that she was no more than Kathleen's age, but she could not be sure because hard work and the sun may have given the woman a head start on aging. The little boy, about two, was wearing a diaper, a pull-over singlet, and was barefoot. He bore the markings of his mother.

As the family approached Ace and Maggie, the little boy tried to walk and at the same time, bury his head in his mother's dress. The boy suddenly shook loose from his mother's hand and ran to Ace who was carrying a paper sack in one hand. He knelt down

and scooped up the boy in one arm. The boy flung his arms around Ace's neck and shouted, "Candy!"

The mother was embarrassed, but the father and Ace both laughed. Ace lowered the child to the ground, saying, "I've got it right here in this bag." He reached into the bag and pulled out a small white sack and gave it to the boy who quickly pulled out a piece of candy and stuffed it into his mouth.

"Just one piece," the mother said. "Save the rest for later."

The boy looked at his father, who nodded and said, "Give the sack to your mother." The little boy was unhappy but he obeyed.

"Virgil, June, this is Maggie. She's a paying passenger going all the way to Miami. Maggie, these fine people are Virgil and June. The little boy is their son, James."

June made what was almost a curtsy, and Virgil said, "The boy's full name is James Longstreet. We're the Hockersmiths."

Ace laughed and turned to Maggie. "Virgil hasn't surrendered yet."

Virgil smiled. "That's for damn sure."

"I apologize for Virgil's language," June said softly to Maggie. "We may be in the barn lot, but the rules of the house apply when I'm out here."

Maggie did not know what to say. She had been quickly thrust into a different world, but it was clear to her that she was about to spend the night in this world. She nodded and looked at Ace.

There was a moment of silence which was ended when Virgil said, "We need to get this plane under the lean-to. That's a good storm coming up tonight."

"Right," Ace replied. He handed the paper bag to June. "There's some cloth for you and a box of shells for Virgil."

"Thank you," June said. "We'll go on up to the house. Supper will be ready soon. You men wash up before you come in."

Maggie suddenly wanted to pull off the sweater she was wearing. She realized that it was very hot. The sun seemed to press down against her head. The storm clouds approaching were bringing rain, but running ahead of the storm was a high humidity that made the heat even more oppressive. She felt light headed. Then she realized that the others were staring at her. She slowly crumpled and then was on the ground. She was only dimly aware that she was being carried by Ace.

When she came around, she found herself in a narrow bed. The room was small, but there was a breeze coming through an open window. The window was so close to the bed she could have reached out with a hand to touch it, but she did not because her hand was not yet ready to cooperate with her brain.

June sat on a straight chair by the bed. She had a pan of water on the floor and was dipping a wash cloth in the water, wringing it out, and then softly moving the rag on Maggie's forehead. As she came around, Maggie realized that she was barefoot. Someone had removed her shoes and stockings. Then she realized that her sweater and shirt had been removed. Now she was wearing a blouse, a blue blouse with buttons. It was a woman's blouse.

Maggie started to raise up, but June gently held her down, "Not yet," she said softly. "You had a touch of sun fever. Rest here a little longer. You'll be fine, but you need to take it easy for a while. You have to be careful about the heat down here."

"My clothes?" Maggie asked. "My shoes?"

"I took off that heavy sweater and that old shirt. I don't know where you found that shirt, but I know where you lost it. I had Virgil take it out to the trash burning pit. The sweater and stockings, too. Sorry about the stockings. They looked very expensive."

"Your blouse?" asked Maggie.

"Yes. I picked one that I thought was appropriate."

"Thank you. I'll pay you for it."

"Wouldn't hear of such a thing. You're a friend of Ace's, and that's enough for us." June's soft Georgia way of speaking did not disguise the fact that she considered the issue of payment closed. "Now, you rest here for a while. I've got to put supper on the table. Those men will have the plane fixed up for the storm, I reckon, and they'll be putting their feet under the table."

"Where is the bathroom?" Maggie asked.

"Bathroom?" June seemed puzzled and then understood Maggie's question. "Oh, we don't have an indoor place. The outhouse is, well, you're in no condition to traipse out back. You can use the chamber pot under the bed. There's an old almanac here on the bed table if you need it. I'll close the door on my way out."

June got up, smiled, and left the room, being careful to latch the door behind her. Maggie was tempted to have a debate in her mind as to which was going to be the more embarrassing course to pursue. Should she use the chamber pot, or let nature have its way. As she pulled the chamber pot out from under the bed, she considered the possibility that there were very few real bathrooms south of Philadelphia.

The threatening storm coming out of the east arrived shortly before supper. Maggie soon realized that a driving rain storm and thunder and lightning took on a more personal nature when a small farmhouse was the shelter instead of a large brick house in a city. The storm did bring a welcome relief from the heat.

They sat at the table, Virgil and Ace on one side, Maggie on the other side, and June at one end. James sat in his mother's lap. There was no mistaking the fact that the child was hungry. The main dish was a concoction in the skillet which June had placed in the center of the table. There was a side dish of what appeared to be tomatoes and something green which Maggie assumed wrongly was celery. The food in the skillet was a combination of grits, cheese, and sausage cut up into small chunks.

"I been saving that last jar of tomatoes and okra," June said as she passed a plate of biscuits. "Be glad when the next batch comes on the vine."

Maggie took a sip from her glass of tea. It was cool and sweet. "How do you get tea this cool?" she asked.

"We have a spring house," June said proudly. "It makes life so much easier. It was the first thing Virgil and Ace did when the place was bought. They built a little shed around the spring."

June fed James a spoonful of grits and cheese, and Virgil said, "Ace found the place. He knew the value of a good spring. We put a pipe into the spring so the water comes out into a big butchering kettle we buried in the ground. The water's almost cold and it flows every minute of the day and night."

"It's almost like one of those iceboxes," June added. "Food keeps real good. Course, you have to put it in a crock."

"It's better than an icebox," Ace explained. "You don't have to empty the pan under the icebox when the ice melts."

June looked at Maggie and smiled as she said, "Men can't be trusted with things like icebox pans. It takes a woman to keep such things working right. I 'spect that if Ace had an icebox, he'd have the wettest floor in Georgia."

Maggie looked at June and nodded agreement, as she sampled the food on her plate. It tasted surprisingly good. The okra was a strange taste, and she was not sure she wanted more than a taste, but the grits, cheese, and sausage were interesting. She thought she caught the beginning of a conversation that she and June had not yet had. When and if it actually occurred, she knew it would be about her and Ace.

"That storm's coming in pretty hard," Ace noted. "I didn't hear anything about this much heavy weather coming in when we were at the air field up in Virginia."

"Oh, I don't think it's anything more than a late spring storm," Virgil said. "One good thing about it, the federals out in the woods looking for stills will get good and wet."

Ace laughed. "Serves them right. What about the local people?"

"The laws?" Virgil asked with a shake of his head. "They're busy with the coloreds. Two boys got away from a chain gang three days ago, and they still haven't found them. I'd guess our county's got the laziest, no good bloodhounds there is in the state."

Maggie was troubled by the mention of bloodhounds and it showed on her face. Virgil saw it and he added, "Those boys running from the chain gang aren't any poor little Elizas."

"Momma and Clara live by themselves," June added.

"I'm sorry," Maggie said. "I suppose it is the bloodhound image. I'm sure that being hunted by the police in Philadelphia isn't much different. For a long time, the police hunted the Irish, like my father. Now, the police are Irish and they hunt the Italians."

Ace laughed, "It sounds like everybody gets hunted sometime."

"It's different down here," Virgil said. "Irish and Italians are pretty near the same, though neither one would ever admit it."

"That's true," Maggie agreed.

"But down here, we and the coloreds have to live together. The coloreds are part of our life the same as the trees, the grass, and even our spring house. But we aren't the same. We aren't even close. We are two different races. We can live together as long as we find ways to live apart."

Maggie felt a sense of confusion in her mind as she tried to sort through Virgil's logic. She realized that there might be some truth in what he was saying.

"We have Negroes living in Philadelphia. But they can only live in certain parts of the city," she said.

"That's about the same here," Virgil nodded. "Except we got more parts and the parts are mixed up even if the people aren't. How many good colored friends do you have up in Philadelphia?"

"None," Maggie admitted.

"We got good colored friends. Old Tobey and his family over across the crick from us, why, we'd be the first ones to help them if they were in trouble, and I know they'd come running to help us." Virgil took a long drink from his glass of tea before continuing.

"They're good coloreds. They know their place." Virgil paused, picked up the pepper shaker, and sprinkled pepper over the whitish mix of grits, cheese, and sausage.

James watched his father sprinkle the pepper. The tense moment of silence following Virgil's declaration ended suddenly when the child raised his hands and shouted, "Pep, pep!"

There was laughter. June sprinkled pepper on the food left on her plate. James was delighted. "I do believe if his daddy ate a board, James would want some splinters," June said. She gave James another taste of the food and added, "The other day, he had both his feet down in Virgil's work shoes, but he couldn't take a step because the shoes were too big and heavy."

"He will grow up," Virgil said. "Filling those shoes won't be any problem. He will be a fine man."

Chapter 14

The storm eased during the night, and once, when Maggie woke up, she thought the rain had stopped. By the next morning, however, the rain was coming down hard, although there was no thunder and lightning and very little wind.

The sound of voices in the kitchen, voices she guessed were being kept low so she would not be awakened, edged into her room. She ran her fingers through her hair in an effort to keep from looking like a badly used rag doll with tangled yarn pieces for hair.

When she made an appearance in the kitchen, she saw Ace and Virgil at the table. June brought a pot of coffee to the table. Dishes were set for four just as they had been for supper the night before.

"I'm afraid I've got some bad news," Ace said as he lifted the coffee pot and poured coffee in the four cups.

"I can guess," Maggie replied. "We can't fly today because of the weather." She sat down and picked up a spoon and began stirring her steaming cup of coffee.

"It's a good thing," Virgil said as he lifted his cup and looked at Ace. "We can give that crate of yours a good going over. When's the last time that engine was checked out?"

"Not long ago. I've kept a close watch on it. Maybe when we get to Miami, I'll do some heavy maintenance."

Virgil shook his head. "We might as well spend the day on it. Can't do much else in this rain, anyway. The shed roof will keep us dry enough. Besides, the women won't want us sitting around the house all day."

Maggie looked at Ace and asked, "When will we be able to fly?"

Ace glanced questioningly at Virgil who said, "The rain most likely will let up this afternoon and clear out by tonight. The field has good grass. You should be able to take off tomorrow morning."

"I wouldn't mind some more rain," June said as she checked the eggs frying in a large skillet and a pot of grits boiling on the stove. She moved with no wasted motion to the door to their bedroom to listen. "James is sleeping late this morning."

When breakfast was finished, Ace pulled out his pack of cigarettes and the gold lighter. Virgil carefully filled his pipe. As the men lit up, Maggie reached over to Ace's cigarettes and lighter saying, "I'm out."

June stared at Maggie, who saw her reaction and quickly asked, "Is it okay if I smoke?" She needed a cigarette, but she did not want to offend June. Over the past hours, she had developed respect for this woman.

June smiled. "Surely. I've just never seen a woman smoke a cigarette before. My momma and Clara both smoke pipes. They don't smoke ugly pipes like Virgil. They smoke clay pipes."

"Yes," Virgil said. "And those clay pipes break easy. My pipe may be ugly, but it's always ready when I am."

After coffee and cigarettes and pipe were finished, the men dashed through the rain to the barn. Maggie helped June wash dishes and tidy up the kitchen. James had awakened, been fed, and contented himself with a box of toys that were kept by the sofa on the other side of the room.

Maggie sat down at the table. June busied herself at the stove. She stirred the fire and added some kindling from the box by the stove. "The men drank up the coffee," she explained. "This is a real restful morning for me, so I thought I'd make some tea. Do you like tea?"

"Yes," Maggie answered. She pulled the cracked saucer that had been used for an ashtray over in front of her. She had three cigarettes and the lighter that Ace had left behind for her.

After June finished making the tea, she took two small china cups and saucers from the cupboard. They were antique pieces, and Maggie wondered how old they were, and what an antique dealer in Philadelphia would ask for them.

"Those are beautiful cups and saucers," Maggie said.

"They come down to me from my grandmother," June replied. "They're all that's left from the set. Momma had them, but she allowed as how I shouldn't have to wait for them to come to me. It was a wedding present."

"How far away does your mother live?" Maggie asked.

"Not far. About five miles. She's kind of crippled up, but she gets around. My sister-in-law, Clara, lives with her. Clara's got two children. I reckon she will be living there for another three years, more's the pity."

"She takes care of your mother?"

"Yes, but it's because my brother, Jubal, is in the federal prison up in Atlanta. The laws got him one night when he was carrying a batch of white lightning for some bootleggers. Ace has been trying to get him out on parole, but it's a federal matter. Ace says if it was the state, some of his friends might be able to get the governor to do something."

"I didn't know Ace knew any governors," Maggie said with a smile.

"Oh, he don't. But Ace has ways of getting things done. He's surely done a lot for us. He bought this farm for us."

"Ace did that?"

“Yes, he did. Virgil keeps claiming that it’s a loan, but Ace says it’s a gift.”

“Ace seems to get some use out of it,” Maggie said.

“He does that! About a year or so ago, Ace came down here and stayed for twelve days. At first, he said he was taking a vacation. I don’t know everything about it. Virgil told me some, but not all.”

Maggie sipped her tea and lit a cigarette. “Was Ace in some kind of trouble?”

“He surely was.” June leaned over toward Maggie and spoke softly. “Ace had been here about two days. The mailman told Virgil that some city fellers were asking around about an airplane coming and going from around here.”

“Then what happened?”

June leaned back in her chair. “Well, I can tell you that Old Blue Twelve came right off the wall!” She pointed up to a double-barreled shotgun that rested on two pegs above the back door. “And Ace had a pistol.”

Maggie nodded. “Ace must have gotten in trouble with some of the gangsters he works for.”

“I figured the same thing,” June said. “For about three days and nights, Ace and Virgil took turns standing guard. They didn’t both sleep at the same time. And Virgil, he scouted out some at night just to make sure no one was sneaking around.”

“I wonder what it was all about,” Maggie said, and then she asked, “How did it end?”

“I guess things got made right somehow. Ace flew off to Miami, and Old Blue Twelve went back up on the wall.”

“Weren’t you afraid?”

June raised her cup to her lips and made a face. “The tea got cold.” She paused and then said, “Of course I was afraid, but not for myself. There’s not a half dozen city fellers who could go up against Virgil. And Virgil’s always said that the one man in the whole world he wouldn’t want to face in a gun fight is Ace. Virgil’s not given to making false praise, you know.”

“Ace must have gotten caught up in a fight between two gangs,” Maggie said. “It seems like they are always shooting each other in Chicago.”

June nodded agreement. “That’s what Virgil thinks. He never told me everything, I’m sure, but the way I figured it, it had something to do with Ace flying a man from New York to Chicago. Somebody got killed, and Ace flew the same feller back to New York.”

“That makes a lot of sense,” Maggie said. “I’m surprised you didn’t take James and go stay with your mother, or at least, someplace safe.”

“Couldn’t do that,” June said. “Virgil’s my man. If I left, it would mean I disrespected him. But I did have one fear, though.”

“What’s that?”

“If there was trouble, the laws might come in and Virgil could end up in prison like my brother.”

Maggie nodded. “I can understand that. Virgil is a good man. But I don’t know what to think about Ace. The first time I saw him, and do you realize that’s only been, what? Two, or is it three days ago? I’ve lost all track of time!” She grimaced and suddenly sat upright in her chair and stared straight ahead. “My God, what am I doing here?”

Maggie slowly lowered her head, cradling it in her arms which rested upon the table. Tears came, but in a fashion more like a gentle rain than in a storm.

At that moment Virgil's face appeared at the back door, but before he could enter, June was up and moving to block the door. "Get back to the barn. You and Ace stay there till I call for you to come in for dinner." There was no room for compromise in her voice, and Virgil's face quickly disappeared.

June moved to Maggie's side, gently put a hand on her back and said softly, "Rest a bit. Everything will work out." She then moved to the stove and stirred the fire. "I think we could stand for another cup of tea."

Maggie raised her head. She reached for a handkerchief in her pocket. "I'm okay, now. I don't know what came over me."

June smiled. "You've been through a lot. You been rode hard and put away wet."

As Maggie looked questioningly at June, James came toddling out of the bedroom. "Momma? Hungry boy!"

"Doesn't rain but it pours," June said as she picked up the boy. "Let's go change diapers and then get you something to eat. Probably ought to make some coffee and take it and some biscuits out to the men."

"Can I help?" Maggie asked.

"You know how to make coffee?"

"Yes, and I can cook, too. At least some."

"Take the water from the drinking pail. The coffee's in that blue crock. Fill up the basket and put in water up to the mark in the pot."

June carried James into the bedroom and Maggie made the coffee. She picked what seemed to be the hottest place atop the stove and put down the pot. By the time she finished the coffee, June returned with a smiling James. She gave him a biscuit and a tin cup filled half-way with milk and seated him on a small rag rug on the floor. Maggie was surprised at how well James did with the milk and biscuit.

"I'll have to get some fresh milk from the spring house," June said as she loaded four biscuits in a small cloth bag. "Soon as the coffee's done, I'll take it out to the men." She paused and looked at Maggie. "You can wash up out on the porch. There's a wash basin and some soap. I put a clean towel and wash rag out there this morning after the men washed up."

"What I'd like to do is wash my hair," Maggie said.

"That's no problem. We got plenty of rainwater today. Just take water out of the rain barrel at the corner of the porch. It's clean water, though a little cool. There's a big ladle you can use to pour the water over your head. I'll tell the men to stay in the barn till I come to fetch them."

"Thanks," Maggie said gratefully. "Could I watch James for you until you get back from the barn?"

"Yes, you could, 'cept I'm going to take him with me. He's got a play pen in the barn. He likes to be out there with his daddy. And it gives me a chance to get some things done."

The coffee was soon ready and June reserved two cups in a small pot and put it back on the stove, but away from the hottest part. She gathered up the sack of biscuits and the coffee pot in one hand and took hold of James' hand with her free hand. She pushed open the screen door with her shoulder.

Maggie realized that June had forgotten cups. "Can I bring cups?"

"Oh, no," June replied. "I'm not taking any of my cups out to the barn. They got tin cups."

Maggie laughed. June was unlike the young women she knew. Her every move seemed to be carefully thought out, and yet at the same time, seemed completely natural. Maggie got up from the table and hurried outside. Her appreciation of June was second to the anticipation of water and soap. She dipped rainwater out of the barrel and filled the basin. The soap was brown, and even though she knew her skin would probably die of shock, she set to with vigor. She had started on her hair, making as much lather as possible when June returned from the barn.

"Let me do the lading," June said. "I'll pour and you scrub."

"That's a deal," Maggie said. June guided her to the edge of the porch so the water would fall to the ground. Just as the first ladle of water splashed on her head, Maggie started to say, "I'm sorry about... Oh, that feels good!"

"You don't need to apologize about a few tears," June said as she poured another ladle. "You've had a hard time. I'm glad it's you and not me getting hooked up with Ace."

"What?" Maggie asked sharply as she straightened up.

June pushed her back down and unloaded another ladle full of water on her head. "Don't pretend with me," she laughed. "I saw the way you were looking at Ace, and I saw the way he was looking at you. It must have been a miracle that those looks never ran into each other."

Maggie shook her head, but remained bowed for the next ladle of water. "Ace thinks I'm a package to be delivered from one point to another."

"Maybe," June said as she unloaded another ladle full of water and then reached for a towel and put it into Maggie's hands. "But however this started, he's changed his mind. Of that, I'm sure."

As she toweled her hair, Maggie said, "It's hard to see much future with a man who has gone into hiding. I couldn't handle that."

"Ace is no gangster," June said. "He does deal with some rough people. We all do. Virgil doesn't keep Old Blue Twelve up there above the door for a decoration."

"Maybe if Virgil wasn't friends with Ace, he wouldn't have to keep the shotgun handy." Maggie wrapped the towel around her head. "Did Ace and Virgil serve together very long in the war?"

"No. Virgil was among the first to go over. Ace didn't get there till near the end. Virgil was Ace's mechanic. But Virgil knew Ace before the war."

"How is that?"

"Virgil always wants to go to the county fair. I don't think he ever missed one since he was a little boy. Anyway, back about '16 or maybe it was '17, Virgil went to the fair and saw this young boy. He didn't look to be more than fifteen or sixteen at the most. Well, he was flying an airplane and doing tricks with it!"

"Ace?"

June nodded. "Virgil said he was billed as a boy daredevil pilot. There were posters all over the county."

"Ace flew with a circus when he was a boy?"

"That's what Virgil says. Come on, you can comb out your hair while I fix us another cup of tea. Then I'll have to get to work on supper."

Over the second cup of tea, June explained how Ace got his name from the circus and not the war, even though he did become an ace during the last days of the war. "Virgil says that right from the beginning Ace was the best pilot they'd ever seen."

"He is a strange man," Maggie said. "No wonder he seems like a gypsy. I wonder if he could ever be a part of my world."

"You fixin' to try that?" June asked.

"I don't know. Virgil seems to have settled down for you."

"Maybe," June said as she traced the rim of her empty cup with her finger. "Virgil's got this hankering to move down to Florida, over on the coast."

"Why? You two are building a fine place here. I think you love this place."

June smiled. "That's true, but Virgil's a good mechanic. He's heard that there is motor car racing down there on the beaches."

"Are you going to go along with that?"

"There's not much choice in it that I can see. Virgil's my man. If he's got a dream, I can't stand in the way."

Maggie shook her head. "But what about your dream? Doesn't that count for something?"

"Course it does. Virgil knows how I feel about this place. He will think long on it before making up his mind."

"I don't understand this," Maggie said. Even as she spoke, she knew that she did understand it. The problem was that she felt anger because she did not approve of June's stance on the matter.

"You are angry," June said. "I'm sorry. We come from two different worlds, and that's plain to see."

Maggie instinctively reached across the table and put her hand on June's. "Please forgive me," she said softly. "I've never known another woman like you."

June covered Maggie's hand with her other hand and squeezed gently. "Maybe in another time, another place, we'd have been sisters. I would like that."

"We are friends," Maggie said.

"I guess we owe it to Ace for that," June laughed. "I surely don't envy you. He's a gypsy stallion and breaking him to pull a plow will be a mighty big chore."

"There's better uses for a stallion," Maggie replied. They both laughed. As they laughed, Virgil, holding James, and followed by Ace, was at the door.

"What are you women laughing about?"

"Now, Virgil, this is women's business and none of your concern," June said.

"That's for sure," Maggie added whereupon they laughed again.

After supper and as the sun set, June moved people about like a chess master moves pieces on the chess board. The Hockersmiths were in their bedroom and Ace and Maggie were seated close together on a small bench by the washstand on the porch. The first of the night insects were tuning up for an early evening performance.

Ace pulled out two cigarettes from his pack, lit both at the same time, and handed one to Maggie.

"Thanks. I hope I'm not running you out."

"No problem. I've got a couple of packs in the plane."

They sat quietly and smoked and then both spoke at the same time and then stopped. "Go ahead," said Ace.

"I was just starting to say that I had fun watching June get this organized."

Ace laughed softly. "It was kind of obvious, wasn't it?"

Maggie took a puff from her cigarette, and then another. "I like June. I've never met another woman like her. God, I'd like to take her back to Philadelphia with me."

"Why?"

"So that snotty bunch could see what a real woman looks like."

"Wouldn't that be a little hard on June?" Ace asked.

Maggie looked at Ace. She could see the scar side of his face briefly as he took a long pull on his cigarette. "I suppose so. I guess it would be like she was something from the zoo for them to see." Maggie glanced sideways at Ace. He showed no reaction to what she had said. She spoke again. "You surprise me. Just when I think I've got you figured out, you do something different."

"How's that?"

"You've got a sensitive nature. You dress like a swashbuckling pirate, and deal with some very bad people. You have a curious idea about comfort, and yet you can be concerned about June's feelings. Just who is the real Ace?"

"What you see is what you get."

"Well, June certainly thinks the world of you," Maggie said.

"June's a special person. She reminds me of a woman I knew when I was young."

"There have been a lot of women in your life."

"This one was not what you think, Maggie. She was the wife of a farmer, a guy named Jones. When I was fifteen, I was sent from the orphanage to work on their farm. He was mean to her, his animals, and me, but she was kind to me. I never forget a kindness."

Maggie was silent as she tried to find the proper niche in her mind for this new piece of information. She was beginning to put together a picture of Ace, but she was not sure that she had the parts in the right order.

"You grew up in an orphanage?" Maggie guessed.

"It was the only home I ever knew. A woman named Miss Castor ran it. She was probably the closest thing I ever had to a mother. I still send money to her."

"Were you really a boy daredevil pilot?" Maggie asked suddenly.

Ace laughed. "June talks too much. It is true, though. I ran away and joined a circus, but instead of working for the circus, I ended up working for a guy who had an airplane, an old Wright Model B. He did air shows and took people up for a ride. He got five dollars a passenger."

Maggie shook her head. "How come it cost me so much for a ride?"

"Because I thought you were an empty-headed, spoiled young woman, and I thought a hundred dollars would scare you off."

"Thanks for the compliment."

"Don't mention it," Ace said. He reached over with his hand and gently took hold of her shoulder and turned her so she faced him. "I also thought you were very pretty. I don't like the short hair, though. You would have lovely long auburn hair if you let it grow."

"I'm glad I have some good points." Her voice had the hint of a pout in it, but as she spoke, she moved ever so slightly toward him.

"I was wrong about you," Ace said. "You are one tough lady. When we get to Miami, I'm going to be sorry to see you walk away out of my life."

"Do you mean that?"

"Yes, yes I do."

"Would you teach me how to fly?"

Ace laughed and Maggie quickly responded, "Damn you! Don't laugh at me!"

"I'm sorry. I knew you were going to ask me that. The reason I laughed was because of Griggs."

"Who's Griggs?" Maggie asked. Her voice was softer, her anger all but gone.

"He's the guy who taught me how to fly when I was a kid. It was his idea to bill me as the daredevil boy pilot. He hated the idea of women flying. He wouldn't take a woman up for a ride even if she paid ten times the fee. He'd roll over in his grave if he knew I was going to teach a woman how to fly."

"Then you'll do it? You will teach me how to fly?"

"Sure. I think you would make a swell pilot. You're not afraid of being up in a plane. You are tough and you are not a quitter."

"How long will it take?" Maggie asked.

"Not very long. Depends on what flights I have to make. I think we can have you qualified in a month or less. Once you get certified, though, you have to rack up hours in the air to get a full license. When you get a license, you still have to get experience. If you get your license and then put it in a drawer and don't fly, you won't really be a pilot."

"I understand that. Once I get my license, I promise that it won't go to waste. How much money are you going to charge me?"

"No money. You'll need your money just to live. It's been some years since I taught anyone how to fly. You could do this in Philadelphia, you know."

"Oh, no. I don't even want to think of the fight that would mean. Daddy would have a tizzy-fit. A few phone calls, and I wouldn't even be able to buy a toy airplane."

"I understand," Ace said. "We will have to find you a place to stay."

"Where do you live?"

"I've got a small house right by the airport."

"Indoor plumbing and electricity?"

"Sure. I've even got maid service."

Maggie started to say something about the maid and then thought better of it. She broke the brief silence by asking, "Are you really going to teach me to fly?"

"Yes, Maggie."

She leaned over and kissed him. The kiss had been aimed at his forehead, but it caught him almost at the bridge of his nose. In an instant, his arms were around her and his lips found hers. The fierce passion of his kiss mixed with her excitement at the idea of flying. She wondered if she would ever come back down to earth.

A curtain moved, and there was an unseen smile.

Chapter 15

Ace circled the air field, banking the plane so Maggie could easily look over the side and down at the scene below. She sighed with relief. On the west side of the field, just beyond the usual hangars and sheds, there was a street with buildings on both sides of the street. She could see several cars. It wasn't Philadelphia, but after the past few days, it looked to her like a suburb of heaven. She saw what looked like light poles. That must surely mean electricity.

The landing was smooth, and after they taxied up to the parking area, they climbed down from the plane. Ace was carrying a small bag that was padlocked shut.

"You go wait for me in the office," he said. "I've got some business to take care of."

Maggie nodded and headed for the office. She turned around once for a quick look. A large car was driving up to Ace. It stopped, and two men got out. She glanced back again and saw Ace give one of the men the bag and receive in turn an envelope. She looked back no more and quickly entered the office. There was a scruffy-appearing man seated at a desk on the other side of the counter.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked, his voice sounding like a dull rasp trying to work a hard piece of wood.

Maggie stammered, "I'm with Ace." She quickly recovered and added, "And who the hell I am is none of your damn business." She paused, smiled, and asked, "You got a spare cigarette?"

He got up from the desk and limped over to the counter. "You're with Ace? Never knew him to carry passengers." He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket and started to take one out and then remembered his manners. He shook the pack so that the ends of three cigarettes stuck out.

Maggie smiled again. "I'm afraid all I've got is the habit."

He reached in a pants pocket and produced a large wooden match. Catching the tip of the match under his thumbnail, and with a quick motion, he ignited the match. The smell of sulfur filled the room, and she barely kept from coughing as she puffed the cigarette into life.

Ace came in just as she drew back from the match. "Careful, Louie. That's how she caught me."

"Hi, Ace. Have a good trip?"

"A little rough weather up in Georgia. Had to lay over a day."

Louie nodded toward the door. "Those guys were here waiting for you yesterday. They don't look like the kind of people you want to keep waiting very long."

"They're with a garden society," Ace said with a straight face. "They wanted some new seeds for a garden."

"Hell, the only thing those yeggs would plant wouldn't be flowers." Louie limped back to his desk. "Don't worry about your plane. I'll have the boys take care of it." Back at his desk, he eased into his chair, looked up and squinted. "Get some decent clothes for that poor woman. I thought she was a bum and was going to throw her out of here."

Outside, Maggie asked, "Who is that man?"

"That's Louie. He runs the air field. He may seem a little outspoken at first, but when you get to know him, you realize he's a whole lot outspoken. He's a good guy, though."

"The limp?"

"France. He got shot up and was gassed. He manages to get around okay."

Maggie looked at Ace. "Are there very many like him around the country?"

"Enough. Now, let's see about getting you organized."

"Three things, and I don't know which is first. I'm starving. Those biscuits June packed helped, but I finished off the last one hours ago. Second, I want to buy some clothes. Imagine, your friend, Louie, thought I was a bum. Third, I want a bath. A real bath in a real bathroom. No wash basin and rain water. No outhouse. A real bathroom."

"Follow me. We can take care of the first two real quick. There's a small general store not two blocks from here. There is a restaurant a block further, and my place three doors from there."

"I'd race you, but it's too hot."

"You'll get used to it," Ace laughed.

As they walked, she silently reflected upon his laugh. He laughed often and easily. It was a spontaneous laugh, a completely genuine laugh. He must have a deep pool of good humor, she told herself.

At the store, Maggie bought two pairs of walking shorts, sandals, two blouses, and underwear. She held up the blouses one by one to get Ace's opinion. She deliberately held up a pale, almost colorless blouse. Ace made a face and shook his head, no.

Then she held up a flaming red blouse, something that she would never have picked while living in her very recent past life. Ace smiled, nodded his head up and down, and mimed applause with his hands.

"I'll take these," Maggie said. "And, I want to wear the red blouse, some of the underwear, the tan shorts, and the sandals out of the store. Do you have a dressing room where I can change?"

The store owner was a man in his fifties, slight of build, and he wore his glasses low on his nose. He looked at Maggie, and then at Ace. "That is a little irregular," he said. It wasn't a question but he made it sound as if it could be.

Ace understood the situation and quickly responded, "Put it on my bill."

"Of course, Mr. Mathews." The store owner was considerably relieved. "Right this way, Miss. There's a light in the dressing room. Just pull on the string hanging down."

When Maggie emerged from the dressing room, she was a changed woman. The red blouse and the auburn hair did not do much for the fashion world, but clean, light, and airy clothes lifted her spirits. She carried the old clothes in her arms, dumping them on the counter.

"You want them wrapped?" the store owner asked as he eyed the pile.

"No," replied Maggie. "Burn them."

Later, as they sat under a ceiling fan in the small restaurant, Maggie made a face after sampling the ice tea. "It's really sweet. Last year's sugar crop must have gone into my glass." She took another sip and then said, "I could have paid for the clothes. I've got some money."

"I know that," replied Ace. "But Richardson's a careful man. The way you looked did not give him much confidence in your ability to pay. Besides, you can pay me back when your money comes in from Philly."

The meal was simple but substantial. While they ate, they talked about flying. Maggie was curious about how he was going to teach her when there was no way to communicate from one cockpit to the other.

“Remember when we were flying down here and you began playing with the controls?” he asked.

“Yes, and you beat on the side of the plane with your hand. Are you sure there isn’t a better way?”

“I don’t have an intercom system. We could probably rig one up. I’ll see what Louie’s got in his storeroom. He’s a great one for collecting junk.”

“I’d feel a little more secure if you could talk to me instead of beating on the plane.”

When they finished the meal and were standing outside the restaurant, Maggie held up two fingers. “One more to go.”

“What? Oh, clothes, food, and bath. We have to get some place for you to stay, too.”

“Let’s concentrate on the bath, first,” she said. She glanced up at the sky. “It’s clouding up and looks like rain.”

“It does that here about this time. Rains hard for about an hour or so. Then it cools off for the evening. Come on. My house is just down the street.”

The house was a small building, but it looked in good repair. There was a porch in front, and she could see the electric line coming from a pole in the front yard and going to the house.

Ace opened the front door and stepped back to allow her to enter. The living room became the kitchen and behind the kitchen was a bedroom and bath. The floors were wood planks that had been sanded and varnished. The ceiling was ten feet high, and in the center, there was a large overhead fan.

“Show me the bath!” Maggie ordered.

The bath was a surprisingly large room, but there was no tub. Instead there was a shower and more interesting yet, there was no side wall. Where there should have been a wall, there was only screen and the outside.

“It does have a privacy problem.” Maggie said. “And what is that chain hanging down from the shower head?”

“That’s what works the shower. You pull on the chain and water comes out of the shower head. It’s really very simple. You get wet, then soap and rag, and then rinse.”

“Well, that’s different. But, hot water and soap are the same here as in Philly.”

“Uh, the water will be warm, but it probably won’t be hot. The water comes from a tank on top of the house. The sun heats it. Oh, and there are bushes outside. It’s more private than it looks at first.”

Maggie stared at the bathroom. She saw soap, shampoo, and what appeared to be a clean towel and washcloth. She remembered Ace mentioning a maid. “It looks like someone keeps your place clean.”

“That’s Maria. She stops in a couple of times a week and gives everything a good going over. I haven’t looked yet, but I’ll bet there’s a chunk of ice in the icebox and something to eat. She hears the plane coming in and hurries over with ice from the store. That’s why I didn’t buy any.”

“Maria? Is she Spanish?”

“In a way. She’s Cuban and speaks Spanish. Her English is not very good, but I can understand her. If you are going to take a shower, now would be a good time. It will rain

soon, and there will probably be some thunder and lightning. It's not a good idea to be in the shower in a thunderstorm."

"I'll hurry," Maggie said. "I need my purse. I think there's even a lipstick in it."

They returned to the kitchen area and Maggie retrieved her purse from the table. She eyed the boxes and then decided to wear what she had on after the shower. She hurried toward the bathroom, saying over her shoulder, "I won't be long."

Ace checked the icebox. As he expected, there was a ten pound chunk of ice and six Cokes in the box. The ice had barely started to melt.

He was looking for the ice pick when he heard Maggie scream. He ran to the bathroom. Maggie had taken off her clothes. She stood naked but with a towel held up between her and the shower.

"What's wrong?"

"There's a huge thing in the shower," she gasped. She suddenly realized that she was standing naked and that Ace was far more interested in that fact than he was about the monster in the shower.

"Stop ogling and do something!"

Ace stepped to the shower and pulled the curtain open. There on the wall was a large bug that he guessed was almost three inches long.

"That's a big one," he said calmly. He stepped in the shower and jumped up. His hand smacked hard against the bug. The bug dropped to the floor, and Ace quickly mashed it with his foot.

"You better run some water on the floor before you get in the shower," he said as he reached down and picked up the remains.

Maggie had shifted the towel to cover as much of herself as was possible. "That has got to be the biggest and most disgusting cockroach on the face of the earth!"

"It's not a cockroach," Ace laughed. "Here in Florida, they call them Palmetto bugs."

"Well, take what's left of your pet and get out!"

Ace laughed again and said to the remains in his hand, "Come on, pet. The lady doesn't like us." As he walked out to the trash can in the kitchen, he heard Maggie call after him.

"And wash your hands in the sink."

He deposited the remains of the bug in the can and then moved over to a drawer where he pawed around until he found the ice pick. He chipped pieces of ice from the block in the box, but left them there. He felt the Cokes and they were cold to the touch. He found two glasses in the cupboard and as he sat them down on the counter, he stopped suddenly, looked down at his hands and said, "Damn." He moved to the sink and washed his hands.

Maggie took a long shower. Pulling on the chain was not hard, and she kept an almost steady stream of water falling from the shower head. She was considering doing a second wash on her hair when the cooler water being pumped into the tank above began replacing the sun-warmed water. She pulled the towel from its rack. It was a large towel, the kind of towel that worked well on a beach. She was not surprised that Ace used beach towels. After all, this was Miami, or at least close to Miami. She pulled out all the tools of the feminine trade from her purse and put them on the shelf by the sink. She studied the work ahead in the mirror above the sink.

Ace sat at the kitchen table and waited. He lit a cigarette and smiled as he put the lighter down on the table. The Countess had been a beautiful woman, but older. The

image of Maggie standing naked in front of him flicked through his mind and not for the first time since he had rushed to her rescue. When Maggie reached the age of the Countess, some years from now, she would surely have the same graceful beauty. He smoked another cigarette and as he stubbed out the butt in the ashtray, he looked over at the icebox. He moved from the chair and took a bottle out of the cabinet. It was rum, an unopened bottle, the last of six that had been part of a shipment run in from Cuba and given to him by Maria as a gift. Maria pretended to be his maid, and she did do work for him, but she made her living in other ways. He understood that he and she had much in common.

Ace put ice in a glass, opened a bottle of Coke, and poured half in the glass. He added a generous amount of rum and stirred the drink briefly with a spoon. He knew he should wait, but he also knew it might be a long wait. Maggie would just have to catch up as best she could. He returned to the table with his drink, sat down, and lit another cigarette.

Maggie took her time. She vigorously rubbed her hair with the towel, and then made use of the brush she carried in her purse. It was too small for the job at hand, but with some considerable effort, results could be seen in the mirror. Her short hair soon began to take the shape she desired. These were the first moments of leisure and relative comfort she had enjoyed since the afternoon she had taken to make herself ready for the big coming-out dance. That seemed an eternity ago. She tried to calculate the days and nights. They had been at June and Virgil's place for two nights. There was the night spent at the air field near Philadelphia. There had been a seemingly endless procession of behind-the-shed places. Now there was leisure and comfort.

That was something different in another way, too. She was nineteen her first time. It was a hurried matter at a picnic. She and the boy had slipped away from the others. He put his sweater down on the ground for her and that was a mistake. The other two occasions had been just as woeful. This time would be different. This time there was leisure, and she had no doubt that Ace was experienced. She looked into the mirror, a quizzical expression on her face. Just how much experience did he have?

Maggie made an entrance into the kitchen. She was barefoot and wore nothing except the towel wrapped around her. "What are you drinking?" she asked as she took a seat at the table.

"Rum and Coke," Ace answered as he got up and began making Maggie a drink. "I'm afraid I'm two drinks ahead of you."

"Real rum?"

"The best. Comes from Cuba."

"Rum runners?"

"I guess so. A friend gave me some bottles. This is the last one, but don't worry. There will be more coming in."

He made her a drink and replenished his glass and returned to the table. "That's a nice outfit you've got on."

"Miami fashion," Maggie said as she took a sip of her drink. "God, you make a strong drink. You've had two already? You will really get crocked."

They talked and smoked through two more drinks. Plans were made for the next day. As Ace was preparing another round, the sounds of thunder off in the distance were heard. Ace brought a candle holder and a fresh candle over to the table.

"Candle light? That's very romantic."

"I suppose so, but better than that, we'll have some light when the electricity goes out during the storm."

"No electricity? No light bulb?"

"We get these storms about every evening, sometimes early, sometimes later, this time of year. There's always a lot of lightning and the lights go out."

The storm came on quickly. The first sheets of rain hit the tin roof and surprised Maggie. "You can sleep through that?"

There were several flashes of white light and immediately followed by sharp crashes of high-pitched thunder.

The lights went out and Ace lit the candle. Time had pushed the sun almost down, and the dark cloud overhead made the candle flame a welcome sight.

"The electricity will be back on tomorrow morning. There's a flashlight on the table by the bed if you have to get up during the night."

When Ace mentioned the word, bed, Maggie said that was the best word she had heard all day. She got up from the chair and picked up her drink. "Bring the candle," she added.

Maggie moved to the bedroom and Ace followed with the candle. She lay down across the bed, crooked an elbow and rested her head on her hand. There were flashes of lightning and the thunder was quick to follow each flash. The towel she had wrapped around her body came loose, and she made no effort to adjust it.

Ace put the candle holder down on the table. He hesitated and then moved close to the edge of the bed where Maggie was lying.

"Are you sure about this?" he asked.

Maggie was surprised. This was not how she had pictured this moment which she knew had to come. She had imagined an Ace who would casually take what was offered. Briefly, she wondered if anything ever goes the way it's supposed to. This should be a casual fling. Neither of them would be bound by this act. She believed she had not yet made a decision about Ace. Even though she was strongly attracted to him, there were so many little mysteries that needed solving, that needed answers.

"I'm sure," she replied. "There is just one thing, though. By my count, we are okay tonight. But tomorrow, you have to get some protection. We don't want a little bastard playing on the floor of our bedroom."

There was a vivid flash of lightning and the sharp crack of thunder. The light from the nearby strike filled the room with a brilliant, blue-tinged light. Maggie saw Ace standing before her. His arm was pointing toward the door. The scar on his face seemed to have grown larger and was a harsh red.

"Get out of my house!" Ace said.

His voice was hard, and each word was freighted with the possibility of destruction.

"Get out of my house," he repeated. The lightning and the thunder reached a peak of intensity. The scar on his face continued to grow. Maggie knew a fear that she had never known before.

"Holy mother of God!" she cried out as she rose to her knees on the bed. The towel dropped away, and she knelt on the bed naked before him. "What have I done?" And, as she spoke she knew. She understood. The bits and pieces of his past that she had gathered, and the knowledge that she had gained from June, all came together. She understood that she might just as well have stabbed him with a sharp dagger.

“Please, please forgive me!” she cried. She clasped her hands together in front of her, making a tearful portrait of a suddenly small child begging forgiveness under the stern gaze of a hard-bitten nun.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you. Of all the people on this earth...I’ve never felt about anyone before...Oh, Ace. What have I done?”

His arm slowly lowered. He stepped forward and then knelt, his knees on the floor, his face on her thighs, and she could feel the tears that were coming from his eyes. He spoke, slowly at first, and then the words came out in a rush.

“I trusted you. It hurts. So much pain.” Then he poured out in tear-etched words the pain that had been stored up over the early years of his life.

Maggie touched his head and then his cheeks, smoothing away the tears. “It’s okay,” she said and as she did so, she knew in her mind that her words were really inadequate. Her mind was filling with recognition that she had been wrong about Ace. He was not the strange man of the world, a cross between a gypsy king and powerful knight on an unknown quest. He was a vulnerable man who had been deeply hurt. For all of that, was he not still a gypsy king or knight? She came to the conclusion that he was a man of great contradictions.

They did not make love that night, but they held each other close. The storm passed and Ace fell into a deep sleep, his mind, his soul, exhausted by the release of the pain.

Maggie dozed and then awoke. It was a warm night. The moon had replaced the storm and now it shone into the bedroom through the screened window. She rose up on one elbow and looked down at the sleeping man beside her. She could see the scar. It looked tame now, a sleeping beast. Maggie knew that she was deeply in love with this man.

“What am I going to do with you?” she whispered softly.

Chapter 16

Maggie awoke first and slipped out of bed and hurried to the bathroom. Her head hurt and her stomach was not happy. There had been too much rum and too much fear and then maybe too much hope for the future. Now, the future was going to start as soon as Ace woke up. Which Ace would it be?

While she went about the quick business of putting herself back together again for this day, other thoughts crowded into her mind. They came almost as a relief. The shower water was cool, but it felt good. It was already hot, and she knew it would become hotter as the day wore on. It was only her second shower, but she found that it was so much more refreshing than a bath. She would have to talk to Daddy about showers. Showers and airplanes, these were the instruments of the future.

She made a face at the thought, but quickly towed off and put on the same clothes she had worn the day before. She would change for dinner! She smiled at that thought and paid a price for the movement of her facial muscles and jaw. She needed an aspirin and coffee.

Ace was up when she came out of the bathroom. He was wearing pants but no shoes or shirt.

"My turn," he said, as he headed for the bathroom. It did not take him long. He returned, finished dressing, but said nothing. When he came into the kitchen where Maggie was sitting at the table, he spoke. "Come on. Let's go get something to eat."

They walked in silence until they reached the restaurant. Then Ace said, "I think we had too much to drink last night."

It was as if last night had never happened. Maggie was puzzled by his reaction. She wanted to talk about it over breakfast, but she decided to allow some time to pass. Instead, they talked about the day ahead. There was much to be done. There was a small bank nearby that would take care of the business with Trish. Then they would set about rigging an intercom in Ace's plane.

"We can begin the flight instruction this afternoon," Ace said.

"We fly today?"

"No," Ace replied. "Today and tomorrow and maybe the day after that, we talk a lot about flying."

"What do you mean, talk? I've been talking about flying for days."

Ace laughed. "This is a different kind of talk. Before you get your hands on the controls, you've got to know just what the controls can do and what they cannot do. The actual flying part isn't hard. Hell, it's easier than driving a car, but only if you know everything possible about flying."

"Is this going to be one of those things where you point at the propeller and say, 'This is the propeller'?"

"It's a good way to start," Ace replied.

The first order of business was the bank and a telegram to Trish. The message was simple, "send money." Once that was done, they returned to the air field.

Louie found enough parts in his store room to put together a reasonable intercom in Ace's plane. "You should have put in an intercom years ago," he grumbled. He winked at

Maggie. "I've been trying to get Ace to get one of these new planes. You know, one of those planes where you don't have to sit with your head sticking up in the wind and god knows what kind of birds flying by."

Louie supervised the work, but another man did the installation. Ace paid no attention to them. It was time to begin training Maggie, and at first she thought he was joking when he walked with her to the front of the plane and pointed to the propeller and said, "This is a propeller. It is a good thing if it goes round and round."

The installation work was done by the time Ace had reached the tail. Louie and his technical assistant returned to the office, and Ace motioned to Maggie to climb up in the front cockpit. When she was seated, he told her to fasten the seat belt.

"I thought we weren't going up today?"

"We're not. But fastening that seat belt is something that has got to be done every time. There's an old rule which I made up some years ago. 'There's no such thing as an old pilot.' Forgetting to buckle that belt is one of the things that make that saying come true."

Ace was just beginning to go over the controls, point by point, and Maggie's temper was becoming frayed when Louie called out from the office door that Ace had a phone call.

"Don't go away, sweetheart, I'll be right back."

As he walked to the office, Maggie called out, "First you pick up the phone. Hold the short end to your damned ear. Speak clearly in the funnel-shaped end."

She resented his treating her like a child. She had to admit, though, that she could clearly remember everything he said, point by point. This ground training had to be the worst part of it, she hoped. She knew she could fly this plane. There had been many hours during the trip to Miami, and she had closely watched the controls, seeing the movement of the controls and the reaction of the plane.

Ace returned from the office. "Let's call it quits for today. I've got to fly to Jacksonville tomorrow. I need to check out the plane. You can watch me. Someday, you'll have to do your own pre-flight check."

Maggie unbuckled and climbed down from the cockpit. "Business?"

"Yeah. I'll leave out early in the morning. I'll be gone all day tomorrow, tomorrow night, and probably get back before dark the next day. You'll be okay staying at the house?"

"I guess so," Maggie replied. "I'm not afraid of bogeymen, but I hope none of your pet monsters are in the bathroom. God, those are ugly things!"

Maggie followed him as he checked the plane. He was thorough. She followed and made mental notes. Among the notes was one that marked yet another contradiction. He was the most casual man she had ever met. Nothing seemed to bother him, except of course for one particular word. His style of living was simple, his clothing was second-hand gypsy, and he was perfectly capable of taking off in his plane and flying to a destination where he had never been, and only using a compass and maybe a road map to guide him. However, when it came to his plane, that was a different matter.

It was mid-afternoon when they finished checking the plane. On the way back to the house, Ace said, "It's too early to eat. But if we wait too long, it will probably be raining. We could get soaked running to the restaurant."

"I can cook. Why don't we stop at the store and get some groceries?" Maggie asked.

“You can cook?”

“Even rich girls can learn how to cook. Daddy made sure of that.” She mimicked an Irish brogue, “I’ll not be having daughters who are of no use in the house.”

“So, when did you cook?” Ace asked.

“On Sundays. It was the cook’s day off. Every Sunday Kathleen and I made dinner. It wasn’t very hard. I mean, how difficult is it to make corned beef, cabbage, and potatoes?”

“If you will cook hamburgers and fry some onions and potatoes, you got a deal!” replied Ace.

“How about some tomatoes with it?” Maggie asked.

“You’re on.”

Maggie carried a bag of groceries and Ace carried a ten pound chunk of ice wrapped in a rag that was wet by the time they were at the door of the house.

Maggie cooked and Ace found the results to his liking. After they ate, Maggie put on a kettle of water to heat. Ace got out the rum bottle, two Cokes, and chipped some ice.

Maggie looked at the rum bottle. “We put a real dent in it last night. Go easy with my drink, please.”

“You’re right about that. We shouldn’t have hit it so hard. Rum works on you when you are tired. We put in a hard day yesterday.” He made drinks and Maggie joined him at the table.

“I would like to fly up to Jacksonville with you tomorrow,” she said. “After today, I think I could use some real flying time with my hands on the controls.”

“It’s a good idea,” Ace replied. “But the people I’m flying for are a little worried about you. They don’t know you, and they don’t want you to see the people who will meet the plane in Jacksonville.”

“They trust you. Why wouldn’t they take your word that I’m okay?”

“They don’t even trust each other,” Ace laughed. “It’s not like France.”

“Mobsters are nicer in France?”

“Yeah, in a way. Don’t get me wrong. You cross the French and you are going to end up the same way you would here. But they are much more relaxed about everything. Here, everyone’s trying to rise to the top, to get control, to be the boss.”

“It’s not that different in the business world,” Maggie nodded in agreement. “Daddy’s got managers who would cut each other’s throats in a second to get another step up the ladder.”

The water in the kettle came to a boil. Maggie got up from the table, and Ace asked, “Where are you going?”

“The dishes. We have to do the dishes.”

“That’s probably a good idea,” Ace said. “We could leave them for Maria to do. I guess she didn’t come in today, though.”

“We are not going to leave the dishes for Maria. It’s Mary Margaret’s turn, and if a rich woman can do dishes, a gypsy pilot can wipe them dry!”

She handed Ace a towel and he got up with a smile and took his place by her at the sink. As they finished the dishes, he put down his towel, put both hands on her shoulders and asked, “Is this the way it is, you know, being together, like a team?”

She dried her hands on her apron and smiled. “I think the word you are looking for is being married.”

He nodded. “Yes, I guess so. Maybe it’s not so bad.”

“You are getting close, Ace. You better be careful.”

“Don’t make fun of me,” he said. “This is a different kind of air space for me. Maggie, I...”

He never finished. They kissed. It was a long kiss. After the kiss, they walked to the bedroom, his arm around her and holding her close. At the bedroom door, they discovered they could not go through the door while holding on to each other. Maggie giggled nervously as they unclenched so they could pass through the door. She had seen a comedy routine like that on the stage in New York.

It did not rain that evening. The air stayed warm and still. When they finished, it was dark, but there was no relief from the heat, and they did not hold each other closely. Maggie dozed off finally. When she awoke later, the back of her head was sweaty and the pillow was damp. She got up and went to the bathroom without turning on a light. She got in the shower and pulled the chain and the cool water came down on her hot skin and caused her to shiver. It was while pulling the chain the second time that she remembered she might be sharing the shower with others. She shrugged her shoulders and pulled the shower chain again. After that, she toweled off some of the water and then wrapped the towel around her and went out to the kitchen. She got a drink of water and sat down at the table and lit a cigarette.

She smiled in the dark. Washing dishes had never figured in her dreams about a romantic interlude with the man she loved. Her dreams had always floated a glitzy apartment, cocktails, soft music, but never washing dishes in a small house that wasn’t even in Miami, just near Miami.

Ace appeared at the kitchen door. “You can’t sleep?” he asked.

“No, it’s too hot. I took a quick shower. I feel cooler now,” Maggie replied.

He came to the table, reached down and got a cigarette and lit it. “You got a drink?”

“Just water.”

“I think I’ll have one. You want one?”

“No thanks. The water’s good. You can turn on the light.”

“Don’t need it,” he said as he moved easily in the dark to find a glass, the bottle of rum, a Coke and ice from the icebox. He chipped off a few pieces from what was left of the block and dropped them into Maggie’s glass.

“Thanks. I forgot about the ice.”

The kitchen was dark. Ace decided that he wanted more light, but he did not turn on the light. His hand felt for and found the candle on the table. He reached for his lighter and lit the candle. “That’s better,” he said. He looked across the table at Maggie. “I like looking at you in candle light.”

She smiled and almost tossed aside his intended compliment by saying that she was glad that the candle was not bright enough to see how she looked without makeup. She realized that he meant what he said. He always meant what he said. She knew she was fond of that, but nevertheless, having to be so careful with words was sometimes a little irritating.

“If I look good to you, it’s because you make me feel good about myself,” she said carefully. “I feel very happy right now.”

Ace sipped his drink and as he put the glass down, he said, “You will feel real good in a week or so. By then you will have soloed.”

“Really? That soon? It took me longer than that to learn how to drive a car!”

“Well, you will be a pilot, but with a limited license. Still, you will be one of us.”

“One of us?”

“Yes, one of us, people who fly. When I first learned to fly, there weren’t very many of us. Now, there’s more, but at the same time, there’s more rules and regulations. I didn’t even have a license until after the war. Things are getting more complicated all the time.”

“That’s true,” Maggie agreed. “They have licenses for lots of things.”

Ace chuckled. “You mean like marriage licenses?”

Maggie hastily replied. “No, not marriage licenses, exactly. I mean, well, yes, marriage licenses. Florida probably has marriage licenses. No, what I really meant was that Daddy is always complaining about how things are changing. Sometimes, he can get pretty salty about it.”

“Salty?”

“Yes, really salty.” Maggie puffed out her cheeks and coarsened her voice. “Why, daughter, one of these days, we’ll have to have a license just to go piss!”

Ace slammed his hand down on the table and laughed. “That’s the truth! Sometimes I think your father and I are a lot alike.”

She recognized significance in his words that he probably did not intend. She would have to give some thought to the cliché that daughters marry men who are like their fathers.

“Maybe,” she replied. “But there is a big difference, too. You go everywhere, and Daddy hates going anywhere. But when it comes to his business, he’s like you and flying. He’s never happier than when he is working.”

“You would like me to stay in one place for a while?” Ace asked. “Sometimes I think about what it would be like to live like Joe and Elaine, or Virgil and June.”

“Who are Joe and Elaine?”

“They are friends of mine, in Paris. He runs a bar there called Joe’s American Bar.”

“He’s American?”

“Yes, Joe’s American and Elaine is French. They met after the war and got married.”

“An expatriate?”

“No, or at least he doesn’t think so. He saved my life once and probably kept me from ending up on Devil’s Island a few years after that.”

“What? Devil’s Island! Does June know this? Is there any of that rum left? I think I need a drink.”

Ace split the last of the rum and made drinks. He told Maggie about Joe and then Elaine and Cassie, too. His telling lacked many of the details, but it was sufficient to cause Maggie to empty her glass in one gulp.

“My God!” she said. She repeated the phrase again, this time softly. “I don’t know what to say. But damn it, I’ve got a lot of questions. Those scars on your shoulder, those are bullet holes?”

“Yes.”

“And Joe’s a colored man, married to a white woman? Does Virgil know about this?”

“Yes to both your questions.”

“I can imagine what Virgil thinks about that! No wonder June didn’t tell me.”

“Virgil doesn’t have a problem with it. France is a long way from Georgia.”

Maggie stared at her empty glass and then looked at Ace. "What was so valuable? I mean, what kind of cargo could you have been carrying that was worth so much money?"

"I never asked."

Maggie shook her head. "No, you wouldn't ask. I understand that. God, you were the perfect delivery man. You were more honest than anyone your friends had ever known. You were reliable, and you never asked any questions."

"Asking those people questions was not a good idea," Ace said. "But I figured what was in the satchels."

"What? What was it?"

"Diamonds. Once the diamonds were smuggled into Marseilles, I flew them to Paris. Sometimes, I flew them from Paris to Amsterdam. They paid me very well. The Americans I fly for aren't as generous, but it's a living."

"It figures," Maggie said slowly. "They would pay a lot to get the diamonds safely across France. What are you flying now?"

"Mostly money, I think."

"They must really trust you a lot."

Ace smiled. "I'm an honest man."

Maggie burst out laughing. "An honest man? Ace, darling, you were one good friend away from really ending up on Devil's Island."

"I'll understand if you want to catch a bus back to Philadelphia," Ace said softly. "But it will hurt."

Maggie reached across the table and clasped his hands in hers. "I know I should be running out that damned door as fast as I can run, but sweetheart, I can't do it." She released his hands and sat back in her chair and smiled. "Besides, I want to learn how to fly, and I surely want an honest man to teach me."

"It really means that much to you?"

"It's the future, and I want to be a part of it. Speaking of the future, morning isn't so far off, and you have to fly. You better get some sleep."

Ace got up. "You're right about that. Are you coming? It's cooler now, and it's really not too late."

She got up from her chair and made a face at him. "I'll try to sleep. I mean sleep. The sheets are still damp."

"That's why we have big towels in Florida. I'll get the towels from the bathroom."

Maggie smiled and blew out the candle.

Chapter 17

It was morning, and Maggie could feel the sun starting its daily burn on her skin. The day had started just before first light when Ace had awakened her with a kiss. He was already dressed and ready to leave. She had offered to make coffee, but he told her to go back to sleep. He would buy coffee at the restaurant and some biscuits to snack on during the flight. He would be back by nightfall the next day. He told her that he had put some money for her on the kitchen table.

She found the money. He was a generous man. How could she possibly spend a hundred dollars in two days and one night? Well, in Philly, it would have been easy, but after she left the house and headed for the restaurant, she looked around at the several businesses on the street and shook her head. It would be impossible.

Not starting flying lessons today was a disappointment for Maggie, but that feeling was softened by the other possibilities. She would have a whole two days to herself. In the five or six days since she had met Ace, she had been in close contact with him and a variety of strangers. She ran that thought back through her mind. Did she really know Ace better than she knew Virgil? She remembered last night and smiled. Well, at least in some ways, she knew Ace better than Virgil.

There was much to be done. She decided that she would come back later and shop for two more outfits. She would stop at the grocery store and pick up some food and ice. She could stop at the air field office and use the phone to see if Trish had sent money to the bank. Louie was an interesting man. Ace had a way of developing close, loyal friends who would do anything for him, but the friendships seemed casual. Virgil and June never knew when they would see him. Obviously, months might pass, but when they met again, she knew it would be as if the time that had passed had only been days and not months.

She finished her assigned tasks and headed home with a small block of ice wrapped in paper in one hand, and a bag of groceries cradled in her opposite arm. The ice was already dripping, and she held it out from her side so it would drip on the walk and not her.

She paused briefly in front of the little house. She took note of the large oak tree in the front and the Palmetto fans that sheltered under its shade. For a second or two, she thought of it as her house, and the thought caused her to feel good, and she considered that maybe she was truly living the good life. Something should be done about the yard. It was mostly bare. Very little sunlight got through the large oak tree's leaves and clumps of Spanish moss.

As she approached the door, she saw that it was partially open. She rebuked herself for not making sure that the door was latched when she started her little journey earlier. It was a mild rebuke, however, because she would have had a small problem opening the door since she was carrying the ice and the groceries.

Maggie shouldered the door open and entered and stopped. There was a woman seated at the kitchen table. She had long black hair, and there was a wildness about the hair even though it seemed to have enough discipline to frame an olive complexioned face. On the left side and toward the front of her head, there was a patch of pure white hair.

She sat almost indolently on the chair, her legs spread out in front, only her ankles and sandaled feet showing. She wore a very low cut blouse that was almost falling off of one shoulder. She was a large woman and striking in appearance. She was an older woman with two eyes that promised a quick response to any slight.

"You are Maria, the maid?" Maggie asked, almost hoping that this woman was not the maid, but instead, some stranger who had found an open door.

Maggie sat the groceries down on the sink counter and moved to the icebox.

"I am Maria, but I'm not a maid. Are you the whore?"

"What?" Maggie said sharply as she spun around to face what she now recognized as a dangerous enemy. "Who the hell do you think you are? And, I am not a whore. And, I do not pretend to be a maid when it seems damned clear to me that any dusting you'd do would be in your free time when you are not on your damned back!"

"Put the ice in the sink. You're dripping water on my clean floor."

"What? Your clean floor? I thought you said you weren't the maid." Maggie moved to the icebox, opened it and found the ice compartment already full of ice and bottles of Coke. She turned and stared at Maria. "I see you have already been to the icebox. That's bad timing on your part. Ace isn't coming back until tomorrow evening." She slammed the dripping bundle of ice down in the sink.

"I thought you would be gone today," Maria said as she lit a long cigarillo.

"I'm in no hurry," replied Maggie. She walked to the table and pulled out a pack of cigarettes and matches from her pocket and lit a cigarette. She took the chair to Maria's left and sat down.

"So, what will it be?" Maggie said. "Do we just blow smoke at each other or did you have something more serious in mind?"

Maria smiled and reached down. From a concealed slit in her skirt, she produced a switchblade knife that made a snick-like sound as she pushed the button and four inches of blade leaped out. She laid the knife on the table in front of her.

Maggie looked at the knife which was pointed in her direction. She got up from the table, moved to the stove and lifted the heavy iron skillet, returned to her chair and laid the skillet on the table.

"Your move, lady."

Maria was surprised. "For a *puta gringa* you've got some guts. I bought two bottles of good rum for Ace. We should open one and have a drink while we figure out what we are going to do."

"It's a bit early for me, but what the hell. You get the rum and I'll get the Cokes and ice. Oh, if you leave the knife on the table, I'll leave the skillet."

"Hokay. That's a deal, I think."

When the drinks were on the table and both women had returned to their chairs, Maria raised her glass and Maggie returned the salute and both drank.

"So, what's next?" Maggie asked.

"I think now we say on what day you are leaving."

"It's not going to be that way. Ace is going to teach me how to fly."

"And in return, you are giving him what?" Maria smiled and waved her hand up and down.

"Just keep it up and I'll lay this skillet alongside your head, lady."

Maria nodded. "I think you would try it. Hokay, let me ask you a question."

"Ask away."

"Are you in love with Ace?"

"You serious?"

"My honor, I think, yes, I am serious."

"Sometimes, maybe. I've never met a man like him. But I don't know about love. It would be awfully hard for me to walk away from him. But, my god, the company he keeps, you especially. I just don't know if I could put up with his kind of life."

"Maybe I should feel sorry for you, *Gringa*. You should go back to your people. You don't belong here. You could never hold a man like Ace."

"And, you could?"

"No. I would never try to do that to him. He is not a dog to be kept on a leash. He is a real man. He fears nothing except not being free."

"You asked me a question, now let me ask you a question."

"Hokay, ask me."

"Have you slept with Ace?"

"Sleep?"

"You know what I mean."

"Sleep? Oh, I understand now. The answer is maybe. But in truth, not since you've been here."

"That's good!" Maggie said. "No, not really. It's not good at all. I'm not someone who shares. I'm not sharing Ace with you or anyone else."

"What was between Ace and me was before he met you. Even if you own him now, you could not own him, I think, before he even knew you, yes?"

"That's a round about way to put it, but I see your point. You speak English very well, most of the time. Where did you come from?"

"Cuba. I learn to speak English because I do business here."

"What kind of business? Is there anything remotely legal in what you do?"

"Sometimes, maybe. It will not help me if you take Ace away from here."

"Just what does Ace have to do with your business?"

"He flies for me sometimes."

"What? I thought he flew for some mob."

"Oh, he does. They do not like him flying for me. They do not even like me. I think, but they have to live with it."

"Lady, you are playing with some very dangerous people."

"Maybe," Maria laughed. "But I am on my own ground here. Once they tried to put an end to my business. They made a mistake. Some of their people walked into the swamp and the gators ate them."

"You put Ace in the middle of a mob war? And you claim to be worried about him?"

Maria drew back. For the first time in this unusual summit, she seemed unsure, defensive. Maggie leaned forward and asked, "Well?"

"I take care of Ace. My people keep watch. He is safe. My people will take care of him tonight in Jacksonville."

"You knew where he was going? I suppose someone at the air field told you."

Maria leaned forward with the swiftness of a fencer about to drive home a deadly rapier.

"I knew because I sent him there on my business."

"You sent him! Damn. Anytime you want to split us up, you can send him off on some errand and away he goes. That tears it! You win, lady."

Maggie got up from the table, grabbed her purse, and stalked toward the door.

"You weren't so tough, *puta gringa*. You are not the woman for my Ace."

"Go to hell!" Maggie snarled as she marched out of the house.

The hot sun was no match for the burn in Maggie's head and heart as she walked swiftly toward the air field office. Once there, she entered and slammed the door behind her. Louie looked up from the papers he had on his cluttered desk. He pulled out a cigarette from the pack lying on the desk and lit up.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

"When's the next bus coming by here heading for Miami?" she asked angrily.

Louie cocked his head to one side, "So Maria's running you out of town? I'll be damned and worse yet, I lost five bucks."

"What are you talking about?" Maggie asked.

"The boys saw Maria going to Ace's house this morning. Jose bet me five bucks she'd run you out of town before sundown. I told him that an Irish washerwoman could lick a Cuban rum runner any day of the year."

"I don't do laundry," Maggie said. She looked at Louie and started laughing. "I'm surprised you didn't sell tickets for the big fight."

"There was some talk," Louie said with a straight face.

"I'll bet."

"No, I'm the one who bet. There's a bus comes by about four o'clock heading for Miami. You walk up to the highway and wait there. Wave like hell when you see the bus coming."

"Thanks, Louie. I'm sorry about your losing a bet because of me. Thank you for being kind to me." She had a lump in her throat and knew that her eyes were beginning to tear up.

Louis got up from his desk and limped over to the counter. "Take it easy, kid. You'll be okay."

Maggie drew a hand across her eyes. "I'll be all right. What's it been, a week since I left Philly? I've lost all track of time. So much has happened. I don't know what I was thinking that night back in Philly. Maybe it was the booze."

"I've done a few dumb things myself," Louie said as softly as his raspy voice would permit. "Hell, I went off when I was a kid to fight the war to end all wars. Look at me now. I'll bet you two to one I'll live long enough to see another war. For that matter, maybe two or three more. But it don't pay a nickel to sweat over what you did."

"Thanks, Louie."

"There's something else, too."

"What's that, Louie?"

"Don't hang a hard judgment on Ace. I think he's walking a tightrope right now. I'm kind of worried about him."

"I know. I hate his guts, but I'm also scared. I'm afraid he will get hurt. He never mentioned anything about this to me."

"Ace ain't the kind to go around blabbering about his situation. He's one tough cookie."

"Sometimes I wonder if he ever really knows what kind of situations he's in. I know there was some trouble up in Georgia a while back."

"I remember that," Louie nodded. "I've still got a pistol in the desk drawer from that time."

"You, too?"

"Ace's got a lot of friends. He loaned me some money when I was down on my luck and finagled this job for me. It's none of my business, but you are walking away from the best man I ever knew on this earth."

"Sometimes, I have to agree with you on that."

"Besides, you ain't finished out the game yet."

"What do you mean?"

"You got Maria right where you want her!"

"You have got to be kidding me, Louie."

"No, it's true. You show up for breakfast tomorrow morning at the restaurant, Maria loses and there's not a damned thing she can do about it."

"She will have her gang feed me to the alligators."

Louie laughed. "She wouldn't be a bit above that, bet on it. But, if she tries any rough stuff, she'd have to answer to Ace. She wouldn't want to do that."

"You think they might have a lover's quarrel?"

"I don't know about that. I don't know whether or not they are lovers. I think maybe she's more like a mother to him. Hell, Ace is one of those guys women can't make up their minds about."

"What do you mean, make up their minds?"

"They can't make up their minds whether they want to nurse him or go to bed with him."

"Louie!"

"I'm sorry, Miss. I guess I overstepped my bounds."

"You sure did, but you probably hit the nail on the head. Okay, you win. I'll hang around for a while."

"I'm glad to hear that."

Maggie smiled. "I've got three good reasons to stay. I want to learn how to fly."

"That's a good reason," Louie said.

"And I want you to win your bet."

"That's a really good reason. What's the third?"

"There's a good iron skillet at the house. When Ace comes home, I want to introduce his head to the skillet."

Louie laughed. He laughed until he started coughing.

"Are you all right, Louie?"

"Yes, yes, I am. Get the hell out of here, you Irish washerwoman."

The evening storm came in on time and the lights went out as usual. When Maggie went to bed, she put a new candle in the holder and lit it. The iron skillet was on the bed and close at hand. She knew that she should not go to sleep and leave the candle burning. She also knew that she would never go to sleep in the dark.

She thought about what Louie had said concerning Maria. Louie did not look like much, but he had the kind of intelligence that is hard to measure. She smiled when she remembered his observation about women and Ace. Louie was almost right, but not

quite, she decided. Maybe it was a matter of both instead of one or the other. She never got very far with her analysis. It had been an intense day. She fell asleep.

Sometime before three in the morning, the dream came, the same dream she had before. There was the sound of gunfire, and cloudy visions of men marching with rifles on their shoulders. This time the dream evolved into a vision, clearer than before. This time the vision revealed a line of soldiers holding rifles leveled at something. Then came the horrible part, the sound of gunfire, a ragged volley.

She awoke screaming, "No! no!" She sat up. She was covered with sweat. The candle was burned down to a stub but still shedding light. She remembered every detail of the dream except for why she was screaming the word "no." She got up and carried the candle and the skillet out to the kitchen. She found a new candle and replaced the stub. Then she got a glass of water, sat down at the table and lit a cigarette.

This strange dream troubled her. What did it mean? She could remember every part of the dream clearly enough except for the part that caused her to wake up screaming. Why was she blocking this from her memory? What horrible thing was happening in her dream?

Slowly, she cleared her mind of the dream, and the present realities began crowding in and demanding her attention. Maybe she should have gone to Miami. She would be comfortably asleep now in a hotel. The next day, she would have boarded a train and have been on her way to Philadelphia.

The homecoming would not be pleasant. Daddy would be furious. Now she faced a different kind of homecoming. Ace would return by nightfall.

What was she going to say to him? She gave deep consideration of her relationship. It was like holding a handful of thorns and squeezing the thorns tightly. It would feel wonderful if the thorns were thrown down, but then her hand would be empty. She smiled and shook her head and told herself that she was going in circles. She got up from the table, took her candle and skillet back to the bedroom and crawled back in bed. Sleep came again and when she awoke, it was the new morning and electricity had been restored.

Chapter 18

Maggie's preparations for dinner, or supper, as Ace called it, were nearly completed as the evening storm began sounding its approach. It was Ace's favorite meal, hamburgers, onions, potatoes, and all fried. She entertained two thoughts as she juggled two frying pans and the coffee pot on two burners. The first was that maybe she should have picked up some rat poison at the store, and the other concerned the job ahead in terms of broadening his ideas on food. Even Daddy occasionally appreciated something besides corned beef, potatoes, and cabbage.

She heard the door open, but no one came in. As she moved for a better view, a bouquet of flowers sailed into the room and landed on the floor. She heard Ace's voice coming from outside.

"Can I come in?"

Maggie did not respond.

"Well, can I come in, please?"

"I'm thinking about it. Oh, damn, get in here!"

Ace was hungry and Maggie wisely waited until he had eaten his meal and half of hers before beginning the speech she had prepared in her mind throughout the day. When he finished and lit a cigarette, she got up and made two stiff rum and Cokes and then sat back down.

She took a sip of her drink and then threw out her mental preparations and simply asked, "Why?"

Ace looked at her and replied, "Why? You mean about Maria?"

"It's a start."

"First of all," he began, "I didn't figure you and Maria would get into a fight. I guess I was the only one here at the field that didn't see it coming. Yes, it's true that I work for Maria sometimes."

"Is it a case of mixing business and pleasure?"

"Now, Maggie, I'm willing to talk about my business, but not about other things, okay? I never asked you about your past, did I?"

"No, that's true. But I could explain my past in above five minutes. Yours would take five hours and we still wouldn't cover the subject."

"So anyway," he continued with a clear effort to limit the discussion to business matters, "Being here in the States is not like being in France. Things are different. In France, I made a lot of money. Here I don't make as much, and the people I'm working for, except for Maria, are just not to be trusted."

"Do you need money?" asked Maggie.

"No, I'm doing okay. It might have been a little rough this past year, though, if Maria hadn't been looking for ways to cover her business matters here in Florida."

Maggie sensed that some of Ace's defenses were down, and that she had a chance to peer into that part of Ace seldom seen by anyone. She had been in that place once before when he had allowed her to see the pain that he had carried for most of his life.

Ace took a generous portion of his drink and lit another cigarette. "There was that trouble in Chicago June told you about. I was hired by some people in New York to fly a

man from New York to Chicago. The money was okay. So, I took the job and flew the guy to Chicago. Then I flew him back to New York. I guess he killed someone in Chicago and all hell broke loose.”

Maggie nodded in agreement. “The Chicago mob found out and came after you!”

“Something like that. I had been flying down to Miami for the New York people, and I had some connections with the Miami people. I still make trips to New York sometimes. When I met you, I started out here, flew to New York, then Philly, and we came back here.”

“So, Miami is kind of a safe haven for you?”

“Sort of. And I like this place. Basham’s winter quarters for the circus aren’t far from here. I went to see him and some old friends back in December.”

“Basham? Please tell me that’s not another girlfriend.”

“Don’t be silly. He’s the owner of the circus. He’s not in very good health these days. He wanted me to come back to the circus and run it for him. He doesn’t have much in the way of a family, kind of like myself, and after he’s gone, I’d own it.”

“That sounds like a good deal to me,” Maggie smiled. “You could run the circus and still do flying as a part of the show.”

“I wouldn’t know the first thing about how to run the circus. It’s a big job.” Ace chuckled as a thought passed through his mind, “Basham said I wouldn’t have much of a problem, though, because Digby was still there and could help.”

“And Digby is?”

“He’s a con artist who makes a living with three shells and a pea. He’s not very good at it, though. His real talent is as a forger. Give him enough time, and he could make a copy of the Declaration of Independence that would fool the experts.”

“How is he with tens and twenties?”

“Basham would beat his brains out if he ever used the circus to pass funny money.”

“Ace, did you ever have any friends who got up in the morning and went to work and came home after work?”

“There was one that I can think of. He was the meanest man I ever knew. He died when his horse kicked him in the head. If I could, I’d contribute a lot of money to build a statue of that horse.”

Maggie sighed. “You are incorrigible.”

“Is that the same as corduroy?” Ace got up and made himself a second drink. “You want a refill?”

“No, thanks. I’m going light tonight, and corduroy isn’t funny.”

“It’s a big word,” Ace replied with a smile. “I’m sorry. I know you’re trying to be serious tonight. Hey, I just remembered, I do have friends who are respectable. Joe and Elaine. They’ve got a business, and they seem to be very happy.”

“Oh, yes, the bar in Paris. What was it, Joe’s American Bar?”

“Right. They’ve got a child, a daughter, as I recall. Sometimes, I envy Joe. He’s got everything he ever wanted.”

“How do you mean, you envy him? Don’t you have everything you ever wanted?”

“I guess so, Maggie, but sometimes it doesn’t seem to be enough.”

“Ace, I wish I could believe that.”

He drained his glass and stubbed out his cigarette. “I’ve had a long day, and tomorrow’s going to be a busy day, too. We fly tomorrow.”

“Lessons?”

“That’s right. If you like, I can sleep out here on the couch.”

She got up and waved her hand toward the bedroom. “Oh, get in there, damn it!”

Later as they were waiting in the dark for sleep to come, Maggie suddenly sat up.

“Guess what?” she said.

“What?”

“It didn’t storm tonight. I was sure I heard thunder. It must have gone around us.”

“I was afraid there would be more of a storm in the house than outside,” Ace said sleepily.

“No, no storm in or out. Maybe it’s a good omen.” Ace did not answer, and she knew he was asleep. He was right about one thing, she told herself. There was no storm in the house. There probably should have been, but she just could not bring herself to throw the lightning bolts she had stored up during the day. She knew she couldn’t use them. She was hopelessly in love with this man, and tomorrow, he was going to begin teaching her how to fly. She started to consider which was the most important, but never finished the debate.

The next day was remarkably like the day before. The sky was clear, and it was hot. The first order of business was to check the bank. They borrowed Louie’s car for the trip to the bank. Maggie discovered that there was a thousand dollars in an account for her. A money order had arrived the day before from Philadelphia, the bank teller said as Maggie filled out a check cashing card.

“Do you need any identification?” she asked.

“Oh, no. If Mr. Mathews vouches for you, that’s more than good enough for us.”

As they turned to leave, Maggie stopped and asked the teller who had signed the money order.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” he said as he rummaged through a drawer. “There’s a telegram for you. And, the money order was signed, uh, oh, yes, by M. P. O’Malley.”

“Thank you,” Maggie said as she took the telegram.

On the way to the car, Maggie shook her head. “The jig’s up, I’m afraid.”

“What’s in the telegram?”

Maggie read the brief telegram aloud as Ace drove back to the air field. “It says, ‘Daddy knows all. Come home now. Hurry, hurry.’”

She folded the telegram and put it in her purse. “It’s from Trish, poor girl. Daddy must have used a rubber hose on her.”

“So, what are you going to do?”

“I’m not going home,” she said defiantly. “I’m free, white, and four years older than twenty-one.”

“Free? That means you aren’t colored. That’s what Joe would say.”

“I never thought of it that way,” Maggie replied. She was silent for a few seconds and then returned to her situation. “Besides, if I went back now, I’d never become a pilot. Worse yet, I really doubt that I could coax you into coming with me.”

“Maybe you should call your father. He might be worried, you know.”

“I will, but not until I have soloed.”

Instruction began immediately after they returned to the air field. Ace told Maggie that she must never forget that there are no old pilots. The end could be postponed,

however, by paying close attention to small details. She must become a part of the plane and pay attention to what the plane was telling her.

"That sounds kind of mystical to me," Maggie responded.

"Maybe so," Ace replied, "But it works."

It proved to be a long and hard day. They spent two hours on the ground with Ace going over every possible detail, and then up in the air to test how much Maggie had absorbed. As before, she was surprised at how detail oriented Ace was when it came to flying.

By the end of the day, Maggie had actually been in control of the plane for well over an hour of flying time. When the evening storm came, she did not care if the lights went out. All she wanted was a bite to eat and then sleep.

The days that followed were even more intense. Learning how to land a plane was the next lesson. This was accomplished by Maggie bringing the plane into a gliding descent while being careful to keep in line with the landing strip on the approach. She was not to actually set the plane down, but to touch and then go, climbing back up to altitude and then banking around to begin the procedure all over again.

On her first approach, Maggie came in and then took the plane back up.

"How was that?" she asked over the intercom.

"Not bad, except that you were about fifty feet above the ground. This time, keep coming in until I say go, and remember to keep the nose up."

All morning long, they practiced touch and go. The first time Maggie felt the landing gear touch the ground, she heard Ace's voice come in over the intercom, "Good work!"

That afternoon, Maggie got a surprise. "You get in the back cockpit," Ace said. "It's going to look a little different from there. We'll do some more touch and go patterns."

It was different. As they came in on the first attempt, Maggie's voice came over the intercom. "I can't see anything. How am I supposed to know where the ground is?"

"Like I said before," Ace replied, "keep coming down in your glide pattern until the wheels touch the ground. And, keep the nose up."

Over and over, they practiced the touch and go procedure. Each time, Ace offered suggestions and reminders such as checking the oil pressure and the fuel. "Those gauges are not there for decoration!"

After nearly an hour and a half of practicing touch and go routines, Ace said, "Fuel's getting low, and I'm tired. Circle the air field and then take us home, Maggie."

"Me?"

"Why not?"

"You've got it!" Maggie replied.

Louie happened to be returning to his office after checking the storeroom. He saw the plane make a wide circle over the field, and he guessed that Maggie was coming in for her first landing.

He watched as the plane banked into a landing glide. Down it came and gently kissed the ground. It was a perfect landing, and Louie knew that it had to be Maggie, because Ace was lousy at getting the tail to drag right. He limped over to the area where Ace kept his plane and waited.

The plane came to a stop near Louie, and Ace and Maggie climbed down from their cockpits. Maggie took off her helmet, and shook out her hair.

"Damn nice landing, kid," Louie said as he walked up to them.

"We landed in one piece," Ace said as he turned to run his hand over a part of the wing.

Maggie stuck her tongue out at him, and Louie laughed, and Ace said, "I saw that."

"You couldn't have," Maggie replied. "You had your back turned."

"Pilots got to have eyes in the back of their heads," Ace laughed. "You did okay for the first time, Maggie."

"Hell!" rasped Louie. "It was a better landing than I've ever seen you make. When you come in for a landing, you look like a kangaroo bouncing all over the field."

The next day was spent practicing takeoffs and landings with Maggie in the back cockpit and Ace in the front. During one of the approaches to another landing, Ace had his hand on the control and was trying to feel how Maggie was anticipating changes and then reacting. There was a sudden banging on the side of the plane. He turned and looked back. Maggie was waving her finger in the air and shaking her head, no.

Over breakfast the following day, Maggie asked Ace what the drill was going to be for the day.

"I thought we'd take it easy today. I've been pushing you pretty hard. We'll go over a few things this morning. This afternoon I thought we'd just go up and enjoy flying."

That is the way it proceeded, a low key review during the morning, and a leisurely lunch. It was nearly mid-afternoon before Ace said, "Let's do some flying."

There were an unusual number of people, pilots, and mechanics hanging around the air field that afternoon. Louie came out of his office and watched as Ace and Maggie checked the plane, started the engine, and got ready to fly.

"Get in the back cockpit, Maggie," Ace said as he took off his goggles and leather helmet.

"What's going on?" Maggie asked.

"Take her up, Maggie."

"You sure?"

Ace nodded. "It's time."

Maggie climbed into the cockpit, gave a thumbs-up sign, and taxied the plane out to the strip. She picked up speed and made a clean take off.

Louie walked over and stood by Ace. "Will she be okay?" Louie asked.

"I hope so," Ace answered. "There always has to come a time when you have to go up alone."

The other pilots and mechanics gathered close by. They remained silent. Their eyes were locked on the plane overhead.

Maggie circled the air field several times and then waggled the wings and followed that by making a banking turn to come in for a landing.

Ace heard Louie whisper, "Good luck, kid."

The plane came down in a glide that looked perfect, but Ace was worried. "Not too fast, not so fast," he muttered.

Maggie set the plane down smoothly and taxied up to where the crowd was waiting.

She climbed down and ran toward Ace. The onlookers applauded as she leaped into his arms and kissed him. She turned from Ace and hugged Louie, and then she blew a kiss to the onlookers.

Louie's voice ripped out over the noise, "To the office! I got rum, Cokes, and ice for everyone. Ain't this a hell of a day!"

The office was crowded and noisy. Maggie was the star of the moment. None of those present could ever remember knowing a woman pilot. Most had never even seen a woman in an airplane before Maggie.

Maggie's face was flushed. She was laughing and sometimes hugging people she didn't know. And then, as everyone was working on the second round of drinks the open door to the office was filled by Maria's strong body and long black hair with the splotch of pure white.

The room quieted immediately. Maria strode into the room and her large eyes had a wild look. She stopped in front of Maggie.

"You did it. You are now a pilot. You are a better woman than I thought. Don't you ever forget that it was my Ace who made it possible. He has given you something no man can ever take away from you. If you ever hurt him, I will come after you."

Maria turned and walked out the door without another word. Jose followed her out. That surprised no one. It was understood by all that Jose worked as a mechanic, but his real job was doing what Maria told him to do.

"Well, if that don't beat all!" Louie said. He turned to Maggie, "You've won! The Irish washerwoman won, by damn, and that deserves another drink."

"Thanks, Louie, but aren't we drinking Maria's rum?"

"You're damn right about that, Maggie. And it never tasted sweeter!"

The party soon broke up, and Ace and Maggie headed for the little house. As they walked side by side, Ace reached over and took her hand. She glanced at him and smiled.

"I feel like a high school kid again," she said softly.

"It's a good day," Ace said. "I'm really proud of you."

"My becoming a pilot meant a lot to you, didn't it?"

Maggie asked.

"I remember when I soloed," Ace said. "I have never known such a feeling of freedom. I felt the same way today when you soloed. We own the sky! We are free."

They reached the restaurant and decided to stop for dinner. "I had two drinks back at Louie's party. I think I need to eat dinner," Maggie said.

The waitress was quick to take their orders. Usually, she had eyes for Ace, but this day, she kept glancing at Maggie while writing the order on the little pad in her hand.

After the order had been placed, the waitress came back and stood near Maggie. She looked down at Maggie who could see that the young girl was misty eyed.

"Ma'am," the waitress said in a low voice. "Thank you for what you did today." She brushed her hand across her eyes and quickly walked away.

"What was that all about?" Ace asked.

Maggie was more than a little misty-eyed herself. She dabbed at her eyes with a napkin, and then she answered.

"Sweetheart, I love you dearly, but I'm afraid there are things you will never understand. Well, maybe you will in time, especially if we have a daughter."

They were able to reach the house just as the evening storm began. They had another round of rum and Coke, but without the ice. The electricity disappeared as usual, and after the drinks, they took the candle to the bedroom. The bed became an airplane and they took it up to about five thousand feet. It was impossible to tell who the pilot was at any given moment. They fell asleep and left the candle burning.

The storm had passed, the candle had burned down to half its length, and a half-moon had risen when the front door was shattered by a makeshift battering ram and four men rushed into the living room. After a moment's confusion, they assaulted the open bedroom door where they were met by a naked but wide awake Ace.

Maggie screamed as the four men forced Ace back. One of the men headed for Maggie, while the other three tried to overpower Ace.

Maggie rose to meet her assailant who yelled, "Jesus Christ, she's naked!"

One of the three men attacking Ace growled, "Get a sheet around her and be damned careful. Her old man won't pay us for damaged goods."

One of the three men trying to wrestle Ace to the floor pulled a sap from his belt. It was a piece of one and a half inch rubber hose about twelve inches long with a lead ball secured in one end.

Ace landed a good punch on one of the other attackers and knocked him to his knees. The man with the sap saw his opening and clubbed Ace on the head which caused him to stagger backwards. He struck again and again with the sap, hitting Ace on the head and shoulders.

The man trying to secure Maggie yelled again, "Gimme some help! She's a damned wildcat."

The man who Ace had knocked to his knees got up and helped his friend gain control of Maggie. Together, they were able to drag her from the bedroom and toward the shattered door. The two men still working on Ace backed away and out the door. Ace was still standing, but only because he was leaning against the wall.

He heard Maggie screaming and knew that the attackers had dragged her out in front of the house. He staggered out of the bedroom and through the kitchen and out the door. He could see them loading Maggie into a car.

One of the four men came back toward Ace. "You ain't had enough, yet? Well, by God, I've got something that will tame your ass." He pulled a knife and started inching his way toward Ace.

Ace did not wait. He lunged forward, trying to take the knife in his arm so he could close with the attacker, but he was too groggy from the beating with the sap to make his move effective.

Just as the attacker sliced Ace across his upper belly, Maria and Jose came running from the side of the house. Maria carried a pistol. Jose had a pistol in one hand and a flashlight in the other.

The beam from the flashlight centered on the attacker. Both Maria and Jose opened fire, and the attacker fell to the ground. The car with Maggie in it sped away. Maria and Jose emptied their pistols at the car.

Maria knelt down by Ace and cradled his head in her lap. "My poor Ace," she crooned, and then lifting her head up so she faced the half-moon overhead, she screamed, "Miami will pay for this night!"

While she checked Ace's wounds, Jose reloaded his pistol and inspected the man lying on the ground.

She spoke quickly in Spanish, "Is he dead?"

Jose replied that the man was very dead, and Maria nodded and told Jose that after they had taken care of Ace, the dead attacker was to be fed to the gators. Then she told

Jose to go into the house and find towels or a sheet and bring them out so she could get Ace bandaged.

As Jose was returning with the towels, a car came racing up. Jose drew his pistol, but Maria said it was Louie's car.

Louie stopped and got out of the car. He left his headlights on which added more light to the scene. He was holding a pistol.

"What the hell happened?" he asked. He could see Ace on the ground. "Where's Maggie?"

"The Miami people have hit my Ace. They took the whore with them. They will probably sell her back to her people," Maria replied as she pressed lightly on the towel covering the long knife wound which was bleeding and soaking the towel.

"Damn, it looks like he got cut real bad," Louie said. "We've got to get him to a doctor. Put him in my car."

"No," said Maria. "We will take him to a doctor I know. Then I will take my Ace to Cuba where the Miami people cannot get to him. Then I will come back and kill the Miami people."

"Okay, but let's get going."

"No. You are not to know who is my doctor. We will take your car, but Jose will drive," said Maria.

"Well, if that's the way you want it. What about the dead guy over there?" asked Louie.

"When Jose comes back with your car, he will take care of the body. You stay here in case they come back. You have a gun. Shoot them dead. Take care of my Ace's airplane. I will pay any costs."

They loaded Ace into the back seat. Maria climbed in to keep him from bouncing off the seat. Jose got behind the wheel and they sped away.

Louie looked over at the dead man and shook his head. It wasn't France, 1918, but it was war, just the same.

Chapter 19

Paris, 1933

It was good to be back in Paris. The sun was shining and the French were busy doing what they do best, being French. Ace walked slowly and with a slight limp which he had picked up as the result of a car wreck in Spanish Morocco. Now he was back where he wished to be, in Paris, thanks in most part to the beautiful Countess who had never forgotten him. She had used her considerable influence on government officials to persuade them to drop the charges that had been placed against him because of the episode twelve years ago.

His other friends, in their own way, had been of help in the matter. They had influence, and they knew how to use it. It would be business as usual once again, but some caution would be required. The authorities were well aware that Ace made money flying errands for people. It would not do to publicly flaunt his activities. It seemed to him that the authorities really did not mind a little extra-legal activity if they did not see it. Then there was the matter of financial arrangements.

Ace smiled as he considered just how well the authorities could see depended sometimes on the amount of money in front of their eyes. He reminded himself that they were not paid very well, and they could probably use the extra money. Besides, it was not his place to judge them. There had only been one man who he had judged harshly, and a horse had taken care of the execution.

The return to France did have a few complications. Ace visited the Countess and spent a week with her on her estate outside of Paris. She was older now, but still beautiful. He found her to be as puzzling now as when he first met her. When he was with her, it was as if his feet never touched the ground. It was almost like flying. His head was a different matter. Sometimes it seemed as if she could read his mind and that she knew what he was going to say before he said it. He knew she was an extremely intelligent woman, and that led him to wonder why she was interested in spending time with him. She claimed that it had to do with philosophy and noble savages. He did not seek further explanation, and none was offered.

Ace learned from the Countess that Joe and Elaine still owned the bar. He had delayed contacting them. He was concerned about whether or not the charges against him would stay buried deep. If there was a problem, he did not want them to be implicated.

Much of his edginess about the matter was due to conversations he had with some interesting Frenchmen who were not disposed to be friendly. His conversations were not an optional matter. Ace spent several hours trying to answer their questions. The questions concerned affairs in Spanish Morocco. They were especially interested in a Spanish officer named Franco, but there was little he could tell them. He had met the officer once. His questioners had also been interested in whether or not he had seen British or Germans in Spanish Morocco. There had been some of each, he reported, but he knew nothing about them.

It had been twelve years since Ace had walked in this part of the city, but he remembered the way and soon he stood in front of Joe's American Bar. He paused for a moment before entering. He experienced the same unease that he had back in '21, or was

it '22? So many years had passed, and he was uncertain about how welcome he would be after all this time.

Once inside, he noted that the place appeared to be prosperous. There was a man behind the bar who looked like a Frenchman. Ace asked for Joe, but the man did not speak English, and Ace could not make him understand what he wanted. Ace finally used the British technique for communicating with the French. He turned up the sound dial on his voice. It achieved nothing in terms of communicating with the Frenchman, but it produced the necessary result.

Joe came out of the kitchen, wiping his hands on his apron. "What's the problem?"

He stopped. A big grin spread across his face. "I'll be goddamned! Ace?" He started toward Ace, then stopped, turned, and hurried back to the stairs leading to the apartment on the second floor.

"Momma, come quick. It's Ace!" He started to rush back to Ace, stopped again, and yelled up the stairs, "Bring the envelope."

He turned again and hurried back to Ace and grabbed him in a bear hug and lifted him off the floor. "Where the hell have you been?"

Once back on the floor and free of the bear hug, Ace smiled and said, "Around. You got anything to drink in this place?"

"We sure have. Sit down here at this table. Momma will be here in a few minutes. She's finding the envelope and brushing her hair before she comes down."

Joe got the bartender's attention and then in his usual bad French, he ordered a bottle of wine and three glasses. The bartender hurried to comply. Joe took a seat at the table opposite Ace.

"So where the hell have you been for the past twelve years besides around?"

"Well, after the trouble here, I ended up back in the States for a few years, then Cuba for a while, then I spent some time in Venezuela. From there I went to Spanish Morocco. I just got back into France a few weeks ago."

"You on the lam? You don't act like it."

"No, that business has all been taken care of. The French police may not have forgiven me, but they have decided to forget me, as a matter of policy, at least."

The waiter brought glasses and a bottle of wine and pulled the cork on the bottle. As Joe poured the wine, he said, "That must have taken some money."

The two old friends saluted and drank from their glasses.

"I suppose so. Money and influence can get a lot done."

As Joe refreshed the glasses, there was a shriek of joy from the short hall that separated the stairs from the kitchen.

"Ace! It is really you!" Elaine hurried into the bar, an envelope in her hand.

Ace rose from his chair. Elaine reached him and the only difference between her hug and Joe's was that she could not lift Ace off the floor.

"It has been so long. Look, I have the little gray hairs now. How are you?"

When Elaine released Ace from her hug, he stepped back, cocked his head and looked carefully at Elaine.

"You are as beautiful as you were when I first met you," he said.

Joe laughed. "You haven't changed, that's for sure. You're still a fast one with the ladies. Sit down. It's high time we killed a bottle. We've got a lot of catching up to do."

Ace tasted the wine in his glass. It was a good wine and he nodded appreciatively at Joe. "Good stuff. When I first came in and saw the guy behind the bar, I thought you had sold the place."

"No," Joe replied. "Business has been pretty good so we hired a bartender to help out."

"Good thing you're not running a business in the States now," Ace said. "Things are bad there."

"Yeah, real bad. It's that damned Prohibition. Thank God the French have better sense."

"French people will never give up their wine," Elaine added.

"Which reminds me," Joe said. "Give Ace the envelope, Momma."

Elaine smiled and handed the envelope to Ace.

He opened the envelope and whistled, "That's a lot of money!"

"It's what we owe you," Joe said.

"For what?"

"It is the amount of money you loaned us to buy the bar. You made all this possible for us." Joe put his arm around Elaine. "I've got all I ever wanted in life. I got Momma here, and Angelique, and the bar. It's a damn sight more than I ever thought I'd have in life, that's for sure!"

"Angelique? I remember Cassie, but I don't recall anyone named Angelique."

"She is our daughter," Elaine said. "You were not in good mind when you saw her."

"That's for sure," Joe added. "You saw her just after she was born, that night when you had taken a couple of bullets."

"Then she must be about twelve years old now."

"Angel is a doll," Joe nodded.

Elaine looked at Joe and shook her head and then turned back to Ace.

"Her name is Angelique," Elaine said with another glance at Joe. "Poppa keeps calling her Angel, though. I thought Angelique was such a pretty name."

"It might be a good stage name someday," Joe said. "That girl can sing. She's got a great voice. People do a double take when they hear her sing. She's a girl, but she's already got the voice of a thirty-year-old woman."

"Where is Angel, uh, Angelique?" Ace asked.

"She will be home soon from school," Elaine said. "She is a good student."

"Yeah, she is, but the nuns have filled her head with a lot of stuff about heroes and knights in armor. She's got a big poster on her wall of some guy named Roland. He's dressed in armor and holding up the biggest sword I ever saw," Joe said.

"She has another picture on her wall, too," Elaine added. "It is a picture of a new hero."

"Who's that?" Ace asked as he closed up the envelope with the money and put it down on the table.

"You!" Joe answered with a big grin. "She found a picture of you in an old magazine and cut it out. We've had quite a time with that picture."

Elaine quickly explained, "About a year ago a woman came here looking for you. She was the woman who took the picture. She signed it for Angelique."

"Rochelle was here? How did she look?"

"She looked real good to me," Joe laughed.

“Poppa!” Elaine said with vigor, and then smiled.

“In fact,” Joe continued, “I should have expected you would be coming around one of these days. There’s been other women looking for you.”

“For me?”

“Oh, yes,” Elaine said. “There was a woman, an elegant woman, who came here. She asked about you. That was about six or seven months ago, right, Poppa?”

“Yeah, about that. But those were minor leaguers compared to the O’Malley woman,”

“O’Malley?”

“That’s the one,” Joe said. “She is a real classy woman. Why did you let her get away?”

“Maggie? You’ve met Maggie?”

“Just the other day,” Joe replied. “She’s here in Paris on some kind of business.”

“I was happy to finally meet her,” Elaine said. “We have been exchanging letters for years. You should marry her, Ace. She is very much in love with you, I think.”

This time Ace took a very long drink. Joe waved at the bartender and pointed at the empty bottle on the table. The bartender understood the signal and hurried to bring another bottle.

“It’s been a long time, There’s been a lot of water go over the dam,” Ace said slowly, and then, after a moment’s reflection, he quickly asked, “She didn’t get married?”

“That’s funny,” Joe said. “She asked the same question about you.”

Ace looked down at the envelope. As he was starting to push it over to Joe and Elaine, the door opened and in came a very pretty girl. The conversation was diverted from talk about Maggie just as Ace hoped, and he did not have to force the issue.

“Angelique, come here. We have someone you will want to meet,” Elaine said happily. “My friend, Ace, this is our daughter, Angelique. This is the pilot, Ace, whose picture you have on your wall.”

Ace quickly got up from his chair and made a slight bow. “I am pleased to meet you, Miss Angelique. You are as pretty as your father and mother said you were.”

She made a slight curtsy and murmured shyly in English, “Thank you.” She then turned to Elaine and spoke quickly in French. She asked if Ace understood French.

Elaine answered in French, saying no, but that she should speak in English so Ace would understand her. It was not polite to speak a language the guest could not understand.

Angelique nodded and then said in English to Ace, “I have your picture on my wall. Did you kill many of the *Boche*? I hope so. You are like Roland!”

Blushing, she glanced at Elaine and started to speak in French and then switched back to English, “I have much homework to do. The nuns are very cruel!” She turned and ran to the hall and started up the stairs. Ace and her parents did not see her as she paused on the first step, peeked back, blew a kiss, and then fled up the stairs.

“Well, if that don’t beat all!” Joe said. “That child usually talks a mile a minute and never stops unless she’s going to sing! Why, she seemed almost bashful.”

Elaine looked at Ace and smiled. “She has, I think, what in English is called a schoolgirl crush on you.”

“She just met me,” Ace replied.

“No, it is the picture she loves, maybe.” Elaine added. “I remember when I was twelve years old. I fell deeply in love with an older man who was a journalist.”

"You never told me about that?" Joe said, faking an exaggerated look of betrayal.

"What became of him?" Ace asked.

"He died in the war."

There was silence at the table for a few seconds until Joe broke it by saying, "Another drink for everybody," as he lifted the bottle and filled the glasses to the top.

"I just hope we don't have another war," Ace said after taking a drink.

"You think the Germans are going to come again?" Joe asked.

"Not again!" Elaine exclaimed.

"It's possible," Ace nodded. "This guy, Hitler, is a scary piece of work."

Joe frowned. "Yeah, but the French have a helluva army. God, it would mean back in the trenches again. At least we're too old for that kind of work. At least I am." He looked at Ace and continued, "You look in pretty good shape, though. It's like you've not really aged at all." He grinned and added, "And it sure as hell doesn't come from clean living in your case."

"I keep in pretty good shape, though I really don't have to work very hard at it. Now, about this money." He tapped the envelope with a finger. "I'm fine when it comes to money. I meant it as a gift. And it still is a gift."

"Hey," Joe interrupted. "We are doing pretty well, ourselves. It's all due to Momma here. She keeps the books. If I had been running the place by myself, we'd probably have gone broke in a month."

"You should set aside this money for when you get married," Elaine said. "You might need it when you get old."

Ace stared at her for a second and then smiled. He had successfully refrained from saying the phrase that was part of his working philosophy of life, 'there are no old pilots.'

He looked at Elaine, his face framing a mock seriousness. "I'm too young to think about either getting married or getting old."

"Poor Maggie," Elaine said. "She would be good for you, make you a good wife."

"I don't doubt it," Ace said. "The question though is whether I'd make a good husband."

Joe laughed. "Especially if she didn't see you for twelve years while you're off gallivanting around the world."

Ace shook his head. "Enough about me and getting married. I've thought it through about the money. You two keep it and use it for Angel."

"Angelique," interrupted Elaine very firmly.

"Right, Angelique," Ace continued. "Make sure she gets music lessons. Maybe she could even sing like the people I hear on radio. Maybe she could be a star."

"You sure about that?" asked Joe.

"Why not?" Ace replied. "Let's just say it's an investment in the future." He picked up the envelope and put it in Elaine's hands. "Case closed!"

Elaine was becoming misty-eyed, and Joe saw it and put his arm around her. "Thanks, Ace," he said huskily.

Elaine looked at Ace and smiled, "Yes, all our thanks to you." She turned to Joe, "And maybe we can get a better doctor for Angelique."

"Doctor?" Ace asked.

"Yeah," Joe explained. "She has some kind of blood problem. It's not serious, or at least that's what the doctors say. They gave her a tonic that I guess peps up the blood a little."

"Get the best doctor you can find," Ace said. "If that's not enough money in the envelope, I can get some more."

"Oh, she'll be all right," Joe said. "My mother had the same thing and she lived to be almost seventy."

Elaine looked at the two men and exclaimed, "You are brothers!"

Ace lowered his eyes and spoke softly, "You people are the only family I've ever had."

Just at that moment, the door opened and Cassie entered, saw Ace, and stopped. "Oh, my lord, you're back! I figured you were either dead or in prison somewhere."

Ace laughed and Joe shook his head and said, "Now, Cassie, pull up a chair and have a drink. I think we can squeeze another glass out of this bottle."

Cassie reached down, picked up Joe's half-filled glass, emptied it, then set it back down and smiled. "So, Ace, where have you been all these years?"

"Around," he replied, an answer that caused Joe to laugh and Elaine to smile.

"Sit down and join us," Joe urged.

"Can't. It's getting late. Got to get back to the kitchen and get ready for the evening crowd. I'm just one of the workers, not the plutocrat owners who can sit around all afternoon drinking with a bum just come in off the street."

She smiled as she spoke and then reached over and tweaked Joe's ear before heading to the kitchen.

"She's done that to me since we were kids," Joe said as he rubbed his ear.

"Cassie still a Communist?" Ace asked.

"Oh, yeah, big time," Joe replied. "She's pretty high up in the French party now. She says she might have to go to Moscow for training."

"I wish she was not so involved," Elaine added. "It is a dangerous thing, I think."

Ace agreed. "It could be dangerous, all right, but I suspect that with this German business, she's going to be busy for a while."

"It is getting late," Elaine said. "I better go help Cassie in the kitchen. Ace, you will stay for dinner, yes?"

"I'd like to," Ace replied, "But, I've got some business to take care of."

"What kind of business?" Joe asked. "You better be careful. Things have changed a lot."

"Yeah, I know. But I've got a new plane I'm breaking in. It's an experimental job. It's an ugly thing, but it's got good range and it's faster than anything I've ever flown before. I wish I'd had it back when I was in Miami. It would have made flying to Cuba a cinch."

"Miami is where you taught Mary Margaret how to fly?" Elaine asked.

"Sort of," Ace answered. "I got her up to the point where she soloed. She still had a long way to go, though, before she could become a fully licensed pilot. Well, I better be getting along."

He rose from the table and smiled at them. "It's like coming home. I'll see you tomorrow or the day after, for sure."

They walked with him to the door. Elaine hugged him. Joe asked, "How long you going to be in Paris?"

As he stepped outside, Ace answered, "For quite a while, I hope."

It felt good to walk, and maybe he could wear off some of the wine. There was time. His invitation for dinner with the Countess was for later in the evening. A few more blocks and he would catch a taxi back to his hotel room.

Maggie was in Paris! If she was truly in town, they would inevitably meet, and yet, that was silly. Paris was a big city. How could it be inevitable for two people to meet in a big city?

It was clear that Elaine was going to play matchmaker. June would do the same thing if she were here. Joe and Virgil, Elaine and June, James Longstreet and Angel. He smiled as he corrected himself, Angelique, not Angel. It was the child's eyes that had caught his attention. They were like what he called Egyptian eyes. They seemed to fold around catching the beginnings of the sides of her face. They were large eyes. Maybe she would grow into them someday. Angelique's eyes reminded him of the beautiful eyes of the Countess.

Maggie marched back into his thoughts. She would not be denied access. With Maggie came Maria, and that was inevitable, too. He remembered the day when Maria's body was brought back to Cuba. He remembered the cemetery and the burial, and he blamed Maggie, but at the same time, he knew it was not Maggie's fault.

"Excuse me, sir!"

Ace jumped out of his mind and back into reality. Facing him was an attractive young woman, early twenties, black curly hair, and dark brown eyes.

"Sorry," he said softly. "Did I bump into you?"

"No. I recognized you from a description given to me by some mutual friends. They said I might find you at a place called Joe's American Bar. I was on my way there now."

"You are an American?"

"Yes. My name is Rachel Green, and I must talk to you. It's terribly important."

Chapter 20

It was a warm afternoon in autumn and the pleasant day brought out strollers and men in chairs at sidewalk cafes to read newspapers or just to watch the people passing by.

It had been three days since Ace reunited with Joe and Elaine, his family, as he thought of them, in Paris. It had been a busy three days, but they had been pleasant days, except for two problems. Maggie was somewhere in Paris and Rachel Green was late. He looked down at the English language newspaper in front of him. The Herald-Tribune was laced with articles about the German situation. He had to tell Miss Green that he could not do what she wanted, and that would be awkward under the circumstances. She had friends, well, not friends probably. It was more like they were connections, but important connections in Amsterdam. He knew he owed a great deal to them, but only indirectly, and by the same token, they owed him a great deal.

Ace noticed an article in the paper about Roosevelt's first one hundred days and how there were no signs of an economic recovery yet. He did not dwell on the recovery aspect, instead casting his thoughts to the welcome idea that Prohibition was coming to an end. Maybe now his former business acquaintances in the States could concentrate more on business instead of constantly trying to knock each other off.

That thought alone was enough to make him feel good about being back in France once again. His coffee was cold, and he was just about to signal the waiter when he saw her coming up the street. She was a good half-block away but there was no doubt about it. Maggie was headed his way. He pretended to be looking down at the newspaper on the table, but his gaze was upon her.

This was a Maggie he had never seen before. She seemed taller, and her hair was longer, the sunlight glinting on the auburn hair that streamed down from a silly but fashionable little hat.

He thought of the Countess and her Old World elegance. Maggie was elegant, also, but her elegance had a vibrancy, a confidence, a sense of control of the world about her.

It took an effort to keep from blurting aloud, "She's beautiful!" He kept the words from escaping his lips, but they rang through his mind. And then she disappeared from his sight.

A few seconds later, two hands closed over his eyes, and he picked up a subtle scent that nevertheless, subtle or not, succeeded in provoking a response in his mind that had little to do with subtlety.

"Guess who?" a soft female voice behind him said.

"Hello, Maggie. Long time no see. Pull up a chair and sit down."

"How did you know it was me?" She moved around and took a chair to his left.

He looked at her for a second before responding. "I saw you coming. You've still got the best legs, and now, the best legs on two continents. What brings you to Paris?"

"Thanks for the compliment, I think. I'm here on business, and I hoped I would finally run into you. You are the hardest man to find on two continents, you know. Where have you been?"

"Around."

She hesitated and then reached out. She touched his hand and then pulled back and pointed at the lighter by the pack of cigarettes on the table.

"I see you still have that lighter."

"Can't seem to lose it," he replied. "The gold is a little worn, though."

Maggie started to respond that both he and she were also a little worn, but pulled back. She hesitated and then came to the point.

"What happened that night? What happened to you? I never knew if you had been hurt. No, I knew you must have been hurt or otherwise Daddy's goons would never have taken me away."

"One of them did a good job on me with a sap," Ace replied. "Another one had a knife, and he opened me up like a tin of sardines. Maria saved my life."

"Maria?"

Ace nodded. "She and Jose came just after I got sliced. They killed the guy who knifed me, but the others got away with you."

"Oh, my God, Ace! I'm so sorry. I suppose they got rid of the goon the usual way?"

"Yeah, gators."

"I looked for you," she said. "I called the air field, but Louie claimed he knew nothing about you or where you went or why. He sounded angry. I think he blamed me for the trouble."

Ace signaled the waiter and when he got his attention, he motioned to Maggie and himself, then made like he was milking a cow and pointed again at Maggie. The waiter understood.

Maggie laughed despite her growing concern about just how awkward this meeting with Ace had become.

"And guess who is still waiting to take his first French lesson?" she asked.

Ace shrugged. "He understood every word I said."

"Well, at least you've got the shrug down. That was a very French shrug." Maggie paused as the waiter produced two coffees and a small jar of cream.

"Where did you disappear to after that night?"

"I was out of it," Ace replied. "Maria got me to a doctor, and then she smuggled me into Cuba where she thought I would be safe."

"Cuba! Why go all the way to Cuba? She had people who could protect you. Jose looked very capable to me."

"Maria got it all wrong. She thought the people in Miami were making a move on her, and I was just the first step. She thought they would be back to finish off the job."

"She was very possessive. She always referred to you as 'my Ace'."

"Now, Maggie, don't speak ill of the dead."

"Dead? What do you mean?"

Ace looked down at his coffee. He started to take a drink and then put it back down untouched.

"Maria went to war," he said slowly. "After getting me to Cuba, she returned and had it out with the Miami people. I was still in bad shape and couldn't stop her. I told her that it was your Daddy's doing, not Miami, but she didn't think so."

"Did you blame me?"

"Not at first, I guess. Mostly, I blamed myself." He paused and again raised the cup to his lips. This time he took a sip and set the cup down.

"I was still in bed when Jose brought her body back to Cuba for burial. I had them carry me to the cemetery on a stretcher."

He laughed, a short, harsh laugh, sardonic, and very unlike the Ace that Maggie had known when he was teaching her how to fly.

"It must have been an interesting sight. Maria in a coffin and me on a stretcher. One going into the ground and one on the way."

She wanted to reach out and touch him, to somehow take away the pain he was obviously feeling. The scar on his face appeared to be widening and taking on a reddish hue.

"Maria must have had a lot of friends at her funeral," Maggie said. "She was able to give loyalty and to get loyalty in return. It was clear that Jose was her right hand man. He served her well."

"Jose is her son."

"Oh, I didn't know."

There was a silence. Ace lit a cigarette, and Maggie used her spoon to stir her tepid coffee which she was not going to drink. This meeting had not gone the way she had pictured it in her mind. It was Paris and a warm day, even if it was autumn. But Ace had not thrown himself at her, had not kissed her, nor even claimed that he had missed her terribly, even if it was not true. All these years, she had been on a quest. The quest was completed and the only result was a great empty spot in her heart. She looked up and saw him glance at his watch.

"Are you expecting someone?"

"Yes. She's late. I guess I've been stood up."

"You? Stood up? I find that hard to believe."

Ace smiled. "It's been known to happen."

Happy to have an opening to change the subject from the days back in Miami, Maggie asked, "Is this, or maybe was it, something serious?"

"Yeah, but not in the way you're thinking. This is business."

"Well, if that pretty young lady approaching us comes under the heading of business, then you are indeed mixing pleasure with business, and robbing the cradle at the same time."

"She wants me to fly her to Berlin," Ace said as he rose from his chair and waved to the woman. "Hello, Rachel."

The young woman stopped in front of the table and glanced down at Maggie. "Am I interrupting something? I can come back later."

"No, no, we are old friends. Pull up a chair, uh, oh, yes, Maggie, meet Rachel Green. She's a reporter with the International Press. Rachel, meet Maggie O'Malley of Philadelphia."

Rachel sat down, and she and Maggie nodded politely.

"Ace tells me that you are trying to get to Berlin," Maggie said.

"Yes, but the Germans won't give me a visa." She paused, reached over and took a cigarette out of Ace's pack and used his lighter. Maggie glanced at Ace, who looked up for birds in the sky.

"I thought," Rachel continued, "That if I just showed up, the Germans would have second thoughts and let me stay."

"I think I understand," Maggie said. "You want to know if the Germans are going to do what Hitler says they are going to do."

"Something like that," Rachel nodded, "And if it is as bad as I suspect, then I'm going back to the States to shout it from the rooftops!" She took a long look at Maggie.

"O'Malley? Maggie? Oh, my, are you the Mary Margaret O'Malley? Philadelphia? Of course, you are. M.M. O'Malley!" She reached into her handbag and pulled out a notebook and a pencil.

"I don't do interviews," Maggie said quickly. And then to Ace, "I think she knows more about me than you do."

"Depends on the topic," Ace said.

Rachel looked at Ace. Her voice showed her surprise when she asked him, "You don't know? You are old friends? M.M. O'Malley controls corporations, has her own foundation, and is one of the leading women aviators in the States. Where have you been?"

"That is an interesting question," Maggie said.

"Couldn't you give me just a little interview? Maybe just a statement, like, what do you think of this German situation? Or, how about the economic situation in the States? How long do you believe the Depression will last?"

Maggie laughed and said, "No to everything." When she saw the look of disappointment on Rachel's face, she had a change of heart. "Well, take a page from your notebook, write down your phone number on it, and I promise I will get back to you."

Rachel's face brightened. "Thanks, Miss O'Malley." She tore a page from the notebook and scribbled down a phone number. "I could use a break like this!"

Maggie took the paper and put it in her purse as she got up from the table.

"I really must be on my way, now. Rachel, it was good to meet you, and I promise, I'll call. Ace, good to see you again. I'm staying at the Ritz. Give me a call."

Rachel and Ace watched as Maggie walked away. Rachel helped herself to another of Ace's cigarettes and lit it.

"She's much prettier than I had expected. The newspaper photographs and the news reel film don't do her justice."

"Just how famous is she? News reel film? You mean the kind they show at the movies?"

"Where have you been? Sure she's famous. She's one of the leading female pilots in the U.S.A. She took over her father's companies after he died, and they are actually making money during this Depression. If times ever get better, she'll be well on her way to becoming the richest woman in the States. Oh, yeah, you could say she's famous."

Rachel paused and her eyes narrowed slightly and she cocked her head to one side. "I wonder what she's up to here in Paris. You can bet it's something very, very high level."

"He's dead?"

"Who?"

"Maggie's father."

"Oh, yes, about five years ago, I think. She took over the companies, but the word on the street was that she was having a hard time. The bigwigs didn't like being bossed around by some dame, that sort of thing."

"Maggie can take care of herself," Ace said. "She probably had the big shots flogged three times a day."

"She may have wanted to," Rachel said, "But she came up with a strange idea. People are still trying to figure it out."

"What's that?"

"She formed some kind of a foundation that the companies have to support."

"I don't like to appear dumb, but what the hell is a foundation?"

"Well, Maggie, as you call her, created this foundation to promote women fliers, you know, to get more women up in the air."

Ace stared at his cold cup of barely tasted coffee and shook his head. "What would Griggs say about this?"

"Griggs?"

"Just a man I knew when I was a kid. He taught me how to fly."

"There's a good story angle," Rachel said. "I wonder who taught her how to fly. Someone had to do it."

There was a quick spark in Ace's eyes. "When you get your interview with Maggie, be sure to ask her about Miami."

"What about Miami? I don't know, the way you are smiling, I have a strong feeling that if I asked about Miami, she'd probably hand me my head."

"That would be better than what you would get in Berlin, Rachel."

She nodded. "I guessed that your answer was going to be no. But I think it would work. I think once we were there, they'd be happy to see the international press."

"Rachel, damn it, you are Jewish!" Ace said sharply. "Surely you have heard the stories about what's happening to the Jews in Germany."

She snapped back, "Of course I've heard the stories. I know the stories, you know the stories. I think you even believe the stories, but most of the people back in the States don't believe them. There are even Jews who believe that it's just Zionist propaganda. When I see it with my own eyes, then I'll fight it. I'll fight it in the States, but first I have to be sure. I have to see it."

"Kid, you've got moxie. I could probably get us in, and I might be able to get me out. I might even be able to fly my plane out. But I do not know of any way I could get you out. It would probably end up being a one way trip for both of us."

Her eyes misted. "I feel so frustrated. I want to do something. Someone's got to draw the line somewhere, don't they?"

"Maybe. I'm not much for lost causes."

"Lost causes?" she asked.

"Yeah, lost causes. Come on now, cheer up. Who knows, maybe even people like myself will draw a line in the sand."

She pulled a handkerchief from her purse and dabbed at her eyes. She smiled. "I'm okay. Listen, as long as there's no Berlin, how about you tell me about Maggie and Miami?"

"That's better. Now you sound like a reporter instead of a crusader. I have a better idea. It's late enough in the day for a drink. Let's split a bottle and then have some dinner."

"That sounds good. I'm sorry about getting carried away."

"What's the point of being young if you don't believe in something?" Ace said as he motioned the waiter over and handed him money. The money was obviously more than enough to cover the bill because the waiter bowed several times.

“You must have really overpaid him,” Rachel said as they walked away.
“We held his table a long time,” Ace replied.
“That’s really thoughtful. Are you going to call?”
“Call?”
“Mary Margaret O’Malley!”
“I don’t know. Maybe.”

Chapter 21

Maggie watched the ice in the large, ornate bowl on the low antique table in front of the sofa. The small chunks surrounded six bottles of Coca Cola. She was looking for signs of melting, well aware that during the start of that summer back in the little house near Miami, the ice would be melting rapidly.

Ace had called and said he had some spare time this afternoon, this autumn afternoon in Paris, and only three days after they had met, quite by accident, at the sidewalk café.

She had been searching for him ever since that summer in Miami, but it had been pure luck stumbling onto him sitting at the table and waiting for a woman, and she was not that woman! That thought led her to consider whether or not this meeting was a bad idea. She admitted to herself that if it had been any other man and any other hotel room, she would not be there.

But the man was Ace. She checked the vase near the end of the table. It was the third time she had checked it. Yes, she told herself, there is water in the vase. All preparations had been made except for deciding what she would say when he entered the room.

The doorbell rang. It was a gentle doorbell, almost musical. She jumped up from the sofa and moved quickly several steps toward the door and then stopped. The bell rang again. She moved slowly toward the door. After the third ring, she opened the door.

“Ace! Come in.”

He stepped through the door and into the room. He had a dozen red roses in one hand and a box of chocolates in the other. He handed Maggie the flowers.

“The last time I brought flowers, I threw them in the door, remember?”

“Oh, yes, I do,” she said as she took the flowers, freed them from their binding, sniffed them, and then put them in the vase. “It was a crazy thing to do. Sit down.” She waved her hand so that the invitation was meant to include the sofa or the two chairs close to the small table and facing the sofa.

For a second, Ace hesitated and then seated himself in one of the chairs and gazed around the room. “This looks like an apartment.”

“It’s a suite. The last few times I’ve been in Paris, I have stayed in this suite. How about a drink?”

Ace laughed. “I thought you’d never ask. I saw the Cokes and the bottle of rum when I came through the door. It’ll be like the old days.”

Maggie quickly made the drinks, splitting a Coke between two glasses, adding ice, and then a generous amount of rum to each glass.

"Six Cokes?" Ace asked. "I'm glad I'm not flying this evening."

"You can fly at night?"

"I can with the plane I've got now."

"A new plane?"

Ace nodded. "It's a French plane and only a year old. It's an experimental job, and I'm still working out some of the kinks."

"Who's the maker?"

"It's not a factory plane. I don't even know who put it together."

Maggie took a long sip from her drink and then asked, "You are flying something put together in a workshop or maybe even a barn? I remember one time you told me that there are no old pilots. Flying experimental stuff and you don't even know who made it? That seems to me to be a good way to make the prediction about old pilots come true."

"I checked it out before I took it up the first time. It looked good. It's got about a four hundred mile range and a top speed of almost two hundred miles an hour."

"It sounds like a Curtis P6 or a Boeing P26," Maggie said. "Is it a fighter? I know the French have a fighter that has those capabilities."

"No, it's not a fighter," Ace replied. "But if I had a couple of machine guns on it, I'd give most of these fighters today a hard time."

"You must be making some good money if you can afford a plane like what you are describing."

"Well, it's not really mine, actually. I think the deal is that I get to use the plane as long as I'm a good boy and give reports on how it flies."

Maggie noted that both their glasses were nearly empty and made a fresh round of drinks. "I have a strong hunch that I really don't want to know too much about who's behind this business."

"You know the old saying, Maggie. What you don't know won't hurt you."

Ace pulled out his cigarette package and lighter. "Is it okay?" he asked.

"Sure," she said as she brought an ashtray over from the buffet. "I'll have one, too. You don't mind offering me one, I hope. If you put them down on the table, I could do like Rachel and just bum one without even asking."

"Rachel's a good kid," Ace said.

"Please, Ace, Rachel is not a kid. She's a woman and a damned good-looking woman. Did she ask you about the lighter?"

"Yeah, now that you mention it, she did."

Maggie leaned over with the cigarette in her mouth. Ace leaned forward and flicked the lighter. As she puffed on the cigarette, she started to reach forward to steady his hand, stopped, and they both laughed.

Maggie leaned back, "Well, at least I've solved your Berlin problem."

"I didn't know I had a Berlin problem."

"Of course you had a problem. That sweet young woman wanted you to fly her to Berlin."

"I told her no."

"I hoped you would. I did some checking on her. She has some interesting connections. She apparently has relatives in Amsterdam, and I know you are involved with the same people."

"You have that kind of clout?" Ace asked.

"I don't but my money does. That's what money's for, you know."

"I see," Ace said. He smiled. "The Maggie I knew eight years ago who was willing to use an iron skillet on someone's head now has a different kind of skillet."

"I was just another Irish washerwoman as Louie said." She paused and then added, "The Germans might have killed Rachel. And, they would not have been very happy with you for smuggling in a Jew."

Ace nodded. "Sneaking into Berlin could have been her death warrant. So, how did you solve my problem, which I already solved?"

"I called her this morning and offered her a job with my foundation. She accepted."

Ace emptied his glass, got up and opened another bottle of Coke and made himself another drink. As he did so, he motioned toward Maggie's glass, and she shook her head, no.

"Well," he said, "Hiring Rachel was one way of getting rid of the competition."

"I suppose it might look like that," Maggie said, "But I doubt that either she or you would let the fact that she works for me interfere with your relationship."

"Maggie, we don't have a relationship."

"Be that as it may, the truth is that I hired her because she's smart and capable. I need the best I can buy for what I'm going to do."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going heavy into the airplane business."

"You are going to build airplanes?"

"I thought about it," Maggie said, "But there are too many already established companies making planes. What's lacking right now is buyers."

Ace laughed. "Okay, that's a great idea. There's not much competition when it comes to buying planes. But, how do you make money by spending money to buy planes?"

"Simple," Maggie replied. "I buy the planes and then lease them out to companies, airlines, and maybe even nations."

"You have to charge enough for the lease to pay for the plane and make a profit," Ace said thoughtfully. Then he added, "What if the plane goes down, crashes, where are you then?"

She smiled. "I'm fully insured, that's where I am."

"It sounds like a damned good idea, Maggie. Is this why you are in Paris?"

"Partly," she replied. "I'm looking into whether or not I could do business in France and Great Britain. The way it looks, I'll have to set up British and French subsidiaries. It will mean having to buy British and French planes."

"You got the money for this kind of business?" Ace asked. "I thought everyone in the States was broke."

Maggie sighed, "Business is lousy right now. But I'm not broke. Daddy was a smart man. He believed in gold and thought the stock market was a gambling casino. He never gambled."

"Roosevelt's going to get your gold!" Ace said with a smile.

"When Daddy died," Maggie said, "I took over the reins. The gold was not in the United States. It was in Ireland and Great Britain."

She reached out for Ace's pack of cigarettes, and helped herself to a cigarette and his lighter. She smiled and shrugged. "Rachel and I both have bad habits."

"So when do you figure to start this business?" Ace asked.

"Oh, I've started. I bought two Ford Trimotors. I've got one in the States and one here in Paris. I'm using them right now for my own travel, but they also serve as demonstration models."

"You do your own flying? You are really rated to fly multi-engine planes?"

"Yes, I am. One of these days, I'll have a plane that can make it across the Atlantic. You want to come along when I make the flight?"

"It would be like driving a truck across the country," Ace said with a chuckle.

"There's going to be a great need for trucks in the sky," Maggie said. "Things are changing. For that matter, just look at you."

"What?"

"Your clothes. You don't look so much like a gypsy now."

"It's hard to find good clothes any more," Ace said with a shake of his head.

"There's something to be thankful for," Maggie laughed. "And what about your plane? It sounds very modern. No more sitting outdoors on the wing!"

"It's a good plane, but it does have some bad things," he acknowledged. "It is closed in. I have to look out of windows. Worst of all, there is a damned radio. Anyone can try to talk to me while I'm flying."

"A radio!" Maggie sat back and broke up in laughter. "What will they think of next?"

"I don't know," Ace said ruefully. "I suppose someday there will be a saloon or a restaurant. They might even show movies."

"That's an interesting idea, Food and movies for long flights, and of course, restrooms. Not everyone wants to go potty behind a shed, you know."

"Maggie, you are a beautiful woman, but you're crazy. You sound like you're a brick or two shy of a load."

Maggie laughed and made fresh drinks and helped herself to another cigarette.

"Maybe so, but if I am, I owe it all to two men, you and Daddy." She lifted her glass. "Here's to the two men who made me what I am today, which in truth, might be a little bit crazy."

"I'll drink to that, even if I have to share the stage with your Daddy."

"It's a funny thing about Daddy," Maggie said. "After he had me kidnapped, he was a changed man. I think he must have realized that I could have been killed. He even accepted the idea that I was going to be a flier. He made me a part of his businesses, actually giving me real control. I don't know, maybe he had a premonition that he didn't have long to live."

"Your Daddy's goons did a good job on me. I damned near didn't survive that go-round."

"I'm sorry about that, Ace. I truly am. Daddy told me you weren't killed, just beat up some. I tried hard to find out anything I could. Louie wouldn't help. Virgil said he knew nothing. At least, you don't have any visible scars from the beating."

Ace stood up and moved to the side of the small table, his leg brushing the sofa and his body close to Maggie. He pulled his shirt up out of his pants and raised it high. The scar just above his belly button extended from one side to the other.

“My God! Ace, my poor Ace! I didn’t know. I didn’t know! I’m so sorry.”

Ace let the shirt fall. He sat down on the sofa, half on and half off the cushion.

“Your Daddy did what he thought he had to do, I guess. I never did bear him any real grudge.”

Maggie looked at him through misty eyes. “Did you ever hate anyone? I’ve never known a man who had less hate in him than you.”

“I guess I never did hate anyone. I grew up at the bottom of the totem pole. There was no one beneath me to throw rocks at.”

“Have you fully recovered?” Maggie asked anxiously. “I noticed you had a slight limp when you came in.”

“It was a long time ago, Maggie. I’m fine. The limp is a little something left over from a car wreck when I was in Spanish Morocco.”

“If we hadn’t met that night in Philly,” Maggie started and Ace quickly interrupted.

“No, Maggie. It was worth it. I’d go through it again if necessary, just to see the look on your face when you landed and climbed out of the plane after soloing. I was so in love with you that I thought I was going to explode.”

“Ace, do you mean that?”

“Yes, I do,” he said as he reached out and took her hand.

“Ace, don’t do this to me.”

“Maggie,” he said softly. His gray and sometimes greenish and sometimes bluish eyes locked on hers. He moved closer and reached out to her with both arms.

“Damn you!” she cried as she moved into his arms.

Later, there was a passing notion that paraded through her mind. She could not have both. She quickly dismissed the thought and rolled over. There were eight long years to make up for.

Chapter 22

The next day was one of those days that are often found in old family photo albums. Ace and Maggie met for lunch at Joe's place. Elaine and Angelique with Cassie's grumbling help had prepared lunch. They were joined by Rachel who was now a part of this unusual family group.

Lunch had been a leisurely affair, frequently interrupted by the new bartender who needed assistance from Cassie, and sometimes both Joe and Elaine. After lunch, Angelique sang for them and the other patrons.

There was much excitement as Angelique finally got her father and Ace to their feet. A promise had been made and now it was time for the promise to be kept. This was the day that Ace was going to take Angelique up for her first flight in an airplane. Joe was going along, but he was absolutely not going aloft.

As they prepared to leave, Elaine hugged Angelique and urged Ace to take care of her child. Ace promised and Joe said, "Don't worry, Momma, if they fall, I'll catch them. I've caught Ace before."

After the threesome left for the air field, the four women finished their wine and ended their small talk, Cassie having the last word and providing mirth at the same time.

"I hope nobody in the Party saw this meeting." She looked at Maggie. "It's too bad you are on the wrong side. We need people like you."

Maggie smiled and answered graciously, "I've got the same feeling about you. You've got a job with my foundation anytime you want it."

"I don't think so," Cassie responded. It was clear to all, however, that Cassie was pleased by the offer.

Rachel waved goodbye. She had assignments Maggie had given her. Cassie had an important party meeting. Only Maggie and Elaine remained.

"You and Ace are together, now?" Elaine asked hopefully.

"Maybe. With Ace, I never know for sure."

"That is good! That is good! Ace should be married to you. It would be a blessing, I think."

Maggie laughed. "I've got a friend back in the States. It's too bad you two can't get together. You both have the same idea."

"Give me her name and address. I can write her a letter just like I did to you."

"Her name is June. I'll have to get the address out of my file. I'll drop it off the next time I'm here."

"*Merci*, uh, good, good."

Maggie departed to attend to matters that concerned both business and possibly pleasure. She had to see if certain items she had ordered were done. She hoped that the money she offered was sufficient to complete the work on time.

By evening, Maggie was ready. There was an ample supply of Cokes on ice, and the best rum Rachel could find.

The door bell rang, and she hurried to the door and opened it. Ace was standing there with a single flower, somewhat the worse for wear, in one hand, and a macaroon cookie in the other.

Maggie laughed. She had seen the decorations and trays of confections in one of the large rooms reserved for special events.

"It's the best I could do," Ace said apologetically. "We got back from the air field late. I hurried on over. I didn't want you to think I had forgotten about tonight."

"Get in here," Maggie said, "Before someone sees you standing out in the hallway with stolen goods."

Once inside with the door closed, Maggie threw her arms around him and kissed him. "It's the most beautiful flower I ever received in my life," she said. "And if Tiffany's was to ever make cookies instead of jewelry, they could never equal this cookie."

Ace smiled. "You are laying it on a bit thick, Maggie. That's not like you."

She led him over to the sofa. While she made drinks, she said, "I guess I'm a little silly, tonight. It was such a good day. It was like a family reunion. Thanks to you, I have a lot of cousins now, cousins because I say so, and not by birth."

"It was a good day," Ace agreed as he lifted his glass in a salute which Maggie returned. "We had a great time with the plane, except that I could not get Joe to go up."

"How did Angelique do?"

"She did great. She reminded me of you. No fear at all. She was a little excited, but when she calmed down, she did a good job on the controls."

"You let her touch the controls? On her first flight?"

"It was okay. These are dual controls, and we sit side by side."

"When I touched the controls, you banged on the side of the plane, remember?"

Ace took a long drink and then replied, "That was because I thought you were going to take over. It will be fun getting you up in this plane. You'll really like it. All the comforts of home."

"Are you going to teach her how to fly?"

"Who? Oh, you mean Angel? She wouldn't take long. She's a natural just like you were."

"I still am a pilot," Maggie said. "In point of fact, I've got better ratings than you have, and mine are all legal."

"Most of mine are legal," Ace protested. "Maybe my multi-engine credentials are a little on the queer side, but they look good!" Both Ace and Maggie laughed.

"Angel is growing up fast," Maggie said. "Damn, now you've got me calling her Angel. Angelique is a beautiful name, a good name for a singer."

"You think she's got talent?" Ace asked.

"Maybe. It's hard to tell at her age. She's got a voice, I'll say that. I close my eyes and listen, and I think I'm hearing a woman who's maybe thirty singing."

"She can sure ask a lot of questions," Ace said. "She even asked if I wore a tassel on my helmet when I was flying in the war."

"There were pilots who did, you know," Maggie said as she reached for Ace's pack of cigarettes and lighter.

"The movies show pilots with tassels flying out behind the helmets. She probably picked it up from the movies."

"I guess so. She has this idea that we were something like the old knights. She said they wore tassels on their steel helmets."

"Well, you are her hero, a knight in shining armor. Speaking of armor, I have a surprise for you."

"A surprise?"

"Yes, go in the bedroom. When you come out, I want to see the Ace I used to know."

"What's this all about? Have you got a monkey suit in there?"

"Don't be silly. Go on in and look. You'll be surprised."

Ace got up and walked to the bedroom door. He turned at the door and looked back. "Is this some kind of gag?"

"No, sweetheart. No gag." She watched as he entered the bedroom. She heard him exclaim, "I'll be damned." And then she wondered if it was a statement of disgust or delight. With Ace, it was always a gamble, but it was something she had to do.

After a few minutes, Ace appeared at the bedroom door. He was dressed in a red shirt with a large collar. It was a pullover shirt with an open neck. The sleeves ballooned slightly at the cuffs. He had a yellow scarf looped once around his neck, one end hanging down over his shoulder in back and the other over his chest in front. He had a wide black leather belt, and the pants were loose-fitting, gray whipcord, and the cuffs fell half in and half out of his boots.

"Where did you find good clothes like these? I've looked all over Paris and couldn't find any."

Maggie got up and hurried over to him, took him by the hands, and then stepped back to take a long look. "Now, this is the Ace I've known and loved for years."

He took her in his arms and kissed her. When their lips parted, they pulled back ever so slightly and then came together for a second kiss. They returned to the sofa where they sat close and were silent until Maggie said, "We are trying to recapture the past, I suppose. The only good thing about the eight years we lost is that we are back together again."

Ace got up and made a new round of drinks. "Maybe we're getting old, Maggie. Sometimes, I think about the time we spent in that little house down there near Miami. It wasn't much of a house, I guess."

Maggie took her drink from him and gave him a hard look. "Ace Mathews! I loved that little house. Don't you go saying anything bad about it."

Ace glanced around the room. "This place isn't very much like that little house."

"True, but that little house was yours and mine, even if for just a little while. I wish I could wave some kind of a magic wand and make this place into that house."

"That sounds like a reverse of the Cinderella story to me."

"Maybe it is," Maggie agreed. "God, how I envy June and Elaine! They each have a kid. Did you see the way Elaine looks at Joe? They've been married thirteen or fourteen years? How happy they are!"

Ace put his arm around Maggie and she leaned into him. "Sometimes I think about it. What it would be like being married and settled down. Things are so different now. It seems like everyday there's more rules, more people who want to take the fun out of flying." He paused to take a sip from his glass. "Did you ever learn how to cook anything besides potatoes and hamburgers?"

Maggie pulled away from him. "I thought fried potatoes and hamburgers were your favorite food."

"One of my favorites," Ace replied.

"I'll have you know that I am a gourmet cook as well as being one of the best damned pilots who ever took a twin engine plane through a thunderstorm and landed in a cross wind."

Ace laughed and took a long drink from his glass. "I'm surprised that your father let you keep going in this flying business. You didn't learn multi-engine flying in a week."

"Daddy hated it, but like I told you, after that insane business down in Florida, he pretty much let me have my own way."

Ace got up, stretched, and asked, "This new business, the leasing of planes. Do you really think it'll work?"

"It better work! If it doesn't there are a lot of lawyers and accountants back in Philadelphia who will be after my scalp."

Ace returned to his place on the sofa. Maggie reached for another Coke, but Ace shook his head. "Not yet. I've got to go back to my hotel and check for messages. Am I invited for supper tonight?"

"Of course you are. I'll have something sent up from the dining room."

"Sounds good to me. Maybe over supper we can talk about just how I'd fit into your business."

"It seems like every decade or so, I have to ask if you really mean it."

"Yeah, I think I do. You're doing business in France and Great Britain and maybe other places in Europe. One of these days, we'll have planes that can easily fly across the Atlantic. I'd like that, you and I, flying the Atlantic."

She kissed him and then kissed him again and then again.

"No promises, you know," he said as he got to his feet. "At least not until I hear the job offer."

"Get out of here, you bum!" Maggie said with a laugh. "And hurry back. I'll be waiting. Oh, wait. You should probably change back into your other outfit before going out."

"Why?"

Maggie laughed, "Because they might be arresting gypsies."

Ace paused at the door. "I like these clothes. Make me feel young."

"Be careful, my gypsy king."

Ace quickly walked down the flight of stairs to the lobby and headed for the door. He was aware that he was drawing more than a few stares. He knew that these people did not think of him as a gypsy, but instead were wondering just what business an *apache* would have in a high class place. He smiled as he considered the possibility that Maggie probably thought the word meant an Indian.

The taxi ride to his hotel was quick and with the usual thrills and close calls he had come to expect when riding in a Parisian taxi. He was able to give some thought to the question he had asked Maggie. Could he really work for her? What kind of title would he have? Then he laughed aloud because he knew very well what title Maggie had in mind. It was called, husband.

The cab driver noted the laugh that followed the thought and kept one eye on Ace while trying to study the dangerous landscape ahead and to the sides with the other eye.

At the hotel, Ace paid the driver and then got out of the taxi which quickly sped away. As it did so, the space vacated was quickly filled by a car that Ace recognized as an unmarked police vehicle. Two men got out. The driver remained in his place and the engine continued to idle.

Chapter 23

One of the men spoke in English. "You are to accompany us, if you please."

"Where are we going?" Ace asked.

"There are some matters to be discussed."

"Am I under arrest?"

"Oh, no, nothing like that. I think it is only a formality."

Ace was ushered into the back seat of the car with the man who spoke English. The other man got in front with the driver. Ace noticed that the man in front sat almost sideways in his seat so he could observe the back seat. The English-speaking man also sat sideways in the back so he could keep close watch on both. Ace was impressed by the care they had taken to make sure he was not seated behind the driver. The French were much more competent than the Spanish in these matters, he told himself. The Spanish had put him in the back seat, and there had only been two of them sitting in front. After the wreck, Ace had been the only survivor.

After a short drive, the car stopped in front of what appeared to be a warehouse very much in need of repairs.

"What's this?" Ace asked, his muscles tensing for what might be coming.

"Our apologies," the officer beside him said. "We just moved into this building. Much work needs to be done." He shrugged, "You know how it is. There are always the delays and confusion among the higher ranks, is it not so?"

They got out of the car and entered the building. There was a partition and a door in the partition. One of the accompanying officers knocked on the door, opened it, and spoke in French to someone inside.

“Go on in,” Ace was told. He moved hesitantly toward the door, noting the fact that the men who had brought him here were hanging back.

“Will I be coming back out?” he asked the English-speaking officer.

“Of course.” He laughed. “You have been viewing too many American movies. Don’t worry. This is just a formality.”

Ace entered the room. It was a large room, maybe twenty feet by twenty feet. There was a table which was obviously meant to serve as a desk, a chair in front of it, and a chair behind it. There was a man sitting in the chair behind the table. He was looking down at a dossier in front of him. Without looking up, he motioned for Ace to sit in the chair. As Ace sat down, he heard the door close.

The man behind the table continued to scan the dossier. He leaned over the table and his face was close to the dossier.

Ace studied the man. He was not large or small. His suit was appropriate, but not a distinguishing feature. He had hair but it was ordinary, parted down the middle, and he was on the edge of needing a haircut. His face was round and smooth, his nose small, and his eyes receded back in his head and close to either side of his nose. He was a man who could easily disappear in a crowd of people.

Ace felt an increasing level of uneasiness. He had the feeling that if he could look into the man’s eyes, he would find no vestige of a soul. This was the kind of man who had not sold his soul to the devil. He had simply discarded it in a trash bin as not having any value at all. He had seen men like this before, and he feared them.

The man looked up. “Ah, Mr. Mathews. Since I am aware that you do not speak French, even though we have permitted you to live here for quite a number of years, I will speak in English. I believe I have a certain proficiency in the English language and can make myself understood.”

Ace did not respond, and after several seconds, the man behind the desk said, “You fought in the war, and that is to your credit. But what you have done in France since is not good. If you had not fled to your native country back in 1921, you surely must have ended up in what you Americans call Devil’s Island.”

The man behind the table stared at Ace, waiting for a response, but Ace kept his silence. His mind was on the way the man’s words sounded. They were like steel ball bearings darting about in a shallow metal pan heavily coated with oil. Ace could feel beads of sweat forming on his forehead.

The man glanced down at the dossier and then looked at Ace. “Yes, I see my favorite Countess has been active in this case.” He stopped and watched Ace to see how he would react to this gambit. The only reaction was a narrowing of Ace’s eyes.

After a slight shrug, the man continued, “You understand, of course, that she’s not really a countess. No, she is probably the most successful whore France has ever produced. Her marriage to the Count was an utter fraud.”

The man had made a bad mistake. Ace’s anger quickly overcame his queasy feelings, the tinges of fear that had invaded his natural resolve.

Ace smiled, but it was a thin smile, and his eyes were cold and hard. “Maybe, just maybe, I’ll get lucky and bump into you somewhere, and you can repeat those words. You can damn well bet I’ll look forward to that occasion.”

"It is most unlikely that we shall meet under such circumstances, Mr. Mathews. I regret having upset you with my remarks about the Countess. Sometimes, the truth is rather unpleasant. It would be interesting, however, to test your loyalty to her."

Ace saw the man's hand move under the table. The move was followed by a knock at the door. The door opened. Ace turned in his chair and saw two men, one behind the other, waiting at the open door. Both men were large and muscular. The one in front carried a pair of heavy leather gloves.

Ace turned back and asked, "Is this the way the game is going to be played?"

The man waved a hand and the door was closed with the two men still outside.

The man behind the desk brought his hands together in front of him, his fingers touching, and forming a little tent from behind which he peered.

"You are not easily intimidated, Mr. Mathews. That is good. Now we need to get down to business."

"What business?"

"We have a mission for you. You do take flying assignments, do you not?"

"Sometimes, and always for a price," Ace answered.

"Good. Good. We need you to fly a person from Paris to French Morocco. We know you can do this because we are well aware of your plane's capability. Once you are in French Morocco, you will be introduced to another gentleman whom you will fly to a certain destination in Spanish Morocco where he will carry out his mission. Then you will fly him back to French Morocco, and then you will be free to return to Paris, or whatever destination you might wish."

"Why me? Why not have one of your pilots in French Morocco do the job?"

The man behind the desk almost smiled. The edges of his lips curled slightly and then returned to an uneasy closing down into their customary role of bolstering a vague blandness. The words that followed were harsh.

"There is always the possibility of complications. It would not do for France to be implicated in such a matter. You are an American; therefore, we are not involved."

"What about the guy I'm to take in?" Ace paused as the memory of the Chicago incident drifted into his mind. "Is this some kind of an assassination thing?"

"The nature of the mission is none of your concern. As to the person who has been selected to accompany you on the mission, he is also not French."

Ace stood up and leaned forward, his hands on the table. "I don't like this at all. You're asking me to fly a blind mission. I'm to fly to a place I don't know, with a guy I don't know, to do a job that I don't know."

The man behind the desk edged his chair back from the table, but he was still close enough to place his hands lightly on the table top.

"You must learn to control your anger. Please be assured that if you are considering a violent reaction, you will be restrained. As to this being what you call a blind mission, well, that is nonsense. You will be briefed on what you need to know at the appropriate times."

Ace held his ground. "I don't give a damn. You might as well call your bully boys in and get the show on the road. I'm not flying your mission, and you can go to hell!"

"*Monsieur* Mathews! Please. Sit down. I have no bully boys as you say. This is France, not Germany. And, I do believe that I can persuade you to fly the mission, but with logic and common sense, not brute force."

Ace lifted his hands from the table, stood upright, and then sat down in the chair, his body relaxed, and he smiled. The man behind the table had blinked. He could be prodded. After all his use of nearly accent-free English, he had slipped in one word of French. Ace was sure that somehow he had landed a good punch that caused the man to slip.

"You can't have your bully boys beat me senseless," Ace said, "Because it's obvious you need this mission soon. It looks to me like you've lost the game. If there's nothing else, I think I'll be going, if you don't mind."

The man behind the table tensed. His hands curled into fists and then the fingers straightened.

"In point of fact, I do mind," he said. "We know that you spent part of last week flying first to Calais, then back to Paris, and then on to Marseilles, and finally, back to Paris. In Calais, you picked up a packet containing quite a collection of jewelry that had been stolen from a certain British dowager and smuggled out of England."

Ace was surprised. His body stiffened. "Did you make up that story all by yourself?" he asked, but his tone lacked conviction.

Again, the man behind the table made a poor attempt at a smile. "We know all about the matter. One of your colleagues in Calais was picked up and after a rather intense interrogation, he explained the matter in great detail."

"Is he still alive?" Ace asked sullenly.

"Oh, yes, of course. It is logic and not brutality that leads to success. Now, we do not become excited about the English gentry losing their jewels." He paused and made a gurgling sound that might have been a chuckle. "They steal everything from the rest of the world, and it is only fair when they are made the losers."

Ace started to speak, but was waved back into silence as the man behind the table continued. "We could launch a serious investigation into the matter. You would be the focal point of the investigation. Then we would have to make it quite clear to the press that you have a long history of smuggling, especially diamonds. Your countess friend would be a part of the investigation. Your relationship with her would be probed. Your services to the underworld in Paris would be quite a sensation. Your value to your friends would be greatly reduced, of course. Ah, you wish to say something?"

Ace shook his head, signaling that he had nothing to say. This news about Calais had taken him down. The possibility that his long friendship with the Countess might lead to her being publicly vilified hurt him deeply. He suspected that there was more to come and he was right. The man behind the table cleared his throat and continued.

"There is also some concern in government circles about the curious relationship you have with this American woman who is now in Paris. Is there an American connection with this diamond smuggling business? Does she have connections with the Jews? That is bad enough, of course, but there might be even worse. You have the Negro friend who runs The American Bar in Paris. We know his sister is a Communist. Jews and Communists! There are newspapers that will find our files on all this to be of great interest."

Ace was whipped and he knew it. All the people who had formed a family of sorts for him might be destroyed if he did not fly the mission. It had not taken the bully boys after all.

"When do we leave?" he asked dully.

"Tomorrow morning. At dawn."

“Another dawn patrol,” Ace muttered.

* * *

The arrangement was simple. The man, who was to fly with him to French Morocco, left the building with Ace and they returned to the hotel together. His new companion was not communicative at all. His replies to either questions or comments were limited to two words at a time, and sometimes a simple nod or a shrug sufficed in the place of words.

His companion was obviously there to ensure that Ace did not try to disappear. The sleeping arrangements were also simple. The guard took a straight chair from Ace’s room and set it outside in the hall by the door. He took up his station there.

On the way in, Ace was able to obtain two sheets of hotel stationery and two envelopes from the desk clerk. When he was alone in the room, he sat down at a small table with the stub of a pencil in his hand.

On the first sheet, he scribbled several series of numbers and letters. Below that, he wrote a brief note. He folded the sheet and put it in an envelope, and printed Joe’s name on it. Then he sealed it. On the second sheet he wrote, “Dear Maggie,” and then stopped. He stared down at the sheet for almost a minute, then got up and walked to the window and looked out. He could see a man across the street. Ace shook his head and then returned to the table and began writing. When he finished, he folded the sheet, put it in an envelope, sealed it, and wrote, “Maggie,” on the front of the envelope.

With that done, he lit a cigarette and sat quietly smoking. After he finished the cigarette, he walked to the door and opened it. The man sitting in the hall jumped to his feet.

“Take it easy,” Ace said. “I’m not running away. But I do need to take care of some business. Let’s you and I get a taxi and take a little trip. It won’t take long.”

“Where?” the man asked.

“Joe’s American Bar.” Ace waved the letters. “I want to drop these off.”

The man smiled. “Why not? But no tricks.”

“It’s a deal.”

The taxi ride was quick. The driver sensed that these two men were not the best of friends, and the destination was in a part of the city that could cause some concern. The driver kept close watch on the two men in the back. The one with the scar on his face appeared relaxed, the other was clearly alert and kept one hand under his suit coat.

Joe’s place was busy. Ace was able to catch Joe’s eye. He came to the door to meet Ace.

“Come on in,” Joe said. “We’ll find you a place to sit. We’re doing good tonight.”

“Can’t,” Ace replied. “I’ve only got a minute. I’m leaving tomorrow. I’ve got a letter I want you to give to Maggie for me.” He glanced quickly over his shoulder at the taxi waiting.

“You in trouble, man?” Joe asked.

“No. There’s a little problem, but I’ve got it under control,” Ace answered. “Now, this other letter is for you. Keep it for one year. If I’m not back in a year, open it. I have some money in a Swiss bank. If I’m not back, I want you and Elaine to have it.”

“Now, goddamn it, Ace. This sounds like guys back in the war who thought they were going to get it. What the hell is going on?”

Ace smiled. “It’s a long story, Joe. I’ve got to go. See you around.” He turned and hurried back to the taxi. Just before getting in, he waved at Joe.

“Damn,” Joe said as he walked back to the bar, “I wonder what the hell this is all about.”

When the cab returned to the hotel, Ace paid the driver and gave him a very large tip. The driver was surprised, but he was sure that he had probably earned it.

Back in his room, Ace realized that he had not eaten for hours, but he did not feel the need to eat. He lay down on the bed. He was drained physically by all that had happened that day.

Sleep did not come easily. His mind was on Maggie. The day before, life had looked so good. He and Maggie were going to try it. He wasn’t sure if they could make it together. How would he fit in with her friends? She was friends with Joe and Elaine. And there was the business with June. How quickly they had become friends.

Try as he might, he could not keep thoughts of Spanish Morocco from creeping into his head. He knew that this mission would not be the last for the French. They had him trapped. And life in Philly...would he turn out to be Maggie’s pet monkey, brought out to perform tricks at parties?

The world was closing in around him, pressing against him. There were so many rules now. He felt as if he was a man caught in the wrong time and in a life he could no longer control.

He remembered the early days. What was it? Sixteen, seventeen years ago? The Wright Model B and sitting out on the wing. The circus, learning to fly. So much had changed.

The words formed in his mind and he repeated them over and over, “There are no old pilots. There are no old pilots.” He was soon asleep.

Chapter 24

It had been three hours since Ace left, and Maggie easily discounted the first two hours, but she was having considerable difficulty with this third hour. Ace was bad about a lot of things, but usually he could be depended upon to be on time, and certainly within two hours. The doorbell rang.

Maggie hurried to the door, opened it, and exclaimed, "Where have you been?" It was not Ace. It was Rachel, and she laughed.

"I didn't know I was expected."

"Come on in. I thought it was Ace. He should have been back at least an hour ago."

"Coming back for the night?" Rachel asked as she entered. "This is beginning to sound like it's very serious."

"Maybe," Maggie said. "Make yourself a rum and Coke."

"Don't mind if I do. I've got a long evening ahead. That jerk at the Tribune I was supposed to go out with tonight called and cancelled on me."

"At least he called," Maggie said as she checked her watch. "He didn't stand you up."

"Oh, yes, he called all right. He said that he had to work tonight. The French government had a crisis."

Both women had a good laugh. "The French government always has a crisis," Maggie said. "Newspapermen in Paris always have an excuse."

"Sure, it can be both a good excuse and the truth at the same time. It isn't fair. By the way, what's with the rum and Coke? We're in Paris, not Cuba or Jamaica."

"It's one of those things, I suppose," Maggie replied. "You know how some couples have a favorite song they listened to when they were young? Well, with Ace, it has to do with when we first met. Rum and Coke is what we drank."

"That was in Miami, wasn't it?"

"I forgot," Maggie said as she walked over to the window and looked down at the street below. "You are probably writing a book about me."

"No, boss, at least, not yet."

There was a knock at the door, and Maggie hurried across the room to the door and opened it. "Joe?"

"Hi, Maggie."

"Come in, please," Maggie said. "You remember Rachel?"

Joe nodded at Rachel as he entered. "I can only stay for a minute. I've got to get back to the bar. We're pretty busy tonight."

"Have you seen Ace?" Maggie asked.

"That's why I'm here," Joe answered. "I think he's in some kind of trouble."

"What's happened?"

"Don't know for sure. He stopped by the bar and gave me a letter, and one to give to you. I'm not supposed to open mine unless I don't see or hear from him for one year."

Rachel's eyes showed concern as she glanced over at Maggie. "I don't like the sound of that."

Joe agreed with her. "Neither do I. It's like back during the war. Men got spooked sometimes and did things like that and then did something stupid and got themselves killed. I tried to talk him out of it."

"You've got the letter for me?" Maggie asked.

"Here," he said as he handed her the envelope. "I probably should have gotten here earlier, but, well, you know how it is. I guess I kind of hoped he'd come back, and maybe say it was all some kind of mistake."

"I understand, Joe," Maggie said. "Would you like a drink?"

"I've been wanting a good stiff belt ever since Ace came in the bar and laid this on me, but I better get back. Cassie's at some damn-fool party meeting, and Angel's not feeling well. Elaine's got her hands full."

"Angelique's sick?" Rachel asked.

"Just a little spell," Joe explained. "She gets that way sometimes when she gets excited. After that plane ride today with Ace, she's about to give up a singing career to become a pilot. Well, I've got to go." He turned and walked to the door with Maggie following close behind. "If you hear anything, let me know," he said as Maggie moved around him and opened the door.

"Of course. Thanks for bringing me the letter, Joe. And keep an eye on Angelique. If I can be of any help, just let me know, okay?"

"Thanks," Joe said as he left.

After Joe was gone, Maggie returned to the sofa and sat down. She put the letter on the low table in front of the sofa and stared at it. Rachel returned to her seat and waited for Maggie to open the letter. After a long pause, Rachel said, "The letter won't open itself, you know."

"Oh, I really don't have to open it. I know what's inside. Ace is the only man I ever knew who could dump a woman in twenty-five words or less."

"Like those radio contests?" Rachel asked.

"What radio contests?"

"Sure, you know. Those contests on the radio. Win a big prize by telling in twenty-five words or less why you like oatie-floaties, or something like that."

"For Ace, it would only work if he was dumping a woman, and not just any woman, just me. Damn him."

"Open the letter," Rachel said softly. "It might not be what you think it is. Would it be easier for you if I got out of here?"

"No, don't go. You've been stood up, and I've been dumped. I'll read the damned letter if you make us some drinks, and make them stiff, a lot of rum and a little Coke."

Rachel laughed and started making the drinks. "I didn't exactly get stood up. I was warned first. Maybe you haven't exactly been dumped."

Maggie opened the letter and scanned the lines on the page. "Well, there it is. He's off to French Morocco, and he doesn't know when he'll get back. Oh, and he will never forget me! Isn't that just lovely?"

"There's no hint of what's going on, nothing between the lines?"

Maggie took a long drink. "What do you mean, between the lines? You know Ace. With him there is no between the lines."

"I don't really know him that well," Rachel said cautiously.

Maggie stared at Rachel and then laughed. "Relax. I wasn't suggesting anything, just blowing off steam. I must be sounding like a shrew. Playing the bitter, jilted woman isn't a good role for me. Come on, drink up, I've got bottles stashed here I haven't even found yet."

Rachel brightened as Maggie shed her miscast but justified role. "I think Joe's a pretty good judge of character. He all but said Ace was scared. I can't imagine Ace being scared."

"Ace isn't scared," Maggie said. "I saw him pitch into four men one night and he didn't have a stitch of clothes on. He never hesitated. He kept after them until they cut him. You've seen the scar."

"I thought he got that in the plane crash."

"No, I mean the scar across his chest."

Rachel looked up at the ceiling. "I haven't seen that scar."

Maggie laughed. "If that's true, you are probably the only woman in Paris who hasn't."

Again, Rachel was relieved. "Still, I think there's more to this French Morocco business than we know. He spent time in Spanish Morocco, hasn't he? Didn't he just get back from there?"

"That's true. And then there is the matter of the experimental plane that he suddenly came up with." Maggie paused, sipped her drink, and continued. "You're probably right. He is in some kind of trouble. But don't you see it? Life with him is going from one bag of trouble to the next. He won't change. He still thinks he's a boy sitting out on the wing of an old Wright Model B. He's playing with fire and one of these days, he's going to get burned."

"When did you first know you were in love with him?" Rachel asked.

"What? Oh, I don't know. Maybe almost a minute after the first time I saw him. God, he was a sight! Do you really think he's in trouble?"

Chapter 25

London, 1937

It was fall and Maggie deeply regretted that she was in London and not in Philadelphia. Most of the months of the year, she really did not mind not being in Philadelphia. Paris and Rome were delightful most of the year. London was bearable, but the fall of the year belonged to the States and particularly to Pennsylvania.

She waited in her office for Rachel to return from a meeting with people she did not trust, but who sometimes provided useful information. Rachel had friends and family scattered about Europe, especially in Holland, who were good sources of information. Naturally, she was very careful to weigh the information. These were Jewish connections, and there was an agenda.

Maggie walked to the window. It was raining, a drizzling rain that did nothing to disperse the fog. A cup of hot tea would be useful, and Rachel would probably appreciate a cup when she returned. Maggie pressed a button on the telephone console and a young woman entered the room.

"Miss Pettigrew, arrange a goodly-sized pot of tea, cups, saucers, and some cookies, please."

"You mean biscuits, Mum?"

Maggie smiled. "Yes, biscuits. Of course."

Miss Pettigrew left the room and Maggie's mind turned to other matters. The meeting with Lady Langsdale this afternoon was a problem. It was a good problem, though. She was very influential and interested in the idea of women flying airplanes. She could be the key to establishing the foundation in Great Britain. That would make the O'Malley Women's Flying Corps an international foundation. There was this other matter that needed resolved, though, and time was critical.

There was a double knock and a third tap on the door. "Come in, Rachel."

Rachel entered the room. Her raincoat and umbrella had done their duty, but her hair was wet. "Be with you in a minute, boss."

Rachel crossed the room to a door that opened on a small bathroom. She stood in the door as she vigorously rubbed her hair with a towel.

She tossed the towel back in the bathroom and Maggie grimaced. Rachel's habits were not always up to a finishing school standard. Rachel sat down in a chair by Maggie's desk.

"Well?" asked Maggie.

"It's not good," Rachel replied as she ran her fingers through her curly short hair. "My friends say you should be very careful. Unless the Americans are in on the deal, don't do it."

Maggie frowned. "Just how much do your friends know about this deal?"

Rachel laughed, "Maggie, we must have the worst kept secret in town. They know that you have five 247D transports here in London as well as a sixth that you are using for your own purposes, and that we are talking to the Republican Spanish government about a lease on all five."

"How do they know?" Maggie asked.

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in," said Maggie.

Miss Pettigrew entered carrying a tray with a pot, cups and saucers. She put the tray down on Maggie's desk. "Will that be all, Mum?"

"Yes, thank you."

Miss Pettigrew left the room and Maggie poured two cups of tea. There was sugar and milk, but neither she nor Rachel bothered with such niceties.

Rachel took her cup, leaving the saucer on the tray. She held the cup in both hands and sipped carefully. She turned her head slightly, looking over her shoulder in the direction of the door.

"Maggie, what do you know about Miss Pettigrew?"

"What? Oh, come on, Rachel, surely you don't think?"

"Who knows anymore?" Rachel shrugged. "Some of my friends even think you are a spy for the Vatican!"

"The Vatican? That's ridiculous!"

"Well, look at the facts," Rachel said with a grin. "You've been to the Vatican, what? Two, maybe three times, and that's just the public visits." She paused and then with a fake fierceness, pointed a finger at Maggie and asked, "How many times have you made secret trips to Rome?"

"This year or last year?" Maggie asked with a mock innocence that complemented Rachel's fake prosecutorial ferocity. "But enough of the spy business. What do we do about this plane business?"

"A good question," Rachel replied. "You've got six 247Ds to unload. Boeing keeps coming out with better models. The DC2 is a winner. We need to get these five 247s off our books. What about the sixth one? Are you still going to keep it for our travels?"

"Oh, yes. That's our personal plane. We need it. We also need a double guarantee on the other five. We need the Americans to lease the planes from us. Then they can lend the planes to the Spanish government. I don't know how to factor in the Russians. In point of fact, I really don't want to factor in the Russians."

"We lease, and the Americans lend? That will never work."

"Why not?" Maggie asked.

"Because no one will insure the planes. Franco wins the war, if he hasn't already done so, and the fascists simply take the planes. No insurance company will ever cover such a possibility."

"In that case, we lose everything," Maggie said.

"There is a way out, though," Rachel said thoughtfully.

"Really, let's hear it."

"We do a different kind of insurance deal. As part of the lease price, the Americans must put up a bond covering our cost on the planes. That way, if the planes are lost, we recoup our investment plus the leasing price for at least one year."

"Rachel, you've come up with the solution. That could work. You've come a long way since you were a bright-eyed kid trying to sneak into Berlin to get a story."

"Thanks. What I really wish is that these five transports were five top-notch fighter planes. We should be leasing fighters. We could make a mint."

"Right now, it's the Germans who've got the best fighters, and I don't think they would sell any of them to us." Maggie sipped her tea and then realized that Miss

Pettigrew had forgotten the cookies. “No cookies. Miss Pettigrew must have too much on her mind. Okay, you get busy on writing up a new proposal for our prospective clients, whoever the hell they really are. I’ve got to get ready for a tea party with Lady Langsdale.”

“Oh, that sounds ever so exciting,” Rachel laughed. “I’m not fond of work, but I wouldn’t trade places with you today. Be prepared to be bored to tears. What about cookies?”

“Oh, I asked our secretary to bring cookies with the tea. She forgot the cookies. The meeting with Lady Langsdale probably won’t be very exciting, but her name and title will look good on the letterhead as one of the international directors of the foundation. Oh, on your way out, have Miss Pettigrew come in and take away this tray. The tray without cookies.”

Rachel shook her head, “Someday, Maggie, you will learn to speak English properly. It’s biscuits, not cookies.”

Maggie laughed. “I do pretty well for an Irish washerwoman.”

* * *

The country estate looked as if it had been lifted entirely from a period painting. Maggie drove her roadster up the long lane that led to a circular drive in front of the Georgian mansion. She got out of the car, restored her trim suit to its proper position, and carefully snapped on the cover over the two seat cockpit. The afternoon weather had been a bonus. There was some mist, but no rain.

She walked to the impressive door and rang. There was no waiting time. The door opened and she faced a man who was trying to create the impression that he was a butler, but Maggie knew immediately that he was not a butler and would never be a butler. He had the smell of a cop about him, but not a normal cop.

She started to say that she was Miss Mary Margaret O’Malley, when the make-believe butler cut her off.

“You are expected. Come this way, please.”

Maggie noted that the man had not made a request. It sounded to her like a command. She followed him down a hall and into a room that appeared to be a library. There was a table, and on the table was a very fancy tea service. There were two chairs pulled up to the table.

“Please take a chair,” the man said and then he turned and left the room.

Maggie sat down. Her mind was working in high gear as she tried to make sense out of this tea party that was shaping up to be something that she had not expected. She relaxed a little and smiled as she considered what Rachel would make of this matter.

“Good afternoon, Miss O’Malley.” It was a man’s voice and it came from the double door entry to the library which was behind Maggie.

She turned and saw a man walking into the room. He was tall, slender, gray-haired, and a thin mustache. Her eyes took in all this information while at the same time being focused on his left arm. Most of it was not there. His suit coat sleeve was neatly pinned up.

“May I join you?” the man asked.

“Of course,” Maggie responded, while at the same time wondering what was going to follow these tidy little formalities.

The man sat down, reached over with his one hand and arranged two cups on the table and poured tea. “You do not take milk, I believe.”

“Thank you. That’s quite correct. There are two questions. First how do you know about my tea drinking habits, and two, where is Lady Langsdale? And for good measure, a third, what the hell is going on?”

The man looked at her and smiled. “I’m sure this must seem a bit irregular. My name is Hastings, Major Hastings.”

“British army? I guessed as much.”

“Ah, I was indeed in the army during the war. But now I am in a different government service.”

Maggie stirred her tea and considered just how she was going to describe to Rachel this meeting with British intelligence.

“I’d guess that I’m not going to meet with Lady Langsdale,” she said softly.

“I apologize for the sleight of hand, but that was quite necessary,” Hastings said. “There are certain matters that we need to discuss, and privacy is most essential. You must understand that what we discuss here must never leave this room.”

“I get the picture,” Maggie responded. “Now, answer my other question. How did you know I don’t take milk with my tea?”

“It was a simple matter,” Hastings said. “A woman of your station who not only does not have a driver and a large motor car, but instead drives about in an open roadster is obviously not likely to take milk in her tea.”

Maggie took a sip of tea and then put the cup down. “Nice try, but no sale.”

“I do not understand.”

“Let me put it this way. When I get back, I will fire Miss Pettigrew on the spot.”

Hastings frowned. “We really wish you would refrain from sacking Miss Pettigrew.” He held out his hand palm up, and said, “Please, she’s really quite new to this business, and we have such high hopes for her. Besides, she is not the only, shall we say, dual employee in your close circle.”

“Another one?”

“Oh, yes. You have a Miss Green on your staff, and she is most certainly an agent.”

“For who, excuse me, for whom?”

“We are quite certain that she works for Zionist interests.”

Maggie laughed. “I hope so. She’s a lot better at this business than your Miss Pettigrew. You can relax. I won’t fire Miss Pettigrew. Perhaps I’ll make good use of her.”

“I say, you are quite surprising. My briefing on you was lacking in depth.

“I hope that’s a compliment,” Maggie said. “Now, let’s get down to business. What’s all this about?”

“Quite so.” Hastings got up from his chair and walked over to a cabinet and picked up a folder lying on top.

“You are a close friend of a man known as Ace Mathews?”

“You know very good and well that I am.”

Hastings sat down and opened the folder and pulled out a picture. It was a page from an old magazine.

“Is this the man you know as Ace Mathews?”

"Yes, it is. I have one of the numbered prints, the ones done in sepia. The print was taken from the photo. It was damned expensive."

Hastings looked at the picture. "He does appear to be a rather formidable man. He certainly has lived an interesting life."

"I always thought so."

Hastings put the picture down on the table. His face changed from a constant expression of English cheer mixed with the correct amount of proper reserve to one of almost sad resignation.

"I greatly fear, Miss O'Malley, that Mr. Mathews is at the end of his life."

Maggie sat up straight. "What the hell are you talking about? Do you know where Ace is?"

"Yes. He is in a prison in the south of Spain. He was shot down during an air battle with the Germans. He was to be shot until we intervened."

"Ace was flying for the Republicans? That is news. Can we save him?"

"That will depend on you," Hastings answered.

"Okay, what do you need? And, why am I so important in all this? Oh, and while we're at it, what's your interest in Ace?"

Hastings smiled. "We were quite sure of your reaction, but we had to be certain before proceeding. You are important because you are planning to sell five 247D's to the Spanish government."

"No," Maggie objected. "We don't sell, we lease. There's a big difference."

"With the bond arrangements you are planning, and wisely so, there is little difference between selling and leasing."

"Damn," Maggie muttered. "Thank you, Miss Pettigrew. I might not fire your spy, but she sure as hell is going to have a couple of black eyes."

"Oh, I trust not," Hastings said quickly. "Without her help in this matter, we might have had problems."

"So, just how do my 247's play in this game?"

"We can save your friend from a firing squad if you decide not to sell the planes to the Republicans, and instead, present them as a gift to Franco from an American admirer."

"You've got to be kidding me! The only thing I'd like to give Franco is the bottom of a good American iron skillet."

"Well put, I think. But the sentiment is not really appropriate to the situation. General Franco is going to be the next ruler of Spain. There are those in the government who believe it is important for Great Britain to offer a certain degree of friendship to the new leader."

"He hasn't won yet," Maggie said angrily.

"It is only a matter of time. Now here is what we propose. The five planes will be delivered to General Franco, and Mr. Mathews will be delivered to you."

"Me? I'm to go to Spain to pick him up?"

"That is correct. Now, the British government cannot be a visible party to this matter, of course. You will be paid for the five planes by a South African firm seeking to start an airline."

"That's good. I'll put my favorite Zionist to work on the purchase details. But why must I be the one to go to Spain? For that matter, just how safe will I be? You could end up with two hostages for ransom, you know."

Hastings smiled. "I must say that is not at all part of our plan. We have guarantees for your safety. You are a Catholic and known in Rome as a generous Catholic, much like your father, who, unfortunately, was also overly generous to certain elements in Ireland."

"That and a nickel will get you a cup of coffee."

"I beg your pardon, I do not understand."

Maggie smiled. "It means that your guarantees are not worth very much."

"Perhaps. But his Majesty's government would be most unhappy if there was an unfortunate incident. I do not believe General Franco would risk angering the British at this time."

"Did Franco's people stipulate that I was to be the pick-up service?"

"Yes. We tried to get them to accept someone else, one of our special pilots. Their response to that was to suggest that a special pilot might be a spy."

"Has the world gone spy crazy?" Maggie shook her head. "Better yet, has the world gone nuts?"

"We live in interesting times, I fear," Hastings replied. "There is another consideration."

"What's that?"

"Your friend, Mr. Mathews, is quite predictable in most cases, but he does have a way of unexpectedly taking rather direct action. Some years ago, certain Spanish interests attempted to kill him. Three men got in a motor car. The vehicle was wrecked, and only Mr. Mathews emerged alive. More recently, 1933, I believe, the French attempted to use him to bring off an assassination in Spanish Morocco. Now, we have reason to believe that Mr. Mathews was probably an unwilling participant. We were able to spoil the plan. The official targeted was a man we had high hopes for as an informant."

Maggie's brain lit up at this news. "Wait a minute; you say that Ace was forced to undertake the mission?"

"As I said, we have reason to believe..."

Maggie interrupted but she was talking aloud to herself and not Hastings. "That's why he gave Joe that letter! Joe was right about Ace being in trouble." She looked at Hastings. "We've got to get him out of that prison."

Hastings smiled. "You have added valuable confirmation to our surmise about Mr. Mathews. We believe we are correct in our assessment that he will not have much faith or trust in any special pilot agent we send to pick him up. We do not wish to lose a valuable pilot agent, and we very much desire Mr. Mathews to become a part of our organization."

"You want Ace to be a spy? Oh, I'd pay money to watch that show anytime."

"No, Miss O'Malley. We do not want him as a spy. Mr. Mathews is not one who would fit properly in any organization. We do not need another Reilly."

"For the record," Maggie said, "Reilly was not really an Irishman."

"Quite true, but Mr. Mathews and Reilly share certain qualities, with one significant difference. Reilly was very ambitious. Mr. Mathews appears to have very little ambition."

Maggie sighed, "I know. He does have a passion for flying, however. Maybe passion is a first cousin to ambition." She paused and then asked, "What are you going to do with him?"

Hastings hesitated before answering. "I suppose there is no harm in your knowing at least some of our hopes for Mr. Mathews."

"Oh, don't be so patronizing. You know damn good and well that you are not going to tell me anything that hasn't already been cleared."

Hastings nodded, "You are the one we should be recruiting." He paused again. "Mr. Mathews is the most experienced fighter pilot outside of Germany. We know that he shot down at least one Messerschmitt 109 as well as several Italian planes and perhaps two Henkel 57's."

Maggie whistled. "Ace has been a busy boy!"

"So it appears. We wish to know in great detail about what he experienced. Then there is the matter of his knowledge of France..."

Maggie interrupted. "I've got a few questions about his knowledge of France, myself."

Hastings smiled. "Mr. Mathews has his own network of friends throughout France and especially south of the Loire River. He knows places where a small plane can be landed and refueled. He has been able to baffle the best brains in the French police departments for years. We want to be able to take advantage of his knowledge, his network."

"I thought France and Great Britain were allies?"

Maggie questioned.

"We share certain interests," Hastings said while looking up at the ceiling. "There are aspects relating to the future which greatly interest certain members of the government and particularly some who are close to the government."

"Winston?"

Hastings shook his head. "I know you have met Mr. Churchill. He is only one of many interested people."

Maggie did not respond and Hastings waited patiently for her to speak. During the few moments of silence, she put the parts together.

"Ace is a pawn in all this, isn't he? The British government wants to curry favor with Franco, so you offer him some planes, but planes that will not be of any particular threat to Gibraltar. I'm a convenient pawn. You can use me to mask the deal from the British people who hate the idea of a fascist victory in Spain. And as a side benefit, you gain valuable information."

Again the official mask disappeared from Hastings' face. His countenance assumed a sad resignation. "We are all pawns, Miss O'Malley. We were pawns back in '16 on the Somme. I led a company of men over the trench, and my men were harvested by German machine guns. Three rows of men neatly slaughtered and lying like hay cut in a field."

"Is that when you lost your arm?"

"No, that came later. What was left of my company, myself and three men, were relieved by a reserve company. As we returned to the rear, we passed the gun line. One of the cannon exploded and killed the gun crew and two of my men. The third man was mangled, but survived. Later, when he had sufficiently recovered, he killed himself. I lost my arm. I was the lone survivor of the company."

Hastings' tale was told without a sign of bitterness which in turn made it more horrific for Maggie. His sad resignation was almost more than she could bear.

"I am sorry," she said softly, and at the same time, she thought her saying so was terribly inadequate. This thought was just as quickly replaced by another, which in turn caused her to consider that she was becoming as mad as the world about her.

"As I said, Miss O'Malley, we are all pawns."

Maggie looked at him, "Please accept my apologies for what I am about to say."

"Oh, I know what you are going to say. It is why I wish we could recruit you. You are about to ask if my story is true, or something I made up in order to influence your mind. Suffice it to say, it is both a true story, and I hope, a useful one. Perhaps I should order up some hot tea?"

"No, thanks." Maggie replied. "I am sorry about doubting your story. This has not been a pleasant afternoon, and certainly not the afternoon I had expected."

Hastings smiled at Maggie. "I wish we had met under different circumstances, and certainly, more pleasant circumstances."

Maggie sighed. It was not an affectation. She felt tired, emotionally drained, and she knew there was worse to come. She had a brief visual image in her mind. She pictured Ace being led before a firing squad, and then she had the eerie feeling that she had seen the image sometime in the past.

"Well, sir. How do we proceed? I assume you have a plan worked out?"

* * *

The rain fell through the dark night against the window in Maggie's office. There was only a desk light which made shadows across the wall. Maggie sat behind her desk and Rachel lounged in the chair next to the desk.

"And so, that is the story," Maggie said wearily as she raised her empty glass and looked at it.

"The flight to Gibraltar won't be so bad," Rachel said thoughtfully. "But from Gibraltar on, this is one very scary scenario."

"It's the only time I'll be alone," Maggie said. "Hastings and two others are going to ride out to Gibraltar with me. On the trip back, I'll have Ace with me." She smiled. "He can be co-pilot. He might prefer the firing squad to that. Do me a favor and make me one more drink."

"Coming up," Rachel said as she jumped up and added ice, rum, and Coke to Maggie's glass. "I've come to a decision."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, I'm going to make the run with you. When the Spanish check out your plane, I can keep an eye on it to make sure there's no funny business."

"Believe me, I'd give anything to have you along, but you can't go."

"Why not?"

"Hastings made it very clear that the Germans are present at this base. There's at least a squadron of German fighters there. It's no place for a good Jewish girl, even one who sneaks an occasional piece of bacon when she thinks no one's looking."

"That's not true, I mean about the bacon. When did you see me?"

"Never mind about that," Maggie said. She paused to take a drink and light a cigarette. "We professional spies never reveal our secrets. And, it's not just the bacon."

"What do you mean?"

"I thought about borrowing that thirty-two caliber pistol you've been carrying in your purse, but I decided I probably would not do very well shooting it out with Franco's army plus his German friends."

“How did you know about the pistol?” Rachel asked as she added another shot of rum to her drink.

“Can’t reveal that. It’s a professional trade secret. Are you any good with it?”

Rachel looked at Maggie. It was a look that carried a hint of both defiance and pride, the two being so entwined it would be impossible to separate them.

“I’m good. I’m damned good with it. I may be the fastest Jewish gunslinger on earth! Do you have a problem with that?”

Maggie laughed as she shook her head, no. “Simmer down, Deadeye. I may be carrying, what is the movie word? Oh, yes, I may be carrying a gat myself before long. There is just one more question, though.”

Rachel had relaxed when Maggie laughed, but there was something in Maggie’s tone of voice about one more question that caused Rachel to sit up straight.

“What’s that?”

“Did the Zionists make carrying a pistol a requirement when you joined the movement?”

“Hastings?” Rachel asked.

Maggie nodded. “He said I had two spies in my office, Miss Pettigrew and you.”

“So where does that leave us, Maggie?”

Maggie rubbed her eyes. “It’s too late for this, and I’m exhausted. I’ve got to live with Miss Pettigrew. What the hell, what’s one more spy?”

Chapter 26

Maggie checked her controls. She was five thousand feet over Spain and on a compass reading that would take her to the airbase controlled by Franco's forces. She cruised at an air speed of one hundred eighty miles an hour, a comfortable pace for the 247D. It had been a hard trip, and she was tired. On the way back, maybe Ace could take over and she could sleep.

How did it come to this, she asked herself? She was thirty-seven years old and off on a dangerous mission to rescue a man who had made a lifetime career of running away from her. Well, that was not quite true, but it was close enough.

Maggie thought about the life she should be living. She should have a big house in Philadelphia. There should be two children, a boy and a girl. She would raise them up and send them to the proper colleges, and they would marry the proper people, and then there would be grandchildren!

Oh, she remembered, there would have to be a husband. That was absolutely necessary. Would he be the kind of man who would still be trying to come to her aid when he had been half-beaten to death? Well, at least he wouldn't be the kind of man whom she would have to risk her life in order to save his.

"Damn. I didn't see them coming in!"

There were two Heinkel 57's off her starboard wing and slightly above her. Hastings had warned her that there would probably be an escort and not to panic. She pretended to ignore them, but increased her speed. She knew they were probably at their limit.

Maggie increased her speed to two hundred miles an hour and the older German fighters, among the first made when Hitler decided to break the Versailles Treaty, disappeared off her wing. They couldn't keep up. She knew she had an ample supply of fuel and since there was no cargo or passengers, she could easily make the airbase at this speed.

Hastings had also warned her that the Germans would probably make an effort to impress her with their air power. She was not impressed. Her transport was faster than their fighters.

With her escort trailing off behind her, she methodically reviewed the key points of Hastings' briefing. The airbase was about an hour's drive from the prison. She would be taken by car to the prison. There, she would meet a Colonel Alvarado, the prison commandant. She would give the colonel an envelope that contained a reasonable personal gratuity. She remembered her discussion with Hastings about the difference between a bribe and a gratuity. Then the necessary papers would be signed, and she would take possession of Ace. They would return to the airbase, take off, fly to Gibraltar, and then back to London. It all sounded so simple. Maybe it would be that simple.

Maggie's mental gymnastics were smashed when a sleek and deadly-appearing fighter roared past her. It had come up from behind, and she had not seen it. She glanced at her air speed indicator. It was steady on two hundred miles per hour.

"He passed me like I was standing still," she said aloud.

The fighter came around and flew back toward Maggie. She calculated that their closing speed had to be almost five hundred miles per hour, and before she could complete the calculation, the fighter climbed and flew over her.

This time she got a quick look and exclaimed, "That's got to be the German Me-109. My God, that is a fast and wicked piece of work!"

The German fighter came back again. This time he flew under Maggie's plane and off into the distance but not so far that she could not see the fighter bank, come around, and begin a run at her port side. The fighter came in as if the intent was to attack. At the last second, the fighter flew under the transport.

The German pilot was doing a good job of demonstrating what his plane could do. She realized that he was literally flying circles around her. She also considered that there was more than just a little intimidation involved. She desperately wanted to have a go at the German, although she had no idea what to do. If he wanted to play "chicken," then she could play too.

She got her chance. The Me-109 came around again with a head-on attack. Maggie kept on her course. The two planes closed, and it was only at the last possible second that the German dived under Maggie's plane.

After that near collision and pass, the German plane took up position on Maggie's starboard wing and the trip to the airbase was completed without further incident.

Maggie was met by a Major Rodriguez who was to be in charge of transporting her to the prison and back with Ace. He was a pleasant man, well-mannered and trim, a professional soldier. Maggie guessed that he would do his duty. She only wished that she knew what that duty entailed. While they waited for the car to be brought forward, Major Rodriguez asked if she needed refreshments after her trip, and she replied that a visit to a room of convenience was in order.

She was taken to a small building which contained the necessities. Major Rodriguez waited outside and at a respectful distance. When she emerged, she discovered that her escort had been joined by a German officer and a photographer.

Major Rodriguez introduced the officer. He was Captain Erich von Reinhardt, a member of the German Luftwaffe, now serving with the Condor Legion in Spain.

The captain was a poster boy, Maggie decided. He was tall, blonde, sharply chiseled chin, yes, a poster boy for the Aryan race that had become a German propaganda ideal.

The German captain bowed slightly and his heels coming together made a slight click as he acknowledged the introduction.

"It was an honor," he said, "To fly alongside such a fine American pilot."

The photographer circled the group, taking picture after picture.

"You have an interesting plane," Maggie said coolly,

"It is the finest fighter plane in the world," he responded. "The Luftwaffe is invincible. You, of course, the Americans, produce useful transports. I can say that the German and Spanish people are grateful for your gift of the transport planes."

Maggie wanted to slug him, but she kept her temper under control. She remembered Hastings saying that Ace had shot down one of the poster boys flying this hotshot fighter plane, and Ace had probably been flying a Russian piece of junk. Smile prettily and get this business over, she told herself.

She smiled prettily and the German bowed correctly, and Rodriguez provided lunch in a small officers' mess hall. Maggie sensed that Rodriguez shared her feelings concerning the German captain.

After lunch, she and Rodriguez climbed in the back seat of a car. In front were a driver and an armed guard. The car was preceded by a truck with a machine gun mounted on top of the cab. A squad of eight soldiers rode in the back. Another truck, with a squad of soldiers in back, brought up the rear.

Maggie, noting the strength of the escort, asked Rodriguez about the need for so many soldiers.

"You've almost won the war. Why do we need such a strong escort?"

He stared out the window and kept his silence. Maggie thought he was not going to answer her. Finally, he turned and replied.

"It is a civil war. Perhaps when it is over, it will just be starting. We will need decades to bring peace. The war has been bitter. The bitterness existed before the war, and it will continue after the war."

"I am Irish," Maggie said.

Rodriguez interrupted her. "I know. You come from a people who know much about bitterness. How is it that you are cooperating with the British?"

Maggie found herself drawn to this Spanish officer. He was obviously an intelligent man. How could he follow a brutal leader like Franco?

"You ask why I am helping the British, and I'm afraid my answer is not a simple one. First of all, you are going to shoot a man who is a good friend of mine. For that reason alone, I would help the British. I want to save his life."

"I know this man," Rodriguez said. "Why is he in Spain? He has shot down at least six of our airplanes. He would not have to face a firing squad if he had stayed home."

"That is probably true," Maggie replied. "But tell me. The planes my friend shot down, were they flown by Spanish pilots?"

"We have pilots," Rodriguez responded defensively.

"But isn't it true that the planes my friend shot down were piloted by Germans or Italians?"

"That is possible. The German pilot you met, he is new here. He has never flown in combat."

"Why is it wrong for my friend to fly in this war, and right for the Germans and Italians?"

Rodriguez laughed. "You are very clever. I am honored by your presence. Do not worry about your friend. He obviously has friends such as yourself who will save him."

Maggie was inclined to carry the discussion forward, but decided that it would not be wise to be too clever. She closed the discussion with one simple question.

"Tell me, what are you going to do with the Germans and the Italians after you have won the war?"

"A good question," Rodriguez said with a deep frown that exposed wrinkles across his forehead. "We will have to persuade them to return to their own countries. We needed their help, but they are very arrogant."

Maggie smiled at Rodriguez and said, "We are in agreement on your last point."

"*Bueno*," he muttered softly.

They rode in silence for a good quarter of an hour. Despite all her concerns, Maggie was having trouble keeping awake. The rigors of the long flight, the emotional concerns over Ace, and the dangers that seemed to surround her, all contributed to her weariness.

She was startled awake when Rodriguez spoke. He saw that she had been almost asleep and instantly apologized for waking her.

"It's okay," she reassured him. "I must have drifted off to sleep. Are we there, yet?"

"Soon," Rodriguez answered. "I had mentioned that perhaps we will meet again in London before I saw you were asleep."

"You are coming to London?"

"Yes, I hope so. After the war, I seek to be assigned as a military attaché in the Spanish Embassy. I have worked very hard on my English. Do you think it is good enough?"

"You speak very good English, Major. In fact, you speak better than many of my American friends. I have met the man who is the present military attaché in your embassy in London. Senor de la Reyes, right?"

"Yes. But after the war, he will be recalled. He has betrayed the people."

"So, if he returns to Spain, he will be shot?"

"That is very possible."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Maggie said. "Maybe he will seek asylum in Great Britain. He is a charming man, and the British are always fond of charming men."

"I shall practice being charming as well as my English," Rodriguez said. He remained silent the rest of the trip, and Maggie was quite certain that she had been much too clever for her own good.

* * *

Maggie was surprised by the appearance of the prison. It was obviously a large estate, a ranch similar to the pictures she had seen of the southwestern United States. There was a low wall and a large enclosure in front of the main building. Surprisingly, there were no high barbed wire fences or guard towers. The entrance to the walled enclosure was guarded by two soldiers whose leisurely stances did not indicate any feeling of threat or fear.

"This is not what I had expected," Maggie said.

"Do not allow appearances to deceive you," Rodriguez replied grimly. "It is a prison. None who enter ever leave alive." He paused and then added, "Your friend may be the first to ever leave alive. If he lives, it will be because you have paid a very high price. It may be more than you are willing to pay."

Maggie caught the word "may," and thought the reference to a high price was almost a veiled threat. Did the major know about the money in the envelope that was to be given to the colonel?

Inside the main building, Maggie and Major Rodriguez were led to a room. The orderly who escorted them spoke rapidly in Spanish to the major and then left.

"You are to wait here for your meeting with Colonel Alvarado. I must see to other matters. When this is over, I will escort you back to the airbase. Please accept my best wishes for your success."

“Thank you,” Maggie replied. She nodded as the major made a slight bow and left the room. She looked about her. The room was being used as an office. It was of a reasonable size, easily holding a desk, two chairs in front of the desk, and a cabinet on the far wall. She was curious about the cabinet. If it was a liquor cabinet, she could certainly use a drink. The ceiling was low and the tiled floor was partially covered by an elderly carpet which was well-worn in certain places and badly faded in others.

There was a large open window in the wall behind the desk and chairs. She could see that the window opened onto a courtyard. She crossed the room and rested her hands on the warm window sill. The courtyard was formed by a wall nearly eight feet high that came off both ends of the main building, and then another wall of similar height that completed the rectangle. There was a double door gate at one end of the courtyard and a single door at the other end. The long wall facing her had several small windows that were barred. There was a long part of the wall that was solid. The enclosed area had to be at least forty by sixty feet, all of which was paved with smooth stones that were a dusty yellow in color. She realized that she was looking down at the courtyard. She remembered that there had been two sets of stairs, each of only six steps in the hall leading to this room.

Just as she was turning away from the window, there was a commotion outside the wall. She watched as the two gates were opened and a file of soldiers, eight in number, entered. Another soldier was barking orders in Spanish. The file moved into the courtyard and formed a line. Maggie had a sense of *déjà vu*. Had she witnessed this before?

Other soldiers began gathering in the courtyard, but none were along the wall opposite the window. Then an officer entered through the double gates. He was closely followed by a soldier carrying a white towel. The officer was by far the most polished member of Franco’s army Maggie had seen since she had arrived. He wore tan riding breeches which were tucked into highly polished boots. The boots gleamed in the sunlight. He wore a tailored shirt with a yellow ascot about his neck and tucked down into his shirt. A polished brown belt was around his waist, and there was a leather holster attached to the belt. Like the boots and the belt, the leather holster was polished.

He reached into a pants pocket and pulled out a shiny cigarette case and a lighter. Maggie could not really see the lighter, but she did catch a glint of gold as the sunlight briefly played upon it. Maggie knew that it had to be Ace’s lighter, the gold lighter given to him years ago by the French countess.

“Holy mother of God, they are going to shoot Ace!” she cried aloud. She staggered back as the memory of the recurring dream crashed through her brain, confusing reality and dream, both becoming a swirling montage. Now she knew why she could never remember the ending of the dream. It was Ace being shot, and it was so horrifying to her that she blocked it from her memory.

She wanted to move back from the window. She wanted to run screaming from the room, but she did neither. She stayed at the window and watched and waited. A growing sickness in her stomach and a weakness in her legs caused her to clutch the window sill with both hands.

Two guards came through the gates. Between them was a man. The guards helped to steady the man. Maggie gasped. It was not Ace! It was a young man, not much more than a boy, thin, dirty clothes, hair unkempt, and his face showed signs of a beating. The two guards escorted the prisoner to the back wall of the courtyard.

The prisoner had seemed dazed when he was brought into the courtyard, but now he regained his senses. He shrugged loose from the guards. He stood alone and faced the file of men watching him. There was almost a look of contempt on his young face. The guards moved toward him but stopped. The nattily dressed officer with the shiny boots had given a hand signal. They moved back.

The officer strode up to the prisoner, pulled out a cigarette, and offered it to the young man, who laughed and then took the cigarette. The officer used Ace's lighter to light the cigarette and then stepped several paces to the side and waited.

Maggie watched as the young man took his time smoking the cigarette. She was struck by how completely composed he appeared to be. He showed no sign of fear. There was no trembling, no tears. She thought that this young man was the bravest human she had ever seen, but the fact that he was prepared to die with dignity, did not keep the tears from coming to her eyes. Conflicting with these emotions was the fact that the person who was to die was not Ace. He was not going to be shot as in her dream. Then she uncovered the thought that maybe this was just the first of more executions to come on this day, and that by sundown the dusty yellow brick of the courtyard would be splattered with blood.

The young man took one last pull on the cigarette, exhaled a stream of smoke, looked up at the sky for a long moment, and then flicked the cigarette butt away. Drawing himself up as best he could into a pose of formal attention, he faced the firing squad.

The members of the firing squad ignored him, chatting quietly.

The young man stared at them and then in a surprisingly strong Cockney voice, he spoke.

"Well, come on."

The word 'come' was stretched and Maggie guessed that the young man was probably one of the volunteers from a British trade union who had come to Spain to fight against the fascists.

The officer shouted commands and the firing squad came to order. The officer took his place to one side and the deadly commands came quickly.

There was a ragged volley of fire from the squad, and the young Englishman staggered under the impact of the bullets. He slowly sank to his knees. He stared in disbelief at the firing squad. The members of the squad stood with their rifles lowered.

"You bloody bastards! You mucked it up!" His voice was weak, but Maggie could hear him clearly.

The officer moved to the side of the young man and unsnapped his holster and drew out a pistol. The young Englishman turned his head. He appeared to realize what was coming, but before he could speak, the officer fired, the muzzle of the pistol only inches from the head of the young Englishman. The bullet smashed into his head and sent his body sprawling to the opposite side. The officer returned the pistol to its holster.

There were several spots of blood on the shiny boots. The orderly with the towel hurried forward and knelt down and carefully wiped the boots clean. As the orderly cleaned the boots, the officer calmly pulled out a cigarette and lit it with the lighter, making certain that anyone watching from the window would see the lighter.

Maggie stepped back from the window. Her eyes were filled with tears. Her hand found the back of a chair and she sat down. The fear and horror that she had felt while witnessing the execution was fading away and being replaced by a rising and burning

anger. She knew what she had seen and what it meant. This was a new world being born. It was a new world being born in courtyards with dusty yellow brick paving and bloody firing squads. Worse yet, she was a part of this new world, a world that was replacing the idiocy of religion and the romanticism of the bloody middle ages with an industrialized horror that could kill millions quickly instead of thousands slowly. She was a part of this new world. Ace, poor Ace! He was the last of the knights, still going out, or in his case, up, to do single combat.

"We are both damned and doomed," she muttered aloud as she crossed herself. She knew that she must save the last knight and that she must fight against this new world, even if it meant losing everything, even her life. She said a little prayer silently, the gist of which was for God to give her the same courage when her time came as the young English boy had shown.

The door behind her opened and in walked the officer in the shiny boots who had commanded the execution. Behind him came another man dressed in civilian clothes, sandals, pants, shirt, and a vest. The vest was unbuttoned. He spoke in English.

"I present to you, Senorita O'Malley, Colonel Miguel Alvarado, commandant of this base." He bowed slightly toward Colonel Alvarado. "I am to interpret for you, madam. I shall do so faithfully."

Colonel Alvarado sat in the chair behind the desk. He stared briefly at Maggie and then spoke quickly in Spanish to the interpreter, who then turned to Maggie.

"The colonel said he had no idea that you were in this room. He apologizes for any discomfort you might have suffered because of events out in the courtyard. You were supposed to be taken to a room where you could refresh yourself." He paused, glanced at the colonel who nodded, and then continued. "And, of course, change out of your flying clothes into something more suitable and becoming for a woman of your undoubted beauty."

Maggie quickly replied. "I do not need to refresh myself. No room is necessary. These clothes are the only clothes I have with me because I was under the impression that I would be leaving shortly after arriving. Please produce Mr. Mathews so I can begin my return to Gibraltar."

The interpreter hesitated, shrugged slightly, and then translated Maggie's words into Spanish. The colonel frowned. He responded and the translator quickly turned the words into English.

"The colonel regrets that there are certain matters yet to be clarified. There is always the paperwork. It will be necessary for you to stay the night. Proper clothes will be found for you so you will be correctly attired for dinner."

Maggie smiled and replied, "Like hell!" She looked at the translator and said softly, "Don't bother translating that. He gets the idea." She then reached inside her coveralls and pulled out the envelope that had been given to her by Hastings. She handed it to the translator. "Give this to the colonel."

The translator handed the envelope to the colonel who quickly opened it, fingered through the contents, and then put the envelope in a desk drawer. He looked at Maggie as he spoke.

"The colonel thanks you for your contribution to the poor people of Spain. He also thanks you for your gift of the five airplanes. But, unfortunately, it will be impossible for you to leave until tomorrow."

Maggie reached back into her coveralls and found a pack of cigarettes in an inside pocket. She took out one cigarette and returned the pack.

“Light, anyone?”

The translator shook his head, but even if he had been equipped with matches or a lighter, he would have been too slow. Colonel Alvarado was up and around the desk, lighter in hand, and in an instant at her side. Maggie saw that it was indeed Ace’s lighter. She drew deeply upon the cigarette as the colonel flicked the lighter. The deep intake of smoke steadied her. She reached out and took the lighter from the colonel’s hand.

“What a beautiful lighter. I remember it very well. It was kind of you to save it for Mr. Mathews. I shall return it to him after he is freed, and I will be sure to tell him how considerate you were in saving his lighter.” She then tucked it in the inside pocket with the pack of cigarettes.

The colonel quickly looked over to the translator who struggled with the translation. It was hard to convey in words the meanings that were barely masked. When he finished translating, the colonel stepped back. There was a flash of anger in his eyes. He recovered quickly, smiled, and then returned to his seat. He spoke briefly to the translator and then stood.

“The colonel says dinner is at eight. This interview is closed.”

The convoy stood ready for the trip. There was the truck in front with the squad of soldiers in the back, the car, and the truck with another squad following. Maggie and Major Rodriguez stood by the car. He had greeted her curtly, saying only that she must have paid the price. It was a high price to pay. She remembered the English boy and how she had vowed to fight, but what could she do? To fight could very easily mean sacrificing Ace. That was the success of evil, she thought. That was why evil always triumphed. When the new day dawned, Maggie was awake, and the first thought that entered her mind was that we can sacrifice ourselves, but not our loved ones. The evil people have no loved ones, or at least none that they could not easily discard. It would not even be a sacrifice.

Two guards escorted Ace through the opening to the front enclosure. He was dirty and his hair was uncombed. The scar on his face had friends, but these were only bruises.

“Maggie! What are you doing here?”

“I’ve come to take you home, Ace.”

He started to rush to her, to take her in his arms, and then stopped. That could wait for later. He quickly looked around. “Is this our car?”

“Right,” answered Maggie. “We’re about an hour away from the airbase. I’ve got a 247 there. We’ll be over Gibraltar in no time.”

Ace looked around again, noting the escort, and then back to Maggie. “I’m really going to walk away from this place?”

He seemed to stagger, and then regained his composure. “When they brought me out of the cell, I thought it was my turn to face the firing squad. I thought today was my day to die.”

Maggie quickly wiped her hand across her eyes.

“Let’s go,” she said. “I want to get out of here as fast as possible.”

She motioned to Major Rodriguez who nodded in agreement, and they moved to the car. Maggie and Ace sat in back, the major and the driver in front. The four occupants in the car remained silent. The driver pushed the horn button several times, and the convoy moved off on the journey to the airbase.

Ace reached over and touched Maggie’s hand. As he did so, he brushed the sleeve on her coveralls and saw a large bruise. “That’s some bruise,” he murmured.

Maggie pulled the sleeve down. She looked out her window, and replied in a soft voice, “It’s nothing. I banged it on the plane.” She gently squeezed his hand.

The trip back to the airbase was made in silence; the four persons in the car remained within the boundaries of their minds. At the airbase, there were no formalities. The German captain and his photographer were absent.

The plane was ready, and they wasted no time in getting on board.

Major Rodriguez said to Maggie, “Do not let the bitterness make you blind to the good there is in Spain. Maybe we will meet again in London when times are better.”

Maggie nodded and then followed Ace up the steps. When they reached the cockpit, Ace started to move into the pilot’s seat on the left, stopped, turned and smiled at

Maggie, and then moved to the co-pilot's seat. Maggie settled into the pilot's seat and began the sequence for takeoff. After a few minutes to warm up the engines, Maggie guided the plane out onto the air strip and began her takeoff. When the wheels left the ground and they were climbing to altitude, Ace began breathing easy.

"Were you worried about my ability to put this bird up in the air?" Maggie asked. She laughed. "I'm a damned good pilot."

"No. It wasn't you. I keep waiting for some trick, something to happen. I really thought this was the end of the line for me. I've got the shakes, I think. No one ever walks away from that place."

"Except you."

"Maybe," he agreed, "But we aren't safe yet."

Maggie shook her head. "They had their chance, but I don't think they would try anything now. Besides, if they killed me, there would be a stiff price to pay. They'd have a hard time explaining it."

"No, that's not the way it works, Maggie." Ace's voice was both sharp and bitter, and it surprised her.

"What do you mean 'The way it works'?"

"It's war. You are in a war zone. You are a Catholic, probably ties to Rome. They would deny everything and claim that the Republicans or the Communists shot you down. Case closed."

Maggie thought about it before answering. "I see what you mean," she said slowly. "Ace, I think you have grown up! You are not the same single-minded air boy I knew years ago. Which reminds me, I have a question."

"Ask away."

"There was a night back in thirty-three, the night you stood me up, remember?"

"That's reaching back a long way." Ace stared out the window on his side.

"Well?"

"I had to fly a mission for French intelligence. It was a dirty piece of business, but I had no choice. If I didn't go, then some of my friends were going to get hurt."

"French intelligence people sound like Chicago gangsters."

"They are worse," Ace said. "They don't always kill. Sometimes they like to ruin people. All those outfits are that way."

"Joe, Cassie, who else were targets?" Maggie asked.

"You were a target. They made it clear that they would throw a monkey wrench into your plans for making a deal to lease planes in France. Cassie is a Communist. Make no mistake about it, if the Germans ever come again, some of those French intelligence people will be out in the streets welcoming them."

Maggie nodded. His explanation filled in the blanks that Hastings had left open. "That was the mission to Spanish Morocco. You could have dropped me a postcard, you know. Where did you go after that mess?"

"I did some more work for the French. Then in '36, I was contacted by some people who were connected to the diamond business."

"You got back into the diamond smuggling?"

"No. This time it was people smuggling. I made several flights into Germany. I could only carry one Jew at a time. On my last flight, I brought out a young woman and her

baby. Her husband had been killed by the Brown Shirts. Her parents stayed behind. I could have squeezed in the mother, but she would not leave her husband.”

“Is it really that bad in Germany?” Maggie asked. “Rachel gets almost hysterical on the subject. Were you able to get the parents out?”

“No. I was told to forget it. They had been arrested and put in a concentration camp. Then one night, I had my plane in a hangar for some overhaul work. The hangar blew up and my plane was in pieces.”

“What? Who did it?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. Maybe the Germans, maybe the French fascists. It’s six of one and a half-dozen of the other.”

“Then what?”

“I drifted down to Spain. The money wasn’t very good, but I was fighting the people I most like to fight.”

“The Germans?”

“Yeah, among others. Sometimes it seems like I have spent too much of my life fighting them.”

“Do any good?”

“Not bad. A couple of Italian crates, a couple of old Heinkels, and a Me-109.”

“I’ve seen the German fighter in the air,” Maggie said. “It’s a very impressive plane.”

“No one’s got any fighters that can go up against it,” Ace agreed. “The Germans are not playing around. They’re going to come again sure as hell.”

“I think Hastings believes that, too.”

“Who’s Hastings?”

“He’s the one who really sprung you from that prison. I’m just the pick-up and delivery person. You’ll meet him when we get to Gibraltar.”

“Well, I owe a big debt to who ever saved me from the firing squad. As far as I’m concerned, it was you.”

“I’m afraid, Ace, that Hastings has a price in mind.”

“What do you mean, a price?”

“The British set up the whole thing. They bought five planes from me, though I was the donor of record. They want you to go to work for them.”

“The spy business again? Maggie, that’s not a very good deal. I got trapped into that with the French. Now the British? I don’t know. Maybe the prison was a better deal after all.”

Maggie put the plane into a steep bank. Ace yelled, “What are you doing?”

“I’m taking you back.”

“You wouldn’t!”

Maggie continued her turn.

“Okay, Okay, I’ll talk to them.”

Maggie brought the plane around until it was headed toward Gibraltar.

“Damned if I don’t think you would have taken me back.”

Maggie smiled. “I hoped you would change your mind before we got back to the airbase.”

Ace stared out the window, his eyes scanning the sky. “I’ll probably end up with a pension, at least.”

"Somehow, I doubt that," Maggie said. "It's hard to see you staying one place long enough to get a pension."

Ace shook his head. "It's like Virgil used to say. It's hard to stay in one place when you've got a following."

"A following?"

"Yeah, a posse chasing you to the county line."

"Do you ever hear from Virgil and June?" Maggie asked.

"No. I haven't seen them or heard from them since that time when we stayed there. What was it? Two nights?"

"It was two nights," Maggie replied. "I'll never forget it. I wanted to ask June about a dream I had, but I never got the chance."

Ace laughed. "That's because she was telling you wild stories about me and Virgil."

"True. They were wild stories, but I don't think June ever lied about anything."

"Virgil was lucky to get her," Ace said. "Joe was lucky to get Elaine. I was really lucky to get you."

The nose of the plane dipped and then recovered. "What?" Maggie exclaimed.

"Yeah. It might seem a little strange, but I've had you for a long time now. I'll always have you to the day I die, which in my case might be a little overdue."

"Ace, you never cease to amaze me. What do you mean, you have me? Over the past twelve years, we haven't been together three months, if that long. What kind of relationship is that?"

"I guess it's not so much when stacked up against Joe and Virgil," Ace answered.

"But maybe it's the only kind someone like me can ever have. Look at it this way; maybe you're lucky, too. Maybe you're lucky we didn't get married. Look where you are now. Look at all you've done. If you'd married one of your daddy's lawyers back in the twenties, where would you be now?"

"That's a good question. I wish I knew the answer to that. Sometimes I really wish I had a nice home, a kid, maybe two kids, a boy and a girl. That would be something good. But now I don't know. I don't know if I would want to have a kid, not the way the world is going."

"You said you were going to ask June about a dream you had. Was I in it?" Ace asked as he studied the sky outside the window.

"It was a strange dream. I had it several times over the years. Basically, there was a row of soldiers with rifles and military music, drums, that sort of thing. Then in later versions of the dream, the soldiers turned out to be a firing squad, but when I woke up, usually very upset, I could not remember who they were going to shoot."

"Maggie, what did you see back there at the prison?" Ace asked softly.

"I saw them shoot a young kid, British. My God, he couldn't have been more than seventeen. Worse yet, they bungled the execution and Alvarado shot him in the head with his pistol. It was horrible. It was then that I realized the person in my dream who was being shot was you! I couldn't stand the thought of it, so I blocked it out of my memory."

"I'm sorry, Maggie. I'm sorry you had to see that. The kid you saw shot was Jimmy Cottle. He was a damned tough kid. They'd beat him up, and he'd spit in their eyes."

"It was terrible," Maggie said with a shudder. "I want to get out of this God-forsaken place. These people are not human."

"They aren't all bad," Ace said.

“At least you were on the side of the angels in this business.”

“Don’t be too sure about that,” Ace replied. “One side is as bad as the other. Both sides make a practice of using firing squads. When it’s all over, it may be that more people on both sides were murdered by firing squads than died in the fighting.”

“Ace, you’re getting old, and you still haven’t learned to hate, have you? How can you do so much fighting over all these years and not have at least a little respectable hate in you?”

“Never thought much about it, I guess.”

“No, probably not. Oh, before I forget it, I’ve got a little present for you.” She reached in her inside pocket and pulled out the lighter and handed it to him. “Here’s your good luck charm.”

“I’ll be damned! How did you get that? I figured it was gone forever. The guards took everything. I never thought I’d see it again. Hell, for that matter, I really didn’t think I’d have much use for it.”

“You would have seen it one more time,” Maggie said bitterly. “You know, the last cigarette business.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. Thanks for the lighter. Thanks for saving my life so I can use my lighter. I’ll never forget what you’ve done for me.”

Maggie laughed. “You going to buy me a bar like you did Joe?”

“That’s not a bad idea. We could call it Maggie’s Irish Bar. I could learn to be a bartender.”

“Only if the bar had wings, Ace.” He did not reply, and they flew on in silence until Maggie spoke again. “You think we could be like Joe and Elaine?”

“Probably not,” Ace replied. “But, I’ve always envied them. They really have something. They are together. I’ve never figured it out.”

“What’s to figure?” Maggie asked. “They love each other. The bar doesn’t keep them together any more than the farm kept June and Virgil together. The bar and the farm, they were just a means to live.”

“That’s not what I meant. I’ve always loved you, Maggie. And God knows you must love me. You risked your life springing me out of that prison. We have flying which is like a bar or a farm, but somehow, we aren’t Joe and Elaine or June and Virgil.”

“You sound like you want us to get together. Be careful about that. I’m thirty-seven years old, Ace. I don’t have a lot of time left.”

“What’re you talking about? You are still a good looking woman.”

Maggie shook her head. “You don’t understand. You talk about Joe and Elaine and June and Virgil. What about Angelique and James Longstreet? We add Ace and Maggie into the picture, and what is missing?”

“A kid? Maggie, I’d make a lousy father. I don’t know anything about kids.”

“You were a kid, once, I think.”

“Yeah, I remember that, but most of the time, I try not to think about it. I never knew my father or mother.” Ace turned to the window and studied the sky.

“Besides,” he continued while still peering out at the sky, “I’m trapped in this business with the British. I know what that can mean.”

“For now, that’s true. But, I’m sure we could spring you, as you say, from this matter. Once we were back in the States, there wouldn’t be a problem, unless you drifted into something.”

“Maggie, it won’t work, will it?”

Maggie did not reply. She knew that he was right. It could not work. She started to blame him, his love of flying, his refusal to see that the world was changing, that he would never change, and then she considered that she was as much to blame as he was for this situation. She could never change, either.

“No, Ace. It won’t work. But, I can’t let go.” She looked at him and smiled, “I guess our romance is going to be one of those things where we keep popping up in each other’s life, a kind of occasional romance.”

“Maggie?”

“Yes, Ace?”

“How many combat missions have you flown?”

“What? That’s a silly question. Why are you asking me that?”

“Because there’s a plane coming down hard out of the sun.”

Maggie’s hands pulled back from the controls. “It’s all yours.”

Ace took control and put the plane into a steep dive with a whip-like turn coming out of the dive.

“Ace, the wings! You’ll tear the wings off!”

The plane pulled out of the turn and then with all the power Ace could coax out of it, climbed. The maneuver was barely completed before machine gun bullets ripped through the side of the plane just behind Ace and Maggie.

There were clouds ahead. “If we can make it to those clouds,” Ace said, “We’ve got a chance.”

Chapter 28

Paris, 1939

Angelique moved toward the small stage Poppa had built in the corner near the bar. The room was crowded with people. As she moved from the kitchen and around the bar, she could see that the large opening into the other store was also crowded. The expansion had frightened Momma, but both Poppa and Cassie had thought it was necessary, and they had been correct. She could see that people outside at the tables on the sidewalk were moving to stand inside so they could hear her sing.

It had only been two weeks now since the first night she had started singing regularly. School was over for good. Now was the beginning of what she knew in her heart was going to be a life as a singer. She believed that she would be a star, a great singer, and she had known that ever since she was a child. As long as she lived, she would live to sing.

Angelique climbed up the two steps to the small stage and when she reached the top, the applause began. It was enthusiastic. The people were excited, and she felt their warmth. She smiled, and then nodded to the accordion player seated by the stage.

He began to play, and she sang, her rich, strong voice bringing to life a song about love, evocative, but sad, and even sometimes a bit mocking in a style that belied her years. When she finished the song, the crowd applauded. She could see Poppa and Momma and Cassie standing over by the kitchen entry. Poppa had his arm around Momma. She knew they were proud of her, but she also knew that someday, maybe even soon, she would have to move on to larger clubs. Paris was full of opportunity. When she thought about that time to come, she felt sad. Her parents loved her dearly, and she knew it. She knew it even when Momma had objected to the dark lines she had penciled in to extend the tips of her large, oval eyes that some people had called “Egyptian eyes.” Momma had taken a rag to the markings the first time, but she soon accepted the inevitable.

The thought of leaving someday, to sing somewhere else, crossed her mind for a moment and then was gone, but the feeling of sadness lingered and helped make the next song, a sad song about lost love even more moving. She had become adept at keying her emotions, playing them against the music so that to the listeners, she seemed to be somehow inside the song, the words, the emotions, the music all working as one instrument that played upon the hearts and souls of the listeners.

Poppa had hoped that she would be a radio singing star, but two attempts to sing for the microphone convinced her that radio was not for her. She was not a Piaf and she knew it. She was beautiful, and she knew that also. Her voice, full and throaty, but clear and sensuous, needed to be melded in with her long and abundant black hair, her face, full and oval like her mother’s, and her lithe figure. This night, she was clothed in a long soft yellow, clinging sheathe, one of three made for her by a Vietnamese woman, who, like Joe, had not returned to her homeland after the war. Momma had raised both eyebrows when she saw the dresses. Poppa said, as he often did, “Well, I don’t know,” which was what he usually said when he really did not approve, but did not want to say no to his Angel. Cassie’s response had been to mutter something about capitalist

exploitation, but none of them could hold out against her simple statement, "I need these dresses." She sometimes wondered if Poppa could ever say no.

The applause that followed the song was loud. The crowd was warming up, and so was she. The lighting was simply one small flood that covered her but nothing else. It was warm, even if it was just one light, and the room was crowded, and it was warm outside. The light film of perspiration beginning to form on her face made her satiny, light brown skin glisten, and the effect was enhanced by the light reflected up on her face from the yellow sheathe.

Angelique was a confident singer. She knew the songs she should sing, and this night she felt just as confident as she had the first time she sang in the bar when she was a child.

Every time she performed, the results were good. There was just one problem. The man she most wanted to hear her sing was not present. Each night she performed, she hoped that this would be the night when he appeared, saw her, and realized that she was a woman.

It was during the next song that a man came in the door, easing himself through the people standing there. As she sang she watched him move toward the kitchen. He wore a strange uniform, but even so, she felt a rising excitement in her heart. Then when she saw Poppa and Momma react, hugging the man, she knew that at last, he had come. Any doubt was removed when, for a brief moment, she was able to catch a glimpse of his face.

She broke off her song, smiled, and said in English, "Hello, Ace," and then, in French, resumed the song.

When she finished the song and the applause died down, she leaned over to the accordion player and told him that there was a change in the selection of songs she had picked for the set. He nodded and began playing the introduction.

"This song is for you, Ace."

Her voice carried out over the music, and some of the people in the audience turned to stare in the direction she was gazing.

It was a love song, and she sang it with all the feeling she could pull from her heart. The listeners quickly picked up on what was happening. This was a matter of the heart. This was an intensely personal moment which they had been invited to share.

When she finished the song, the people seated at tables, rose and clapped wildly. Angelique bowed several times, then raised her hand, the gesture quickly bringing quiet.

She spoke to them. She told them that under the circumstances, which they could surely understand, and she smiled again, that she must end this evening's performance early. There was a man, and life was ever so short, and the night had just begun. She shrugged and the audience laughed. It was, after all, Paris.

Some of the people drifted out into the street.

Joe moved quickly to secure a table. A waiter cleared the table, and another brought a bottle of wine and fresh glasses. Joe, Elaine, and Ace sat down at the table, and the waiter opened the bottle and poured.

Angelique stepped down off the stage and started walking towards the table. When she got to the entrance to the kitchen she stopped. A shadow of doubt passed across her face. Angelique turned and hurried through the entrance to the kitchen and then fled up the stairs to the apartment.

Cassie passed by the table on her way back to the kitchen. She smiled at Ace and greeted him by saying "Comrade," as she passed.

"What was that about?" Ace asked. "I always thought Cassie didn't like me, and that's putting it politely."

Joe raised his glass to Ace and Elaine joined him. "Man, it's good to see you again. As for Cassie, well, you've got all my women in love with you now. Cassie thinks you are a hero."

"A hero?"

Elaine nodded. "You fought on her side in Spain."

"No, Momma, Ace always fights on his side," Joe said with a laugh. He turned from Elaine and said to Ace, "But Cassie believes, and that makes you a hero."

"Well, I guess I've been called worse," Ace said. "What's going on here? You've expanded, you've got waiters. Business looks really good. And who in the world is that singer? How does she know me? I was sure I heard her say hello to me."

"You didn't recognize her? That's Angel."

"Angelique," Elaine corrected.

"No! Really? The last time I saw her, she was what? Twelve years old?"

"Six years ago. We haven't seen you for six years. The last time we heard anything about you was from Maggie. She told us about you getting sprung from that Spanish prison. She saved your life."

"You should have married her, Ace," Elaine said.

"Or at least buy her a bar," Joe added.

"We talked about both, but neither idea seemed to work out. Maggie and I are still friends. Maybe we are still in love with each other. But we just never seemed to get to the finish line."

"What's with the uniform?" Joe asked. "Are you in some kind of army again?"

"Kind of," Ace replied. "I'm a major in the Canadian Royal Air Force. Oh, and by the way, my name is Archibald McFetters."

Joe exploded in laughter. "Archibald?"

"Actually, I'm a poorly paid no-ranker with British intelligence, which is supposed to be a secret."

"But why the Canadian air business," Joe asked.

"When Maggie got me out of Spain, it turned out that the British rigged the deal. In return for saving me, the Brits insisted I go to work for them as a contract flier, someone they don't have to worry about losing."

"Sounds like they got you by the you-know-whats," Joe said.

"Joe!" Elaine frowned.

"Sorry, Momma. But I still don't get the Canadian angle."

"That's the screwy part of the whole thing," Ace replied. "When I reported for work, they didn't have anything for me to do. So they decided to give me a different name, made me a major, and shipped me off to Canada to teach Canadians how to fly."

"Ain't that something?" Joe said, shaking his head. "Seems like you been teaching people around the world how to fly."

Ace laughed. "Well, there's still the Chinese."

Elaine had been staring thoughtfully into her wine glass as if trying to learn about a great secret. She raised her head and stared at Ace. There was an anxious catch in her voice.

"Is there going to be war?" she asked softly.

"Yes, I think so," Ace answered. "The Germans are going to try again."

"How soon?" Joe asked.

"I don't know," Ace replied. "Maybe this fall."

"Well, if the damned *Heinies* come again, the French army will be ready for them," Joe said.

"I hope so," Ace nodded.

"You don't seem very sure about the French army."

"I don't know, Joe. The Brits seem to have mixed feelings about it. The French army's got communists and fascists. Some of the Brits think they'd rather fight each other instead of the *Boche*."

"There's truth in that," Joe muttered. Then he brightened, "Well, maybe they'll call up the old 369th again."

Elaine shook her head, but she smiled, "I will put an extra thank you in my prayers tonight because you are too old to go off to war."

"Now, Momma, look at Ace here. We were in the same war together. You don't think he is too old, do you? The Brits sure don't."

"Ace is the kind of man who will always be fighting wars, I fear. He was fighting when he was too young, and he will be fighting them when he is too old. Poor Ace. Such a fate for a good man. You should quit this war business and wed Mary Margaret and raise children while there is still time."

Both men laughed. Joe softened the effect of the laughter by reaching over with his arm and giving Elaine a gentle hug.

"Momma, I don't think you are going to have much luck as a matchmaker with Ace." Joe then turned back to Ace.

"I almost forgot to ask. What're you doing in Paris? The last I heard about you and the French, you weren't exactly on speaking terms."

"Oh, the French know I'm here, but they are playing let's-pretend just like the Brits." Ace emptied his glass. Elaine started to pour again, but Ace shook his head. "I've still got work to do tonight. I'd better go easy."

"What kind of work?" Joe asked with a smile.

"The best kind of work. The Brits want me to look up old friends."

"You going back into the smuggling business?" Joe asked.

"Don't I wish. But those days are gone forever, I guess. It was great while it lasted, though." He paused as if choosing his words carefully. "I think that if things go bad, they want to use some of these people for intelligence work."

"That means the *Heines* will occupy part of France the same as they did during the last war," Joe said. "That could happen, I guess." He looked around, and asked, "Where's Angel? I thought she'd have freshened up by now. It gets hot up there on that stage."

"She's probably still resting," Elaine said. "I will go attend to her." Elaine walked back toward the kitchen and the stairs.

"I remember the child had some kind of sickness," Ace said. "Did she ever get over it?"

“Mostly,” Joe answered as he watched Elaine make her way to the kitchen area. “She still has a weak spell once in a while. Mostly it comes on her when she gets over-excited. Seeing you might have brought it on.”

“Well, I’m sorry about that.”

“Oh, don’t pay it much thought,” Joe said with a smile. “Angel’s pretty high-strung, I guess. And you’ve always been her hero. The funny part of it is that Cassie and Angel are in agreement on something for the first time I can recall. They both think you’re a hero.”

“I never thought of myself that way,” Ace said.

“It’s the way you live more than anything else. I’ve always wondered what it would be like to live the way you do.” Joe was silent for a few seconds. “Not that I’m unhappy about the way things turned out for me. I’ve got a good life, better than I ever expected. You know, we took over the upstairs as well as the store next to us. We enlarged our living space and made an apartment for Cassie, too.”

“You’ve done well, Joe. Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to have a place, hell, for that matter, just to stay in one place for a while.”

* * *

Elaine found Angelique sitting at the table in the small kitchen upstairs. When Joe was not present, the mother and daughter spoke in French.

“Are you ill?” asked Elaine.

“No, Momma. Well, maybe a little tired. It is nothing.”

“Then you should come and speak to Ace. He is our benefactor. He is our friend.”

Angelique looked up at her mother. “I am afraid, Momma. I fear that he will look at me and see only a child.”

Elaine smiled. “You are a child.”

“No, Momma. I am a woman. I want Ace to look at me as a woman.”

“Angelique! You must not say such things. It is wrong.”

“No, Momma. It is right. I am a woman. I am in love with Ace. I’ve always been in love with Ace.”

Elaine moved to her daughter. She reached out and softly touched her daughter’s cheek, and then pushed back hair that was beginning to drift down on Angelique’s face.

“You are talking like a silly school girl, my child. You will find a good man, a man like Poppa. Besides, Ace is an old man. He and your father were in the same war together, a long time ago. Ace is too old for you.”

“You are fond of Ace, Momma, I know it. I see the way you look at him sometimes.”

“Child, child, what are you saying? Of course I am fond of Ace. He has been good to us. But I would never choose Ace over Poppa. Women may dream about men like Ace, but if they are wise, they never make the dream come true.”

“Why?”

Angelique’s question rode a puzzled tone of voice, not a defiant tone. It was clear to Elaine that somehow, she had failed to make certain matters clear to the child. And, perhaps the nuns could have done a better job in related aspects.

“We will talk of this later. Now, come downstairs with me. Speak to Ace a little. Then you tell everyone that you are weary and need sleep. That is the way a lady acts.”

"Ladies can be very boring," Angelique replied. There was a touch of petulance in her voice. Nevertheless, she rose from the chair, took her mother's hand, and allowed herself to be led out the door to the steps.

As they descended, Elaine wondered if perhaps she should have kept Angelique hidden away upstairs. Ace was an honorable man, a man of his word, but he was a man, and clearly a man of the world, perhaps even a dangerous man. For a moment she considered ordering Angelique to go to her room and stay there. If there had been more steps, she might have done so.

* * *

"Here they come," Joe said. "It's about time." When Elaine and Angelique sat down, Joe looked at Angelique and asked, "Are you okay, girl?"

"Yes, Poppa."

Ace raised his glass to Angelique. "You have grown up. If I had seen you on the street, I'd never have thought you were the little girl I knew from years ago."

"I hoped you would notice," Angelique replied.

"She sure has grown up," Joe added. "Usually, we got a lot of stage-door-Johnnies hanging around wanting to meet our little girl."

Elaine looked puzzled. "Stage-door-Johnnies?"

Joe laughed. "That's American slang for men who hang around the back stage door hoping to meet the beautiful performers."

Elaine appeared to be listening to Joe's explanation, but she was more interested in the way Ace was looking at Angelique, and even worse, the bold way her young daughter returned look for look. Poppa did not seem to notice what was happening before their very eyes. She would have to speak to him about this matter. But as Ace and Angelique spoke, he about her singing, and she about his flying, there was time for second thoughts. Perhaps her worries were pointless after all. Ace would go away tonight. He said he had business to take care of, and he was based in London now. By the time they saw Ace again, Angelique might be another twelve years older and married with children. Still, maybe she should talk to Cassie about this matter. Maybe Cassie could tell Angelique things she could not.

"It is too bad that Mary Margaret could not be here tonight," Elaine said. Her words dropped into the conversation without any foundation at all, and to the surprise of the others.

"Mary Margaret?" Ace asked. "Oh, Maggie."

"Helluva woman!" Joe said. "You missed the boat on that one, Ace."

"She is a long way away." Angelique added, and smiled at Ace as she spoke.

Elaine watched Ace's face as he nodded agreement with Angelique's words. She was sure that the terrible scar on his face had somehow come to life. She felt a touch of coldness in her heart, but that touch ceased when Ace spoke.

"I've got to be getting along. People to see."

"You be careful," Joe said. "But, hell, you have to be careful all the time, I guess. When will we see you again?"

"Soon, I hope. Maybe tomorrow."

Angelique rose from her chair. "I shall walk out with you. I need some fresh air. It is warm in here."

"You should change clothes and help Cassie in the kitchen," Elaine suggested.

"In a few minutes," Angelique replied.

As Angelique and Ace stepped outside, Joe turned to Elaine, "Look at them. I always knew that if anything happened to me, Ace would be around to take care of you and my baby."

Elaine did not answer.

* * *

The night had finally come, and the only light was from a street lamp which shed a soft glow that formed a circle on the street. At the end of the block was another lamp which formed another pool of soft light.

"I'll walk to the end of the block with you," Angelique said as she slipped her hand into his, an almost instinctive move that a child would make when walking out into the night, and that is the way Ace accepted the move.

"You were away a long time," Angelique said. "I never got another lesson for flying the airplane."

"I'm sorry about that," Ace replied. "We'll get a chance to fly again."

"Oh, I am sure of that," she agreed.

When they reached the next pool of light, Angelique brought them to a stop. She moved closer to Ace. She looked into his eyes.

"I love you, Ace." Then she threw her arms around him and kissed him.

Ace tried to pull back. He was surprised. He could feel her young body pressing against him. He tried to push her back, but she held him tightly and would not release him.

She pulled back slightly, but still remained close. "I have always loved you."

"Angelique, this is..."

She kissed him again. This time he did not pull away. A fire had been started. His arms closed around her for a few seconds, their passions melded, and then Ace suddenly pushed her away.

"No!" he said huskily, his voice half-choked by passion and denial. "Angelique! This is wrong. Go away!"

He turned and walked quickly out of the pool of light and into the dark.

"Come back for me, Ace." She called softly after him. She knew he would come back.

Chapter 29

Paris, June, 1940

It was late at night, just past two o'clock and only a couple of hours before the early summer dawn and the arrival of German troops in Paris. It was a day of French humiliation, and for some, the very real threat of facing a future in a German concentration camp, or a quicker death by a German firing squad.

There was only one light showing in Joe's American Bar. It was a night light that was turned on at closing every night. Seated at a table near the back were Joe, Elaine, Angelique, and Cassie, the family gathered together for what might well be the last night they would own the business.

Joe broke the silence. "I should have gotten us away when we might have had a chance. There were trains we could have taken to the south of France."

Reaching out, Elaine took Joe's hand. "You did what was best, I think. Where would we go? How would we live? This place is where we have worked so hard to make a success."

Joe shook his head, "I just can't believe the French army couldn't stop the *Heinies*. We did it the last time. I never thought I'd see the *Heinies* doing that damned goose step in Paris."

"We could still make a try to get away," Cassie said. "For sure I'm going to try."

"How you going to do that?" Joe asked.

"I got friends, real friends. I'll go underground. If we left now, I could get you people passed out of Paris. You'd be safe."

"Maybe," Joe replied. "But I don't trust your Red friends. Hell, they are partners with the *Heinies*, now. Maybe we should just stay here, hunker down. Paris is a pretty big city. They might not even know we're here."

"The *Boche* came before," Elaine offered. "Back in 1870. Paris survived. I think you are right, Poppa. Besides, it is late now. Soon it will be dawn. We should go to bed and get some sleep."

Cassie shook her head. "You people just aren't facing reality. If I don't go into hiding, I'm a goner. Maybe the big shots in Moscow are friends with the fascists, but that won't stop the fascists from shooting people in Paris."

"Yeah, you've got to make a getaway," Joe agreed. "Do you really have some kind of plan?"

Cassie nodded. "Course I got a plan. Before this night's over, I'll disappear. But, Joe, you just don't get it. Man, the last time I looked, you were still a black man. The Germans make Mississippi look like watermelon and fried chicken heaven. You ain't got a prayer!"

Angelique kept her silence. She knew they would be saved. She knew that Ace would come. He had to come. He would never leave her to face the Germans. She remembered his kiss. That was a year ago, under the street light on a warm Paris night. She had never forgotten, and she knew that Ace could not forget either. He would come. But she was also aware that time was short.

The door to the bar opened. Two men entered.

"We're closed," Joe said in French. "Come back tomorrow."

The men laughed. "We are not customers. We are the new owners of this bistro. We are surprised that you people are still here. You should be running, black man. If you are here when we come back, it will go bad for you."

Joe jumped up from his chair. He had an American baseball bat in his hand. Cassie also rose. From a pocket, she produced a straight razor and flicked the dangerous blade open.

"You get the hell out of here," Joe shouted, "Or, I'll put this ball bat to good use. You ain't taking over nothing but your cracked heads."

Joe had shouted in English, but the two Frenchmen well understood the meaning of his words and the way he wielded the bat. They backed up and then quickly fled out the door. One of them shouted as they left.

"We'll be back, Blackie!"

Joe went to the door and locked it. He returned to his seat. Cassie was still standing, the razor held at her side. Joe looked up at her and said, "Put that damned thing away before you cut yourself."

Elaine had tears in her eyes. "Can they do that, Poppa?"

"Don't worry, Momma. They're just bluffing," Joe said in an effort to reassure Elaine.

"It will be all right, Momma," Angelique said with a smile. "Ace will come. He will save us."

"Girl, what are you talking about?" Joe said angrily.

"Ace will come," Angelique insisted.

Joe started to reply with anger, and then paused. He did not want to frighten Elaine. He knew she was already frightened enough. And there was no need to yell at the child. She was living in a dream world. The child's simple faith that Ace would rescue them still irritated him.

"Real life ain't like a story book, girl. Those heroes from the olden times the nuns filled your head with, they are just stories. Ace is a helluva guy, and if he could do it, he would. But he's off in England or God knows where."

"No, Poppa, he will come. You will see."

Joe was angered by her response, but he controlled the anger. He smiled at Angelique. "I know, Baby. Maybe he will. Hell, for all I know, he might be outside right now. I'll go look out the door."

Elaine guessed what was really on his mind. "Be careful, Poppa."

With ball bat in hand, Joe walked to the door. He needed to see if the two Frenchmen had really gone away, or were hanging around outside waiting for more of their friends to appear.

He opened the door and peered out. He could not see anyone. The street lamps had been turned off for weeks so German bombers would not have too easy a time finding Paris at night. He stepped outside the door and then out on the sidewalk. He could still see no one. He took another two steps and stopped. He called out softly.

"Ace, you out here?"

Back came a voice from the shadows.

"Yes."

"Jesus Christ!" Joe yelled. He jumped back, the bat raised for action.

Ace stepped out of the shadows. He saw the raised bat. "Easy there, Joe. Let's get back inside, quick."

"You scared the hell out of me, man. Where did you come from?"

Once inside, Joe announced, "Momma, look who's here!"

The three women jumped up from the table. "Ace, oh, Ace, is it really you?" Elaine cried out.

Cassie asked, "How did you get here?"

Joe turned to Angelique. "You were right, baby girl. You had the faith, that's for sure."

Elaine quickly looked at Angelique and saw her eyes, and instantly thought this was not the way salvation should come. But then she brightened. This was Ace, and now all would be well.

"Where'd you get a ball bat?" Ace asked. "I haven't seen a genuine American bat since I was a kid."

Joe laughed. "Got it years ago. One of those writer guys came in and traded me the bat for a bottle of wine. I got it out of the closet for tonight. We've got some trouble."

"I know," Ace said. "I saw them come in. I didn't know what they wanted, but I figured they were up to no good. I didn't want to show myself, if I could keep from it." Ace paused, looked around the bar, and then asked, "Why are you still here? You should have gotten out earlier."

"I guess so," Joe answered. "But we really didn't have any place to go. Thanks to you, we got this place. We've busted our behinds making it grow. It's awfully hard to just walk away."

"It is our home," Elaine added.

Ace looked at his watch. "Okay, everybody sit down for a minute. I'll explain what we are going to do."

"You got a plan?" Joe asked.

"Of course he's got a plan," Cassie said as she sat down at the table.

Angelique looked at Ace, smiled, and said, "I knew you would come back, Ace." She joined the rest at the table.

"I've got a car. It's tucked away about two blocks from here. We'll take the car to an air field just outside the city. It's one I've used for years."

"We have to steal an airplane?" Joe looked doubtful about the prospects. "It'd have to be a big one to carry all of us. And where are we going to go, if we can steal a plane?"

Ace shook his head. "I've already swiped the plane. It's one of Maggie's that she keeps near London."

Joe laughed. "You stole one of Maggie's planes?"

"Yeah. It's the same one she used to fly me out of Spain a couple of years ago."

"But where will we go? How will we live?" Elaine asked.

"We'll go to England," Ace answered.

"What will we do there?" Elaine continued.

"It will be rough," Ace said. "You'll be refugees. When we leave here, bring all the money and jewelry you have. I can help. Like I said, it won't be easy, but you will be alive and stay alive until this damned war is over, and you can return to France."

Cassie looked skeptical. "Where do we go when the British surrender?"

"A good question," Ace answered. "We'll cross that bridge or ocean when we come to it. Now, get everything ready to go." He checked his watch again. "We need to reach England at dawn. I have to be able to see the ground. There won't be any lights during dark at the airbase."

They stared at Ace. "Are you really certain about this?" asked Elaine.

"Ace is right," Cassie said as she rose from her chair. "Come on! We don't want to be firing squad bait. I think Ace's plan is better than mine. I can work with the British party."

As the others rose, Ace reminded them, "Just money and jewels, anything small and of value."

When the others had gone to the second floor apartments, Ace pulled out a pack of cigarettes and lit one. He left the pack and the lighter on the table in front of him. The lighter reminded him of the Countess. His friends had checked on her as well as Joe and his family. The Countess had disappeared two weeks ago. When he learned that she had disappeared, he worried that some of the fascists in French intelligence had made her disappear. After a second check, his friends reassured him that she had gone to Marseilles. She would be safe there, at least for a while.

He knew that people like the Countess, and Maggie, too, could always find some way to escape. It was people like Joe and Elaine who almost always got trapped. No, that's not always true. Daisy got away. He smiled as he remembered that Daisy had an accomplice, a horse with good aim. He shook his head. He didn't often think about Daisy. Sometimes he wondered why in the world he even remembered her. That was an eternity ago. Well, not an eternity, but what? Twenty? Maybe twenty-two years ago?

Angelique was the first to come down the stairs. "It didn't take me very long. All I have is a few trinkets and a picture. I've got it rolled up and hidden in the lining of my jacket."

She sat down at the table across from Ace. "I knew you would come back for me."

As Ace fumbled for a reply, she continued, "That is a beautiful lighter. I remember seeing it when I was a child. You've had it a long time."

"Yeah, it was a gift from a friend, a long time ago. I guess it's become a good luck charm."

"Was she beautiful?"

Ace knew what she meant, but he begged time by appearing to be puzzled. Maggie had asked a question like that about the previous owner of the lighter.

"The woman who gave you that lighter."

"How did you know it was a woman?"

"It is what a woman would give a man she loved."

Ace was relieved when he saw the others coming. Both Cassie and Elaine had small bags. He nodded approval. Joe had his ball bat.

"I've got something better than that," Ace said as he reached behind his back and pulled out a gun from his belt. "You still remember how to use it?"

Joe nodded. "An army Colt forty-five. I haven't seen one of those since the war. Sure I know how to use it. It's like knowing how to ride a bicycle. You never forget." He put the ball bat down on the table and stuffed the gun in his belt.

"Will there be danger?" Elaine asked. "Poppa, you be careful with that thing. It frightens me."

Cassie stuck out her hand. "Where's my gun?"

Ace smiled. "I'm sorry, Cassie. I just didn't think of it. The Reds teach you how to use a gun?"

"Of course," Cassie replied. "It's hard to make a revolution without guns."

"Well, I hope you aren't as quick with a gun as you are with that damned razor," Joe said.

"Let's go," Ace ordered.

* * *

It was a small car. Cassie, Elaine, and Angelique sat in the back. Angelique was in the middle. Ace drove and Joe sat opposite him. Joe kept his gun in his lap. Ace had his gun on the seat beside him. The car rushed through narrow alleys. Ace relied on the light that peeked out from poorly guarded windows. He did not switch on the car lights.

"Damn! I think we just drove through somebody's courtyard," Joe said. "I've lived here since the end of the last war, and now I'm seeing some of these alleys for the first time. That is, if they are even alleys."

"I've had a lot of experience at this," Ace said as he steered the speeding car through narrow openings, and on one occasion, along what was really not much more than a foot path. Finally, they turned out on a primary road.

"I know this road," Joe said after a few moments. "This goes out by that air field. What kind of plane did you say you stole from Maggie?"

"Twin-engine job. It'll hold all of us. Don't worry."

"Maybe, but that's just a grass runway, isn't it? I remember it from when you took Angelique up for a ride."

"Yeah, but it's okay. The grass works."

Ace and Joe saw them at the same time. It was a blockade ahead. There were saw horses pulled across the road. A car was on Joe's side. There were at least three men standing behind the saw horses, and two more over by the car. One of the men behind the barricade had a flashlight. He waved it up and down, obviously meaning for the motion to be a signal to stop.

"I need this road," Ace gritted as he slowed the car. "We've got no choice. We've got to run that damned barricade."

Joe picked up his pistol. "I know a little about this business. You shoot out your window at the men behind the barricade. I'll pepper the ones by the car. Maybe I can put some slugs through their radiator so they can't chase us."

"A good plan," Ace agreed. He turned his head slightly and spoke to the women in the back seat. "We'll be okay. Keep your heads down."

Ace floored the accelerator. The car leaped ahead. When the car closed the range, both Ace and Joe opened fire. The men behind the barricade scattered. They saw that the oncoming car was going to ram through the flimsy saw horses.

The car tore through the barricade without the slightest slowing down. Boards hit the windshield and badly cracked it, but there was very little flying glass.

"We made it, by God!" Joe shouted.

Behind them, the men opened fire at the fleeing car. Several bullets hit the rear of the car.

"I'm hurt," screamed Elaine.

Joe struggled to turn in his seat. "Momma? Where are you hurt?" he asked anxiously. "Cassie, see where Momma's hurt. Angel? Are you all right?"

Cassie leaned over Angelique. "I can't tell for sure. I think some of the shots hit the car. She must have been shot in the back."

Angelique got an arm around her mother. "Where does it hurt, Momma?"

"My back. My back. It hurts a little," Elaine said as she turned her head and looked at Angelique. "Don't worry, child. It will be all right."

Joe turned back in his seat. "Ace? Is there a doctor at the air field? We've got to get Momma to a doctor."

Ace kept his eyes on the road. "There's no doctor that I know of. Once we get on the plane, we'll be about two hours from London. We can get a doctor there."

"It's no good, Ace. Momma needs a doctor now. You or I could hold out two hours. I don't want Momma in that kind of pain for two hours."

The car sped past the opening to the air field. "That's where we should have turned," Joe said. "There was a blockade at the gate. We must be too late. The fascists or the Germans have taken over."

"Maybe," Ace said. "Everybody hang on. Angelique, hold your mother tight."

"What the hell are you going to do?" Joe asked.

Just after passing a large building at the edge of the road, which put them out of sight of the guards back at the gate, Ace swerved the car off the road, down in the shallow ditch along the road, and up the other side and through a rail fence and then out on the landing strip.

The jolting of the car caused Elaine to scream out from pain. A piece of the rail hit the windshield, completely shattering it.

Joe yelled out in pain, "Goddamn, I'm cut. My face is cut!"

Ace glanced at Joe. He could see a piece of glass stuck in Joe's forehead.

"You'll be okay," Ace said. "There's a first aid kit on the plane. Once we're on the plane, we'll get everyone bandaged up." He paused and then asked, "Angel? Cassie? You okay?"

They both answered yes just as Ace drove through the open doors of a large hangar. Two men with guns watched as he drove through.

"Ace," Cassie said, "There were men. They had guns."

"Yeah, I know. They're my friends. They'll get us enough time to get the plane up."

"You got your own people?" Cassie asked. There was a hint of admiration in her voice.

Ace stopped the car near a twin engine plane. He got out of the car and hurried around to the other side. He helped Joe get out of the car. In the dim light inside the hangar, he could see the pieces of glass stuck in Joe's forehead. He pulled out a handkerchief from his pocket and carefully wiped the blood from Joe's face after pulling the pieces of glass from his skin.

"Cassie, you get out your side. Angel, you stay where you are until we get your mother out of the car. You can help push her, but be gentle."

"I understand, Ace," Angelique replied.

Ace ran over to the plane and opened the door on the side, and then returned to the car. "Joe, use the handkerchief to keep the blood out of your eyes. Help Cassie and me as much as you can."

With Cassie's help, Ace gently eased Elaine out of the car. When he tried to stand Elaine up, she collapsed.

"Oh, my God!" cried Joe as he saw Elaine go down.

"I've got her," Ace said as he put both hands under her arms and kept her from going to the concrete floor. He moved his arms until he secured a good grip and then lifted Elaine and carried her to the plane. He carefully climbed the steps up to the door and then disappeared inside the plane. Cassie helped Joe to climb inside and Angelique followed.

There was only a small amount of light in the interior of the plane. That light came from the open door. Ace laid Elaine down on the floor.

"Stay here while I get the plane's engines warming up. We'll have more light back here then. There's some canvas cargo tarps. We can make a pad for Elaine. We can get Joe bandaged up and stop his bleeding."

Ace hurried to the cockpit. He quickly started the engines and a light came on from a bulb in the ceiling of the plane. He had the first aid kit which was small enough for him to carry in one hand.

The two women hurriedly dragged up the tarps and folded them over to make a pallet. Joe sat on the floor by the pallet. He seemed to be stunned. There was blood on his face. He had used the handkerchief, but then lost it. They gently lifted Elaine onto the pallet. She was on her side. Her head was in Joe's lap. He absent-mindedly stroked her hair.

"Okay," Ace muttered. "Cassie? You still got that razor? I need something sharp to cut away the dress. We need to see the wound."

"Be careful with that," Cassie said as she handed him the razor.

Ace carefully cut away the cloth. He could see where the bullet had penetrated the cloth. There was a bullet hole, but only a trickle of blood coming from it.

"Doesn't look like she's in danger," he said, "Unless she's bleeding inside." He put gauze over the hole and taped the gauze to Elaine's skin.

He got up. "Keep her awake and watch the gauze to see if the bleeding starts getting heavier. Use the rest of the bandages on Joe's face. Keep him upright. Talk to both of them. I've got to get us in the air. Both of you sit down, one on either side of them. It could get a little bumpy on the takeoff."

Without waiting for a reply from either Cassie or Angelique, Ace turned and hurried to the cockpit. They quickly took their positions as the plane began to move.

Ace guided the plane out through the hangar front and taxied toward the landing strip. He had made takeoffs from this field in the dark, and he had landed the plane on the field earlier in the dark, but with the help of several car headlights marking the beginning of the strip. The cars were gone now.

He switched on the landing lights, hoping that everyone was too busy to notice, or might even mistake them for car lights. He began the run down the strip, lifting off into the night. As he did so, he wondered how long it would be before he flew from this air field again, if ever. Then his memory brought up the last time he had fled for his life from this field. It really wouldn't be a very good idea to try a street landing with this plane.

He knew his compass setting. He had plenty of fuel. He knew he could even fly an evasive course if necessary. He had to stay away from the Channel ports. Those had been

occupied by the Germans for several weeks. There would be anti-aircraft guns. They should not be too much of a problem because the Germans would be on the watch for planes coming from the British side of the Channel. There was always the possibility, however, that the French fascists were efficient, that they knew he was fleeing France and headed for a British airbase. They might have called the Germans. They might be on the lookout for him.

Ace could see lights below and off to his left. He was flying around Paris. It was necessary because he was holding the plane at a little over two-hundred feet altitude. He was determined to fly very low and fast and be gone before anyone could react, and hope like hell there wasn't some church steeple he had forgotten. He suddenly broke out of his mental flight calculations when Angelique slipped into the co-pilot's seat next to him.

"How's your mother?"

"I do not know," Angelique replied. "Sometimes she gives out a little cry. I think the pain is very great. Poppa's a little better. He talks to her. He keeps rubbing his arm. Says it hurts him a little. He thinks maybe one of the boards must have hit him."

"Is there much blood on your mother's bandage?"

"Cassie says there is not much. Poppa is still bleeding a little. Cassie is very strong. She is much like you, I think. How long will it take us to reach England?"

"About two hours. Maybe a little less. We'll get there about dawn. I need the light so I can find a place to land."

Angelique touched his sleeve. "You have saved us. I knew you would come. You are very brave."

Ace hesitated before replying. "Wasn't brave at all. I knew what could be done and how to do it. Being brave is when you don't have a foggy idea about what you're going to do, and you do it anyway."

"Roland knew he might die."

"Who's Roland?"

"A brave French knight." Angelique paused and then asked, "How will the British know we are friends and not Germans?"

Ace chuckled. "That's a good question. If we stay low, their radar won't pick us up. When we get close, I'll get on the radio and warn them that we are coming. What I hope we don't do is run into a dawn patrol over the Channel. That could be dicey."

"Dicey? Foggy? Sometimes I do not understand what you say, Ace. I shall have to learn, I think. The nuns always said I could speak good English."

"Don't worry about it," Ace said. "You speak better English than I do."

Angelique sat quietly for several minutes. When she spoke, there was a slight quaver in her voice.

"What is to become of me?"

"What do you mean, Angel?"

"Poppa calls me Angel. Momma finally gave up trying to get him to call me Angelique."

"I'm sorry. I won't call you Angel anymore."

"It is, what is the word? Oh, yes, it is okay. You can call me Angel."

"No, from now on, you are Angelique. Angel is okay for a kid, a child. But you are grown up now." He glanced over at her and saw that she was watching him closely. "You are a woman, now."

“Yes, I know. I am frightened about being in England. I pray that you will be there with me.”

“Oh, sure. You’ll have your mother and father, and Cassie, too. I’ll be there some. Can’t say how much. Depends a lot on where I get sent.”

“I know. You are a flier. I do not even know why you fly, I mean, who tells you where to go?”

“Right now, it’s the British government, or people in the government. It’s not much like when I was younger. I could fly wherever I wanted to go.”

“We could have a good life, even in England, I think. You doing your flying, and I doing my singing.”

Ace lost his concentration and struggled to regain it. His eyes checked the instruments and the compass. He glanced over at the young woman sitting next to him. He knew that he should change the conversation, maybe even tell her to keep quiet so he could concentrate on flying through the black night. He started to speak and then stopped. He tried again.

“Angelique, you should not be thinking that way. You are a beautiful young woman. You have your whole life ahead of you.”

“Momma said you were too old for me.”

“What?”

“Yes, she knows I am in love with you. And, she saw the way you looked at me when I was singing. You do think I am beautiful, yes?”

“Angelique, you can’t,” Ace started when Cassie entered the cockpit.

“You need to come back, girl. Your Momma needs you.”

Angelique quickly responded in French and Cassie answered. “No, she’s bad off. She’s breathing hard. I need you back with me.”

Angelique hurried back to the cargo area. Cassie leaned over Ace’s shoulder and whispered, “I think she’s dying. How soon will we get to England?”

“It’ll be another hour and a half. What’s she doing? How does she look?”

“She’s breathing real hard. She can barely talk. She feels cold. I’ve pulled some of the tarp over her to get her warm, but it don’t seem to be doing much good.”

Ace responded tersely. “That’s about all you can do. She’s probably got internal bleeding, some real damage inside we can’t see. Damn, I should have put a mattress or something in the trunk of the car. I’m sorry about this. I thought we could pull it off okay.”

“Don’t blame yourself, comrade. You risked your own neck trying to get us out.” Cassie turned and joined the family in the cargo area.

Joe held Elaine’s head in his lap. He bent over, his head close to hers. Tears streamed down his cheeks and mixed with the drops of blood that had soaked through his bandages. Angelique sat on the other side of her father. She had an arm around him, and she was crying softly.

“Momma, Momma,” Joe said, his eyes half-closed from the pain that came from the cuts on his face and the pain that came from his heart. “Talk to me, Momma. Don’t leave me. Talk to me.”

Elaine opened her eyes, she tried to speak, but could not. Her eyes closed again. Cassie moved closer, but remained standing. Elaine opened her eyes again. This time she was able to speak, but her words came haltingly and could barely be heard.

“Take care of my baby. Take care of Angelique.” She closed her eyes, sighed and then was still.

“Momma, Momma?” Joe cried, and then, “No, no.”

* * *

Angelique returned to the cockpit and sat down in the seat beside Ace. She did not speak, and Ace kept his silence. Minutes ticked by, and finally she spoke.

“Momma’s gone.”

Ace bowed his head. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. Cassie says it is so.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It was not your fault. It was the people who shot Momma. It is their fault.”

Ace knew that was true, but he still blamed himself, nevertheless. He had not counted on having a gun fight while driving to the air field. He had timed the escape so that it would be dawn when he reached the English coast. But the plan did not work, and now poor Elaine was dead. “It is always the most innocent who die first,” he told himself.

He looked over at Angelique. She was staring straight ahead. She passed a hand over her eyes which were still wet from tears.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I do not know what we will do without Momma,” she answered. “Why did this happen to us? We hurt no one.”

“I don’t know, Angelique. I’ve asked myself that question too many times, and I’ve never come up with an answer. How is your father doing? Maybe you should be with him?”

“No. He is crying. Cassie is with him. He will listen to her. I feel safe sitting here with you. You must never leave me, Ace.”

“I’ll be here. We’ll be in England soon. Then we can put your life back together again. You must be tired now. See if you can close your eyes and get some sleep.”

“Yes, Ace. I am so tired. Maybe I will close my eyes for a little while.”

Ace kept silent. After a few minutes, he looked over at Angelique. Her eyes were closed, and her head drooped down. She was asleep. He hoped Cassie was able to get Joe to rest, to sleep, but he doubted it. He remembered the day, the last day of the war when he had been shot down, and Joe had saved his life. Now he was trying to save Joe’s life, but at what a terrible cost.

He checked Angelique again. As he did so, he could see out to the east a graying of the sky. It was dawn. Soon he would be able to see the ground below, or better yet, the Channel.

Angelique was still asleep. That was good. He hoped she would sleep as long as possible. In a few minutes, though, he would have to switch on the radio. The English would spot him soon, and they would be very interested in knowing who was approaching their coast from France.

There was much to consider, much to think about, and he was glad for that.

Angrily, he flipped the switch on the radio, and it made a squawking sound. Angelique stirred but did not awaken. Minutes later, an icy voice was heard demanding identification.

Ace responded, "This is the last plane out of free Paris."

Chapter 30

Amidst all the pomp and circumstance, the victories and defeats, and the defiant words hurled about the world stage by much admired men, there are always those little peculiarities that never quite move from the alleyways of history to the main boulevards, and Ace's self-authorized mission to France was one of those peculiarities.

Officially, the British intelligence people knew of no such activity. In private circles within that arcane community, there was much discussion about the mission which was not a mission and which, of course, never happened.

Even though the fall of France meant that the whole might of the German army and air power would now fall on a nearly defenseless Great Britain, the imperturbable intelligence people continued to look to the future. It was not, after all, their mission to make plans for achieving defeat. They were interested in finding ways to keep at least some elements in France active in the war effort against the Germans.

It was Major Hastings who had first seen the possibilities. He was the one who cleverly led the effort to combine a desired effect of British foreign policy, the making of friendly overtures to Franco, with the securing of the services of a promising rogue who was about to be shot by Franco's army. Major Hastings' ability to see far ahead, at least several years ahead, was rewarded. Now, the British had a man ready for missions of considerable urgency. Major Hastings' standing in the community was quite high, even though, officially, the community absolutely was aghast at Ace's daring but unauthorized rescue, a rescue of people who obviously would be of little value to the community. The damnable rogue could have at least rescued someone important, someone who could be useful.

There was no doubt, however, that Ace had performed the kind of mission that would be required in the near future. He carried it out without support, without bureaucratic clutter, and with success, notwithstanding the fact that there had been a casualty.

Not all of the members of the community were happy about the situation. They pointed out the possibility that Ace had used his friends in Paris to help him bring off the escape. Was Ace going to turn out to be another Reilly? Should his services be dispensed with immediately to avoid future possible embarrassments?

Major Hastings was able to respond to these concerns by simply asking, "If we need to insert an agent in France in three days, who do we have available to make it happen?"

A decision was finally reached. Ace Mathews would be left alone. However, Major Archibald McFetters of the Canadian Royal Air Force would be reduced in rank from major to captain. This action took some time. The Canadian Royal Air Force had to concur. There was considerable paperwork involved.

During all this activity, Major Hastings received a report on a funeral. The funeral was for the woman who had been killed during the daring rescue mission. He noted the people present and wondered at what twists of fate had brought together this unlikely combination of people.

* * *

Ace had not seen Maggie since she had saved him from the Spanish firing squad. He did not know that she was in London, or that she would be present for Elaine's funeral. He was surprised when he saw her and Rachel standing outside the church. Maggie was dressed in a blue uniform, a jacket, skirt, and a cap perched jauntily atop her auburn hair. He suddenly realized how much he missed her.

"I didn't know you people were here. I thought you were probably back in the States. What's this uniform all about?"

"Hello, Ace. Steal any of my planes lately?" Maggie asked with a smile. She moved close and touched his arm and they melded into a tight embrace. She kissed him on his right cheek, and they eased apart.

"I'll be in the church," Rachel said as she turned and walked away.

"What's this uniform?" Ace repeated.

"You like it?" Maggie asked and then continued on without waiting for an answer.

"I'm a volunteer for the British women's ferry group."

"What's that?"

"We fly planes to bases from factories and repair shops. We tried hard to get the American government to start such an organization, but the boys in Washington wouldn't approve of it. So, after Dunkirk, some of us came over here to volunteer."

"Can you fly a Spitfire?"

"You bet I can."

Ace shook his head and asked, as he usually did, "What would Griggs say about this? He must be turning over in his grave."

"I suppose so," Maggie replied. "We better go in. Poor Elaine! I asked her one time what would happen if the Germans came again. She just shrugged and said, 'The *Boche* come, boom, boom, and we die. It is the way it is.' And now, the Germans have come, and Elaine is gone."

"It's my fault, you know."

"Ace, that's nonsense, and you know it. If you hadn't stolen my plane and got them out, they'd be in a concentration camp by now."

"Maybe," Ace answered, but he did not sound convinced.

They walked into the church and joined the other four mourners present for the funeral service.

* * *

It had taken five days to obtain approval for the burial in the English cemetery. There were not a great many Catholic cemeteries available. Maggie and Rachel, especially Rachel, had been responsible for the arrangements. It was also Rachel who was in charge of finding clothes and a place to live for Joe, Angelique, and Cassie. Ace was not available. He was very busy answering questions put to him by his superiors.

The six friends and family were the only mourners present for the funeral. Ace stood close to Joe at the cemetery. Joe's grief was visible for all to see, but he did maintain his composure. His shoulders were slumped and most of the time, his head was bowed. Twice while the priest performed the rites at the graveside, Ace reached out a hand to steady Joe.

Rachel saw a man some distance away. He was trying to be unobtrusive, finding a small clump of trees to his liking. He appeared to have a camera. She caught Ace's attention and made a slight motion of her head toward the trees. Ace turned slightly and saw the man. During this silent play, Cassie picked up on the motion and turned her head in the same direction. Her hand drifted toward her purse. Ace saw this and signaled to her. He smiled and shook his head, no, a motion that none of the others noticed.

It was Angelique who surprised them. She had been strong. She had stood by Joe during the rites, her hand on his arm. By leaning forward ever so slightly, she could see Ace on the other side of her father. When the priest finished and the finality of the moment filled her mind, she cried out, "Momma? Momma?" and sank to the ground.

Joe summoned up the strength a father needed for such an occasion. He reached down and lifted her up. He brushed the tears from her eyes with his stubby fingers.

"Momma's in a better place, Angel. She's with angels in heaven. She will always be our angel on earth."

There were two cars parked back away from the gravesite. Rachel had arranged for them. The funeral party would be driven to a small hotel where Maggie had been able to reserve a table for six. There was a driver for the car in which Joe, Angelique, and Cassie would ride. The car for Maggie, Rachel, and Ace did not have a driver. Ace took the wheel.

Rachel reminded him to keep on the wrong side of the road, and Ace replied, "That's usually where I am."

As they pulled away, and were followed by the car behind, Rachel inquired about the man in the grove of trees.

"O, yeah, I saw him. He's one of the boys from the group I work for."

"Was he spying on you?" Maggie asked.

"Sure, they do it all the time. They get mad as hell when I decide to ditch them."

"Is that an easy thing to do?" Maggie looked thoughtful as she spoke.

"Usually," Ace replied. "Sometimes I do it just for fun."

"I hope there are some improvements before the Germans get here," Maggie said. "I hope you know that my plane won't make it across the Atlantic. You'll need to steal someone else's plane for that escape."

"There won't be any escape if the British go down," Ace said matter-of-factly. "You two should consider getting out of here. The Luftwaffe's going to start calling soon and that won't be pretty."

"Can't do it, Ace. For once, I'm going to do something painfully stupid, just like you," Maggie replied.

"I'm surprised that the British are actually going to use women to ferry new and repaired planes from factory to forward bases. It's too dangerous. You don't even know if the plane will fly when it comes out of the factory. Someone should test it first, at least."

"How many hours do you have on a Spitfire?" Maggie asked.

"Quite a lot, actually," Ace responded. "Don't forget, I taught people in Canada how to fly for over a year."

"Well, I probably don't have as many hours as you, but I've got enough," Maggie said.

Rachel had been ignoring the conversation, staring out the window at the interesting people outside who had gathered to defend the Empire.

"Ace?"

"Yeah, Rachel? You've been quiet for a long time. What's on your mind?"

"You've got connections in all the wrong places. Do you suppose you could get me a Tommy gun?"

"A what?"

"A Tommy gun, you know, Chicago typewriter."

Maggie smiled. "I think Rachel wants to take on the Nazis all by herself."

Ace took his eyes off the road for a second and glanced back at Rachel. "I could probably get my hands on a Tommy gun, but you'll have to wait a while. I'm not exactly the fair-haired boy right now. In fact, I think I'm supposed to be under close confinement."

"Are you going to get into trouble for attending Elaine's funeral?" Maggie asked.

"Probably. I might get demoted again. I might be lucky to even be an officer. Actually, it's poor Archibald who gets the whipping, not me."

"That is the most absurd thing I've ever heard," Maggie said. "How can a man who doesn't exist be demoted? Besides which, you are not an officer."

"I was once. I mean, really. I was an officer."

"When? And are you sure it was legal?"

"Yeah. Back during the war, the first one. I was a lieutenant in the Army Air Service."

"I had forgotten that," Maggie said. There was a hint of an apology in her voice. "That seems so long ago now."

Rachel broke into the conversation. "The only thing more fun than going to a funeral is listening to two old-timers talk about the past."

Maggie replied quickly. "Children in the back seat should mind their manners."

Rachel's remark had cut through the mist that they had conjured up about them, a mist that was meant to soften the reality of Elaine's burial. The casual conversation, bordering on banter, had served as a distraction. Now, the mist was gone, and each retreated back into his or her own mental recesses, and Ace drove on in silence.

Ace tried not to think about Elaine's death, but the thought that he had failed to save her would not go away. Too many times since that night, he had reproached himself for not putting boards or even a mattress in the trunk of the car. Just that simple precaution might have stopped the bullet. At least, it would have given Elaine a better chance.

Maggie's remark about the war, the first war, being so long ago was also troubling. He had lied about his age so often that even he was not sure about it, but he knew he had to

be about forty years old. That first war had been a long time ago. It had been so easy back then to climb into the open cockpit of the Spad. Climbing into a cockpit now was a well-rehearsed matter, but he was aware of a certain stiffness, a sense of being uncomfortable, a sense, however, that quickly disappeared when the engine turned over.

He was aware that now he spent too much time thinking about the past. Life had been easier then. Now, so much had changed. He was aware that he was not a free man, and worse yet, he had not really been free for years. Joe was probably right. He should have married Maggie. He would have been Maggie's pet monkey, but that would have been better than being a pawn for some intelligence bureaucracy.

His mind turned toward the future. If he survived this war, and he took close note of the fact that this would be his third war, what then? Angelique's face floated across his mind.

"Ace! You're drifting onto the wrong side of the road," Maggie warned.

They arrived at the restaurant. It was in a small hotel, and in normal times, it would not have been crowded, but these were not normal times. Even with Maggie's connections and Rachel's ability to strike a deal, the table set for six was back by the kitchen. The napkins were paper, the silverware did not quite match, and cleanliness was suspect.

The woman who led them to their table apologized with what had by this time become a favorite explanation. "It's the war, you know."

Joe was on one side of the table flanked by Cassie and Rachel. Ace was opposite Joe and flanked by Angelique and Maggie. It seemed a natural falling into place, but Maggie noticed how smoothly Angelique had gotten a seat beside Ace. Maggie was not surprised by the younger woman's deft manipulation, nor was she angry. It had occurred to her on the way to the restaurant that a mistake had been made with the cars. It might have been better if Ace had been in the car bringing the family. The thought was interrupted by the arrival of the waiter.

The menu was limited and, it did not take long for the waiter to write up the orders. The six mourners sat in silence, each coming to reckonings within their minds. Finally, Joe broke the silence.

"When this is over, the goddamned war, I'm going to take Momma back to Paris. It's where she belongs."

He sniffed and quickly reached for his handkerchief and dabbed at his eyes.

"You going to be okay?" Cassie asked as she put her hand on his shoulder.

Joe nodded. "I'll be all right. It's just so hard to understand. Momma never hurt anybody in her life. Hell, she couldn't even kill a mouse. I saw her one day trying to broom a mouse out the back door of our place. She was trying so hard to be gentle about it." He paused and then added, "I should have gotten her out earlier. We shouldn't have waited until the last minute."

"It's not your fault," Rachel said sharply. "You and Ace have got to quit blaming yourselves. It was the Germans who did it, or at least their friends. Put the blame for this where it belongs."

"Rachel's right about that," Cassie said. "That's all in the past. We got bigger worries to deal with now. Angelique is French by birth. But Joe and I are still Americans. The British might not consider us to be French refugees. They might deport us back to the States. Who's going to look after Angelique?"

"I can look after myself," Angelique responded quickly. "I am not a child anymore." Maggie ignored Angelique's response and instead looked at Cassie.

"You've got a good point. It might take them a while, but the British bureaucracy is usually efficient. There is a way around the matter, though."

"What have you got in your mind, Maggie?" asked Ace.

"Well, I'm here as a visitor on business. I've got a small flat, an apartment, which I keep. It is simple, really, and the British will understand perfectly. Joe and Cassie are my personal staff. They can live in the flat, with Angelique, of course."

"Would that really work?" Cassie asked.

"Oh, yes," Maggie answered. "It's proper form. No upper class British would think of going abroad without a proper staff."

"People really live that way, I guess, if they got money," Joe mused.

"That's what money is for," Maggie said. She looked at Rachel.

"I know, boss. Get it done," Rachel said with a smile.

"Where are you going to live?" Ace asked Maggie.

"Rachel and I both have bunks at our barracks. It isn't exactly the Ritz, but we get by. Besides, I have to be on call for flight duty most of the time."

"Thanks, Maggie," Joe said. "Between you and Ace, me, Cassie, and Angelique always seem to get saved. I appreciate it, but somehow, it just doesn't seem right."

"I think I know where you are going with this," Maggie said. "It's better if you don't. Keep in mind that you saved Ace, remember? And if it hadn't been for Ace, I'd never have gotten the chance to be a pilot. If I hadn't been a pilot as well as having money, Ace would have been shot by a Spanish firing squad. I've seen a Spanish firing squad in action. It might have taken them all day to shoot Ace." She smiled at Ace and then added, "Just like this restaurant might take all day to feed Ace."

That last part about feeding Ace coaxed smiles from the group. The service in the restaurant was slow. But almost as if on cue, the food arrived. It was adequate, but not very inspiring, and nearly as much was toyed with as eaten. The topic of conversation did not change with the arrival of the food. Rachel pushed the subject hard, cutting through the facades that masked the matter.

She turned in her seat so she could almost face Cassie and Joe. "If you people are feeling like you are second class citizens taking a handout, forget it. You got a raw deal in Paris because of the Nazis. We've got to hang together. Here is where we should draw the line and fight."

Maggie laughed. "Rachel, you should write speeches for Churchill. Ace, get me a Tommy gun, too."

"Well, you know what I mean, boss," Rachel said. "Besides, look at the bright side. Here we are, three Negroes, one Jew, a guy who's usually on the lam, and an Irish washerwoman in what was once an all-white restaurant. When did we ever see that?"

There was a second or two of stunned silence at the table and then came an outburst of laughter from five of the six people present. Both Joe and Cassie seemed relieved. Angelique was clearly puzzled. She had spent her short life in Paris, and because neither Cassie nor Joe had ever told her about life in the States, she had no way of understanding what they were discussing. She asked, "What would be so bad about going to the States? I know about New York. I would like to sing there."

As Joe began a short version of why they would not return to the States, a version that was as soft as Joe could make it for his daughter's sake, Ace got up and quickly moved to where a man was sitting at a nearby table. He had a cup of tea on the table before him.

Ace leaned over and smiled at the man. "I hope you got that last statement down real good. When you get back, tell Hastings I'll explain it for him."

The man began to rise from his chair. He was quite upset. He sputtered a shaky, "I beg your pardon!" When Ace stepped back, the man stood, looked around, and then fled, his face red from embarrassment.

"What was that all about?" Joe asked after Ace returned to their table and sat down. Ace saw that Joe's eyes indicated a welcome return from the apathy that had possessed him since Elaine's death.

"It's nothing," Ace replied. "Just one of the boys from the shop keeping an eye on me, and probably Cassie and Rachel, too."

"Well, I hope they don't underrate us Irish washerwomen," Maggie said with a flourish of her hand.

"I forgot about that," Ace said with a smile. "We are really a handful for the intelligence people. Worse yet, they are skittish about everything now. It's only a matter of days until the Germans try to come."

"Invasion?" Cassie asked. "You think the Huns will really try it?"

"I don't know," Ace replied. "The way Hastings acts, I'd guess the British top people are betting on it. Everything seems to depend on what happens when the RAF and the Luftwaffe really get the battle started. Then it'll be a bloody battle between the guys flying the Spits and the Hurricanes against the Me-109s and the German pilots."

Joe joined in with his eyes flashing a welcome determination.

"I ain't running again, by God. If the Krauts come, I'll be on the beach waiting for them. I beat the hell out of them once, and I'll do it again."

They did not realize that after Ace had words with the man sitting alone at a table, the other diners present were paying attention to the table with the six people who were obviously not British. As Joe spoke, the fire inside him had caused his voice to rise, and his words matched the sentiments strongly felt by the people in the room. To Joe's astonishment, his words brought a round of polite, but sturdy applause.

"What the hell?" Joe muttered sheepishly. "I didn't mean to make a speech."

Ace rose from his seat, wine glass in hand. "We thank you. Here's to a pleasant day at the beach." Then he sat down.

The impromptu toast by a man wearing a Canadian uniform brought on another round of applause and several "Hear, hears."

When the applause stopped and people returned to their own lives, Cassie looked at the other five persons at her table.

"It's too bad we don't have any grits," she said.

"What do you mean, grits?" Rachel asked.

"Cause with this much ham, it's a shame not to have grits, too."

That brought forth laughter from Ace, Joe, and Maggie. Angelique appeared puzzled.

"What are grits?" she asked. "Is it a food?"

"Sure is," Joe said. "If we can get hold of some, I'll fix a good dinner for us."

Angelique had been toying with her food. She put down her fork and pushed her chair back.

"I need some fresh air. I'm going outside for a few minutes."

Cassie pushed her chair back, but before she could rise, Angelique smiled and said, "I am fine. I just need some fresh air for a few minutes."

They watched as she walked to the front of the restaurant and out into the hotel lobby.

"Will she be okay?" Maggie asked.

"I think so," Joe replied. "She didn't bring her tonic when we got out of Paris. All she brought was a few trinkets and that picture of Ace, here. You remember, the one that French woman took of you?"

"She still has a copy of that picture?" Ace asked.

"She's not the only one," Rachel said as she smiled at Maggie.

Ace turned to Maggie. "You've got a copy of that picture?"

"Yes, I do, and I think I paid more for it than you are worth."

"She's got one of the original prints," Rachel explained.

Talk about the photo taken by Rochelle years ago made Ace uneasy. It had been a long time ago, but the photo never seemed to go away. He got up from his chair.

"I need a smoke. I'll check on Angelique while I'm at it."

As he headed for the lobby, Cassie said, "Maybe I should go see about the girl."

"No," Joe said. "It's best if Ace goes. She will listen to him. She's always had a stubborn streak, but now that she thinks she's grown up, it's worse. One good thing about it, as far as the tonic is concerned, she didn't bring it out, but I found the bottle in Momma's bag. Poor Momma always took care of everything."

The hotel had a small courtyard in front of the entrance. There was a wooden table, somewhat the worse for wear, and two chairs. There was a bush nearby and a poorly kept row of plants. Angelique sat in one of the chairs. She brushed her hair back with a quick stroke of her hand.

When Ace came out, she smiled. "I knew you would come."

"Are you okay?" Ace asked as he sat down in the other chair. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes and his lighter and laid them on the table after lighting up.

"I am fine now," she replied. She reached over and picked up the lighter. "You have had this lighter ever since I have known you. It is a beautiful lighter."

"I almost lost it in Spain. Maggie saved it for me."

Angelique could not stop the frown that was forming across her face.

"Why do you always speak of Maggie?"

Angelique's directness unsettled Ace. He had never felt comfortable with her even when there were others around. He fumbled for a reply to her question.

"Maggie and I have always been good friends, I guess. I mean, well, we have known each other for years. I even taught her how to fly."

"You are not together now?"

"No, just good friends."

"It is good to have friends," Angelique said, her frown easing into a smile. "But I think that you and I can never be just friends. I need to be with you. I was not frightened that last night at home. I knew you would come. When I am with you now, I am not frightened."

"Your father and Cassie, they will take good care of you."

"No," Angelique replied. "I will have to take care of them, I think. Here they come."

Ace glanced over his shoulder and saw the other four members of the party coming out the door. He was greatly relieved to see them. He rose from his chair without seeing Angelique reach across the table and pick up his pack of cigarettes and lighter.

"Are you all right, Angel?" Joe asked as they approached the table.

"Yes, Poppa. It was just so stuffy in there. The air was bad. I am fine."

"It's getting late," Maggie said. She turned to Joe. "Rachel can drive you and the girls over to my flat and help you settle in. You can stop at the hotel where you are staying and pick up your things. I'll drive the other car, and Ace, you can ride with me. You will probably have some serious explaining to do when you get back to your headquarters, wherever that is now."

Ace and Maggie had not gone a block when Ace remembered that he left his cigarettes and lighter on the table.

"Damn, I forgot my lighter and cigarettes. We've got to go back."

Maggie shook her head. "Don't worry about it. Your lighter is safe. I saw Angelique pick it up with your cigarettes. I think she'll give them back, if you ask."

"No wonder I forgot them. Angelique is a strange child."

"Ace, she's not a child. She's young, but she is a woman, a beautiful woman," Maggie said with a touch of sharpness in her voice. Then in a softer tone, she added, "Be careful."

The temporary absence of his cigarette lighter did not bother Ace. He resorted to using matches to light his cigarettes. He knew that sooner or later, Angelique would return the lighter. In a strange way which he could not fathom, he believed that it was proper that Angelique now possessed the lighter. It had come to him from the Countess, and Angelique reminded him of her. He could not help wondering if when the Countess was young, she might have been another Angelique.

His attempts to telephone Maggie's flat proved unsuccessful. He supposed they were busy adjusting to life in their new world, a world that had been created by Maggie. It was as if Maggie had become a part of his world, and maybe the better part. She had not hesitated to save him from a firing squad. Now, she was making life so much easier for Joe, Angelique, and Cassie. He remembered how quickly Maggie and June became friends. A curious thought passed through, but did not stay very long. Maybe June and Maggie were two sides of the same coin.

For three days after the funeral, the atmosphere around the headquarters was frosty. Ace knew that he was not in the good graces of the senior commanders.

He was like an animal surviving in an urban environment, always acting in a way that reflected the finest elements of experience and intuition, never being entirely seen, never quite heard, but sometimes sensed by those with more acute senses.

Not long after lunch on the third day, Major Hastings sent for Ace. A young woman dressed in a pleasant blouse and skirt and flat walking shoes had spent a good hour tracking him. She found him in a side vestibule watching the rain fall and smoking a cigarette.

She was very businesslike.

"Major Hastings will see you, now," she said.

"I thought he had forgotten me," Ace replied as he took a last puff from his cigarette and then shredded it.

She almost smiled and then replaced the effort with her official face.

"Follow me, please."

The woman turned and walked away. She knew this man was following her as she had requested, but his face was in front of the eyes in her mind. The short, curly hair was turning gray on the sides, and topped a face that disturbed her. He was an older man, possibly as old as her father, yet one side of his face appeared almost boyish. The other side with the scar was a different matter. It was not the curly hair, nor the boyish side of the face, or even the scar, she decided. It was his eyes. His eyes sent messages to her brain. His eyes said that he knew her and had always known her, that there was a past between them, and a certain tomorrow for them.

"We are going the wrong way," Ace said.

"What? Oh, no. We are not going to Major Hastings' office. He is waiting in a new operations room."

She stopped in front of a room that had no label showing either a number or a title. She knocked and then without waiting for an answer, opened the door.

"Captain McFetters is here, sir."

Ace stepped around her and entered the room. It was long and narrow, and there were no windows. There was what looked like a map covered with a stage curtain that took up one entire end of the room. There was a narrow table with four chairs on each side and one at each end.

Major Hastings was standing in front of the concealed map. He was dressed in an army uniform. The left sleeve of his tunic was pinned up just as his suit coat had been when he was dressed in civilian garb. He walked toward the table, and with his good arm, waved an invitation for Ace to take a seat.

"Sit down. We have much to discuss." Major Hastings sat in the end chair and Ace took position to his left. There was an ashtray on the table, and Hastings took out a pack of cigarettes and his lighter and laid them on the table.

"We are not supposed to smoke in here. Terrible ventilation and all." Hastings took a cigarette out of the package, his right hand deftly working the cigarette free of the package.

Ace followed his lead and lit his cigarette with a match.

"Did you lose that extraordinary lighter?" Hastings asked.

"No, it's not lost. A friend has it."

"I always supposed that it was a good luck charm of some sort or other."

"No, just something that I seem to have been able to hang on to for a lot of years."

Hastings nodded, took a deep pull on his cigarette, and expelled the stream of smoke down the length of the table.

"We need you to go into France."

"When and where?"

"Tomorrow night. You are to fly across the Channel and land at a farm between Calais and Paris. I believe you remember the place."

"Those are good people there. They've helped me a number of times, but that was a long time ago. I haven't landed on that pasture in years. For all I know, it could have buildings on it, or maybe plowed up for crops."

"Do not be concerned. It is still a pasture, and your friends still live there, and they are our friends now, as well as yours."

Ace smiled. "Your people have been busy. I guess not everyone was used for following me."

"Oh, yes, about that business, I would really appreciate it if you would stop humiliating our people. There is a war on, you know, and it is damnably difficult to find competent people."

"I'll be more polite the next time."

"I rather doubt that. When you arrive at your destination, you will land and pick up an agent and bring him home."

"Sounds simple enough," Ace said, "Except for finding the right pasture in France in the night. And, let's not forget the Germans. That area ought to be swarming with them by now. They must be moving up everything they've got to get ready for the invasion."

"True enough, I suppose," Hastings mused. "But the fact that Jerry is very busy is to our advantage. He should be so busy that he will not notice a plane passing overhead. And, of course, we shall lay on some interesting distractions for Jerry."

"Distractions? What kind of distractions?"

“That is information you do not need to know, but I can tell you that all eyes on the French coast will be looking out at the sea and not up in the air. As far as the night landing, well, you have had quite a bit of practice, I should say. You seem to be able to find French airports at night.”

“That was an airport. There were still some lights on in Paris.”

“We will provide you with a compass course. You will be able to judge by the time of flight and the compass course. When you get there, fly low and in a circle until you see three lights come on below. Your plane will have landing lights, and the moon is almost full.”

Ace nodded. “I’ll find it. Once I’m over Calais, I’ll be okay.”

Hastings frowned. “Our compass course is not oriented on Calais. And Jerry has a really high concentration of anti-aircraft batteries there.”

“Probably so,” Ace said with a smile. “But, like you say, they will all be looking out at the sea.”

Hastings stared at the man sitting at the table. He spoke calmly but without disguising a touch of irritation in his voice.

“Was there ever a time when you actually followed orders?”

Ace laughed. “I’d probably have to think back a long time. By the way, what am I flying for this job?”

“We have a special plane for you. It’s a French plane, experimental, and only a few were built. It has good range, seats two, and is reasonably fast, though it will not outrun a fighter, of course.”

“I’ll be damned! It sounds like a plane I flew a few years ago. I was probably the test pilot.”

Hastings nodded. There was almost a smile on his face. “We were quite certain you would approve of our choice, at least for the moment.”

“What’s the time for this job?”

“You are to leave out at 0100 hours tomorrow. Your flight time should be under an hour. It will be dark enough by that time. You pick up your passenger and then return. There will be another briefing at midnight. You are to be here at headquarters at 2200. Transportation to the airbase will be provided.”

“Okay, that sounds good. I’ve got some business to take care of tomorrow. I want to see my friends before I go, and I’d appreciate it if you could persuade your friends not to follow me.”

Hastings laughed. “Certainly not. We are building a training program around you. Actually you are most fortunate. There are those persons in this building who suggested that you be confined until time for the mission.”

“Okay,” Ace said while giving his best effort to stage a fine French shrug. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Hastings added, “Oh, and remember, this is all very secret business, you know. Kindly refrain from telling your friends about the mission.”

“Not a word,” Ace replied.

“A note of caution is necessary,” Hasting said, “Even if it will be of little use in your case. We are aware that two of the people who were present at the funeral are agents, one for the Zionists, and one for the Communists.”

Ace repeated his shrug but accompanied it with a smile. "Everybody's an agent these days. You ought to recruit them."

Hastings laughed. "Perhaps we already have that accomplished."

On his way out of the headquarters building, Ace passed the young woman who had escorted him to the operations room. She stared at him, her eyes filled with admiration. She spoke in a low and earnest tone.

"Good luck, sir."

Ace nodded in response and continued on his way. So much for secrecy, he thought.

In the taxi on his way to his lodgings, he gave the meeting with Hastings priority over all other thoughts. One item greatly interested him, but it did not have anything to do with the job, or the mission as Hastings termed it. Instead, he considered Hastings' use of the word, Jerry, which was a commonly used term in London.

Ace had fought the *Boche*, the Hun, the Kraut, and now he was fighting Jerry. He decided that Jerry was a softer way of saying German. Going against Jerry did not sound as scary as going against the Germans. He had spent most of his adult life and perhaps even a part of his adolescence fighting the German. Then he closed the matter from his mind.

He had two rooms in a building that had no keeper, but all services were provided. It was owned by an agency of the government and operated by the organization employing his services. There were no charges for rent or utilities. It was a very private place and under constant surveillance. There was also the very strong probability that the rooms were bugged. Never the less, it was home.

It had been a long day. He poured a generous amount of Scotch in a glass, set it down on a nightstand by his bed, pulled off his boots, and propped up his pillows so he was half-reclined.

The French experimental plane Hastings had described sounded like the plane he had flown. How long ago was that? Obviously, he had been wrong in guessing that there was only one plane made.

His thoughts turned to the practical aspects of the mission. Radar might be a problem. Did the Germans have radar? He did not understand how this new business worked, only that the British were very pleased about the radar towers they had erected close to the beaches facing France. He knew that low flying aircraft could not be detected by radar.

He drained the glass, and settled down on the bed. He was not hungry, and a nap would be useful. A good nap followed by a decent meal and then more sleep would prepare him for the job ahead.

His eyes were closed but he did not sleep. He opened his eyes, stared at the ceiling, and frowned. He could not sleep because Angelique had found a passageway into his mind. He realized that now he was irritated by the fact that she had possession of his lighter. Maybe the lighter really was a good luck charm. The Countess did not believe in luck, and neither did he.

The irritation quickly passed. He began to consider that maybe he was not really unhappy. Since she had the lighter, he would have to see her again so he could retrieve it. There was a sudden push from the past. He remembered the night Angelique was born, the night he nearly died. He remembered Joe holding the baby up and saying something about "My daughter."

He shook his head and spilled all these thoughts from his brain. He rolled over and returned in his mind to a favorite subject, the circus, and flying over the heads of the people who looked up in amazement as he put on his show. This was the most pleasant memory he possessed, and he was fond of taking it out for a walk. He was only vaguely aware that these strolls had become more frequent over the past few years.

Chapter 32

It was shortly before noon when Ace arrived at the small restaurant where Angelique said she would meet him for lunch and return his lighter. He had called the apartment earlier, and Angelique answered. He thought she sounded nervous, almost hesitant, but by the end of their brief conversation, she sounded excited about meeting him.

He was not hungry. That was not unusual. He was accustomed to eating sparingly and without regard to conventional times. Living alone most of his life, he had developed the habits common to such a life. When he did eat, he did so quickly. He had learned that method during the years of his life spent at the orphanage. Rarely did he ever take much pleasure from sharing a meal with another person.

What had started as a nap the day before turned into a long sleep and he awoke during the late night. He made himself a cup of tea and snacked on crackers and sardines. Dessert was a modest glass of whiskey, after which he returned to bed and slept several more hours. When he got up, he had a bath, shaved, and then dressed in his Canadian uniform and became once again, Captain Archibald McFetters of the Royal Canadian Air Force. After that he had a quick breakfast at a nearby restaurant and was ready for the day.

After calling Angelique, most of the morning was spent at the headquarters building. He asked to see Major Hastings, but was informed that the major was busy.

The restaurant was a modest-sized establishment, but quite respectable. Ace told the woman at the counter that he was expecting another person to join him, and she noted his appearance, considered that he was going to be joined by a second party, drew logical conclusions and showed him to a table for two in a corner that offered as much privacy as could be expected under the circumstances.

"Thank you," Ace said pleasantly. "I was afraid we wouldn't be able to get a table at this time of the day."

"It's the war, you see," she sighed. "People live around the clock now. We are often crowded at most unusual times."

Angelique was only ten minutes late, which was reasonable considering that she had to take a taxi. How she decided to pick this place for a meeting was a mystery to him. He wondered when she had been here. He did not give the matter any further consideration.

When Angelique entered the restaurant, the woman behind the counter instinctively knew that this young woman was the companion of the Canadian officer in the corner. She disapproved, of course, but held her response to just a raised eyebrow.

Angelique wore a skirt that was almost too short, a blouse that did not quite match her skirt, and shoes with stubby high heels and open toes. She wore white anklets with the tops turned down. Her garb did not cause second glances in wartime London. The city was full of French, Dutch, Belgian, Czech, and Polish refugees. Added to that lot were colonials of every stripe and hue and dressed in almost unimaginable costumes.

If people actually stared at her, it was not because of the way she dressed, but because of her physical attractiveness. She was tall, nearly as tall as Ace, and perhaps ever so slightly taller in the heels she wore this day. She was slender, but not thin. It would not have been wrong to consider her to be willowy, though that descriptive word would not be entirely accurate. Her skin color was that of a slightly darker kind of cream, and in a certain light, there appeared to be a touch of yellow, though that was probably more of an illusion than reality.

Her hair was black and long, the black contrasting exquisitely with her skin color. Her eyes dominated her high cheeked face. These were the eyes that Ace thought of as Egyptian eyes because they seemed to bend and include the sides of her face.

Ace rose from his chair as Angelique was led by the hostess to his table. He smiled.

"Ace!" Angelique cried out, her face filled with a smile and her eyes shining. She brushed around the woman escorting her, threw her arms around a surprised Ace, and hugged him. She backed away, but held his hands in hers.

"I missed you so much!" Angelique said as she released his hands and seated herself in the chair opposite his. Ace sat down. He felt a slight blush spreading across his face.

"Will you be ordering now?" the woman asked.

Ace had already studied the menu. There was not much choice. He quickly ordered.

"A bottle of wine?" Angelique asked.

Ace shook his head. "A good idea, but this place doesn't have wine." He turned to the woman waiting on them and added, "Oh, and tea, of course, with milk."

The woman nodded and headed for the kitchen. Ace looked at Angelique, and she stared back at him. He could see that she was excited, that she was almost bubbling over with energy.

"How are your father and Cassie?"

At first she ignored his question and responded with the comment, "No wine? Once again, I am reminded that this is not Paris."

Ace laughed. "You miss Paris, and so do I. But how are your father and Cassie?"

"Oh, they are fine. We all have a duty now."

"Duty?"

"Yes. Your friend, what is her name, oh, yes, Maggie. She has arranged for us to volunteer at the French canteen. It is a place where French soldiers in London can go to forget their troubles. They are so sad. Poppa and Cassie work there in the day, and I am on duty, what a strange word, at night. Poppa was not happy about that, but that was fine, you see."

"Whoa, slow down a little," Ace said. "Why is it good that your father is not happy?"

Angelique's face turned down and she stared at the table for a moment before lifting her eyes and looking at Ace. Her eyes were sad.

"It is fine because he stopped thinking about poor Momma. He is so sad. He misses her so much. Sometimes when I think I am happy, I begin crying. But Cassie is so strong. She watches over Poppa. I do not know what we would do without Cassie."

"I'm sorry about your mother. I blame myself for that."

Angelique reached over and took his hand. "No, Ace. You must not blame yourself. You rescued us. If you had not come, I think we would have been in very bad trouble. Blame the *Boche*, not yourself. Cassie said you are a very brave comrade."

"I'm surprised at that. I always thought she didn't have a very high opinion of me."

"Cassie can be strange. She waits so patiently for a revolution, but it never comes. But, wait, no more talk about Cassie and Poppa. There is something more exciting that I must tell you."

"What's that?"

"I am going to sing! Yes, really, I am going to sing. The people at the canteen listened to me. They have a piano, you know. And there is a man who plays an accordion. Such music they can make. I sang for them and there were soldiers there and they applauded me. For a long time, they applauded. Oh, Ace, I felt so fine!"

"Good for you. I'll have to drop in and catch your act some evening."

"Catch my act? Oh, I understand what you mean. There are parts of the English language the nuns did not teach us."

"They did a good job. I can understand everything you say."

The food arrived. Angelique looked at the food, and then looked up at Ace. "Again, I am reminded that I am not in Paris."

Although the food was not inspiring, consisting of two sausages and mashed potatoes and two spoonfuls of peas, Ace noted that she ate everything on the plate. He guessed that like many people in London, she was feeling the effects of food rationing.

He signaled the woman watching over the room and she responded by coming to the table.

"Is there any dessert available today?" he asked.

The woman nodded. "We have cake."

"Good. Bring us each a piece of cake. Oh, and I would like another cup of tea." He looked at Angelique. She shook her head, no. "Just one tea."

Both had finished their meal when the cake and tea arrived. Angelique pitched into the cake with vigor, and when she was halfway through, Ace slid his dish over to her.

"You better eat mine. I don't have room for it."

"Are you certain?" she asked. Ace nodded, and when she finished her piece of cake, she made quick work of the second piece.

"You were hungry," Ace said.

"A little," she replied.

"We should probably go now," Ace said. "But before we leave, you have something of mine that you should give back."

Angelique smiled. "I knew you were going to ask. I have it." She reached in her skirt pocket and pulled out the lighter. "It is a beautiful lighter. Where is it from?"

"Hanoi, I think."

"Ah, Hanoi, that is in the Far East. It is in Indochina, yes?"

Ace reached over and took the lighter from Angelique's hand, and even though he did not regard the lighter as being a lucky charm, he felt much better now that it was back in his possession.

"Thank you for taking care of my lighter," he said. "I might have forgotten it that day, and it would have been lost forever."

Ace paid for the meal, and they walked out the door. It was not raining, but neither was the sun shining. It would rain soon, but the clouds indicated that it would not be a hard rain.

Angelique touched Ace's arm. "Please. Do not make this day end now. Poppa and Cassie are at the canteen. It is lonely in the apartment for me."

Sirens began wailing. People scurried to find shelter. An old man wearing a helmet and an armband motioned to them.

"Come along, now. Into the shelter with you. Step lively."

They followed a crowd through a nearby pair of doors and down steps to a basement level. The room was large but quickly filled with people. There were rows of benches and they found a place to sit down.

"Ace, I am frightened," Angelique said. She moved close to him and took his hand in both her hands. Her body trembled. Ace gently but firmly entwined his hand with her two hands and put his free arm around her shoulders and held her tightly.

There were no sounds of bombs exploding, and Ace knew they were only in the basement of a strong building. They would hear at least muffled explosions and if close in, both hear them and feel the ground shake from the impact. He was not surprised when the warden entered the basement and shouted that the all clear signal had been given. Sirens were sounding, and there was no actual air raid. It had been a practice drill.

There was a good omen when they emerged from the basement shelter. There were still clouds, but one small part of the sky was clear at least for the moment, and they could see the sun. It felt warm and good.

Angelique still held Ace's hand with one of hers. She stopped walking and turned to him. He saw a tiny piece of cobweb on her cheek and reached up and lightly brushed away the web, but he was slow to withdraw his hand, his fingers touching her cheek.

"Do we have to part now, Ace?" She asked.

He withdrew his hand, but she caught it and returned it to her cheek. "Please, could we be together, at least for a little while?"

"I've got to work tonight. I really should get some rest. You have to work, too." Ace said, but he did not sound very convincing.

"A little while, maybe a walk. Do the English have parks? It is so good to see the sun. And when will I see you again? You are flying somewhere tonight, I know that. Maybe you are flying to France? I would like to go with you. We belong together."

He smiled. "A walk? Why not? We have a couple of hours. There's no harm in that. You flying to France, though, well, I have to say that is not possible."

They strolled hand in hand and talked. Angelique did most of the talking, and Ace enjoyed listening to her. She was so lively, excited about everything, so alive, so young, and after a half-hour, he forgot to remember that fact, noticing only that for the first time in a long time, he was beginning to feel really alive. The job that had to be done this very night was not a problem. He found himself looking forward to it. An idea was taking form in his mind. Could he make a perfect night landing with no lights and no sound of

the plane's engine to alert unfriendly people below? It could be done. Calais was the key and he would surprise the Germans. It would be a real feat of flying, flying low and fast and perhaps even through Calais.

Maybe after it was over, he could meet Angelique again, at least for lunch.

"After I get back, I promise to come hear you sing."

"I will sing you a love song, a song just for you."

They found a bench in a small park. They laughed when the clouds closed over the sun and there was a brief sprinkle of rain. There was a tree behind their bench, and its new leaves kept most of the rain from coming down on them. When the sun reappeared, Ace said, "Hip, hip, hooray!" Angelique laughed.

A passing breeze gently shook the limbs of the tree overhanging the bench and a little shower fell upon them. Ace took out his handkerchief and leaned close to her and began dabbing the drops from her face. He paused, stared at her, and then they were in each other's arms, their lips meeting and not parting.

An elderly couple came along the walk near the bench. After they passed, the man said grumpily, "It's the war, you know."

The woman turned her head for a second look. She smiled as she said, "I suppose so."

After putting Angelique in a taxi, Ace returned to his quarters. He intended to take a nap, but he could not sleep. Angelique was a problem. He should be thinking about the job to be done in France. He had landed planes before with the engine shut off. There had never been a choice, however. It had always happened because of engine failure. There was one factor that was a constant, either day or night. There was no second chance. The attempt must be successful the first time. There could be no second attempt to land. He knew that in a few hours, he would have to try the most dangerous trick he had ever attempted in his life. He was young again.

At the headquarters building, the same woman met him in the foyer. She looked at her watch and then up at Ace. She clearly approved of his being prompt.

"This way, Captain McFetters."

This time, instead of dutifully following her, he walked beside her.

"Major Hastings will be happy that you chose to wear your uniform as he suggested."

Ace smiled. He and Major Hastings did not have a discussion about the uniform. It was not necessary. The major knew that Ace would rather wear his own clothing for this mission, and he was aware that the major believed the uniform was necessary. No debate on the matter was needed. He would give in on this point and win his way on the route to the farm in France. Ace understood the major's thinking, but regarded it as wishful thinking, an attempt to avoid unpleasant and very real possibilities. If he were to be captured by the Germans while out of uniform, he would be shot as a spy. If he were wearing a combatant uniform, maybe the Germans would consider him to be a prisoner of war and protected, at least marginally, by the Geneva Conventions. Ace was under no illusions concerning his fate regardless of what he was wearing.

She escorted him to Major Hastings' office. She knocked at the door and then opened it. "Captain McFetters is here."

Ace entered the room. Major Hastings was sitting behind his desk. On the desk was a curious little apparatus that held a pipe in the proper horizontal position. Major Hastings was using his one hand to shake tobacco from a pouch into the bowl of the pipe.

"Come in, sit down, Captain. You are on time." He nodded at the apparatus on his desk. "I'm going through an awkward exercise here. A fellow in our equipment department worked it up for me."

Ace took a chair and pulled it closer to the desk and sat down. "How many hours a day do you make that young lady work?"

"She is my personal assistant, therefore, she customarily works the same hours I do." He tamped down the tobacco with a finger, then lifted the pipe and stuck the stem in his mouth. He picked up a lighter from his desk and lit the pipe. Once it was glowing satisfactorily, he pulled it from his mouth and blew out a cloud of smoke.

Hastings pointed to the pipe-loading device on the table. "A clever piece of work, that. Which reminds me, do you have a sidearm?"

Ace nodded. "Shoulder holster."

"I say, that is interesting. I shan't inquire as to how you obtained such a scarce item. We have some daylight hours ahead before you can fly." He took a puff from the pipe and quickly learned that it had gone out. There was no smoke. Shaking his head, he returned the pipe to the holder.

"There is nothing more to be accomplished here. We can take a car to the airbase, and you will have some time to inspect the plane."

"I'd like that," Ace replied.

Hastings pushed a button on his desk. "While we are waiting for Miss Trombley to bring around the car, your code name for this mission is 'Smallpox.' We are 'Hospital.' You will, of course, maintain radio silence until you are over the Channel on the way back. Then you contact us and say 'Vaccination.' That seems simple enough."

"Smallpox?"

Hastings smiled. "You are not the most popular person in the department. There were suggestions that rather covered the range of social diseases."

The trip to the base did not take long. Miss Trombley proved to be an excellent driver. Ace and Hastings sat in the back seat even though the car was far from being a Bentley. Ace noticed that Miss Trombley cast an occasional eye at him via the rear view mirror. He was curious about her. He guessed that she could not be much older than Angelique, but the two young women could not be more unlike.

He was not comfortable riding in the back seat, even though he was aware that it meant he had a certain status. On the rare occasions that he had to ride in back seats, he quickly became nervous. It was worse when he was in Canada, and on two occasions had to fly back in the passenger section of a plane. On both occasions, he became a "white-knuckle" passenger. He wanted his hands on the wheel or the stick, be it car or airplane.

When they reached the airbase, Ace could scarcely believe his eyes. He jumped out of the car and hurried over to the nearby plane. It appeared to be an exact copy of the French experimental model he had flown several years ago. He inspected the plane by moving around it and under the wings and caressing the wooden propeller. Then he moved on to the door and the cockpit.

Hastings and Miss Trombley stood by the car, Hastings said, "There, Miss Trombley, is his first, and quite possibly, his only true love."

She pretended to take no notice of his remarks. Instead, she busied herself at the task of removing a small bundle from the floor of the front seat.

After Ace had satisfied himself that the plane was indeed a copy and that it was ready for flight, they walked over to a nearby building and entered. There was a room with two men waiting. One of the men gave a quick briefing on the weather. The other produced a map that was attached to a clipboard. The route in and out was traced on the map.

"Are you really going to fly the route we have suggested?" Hastings asked.

"No," replied Ace. "It's too far out of the way, uses too much fuel, and gives me no chance to maybe fool the Germans."

"I thought as much," Hastings said with a smile and a wave of his hand to the briefer who was quite prepared to enter a protest. "Very well, then. You proceed over Calais. When you come out, there will be our night fighters up, but they will be under restraint after we receive your message."

Then there followed a discussion about the French contact. Ace remembered the people, good French farm people who reminded him of June and Virgil.

“The man you are to bring out is an American. Be certain that the man is an American, but if you have any doubts, bring him along. Even an imposter would have value.”

“An American? Why would an American have to be smuggled out of France? We are not at war with Germany.”

“Oh, dear,” Hastings said, his voice displaying a tone of mock reproof. “You Canadians are most certainly at war with Germany.”

“Sorry,” Ace said with a shrug, “I forgot that I’m a Canadian.”

It was soon time to leave. The three of them stood by the plane. Ace pushed his cap back on his head. Hastings stepped forward, his right hand extended, “Good luck, old chap.”

“Don’t worry,” Ace said as he shook the major’s hand. “I’ll be back before you get all the paperwork done on this job.”

Miss Trombley stepped forward. She had the package in her hands and offered it to Ace. “It’s just some sandwiches and a small thermos of tea.”

“That was kind of you,” Ace said as he took the package from her hands. “You made the sandwiches, yourself?”

“Yes,” she said softly. “Good luck.”

Ace smiled. “I’ll be back soon. Thanks for the sandwiches and tea.”

He turned and entered the door of the plane. Seconds later the engine turned over, and Hastings and Miss Trombley stepped back from the noise. After a brief warm-up, the plane taxied out onto the runway. As it did so, small lights flickered on and off, making a line to guide a pilot taking off in the night.

Hastings was standing close to Miss Trombley. He heard her sniff and knew that she had tears in her eyes.

“Do not worry,” he said gently. “He will be back.” He would have reached out and put a reassuring arm about her shoulders, but he was standing to her right and he had no left arm.

Ace ascended to two thousand feet, leveled off, and headed for the coast. Once he was over the Channel, he banked sharply to his right and flew for five minutes parallel to the British coast. Then he dived and leveled out barely a hundred feet over the water, reversed his course for five minutes, and resumed his course for Calais. His maneuver was not part of the plan. Maybe Hastings would figure it out. Ace knew that the British radar was tracking him, but would have lost him when he dropped to one hundred feet altitude. That would cause some worry back at headquarters. He did not know if the Germans had operational radar, but they for sure would have listening devices that could pick him up. Coming in low, the listening devices might have a problem determining whether or not he was an airplane or a warship.

Off to his left he could see flashes of light. The British Navy was making a demonstration for him. He hoped that would add to the confusion.

He was over Calais and not a shot was fired at him. The German blackout was not as complete as he expected. He easily found the road he wanted going out of Calais. There were vehicles on the road with lights. He knew that would soon change. The Germans were very good at organization and rules. Soon, it was time to go back in time, at least in his mind. He followed his instincts after leaving the visual comfort of a busy road. His instincts were guided by an uncanny memory of time and distance, the very essence of the nature of flying ‘by the seat of the pants’ as some termed it.

His mind was clear. There were no thoughts of Angelique or even the job to be accomplished. There were landmarks that he could see or perhaps, simply sense. There was moonlight from the nearly full moon above. He saw for a long second a pale white-washed barn, and he was sure of his location. He kept a close watch out his side window and was soon rewarded with a glimpse that for him was the same as a control tower at a base or airport. There was a small hill and atop the hill were two tall trees whose tops were interlocked. There was moonlight between the trees. It was what he had once named "the keyhole."

He banked hard to the left and swung to the right of the keyhole. He gained altitude, rising to a thousand feet and then cut the engine. The silence seemed strange after the roar of the engine.

The plane glided silently, losing altitude. He banked the plane again, making a large circle until he was once again approaching the keyhole. He again passed to the right of the keyhole. He was now on the glide path for a landing. The British believed the field was clear of obstacles. He hoped they were right.

Gently, almost with a kiss, the wheels touched down. The ground was bumpy, but he was able to keep the plane under control. It was a success. He noticed that he had beads of sweat on his forehead.

The plane coasted up to a shed at the edge of the field. He reached for his shoulder holster and unsnapped the strap that secured his Colt.

Three men approached from the shed. Ace was sure of their identity. It had to be Henri and his two sons. The sons were taller than he remembered, but it had been some years ago.

Ace spoke softly, "Hank?" It was a password that only Henri and his sons would know. When they had first met, Ace called the Frenchman, Henry, and Henri responded with friendly laughter. The language problem was simply solved by Ace declaring that Henri was Hank, a good American nickname.

"*Monsieur Ace!*" came a muted but excited reply. The three men rushed forward, and Ace found himself in a warm embrace. Henri talked quickly. He was both pleased and excited. Ace did understand one word that was said several times. The word was pronounced *Americain*, and he guessed that they were referring to the man he had come to fly out of France.

They hurried to the farmhouse and entered. There was another embrace. Henri's wife, Charmaine, came from the stove. She was a heavy-set woman, her hair was black with flecks of gray, and he thought that she looked enough like Elaine to have been her sister. Somehow, he had never noticed the resemblance until now. He realized that he had put this family in great danger. His appearance could attract the attention of the Germans. This woman who had been kind to him just as Elaine had been, would die, and he would be the cause of her death.

Just then, the door to a room off the kitchen opened and a tall American officer stepped into the kitchen. He was an older man. He had a star on each shoulder. He was a general. He stopped short, a look of astonishment spread rapidly across his face.

"Ace Mathews?"

Ace was equally surprised. "Major Horne?"

The officer laughed as he crossed the room, his hand outstretched. "It's not major anymore. I was promoted a few times since I last saw you."

“Are you the American I’m supposed to fly out of here?”

“That’s right. I have to be extracted, as the spy boys put it. I have some documents that I must get back to the States, and the Germans would never let me get out of France with them, even though we are not at war, at least not yet.”

An attractive French woman came out of the room where General Horne had been waiting.

“This is my cover, Ace. Meet Janice. She works for the British who are running this show.”

Ace and Janice nodded to each other, but neither said a word.

“The British thought it would be good cover, an American officer taking off for a few days in the country with a good-looking French woman.” Horne laughed, shook his head, and continued. “Any self-respecting German officer ought to understand that.”

“That makes sense,” Ace agreed, “But a German officer might have a problem with the Colt forty-five you are wearing.”

“What?” General Horne’s hand dropped down to the holster he wore on a belt. “Yes, I see what you mean?” He glanced over at his French companion. She shrugged.

Ace checked his watch. “We need to be on our way, General.”

“Right. And when we get out of here, you can explain to me what you’re doing working for the British.”

Horne’s companion broke into the conversation. She spoke in English. “We heard your plane overhead. But before we could signal you, we could not hear your plane. I assumed the mission had been aborted at the last minute.”

“Sorry about misleading you, but I shut my engine off in the hope that it would fool any Germans in the area.”

Horne quickly turned his attention to Ace. “You made a dead-stick landing, at night, on a damned cow pasture?”

“It’s not as scary as it sounds,” Ace said with a smile. “I’ve thought about doing it for some time.” He did not explain that some time meant that afternoon, and that a young woman’s impulsive enthusiasm was a factor.

Horne was impressed by the feat, but he was not sure he approved of it. “You were a circus flier when I found you, and twenty years later, you are still a circus flier.”

After more hugs and much talk which Ace did not understand, the plane soon lifted off the ground and into the French night.

“Those people back there were sure glad to see you, Ace. You must have known them a long time. I’m amazed that you can get along with people who you can’t understand.”

“They know I respect them,” Ace replied. “Language sometimes gets everyone all mixed up.”

“That might be a good point,” Horne mused. “There are people in Hollywood still wanting silent movies to come back.” He turned his head suddenly and looked out his side window.

“Ace! For Christ’s sake, I can see trees out the damned window! What’s our altitude?”

“Pretty low, I’d guess,” Ace replied.

Horne checked his seatbelt and then settled back. “You’re the driver, drive on!” He sat silent for a few moments and then asked, “How is it that you are working for the British?”

"Kind of a long story," Ace replied. "There was some trouble with the French, and I flew for the Republic in Spain."

"You a Communist?" Horne asked, his voice working with both disbelief and surprise and coming out on the edge of being garbled.

"Oh, no. The Reds have more rules and regulations than anyone else in the world. It was a job, but the pay wasn't very good."

"How did you do?"

"Not bad. I shot down two Italians, three Germans or Spanish flying the old Heinkels, and one Me-109. I might have done a little better if I hadn't been flying a Chato."

"A Chato?" Horne asked.

"Russian piece of junk."

"That makes you an ace. You've been an ace in two different wars."

The only break in Ace's concentration came as he smiled. "Yes, and I was shot down in both wars."

"Were you wounded?"

"No, but I was caught by Franco's boys."

"Tough luck," Horne said, "But at least they didn't shoot you."

"Well, they were going to, but the British arranged my release."

Horne remained silent, staring at the passing scenery outside his window. He checked the front and saw a road only a few feet below.

"You know you're almost landing on this road?"

"Yes, but it's okay. I've got my landing lights on."

Suddenly, Horne yelled. "There's headlights coming at us!"

"Probably a German truck," Ace replied.

"No! It's a convoy. Get some altitude. We're going to crash into them!"

The leading truck swerved off the road, and the second truck followed. Ace gained enough altitude so that the plane barely skimmed over the roof tops of the following trucks.

It was over in less than a few seconds, if that long. The road ahead was clear.

Ace chuckled and Horne sat in stunned silence. Finally he spoke. "You were playing chicken with a German convoy?"

"Not really," Ace replied. "But we did put two trucks in the ditch. Better yet, wait until they report that they were attacked by a plane on a road. Their superior officers will think the drivers were probably drunk."

"Whatever the British paid to spring you from the Spanish, they sure are getting their money's worth," Horne said as he calmed down. "As soon as I get back, I'm going to see about getting you transferred over to the Army Air Corps."

"I don't know about that," Ace said. "I'm probably too old."

"That's not going to be a problem. We're expanding like crazy, and we need experienced people. For that matter, I retired myself early last year, but I was called back on duty and promoted to general. Besides, I had to fudge the truth a little to get you in the last war because you were too young. Now I'll probably have to bend the truth a little to get you in this war because you're too old. It's a strange world."

"I'm already in this war," Ace replied.

Horne did not reply. He was aware that both the British and the French had been unhappy about the hands-off approach of the Americans.

"I was down in Florida before I was sent over here," Horne said. "I saw your circus, the one you were with before you joined up."

"Oh?" Ace said.

"It wasn't much of a circus. After Basham died, it nearly fell apart."

"Basham's dead?"

"Yes, and the circus was barely more than a forty-mile carnival."

"Forty miles?"

"That's about how far their old trucks can carry them. When I was trying to recruit Griggs and then you, Basham told me that he hoped someday you'd take over the circus for him."

"If I had taken it over, it would be lucky to be a twenty-mile carnival."

Ace did not have time to reflect upon the news that Basham had died. It was the closing of another link to his past.

"Hang on," he said. "We're about to go over Calais. It might get a little rough."

"The Germans have got a helluva concentration of anti-aircraft guns there," Horne warned.

"That's what the British say, too."

There were lights below and Horne would swear that he could see lights out his side window. The plane, going all out, roared over and maybe a little between Calais at two hundred miles an hour. They were out over the Channel and not a shot had been fired.

"That was incredible!" Horne said. "How many hours flying time do you really have?"

"I don't know. Never counted them. I guess I've been flying since about 1916."

"I know. I can still picture you sitting out on the front of that old Wright plane."

"It's starting to get light," Ace said. "Time to let the folks back home know we're coming." He gained altitude, climbing to a thousand feet, and switched on the radio. Both men put on their headsets.

"Hospital, Hospital, come in, Hospital. This is Smallpox calling Hospital."

Ace waited a few seconds and repeated his call. There was a crackling noise in the headsets and then the words, "Smallpox, this is Hospital, over."

"Hospital, this is Smallpox. Vaccination. I say again, Vaccination. Over."

"Smallpox, this is Hospital. Message received. Climb to three thousand feet. Escort in two minutes. Over and out."

Horne took off his headset. "How do they know where we are? How can they say we'll have an escort in two minutes?"

"When I went up to a thousand feet, they picked us up on radar. They've got patrols up already, and it'll be easy for them to vector a patrol in on us. When the Germans come, the radar will pick them up while they are still forming up over their French bases. It's a good trick."

Horne stared thoughtfully ahead, looking for the approach of the escort. "You really think this radar thing is going to work?"

Ace kept close watch out his side window. He was climbing up to three thousand feet, and he was not comfortable with the idea. The Germans would be up by now, also. He regretted not being in an open cockpit where he could look up and behind without difficulty.

"The British think so," Ace replied.

“We’ve got some people studying it, but I don’t think we’re going to get into it very much. I can see why the British are trying to use it. The Germans are sitting on their doorstep. We’re so far away, though, the Germans could never reach us. The Japs might try. They’ve got some aircraft carriers, but our navy would put a stop to that.”

Ace did not respond. These matters were not his concern. He kept close watch and was rewarded.

“There they are, two Hurricanes,” he exclaimed.

“Where?”

“To your right.”

The mission was soon completed, except for what Ace regarded as the worst part, the debriefing that had to be endured. This time, the debriefing officers were mercifully quick. There was really very little to be probed. The mission had gone off without any problems. He did not see Horne again, and he did not expect to see him. The British had experts who would give Horne a much deeper debriefing as well as examining and copying the documents he carried.

During Ace’s debriefing, the package of sandwiches and the thermos of tea, sat on the table by him. After the debriefing was over, he walked down the hall with the package under his arm. Miss Trombley came out of an office door.

“I heard that you were successful,” she said.

“Yes. I didn’t get a chance to eat the sandwiches, but I’m hungry now. Why don’t you join me? We can split the sandwiches. It feels like there’s easily enough for two.”

Miss Trombley smiled and almost shyly said, “I didn’t get much in the way of breakfast this morning, but that will have to wait. Major Hastings is expecting to see you.”

As they walked side by side, Ace asked, “Have you been here all night?”

“Yes, but I did catch a nap, and I am certain that I shall have some time today.”

The door to Hastings’ office was open and they entered. Hastings was standing behind his desk, his hand holding a paper which he had been reading.

“I say, good work, very good work. Come on in. This will not take long.”

“Okay,” Ace said. “But I need to borrow your office for a while. Miss Trombley packed me a lunch and I didn’t get time to eat it. She’s agreed to join me. I’ll only need a corner of your desk.”

Major Hastings was astonished, but he reacted by laughing. When he stopped, he answered, “That is remarkably cheeky!” He shook his head. “This is highly irregular. I suppose it is the war. Very well, but Miss Trombley, not a word of this to anyone. And no crumbs!”

“Yes, sir,” Miss Trombley replied meekly.

As Hastings reached the door, he stopped and turned to look at Ace. “I understand that you and the American are old friends. He informed us that you have some rather interesting flying techniques. I shall return in twenty minutes.”

After Hastings closed the door, Miss Trombley quickly opened the package and spread the paper on the desk. There were two sandwiches, each cut in half. The small thermos cap provided the only cup for the tea which was not very hot. They pulled up chairs to the corner of the desk. Miss Trombley had put three of the halves and the tea out for Ace and kept a half sandwich for herself.

Ace picked up his sandwich, looked at it, and exclaimed, "Peanut butter and jelly! I haven't had a peanut butter and jelly sandwich since I don't know when. Where did you get peanut butter?"

"This is an interesting place to work," she responded. "Beyond that, I cannot say. A military secret." She laughed, caught herself being relaxed, and quickly became more proper.

They talked while they ate. Ace was hungry and quickly ate his share. Miss Trombley ate slowly and carefully. Ace remembered that when he was a boy in the orphanage, Miss Castor gave instructions on the proper way to eat. Food must be chewed a hundred times and the mouth must be closed while chewing.

Miss Trombley never took her eyes off of him. She asked questions, but they were simple questions, the kind of questions that a person almost totally innocent of the ways of the world would think to ask.

They had finished eating when Hastings returned to his office. As he entered, he looked about the room and especially at his desk and nodded, "No crumbs. Good show."

Ace looked at Miss Trombley and asked, "Do you have a ride home? We could share a taxi."

"You are free to leave," Hastings said, "But, Miss Trombley is not finished with her work."

Ace was puzzled, but Hastings' tone of voice left no doubt in his mind that he was dismissed. He rose from his chair, thanked Miss Trombley for her kindness, nodded at Hastings and headed for the door.

"You need sleep," Hastings said. "You've been on your feet now for close on to twenty-four hours. In point of fact, you do not need to report for duty for two whole days."

When he saw the look of surprise on Ace's face, Hastings added, "You've earned it. Your American friend was very impressed with our operational skills."

After Ace was gone, Miss Trombley sat back in the chair and relaxed. She took off her glasses, held them up to the light and squinted. She took a small handkerchief from a pocket and busied herself with polishing the glasses.

Hastings began the laborious task of filling his pipe. He had some difficulty making the pipe fit correctly in the device on his desk.

"Well, what is your assessment?" he asked.

Miss Trombley hesitated, held her glasses up to the light and inspected her work, and then put them on again, taking care to properly fit them to the bridge of her nose.

"Of all the people here whom I have studied, this man is the strangest of the lot. Quite frankly, I cannot draw any firm conclusions. He is the most pleasant of your staff, by far. I could not even reach a decision about his eyes. Sometimes, they appear to be blue, then gray, and even a touch of green. Rather peculiar."

"What about stability?"

"Oh, he is the most stable of all the people I have interviewed. If anything, he is too stable. He does not seem to have any deep-seated hatreds. He will fight the Germans, as he has done now in two wars."

"Three, actually," Hastings interrupted.

"Yes, of course, I forgot the Spanish affair. But there is no sign of hatred. We know he has Negro and Jewish friends. Then there is the matter of ambition. I could not detect any

sign of ambition. It is as if his main interest is to simply start each new day with a clean slate, and whatever is written on the slate during the day is written. In this mission he just completed, he had no fear that I could detect. It was a job to be performed and nothing more.”

“He certainly has nerves of steel. Landing a plane at night on a pasture can be done, but only if the pilot has absolute confidence in his ability to allow the plane to settle down and touch the ground. To do it with the engine switched off, well, there can be no second chance, you see.”

Miss Trombley watched as Hastings finally got his pipe loaded and lit. “Some day I shall write a report on your use of a pipe as a prop, or perhaps a crutch.”

Hastings took the pipe from his mouth and looked at it.

“Tell me. Were you really as concerned as you appeared to have been when our subject was preparing to begin his trip?”

“I was concerned. Yes, and I do not mind admitting that sharing a taxi with him was of some interest, but only for the moment. He has no charisma at all, but he does have a warmth that is somehow mixed with a sense of danger. Not danger because of anything he might threaten, but because he seems to always be on the edge of danger. It is like that terrible scar on his face. The scar means danger, and on the other side of his face, a warmth that could easily be stirred into romance or passion. Does that make any sense?”

“Miss Trombley, you are tired. It has been a long day for both of us. Go home and rest.”

“Yes, yes, of course.” She rose from her chair. “There is one other matter. While we were eating, he voiced concern about the French family we used for this operation. He might be tempted to compromise a mission in order to protect his friends.”

After Miss Trombley left his office, Hastings sat in his chair and puffed on his pipe. He smiled as he considered the probable cause of Miss Trombley’s apparent confusion. It was quite unlike her. In the past, she had always exhibited a starchy professionalism. Nevertheless, her written report would undoubtedly make interesting reading. Her work for the department had been outstanding, but in this case, he was certain that she had missed the most important aspect. The American was a free spirit floating about in the most dangerous of all possible worlds.

Ace took a taxi to his rooms after he left the headquarters. He was sorry that Miss Trombley did not share the taxi. She was an interesting young woman, but his interest in her was because of her value as a distraction. She was so proper. Some of her questions, however, were curious. Mainly, though, she kept him from thinking about Angelique. She kept him from thinking about Elaine. The French farmwife really looked like she could be Elaine's sister. He had never noticed that before. Maybe he saw it now because Elaine was dead. The French farmer and his wife were doing dangerous work. He knew that if they were caught, they would be shot. How many names of his friends scattered about France had he given to the British? How many would die before this war finally ended one way or another?

Then there was Angelique. He knew that he should put an end to it. It was all wrong. He was too old. She was too young. Here he was sneaking around to see the young daughter of his best friend, the man who had saved his life. Then why didn't he do it? He knew that when he was away from her for very long, he missed her. This was all new and strange territory for him.

It was mid-morning by the time Ace returned to his rooms. He slept for almost twelve hours, and when he awoke, he was still weary. He grimaced as he eased out of bed. It was not like the old days when he could easily go twenty-four hours without sleep, then sleep for eight to ten hours and be completely recovered. He bathed and shaved. His left hip reminded him of the car wreck some years before, but as he moved about, the ache stopped. He was hungry. He put on the second of the three uniforms he possessed and wrapped up the badly used uniform for the cleaners. After eating, he left the restaurant and looked around for a pub. He had drinks, three in all, and then left.

The sun was still shining and the temperature was reasonable. It was late, at least ten o'clock, but the sun was up at ten o'clock in London in the summer. With double daylight savings time, there was little relationship between sun and time and night.

He walked slowly, ignoring people passing by, his mind on other matters. It had been good to see Horne again. He remembered Griggs and Basham, both gone now. He hailed a taxi.

"Do you know where the French Canteen is?"

"Aye, that I do, but it's a goodly distance from here, sir."

"Let's go."

The canteen was a long cab ride away, and when they arrived, Ace could see nothing that looked like a club or a canteen.

"Down that alleyway, sir."

It was a short walk down the alley. Ace could hear music coming from a building that looked like a small warehouse. The door was open. He entered. The place was packed with young French troops, men who had been evacuated from the beaches at Dunkirk along with British soldiers, and who had not returned to serve under the Vichy government.

Angelique was up on a stage with a man at a piano on her left and another with an accordion on her right. She had no microphone, nor did she need one. Her voice came out clear and strong. She did not mimic Piaff's style as so many singers tried to do. She had her own style.

When she finished, the young soldiers crowded around the stage and applauded. They were excited and so was Angelique. Her face was shining with perspiration; she was laughing and waving at the soldiers.

One young man stepped forward with a rose in his hand and offered it up to her. She bent over, took the rose, and nearly fell off the stage when she leaned too far in order to kiss him on his forehead. There were many gallant hands forward quickly to keep her from falling, and when her lips brushed the soldier's forehead, there was an even greater burst of applause and cheering.

The accordion player started into the opening of the "*Marseilles*," the piano player followed, and Angelique came in with her strong voice. She waved to the soldiers to sing along and they did so with great enthusiasm.

Ace waited until the song was finished, partly out of respect for the French, and partly because he was fond of the song. Angelique understood how to give the song all the power it inherently possessed. When the last notes were drowned by cheering and applause, he turned and walked back outside.

"Where to, Guv?" the taxi driver asked after responding to Ace's hail.

Ace gave the driver the address

"It's a long ride, Guv. It being dark and all now, we have to go a little slower. Can't show much light, can we, what with Jerry maybe prowling about."

It was better this way, Ace thought during the long ride back to his rooms. Angelique looked so happy. The soldiers were men not much older than she, and it was possible that some of them might not even be as old. There were so many young men in uniform. They looked almost like half-grown children. He wondered if the Germans were also using their children to fight this war. He shook his head when he recalled that when he had first arrived at the squadron back in 1918, someone had growled, "Now, they're robbing the cradle."

It was good that this business between him and Angelique was at an end. She was so young, and he was not. Nevertheless, there was a pain, the kind of pain that he had never felt before. Time would heal this peculiar kind of pain. There was a good side to all this, he reassured himself. The trip had not been wasted. Tomorrow, he would go back to the canteen and see Joe and Cassie. He had neglected them, and he knew it was because of his feelings for Angelique.

When Ace was within two blocks of the building where he lived, he told the driver to stop. He said he would walk the rest of the way, that he needed the exercise. In part, that was true, but the decision was also part of his training. He had given the driver a wrong address from the start. Leaving the cab and walking four blocks, two of them too far, and then coming back the two blocks, might upset the timing of anyone following him. He doubted that the tactic was particularly effective, but it did serve to remind him that it might be a good idea to keep his wits about him and not think about other matters.

He entered his rooms and quickly checked for any signs of an intruder, present or past. Ace took off his tunic and carefully stretched it over the back of a chair. The shoulder holster and gun were draped over a bedpost near where his head would lay. His pants

were carefully folded and deposited in the chair with the coat. When he was ready for bed, he poured himself a drink and lay down on the bed. He looked around in the dim light shed by a small lamp on the nightstand.

His rooms were actually only one room with a bed, two chairs, a small table, a small cabinet instead of a closet, the night stand, and the light. The kitchen was a small alcove, and to call it even a kitchenette would be an overstatement. There was a bathroom that was not very generous although the plumbing did work, and there was occasional hot water.

He lit a cigarette, but he did so knowing that the already stuffy room would quickly become both smoky and stuffy. There was one window by the bed, but it was sealed shut and there was a curtain that blocked any view out as well as in, which was the main purpose.

It was a safe house for people who worked for the headquarters. He was sure that there were other people living in the building, but he never saw them. He wondered if they ever saw him.

An image of Angelique singing for the French soldiers slipped into his mind. He chased the image away, but that image was replaced by a sudden realization that brought him out of bed. Ace looked around the room. He poured himself a shot of whiskey and drank it in one gulp, which was not his habit, and he choked and sputtered.

Words blurted out of his mouth. "My God, I'm almost forty, and this is all I have to show for it?"

He quickly looked around as if he expected someone to have observed him in one of the very rare moments when he was not really in control of himself. He quickly set the glass down on the table by the bottle and retreated to the bed.

He snuffed out the cigarette, reached for another, and lit it. Things would change. Tomorrow would be the first day of a better life. He had money. Besides the pittance the British paid him, he had money in a British bank and in a Swiss bank. He had barely gotten his money out of the French bank before the Germans arrived.

It would not be easy to find a decent place. London was crowded, but it was not impossible. Money was still a powerful tool. He thought of Maggie. Whenever she had to spend money for something, she usually responded by saying, "That's what money is for."

Ace decided that he would spend his free day tomorrow looking for an apartment, a comfortable place, preferably close to a pub where food might be served. That would be a start. He could begin his search in the area of the canteen. That way, he could also see Joe and Cassie. Maybe they could get away and join him for lunch. That would be good.

He finished the cigarette and snuffed it out in the ashtray. He had made more decisions this night than in any number of years, and he believed they were good decisions. He rolled over on his side, closed his eyes and was soon asleep.

When he opened his eyes again, the dark curtain was lighter, and he knew he had slept well for hours, and that it was daylight outside. He checked his watch. It was almost ten o'clock. He quickly bathed and shaved and had his pants and shirt on and was searching in the bottom of the cabinet for a clean pair of socks when there was a knock at the door.

It was the wrong knock. He raised up and dived across the bed, his hand reaching for his holstered gun. He then moved quickly to the door, unlatched it and opened it wide

with a quick motion, his body in line with the door, his right arm crooked so that the gun in his hand covered the opening.

“Angelique!”

It was Angelique, and she stood there in the door with a package in her hand.

“You are surprised to see me, yes? May I enter?”

He hesitated a moment, not quite sure how to react, but quickly regained control.

“Yes, yes, of course.” He stepped aside so she could enter the room. As she passed, he leaned out the door and checked to see if anyone was in the hall or peering out of a nearby door. There was no one to be seen.

“So, this is where you live.” She walked to the table and put down the package and opened it. There was a container and two Danish pastries wrapped in paper napkins.

“They are not croissants and they are a day old, but it is all I could find. The coffee is fresh. I would have been here earlier, but it was not so easy to find the coffee. I did not expect to be greeted with a pistol.”

“I’m sorry about that,” Ace said. He returned the pistol to its holster and followed her to the table, opened the container, and tasted the coffee. It was warm. He set the container down and faced the young woman.

“How did you find this place?”

“Oh, it was easy,” she replied with a toss of her long black hair. “Remember the day I returned your lighter?”

“Yes.” His voice was softer. It was a day that had been in his mind ever since.

She smiled. She picked up a pastry, tore off a bite sized piece and put it to his lips.

“We took different taxis. I had my driver follow your taxi. He understood, or at least pretended to understand. We followed you until you got out of your taxi and did a very strange, uh, yes, a very strange thing.” She looked puzzled. “I have never understood this word, thing.”

“What strange thing?” Ace asked as he chewed on the morsel she had offered him.

“You got out of your taxi too soon. You walked two, or perhaps three blocks, and then another two blocks, then turned around and came back the same distance before entering this house.”

“I didn’t see your taxi,” Ace said. “Your driver must be very good.”

“He thought it was a great game, that I was following you to see if there was another woman, yes?” She laughed and attempted to mimic the driver. “He spoke in a strange English way, ‘E’s a strange bloke, that one. ‘E’s forgot where ‘e’s going’.”

Ace shook his head and laughed. Angelique assumed that he was laughing at her imitation. She was partly correct, but mostly his laughter was due to his ability to see the utter absurdity involved. All his years of training and years of experience were so easily upended by a young woman who simply wanted to know where he lived.

Angelique walked over to the bed, sat down, and patted the bed.

“Come, join me. I do not want to stand very long in these shoes. They are Rachel’s and they do not fit me very well.”

Ace did as she asked, but was careful to keep some distance between them.

“You should not be here.”

“Why?”

“Because, it is a safe house.”

She laughed and replied, “Then it is the best place to be.”

“You don’t understand. This is a secret house owned by the government.”

She looked around. “This British government, it does not spend very much money for its safe houses, I think.”

“That’s true enough, but you should not be here.”

“Oh, but I must. I am returning your visit.”

“My visit?”

“*Oui*, ah, yes. I saw you last night. You were at the canteen. By the time I could get off the stage, you were gone. Why did you leave?”

He reached over and took her hand in his. “I left because I saw how happy you were, how much you enjoyed singing, and the young men, men your age, they all loved you. It was wrong of me to go there.”

“But you were there,” she said softly. She stood up and began unbuttoning her blouse.

“Angelique! What are you doing?”

“I am doing what needs to be done,” she said calmly. “The last year of my school, there were girls there who would be married soon. They told us that this time must come. It is time for us, Ace. Our love must be made real. If not, there will be no flower and our love will die like a plant in the winter.”

She unbuttoned the last button and slipped out of the blouse. There was no slip, no camisole, under the blouse.

Ace was speechless. He stared as she dropped her skirt and panties to the floor and stood in front of him.

“Oh, I forgot.” She sat down on the bed and made a show of removing the anklets. Then she moved with a graceful motion so that she lay on the bed on her side, one long leg stretching out to touch his leg.

“Lay beside me,” she said. It was not a command. It was not a plea. But it was enough.

Ace moved almost as if in a trance until he was by her side in the bed. He reached out to her, but stopped. “We can’t do this.”

“Why?”

“Joe, your father. I can’t betray him.”

“What is between you and Poppa is not our concern.” She smiled, “And what is between you and I, it should be, for we are in love.”

She opened his shirt and gasped when she saw the thin white scar running across his upper belly. She peeled back the shirt from his shoulders and felt him quiver as her breast brushed across him. She saw the two bullet scars.

She quickly moved to his pants, unbuckling his belt and undoing the buttons.

“This is wrong,” he said huskily, but he made no move to stop her.

She jumped to her feet on the bed and whisked off his pants and underpants and then dropped to her knees.

“You are the man I thought you would be,” she said as she looked at him. She noticed the scars on his legs just above the knees where his legs had been broken in the crash on the last day of the last world war.

She traced the scars with her finger and then moved up and traced the scar across his belly. Her fingers touched the two bullet scars in his left shoulder. She then moved up his body and gently kissed the scar on his face.

Then, suddenly, she sat up and looked at him. She asked solemnly, "Did not anyone ever miss?"

Ace stared back at her, and then he laughed, his arms reaching for her and she moved to join him. He rolled her over and there was no more debate in his mind.

Chapter 35

There really was no doubt in his mind. Ace truly believed that for the first time in his life, he was in love. The hours that he was away from Angelique were long and hard and that was true even when he was flying. Two days after her first visit, Angelique returned to the safe house and they spent the time from mid-morning to afternoon tea together. He told her that he loved her, which came as no surprise to the young woman. She told him that she had known that long before he did, and Ace responded by refusing to believe it.

"Oh, it is true," she said. "When I became a woman, just before I became twelve, I knew I was in love with you and that one day we would be together. If I believed that, how could you not believe it also, yes?"

Ace was hopelessly entangled by the words she delivered and he had no chance of following her curious twists of logic. He shrugged and kissed her.

Between the second and third meeting, there was an interval of four days. Each day, Angelique made the trip to the safe house and then returned to Maggie's flat where she, Cassie, and Joe were comfortably settled. She never lost hope. This was the way her relationship with Ace would have to be, and she was content. He would come back from wherever he was because he always came back. She put aside one of those inconvenient thoughts that can slip through the cracks of the mind. Her other hero, Roland, did not come back one day. She dismissed the unwelcome thought. Roland lived a long time ago and he did not have her to come back to after his knightly duty was performed.

During those four days, Ace was busy. The first day, he was assigned a mission and sequestered at the airbase until the start of the mission which was to begin on the third day. It was not a difficult mission, as far as he was concerned. He was to fly a Frenchman back to France. At the proper time and at the proper location, the Frenchman would parachute down to the ground where he would meet friends. After his passenger parachuted, Ace would then return to the base.

The mission was a failure. They were only a few minutes out over the English Channel when a German night fighter jumped them. The Frenchman was killed when a burst of machine gun fire tore through the small aircraft. Ace was untouched and immediately began evasive action to escape the German.

He broke radio silence to report his situation and was cleared to make his landing. The plane was hard to control. The burst of machine gun fire that had killed the Frenchman was just one of several that ripped into his plane.

When he landed, the landing gear failed, the wheels splayed outward on contact, and he finished the landing with the belly of the plane digging a furrow in the grass landing strip. It was a landing completed without a pilot because when the wheels gave way, the resulting jolt threw Ace sideways, his head breaking the window. He did not return to consciousness until he was being lifted out of the plane by a rescue crew.

Hastings insisted that Ace be kept in a hospital for twenty-four hours as a precaution. Ace assured him that he was fine physically, but saddened by the death of his passenger. Hastings was concerned, but it was not just because of a possible brain concussion. Ace had seemed a bit moody of late. His usual happy-go-lucky American attitude was subdued. There had been a marked change, however, for the past few days. Hastings wondered what Miss Trombley would have made of the change. Of course, she would not know the entire story. He knew because he had the documents in a folder tucked away in a desk drawer.

The documents were reports made by people whose job it was to keep an eye on the house where Ace lived. The reports claimed that he was being visited by a young woman with a dark complexion, possibly Indian or Egyptian.

Only Hastings knew the true identity of the young woman. She was one of the family that Ace had brought out of Paris just hours before the city was surrendered to the Germans. The documents had raised the hackles of some of the senior members of the headquarters group. The American was considered to be incorrigible and clearly did not understand proper form. Now that the special plane was destroyed in the aborted mission, there were some who believed that the American should be unceremoniously dismissed and sent packing back to the United States. Hastings would have to find a way to defuse the ticking bomb.

When Ace reported to Hastings after being released from the hospital, the major told him that he should take a few days off, in fact, the next seven days. "You really should get away, you know," Hastings said.

"Where to?"

"Oh, say the seashore, for instance. Lovely there this time of year."

"And have some old Home Guard types take potshots at me?"

Hastings chuckled. "I suppose the beach is not a particularly good place to be." He fumbled in a pocket for his pipe. "Of course, wherever you go, you must remember that you are connected with a group that is rather concerned about security. Keep a low profile."

Ace appeared to be puzzled by Hastings' curious insistence on his taking a week off and then the business about security. His face broke into a broad smile that forced the scar to bend almost into a crescent shape.

"Somebody's been telling stories about me, right?"

"Let us just say that there are certain reports concerning a visitor to a house that some in our organization deemed to be safe, completely secure. You should not have told her about the house and its location."

"I didn't tell her anything," Ace replied.

“Oh, I say. That does not seem very probable. How could she discover our safe house? Though, come to think of it, she is associated with two agents, a Zionist and the other a Communist.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Ace said quickly. “Cassie and Rachel? What in the world would they be spying on here? Both are working in jobs that don’t pay, and they aren’t exactly having tea with Mr. Churchill as far as I know. My secret hiding place was discovered because the young woman followed me. She did it the old-fashioned way. She got a taxi driver to follow my driver. Then she watched as I went through the usual procedure to throw off anybody following me.”

“That simple?” Hastings asked. He tried to suppress a smile but failed, and then covered it with a slight cough and a clearing of his throat. “Could I perhaps make a suggestion that you discover the values and perhaps even the delights of discretion?”

Ace nodded. “I’ve been thinking that I’d like a better place for my quarters. Maybe something a little fancier.”

“That is a good idea,” Hastings said. “I trust you will keep me informed of your second location. I should not wish to have to assign someone like Miss Trombley to follow you in a taxi.”

“By the way,” Ace asked, “Where is Miss Trombley? I haven’t seen her around.”

“Miss Trombley’s services are required elsewhere. She has been transferred.”

Three more days passed and Angelique and Ace were very happy together, and Ace was not discreet. However, he did discuss with Angelique the problem concerning his current rooms. He kept the discussion within the bounds of the quality of his rooms and not the security factor.

“I am happy here,” she responded. “Why do we need a different place?”

“Because I would like something better for myself and for you. There is no problem about the money. Finding something in London right now is not going to be easy.”

She was silent for a moment. She sat up in bed and stared at him. “We need a ring?”

“A ring?”

“Yes, a ring. If we are to have a proper place, we must have a proper ring, yes?”

“Do you mean an engagement ring?”

“That is what I mean, exactly.”

Now it was Ace’s turn to be silent. He sat up and faced her. “Are you sure that is what you want?”

“I have been certain since I was a little girl. I have spent years waiting for you.”

On the third day, they did not make love. They shopped for a ring. Angelique saw a ring with an opal setting that had flashes of red in it when it was held up in the light. When Ace paid for the ring, he told the clerk that it was an engagement ring and that he and Angelique were going to be married.

The clerk was an older man. He looked at Ace and then at Angelique, and said, “Of course.” His expression never changed. He did permit a small smile to appear as he handed Ace his change. “Good luck, sir.”

They had no luck finding an apartment or even rooms. Ace explained to Angelique that he had some old friends who might be able to help, but it would take a while to find a suitable place.

“It is not important,” Angelique said. “We are engaged. This is a wonderful day. I shall love you forever, I think. And, I know you love me. That is what is important.”

Ace heard himself say those strange words, "I love you, Angelique. For the first time in my life, I really am in love."

They kissed and then parted. It was growing late, and she had to leave. Ace watched as she entered a taxi and the vehicle moved off. His own words rang in his head and he listened to them over and over. He walked and was not really aware of where he was walking. He was young once more, and the world was out there ready to be flown over again and again. There were no doubts in his mind. The past was forgotten. There was no past and the present was simply the beginning of the future.

Eventually, he came sufficiently to his senses so that he could find a taxi and return to the not-so-secret safe house. As he made his silly extra two blocks walk away from the house, a man joined him and walked beside him. He was a courier from headquarters, and Hastings was waiting.

Ace guessed that he was in trouble, but that was not unusual. His relationship with the British had been rocky from the start. His unauthorized trip to Paris had not helped. There was also the fact that his life had changed. The whole world had changed. Ever since he had been rescued from the Spanish prison, the British had made it quite clear that unless he cooperated, there might be no alternative except for his being turned over to the French. That would not be good, but the French were no longer friends with the British. The new French government was cooperating with the Germans. There was another possibility, but he did not believe the British would kill him. The British knew he had an American general for a friend. He dismissed that thought. He trusted Hastings, maybe not completely, but enough. Another alternative was that the British might just tell him to get lost. After all, he knew no secrets beyond the location of the headquarters and the safe house. He smiled as he sat in the taxi on the way to the headquarters. Half the taxi drivers in London probably knew the location of both places.

As he walked down the hallway at the headquarters that led to Hastings' office, he thought about how much he had enjoyed his previous trips when he had been escorted by Miss Trombley, but that was behind him now. He was convinced that Angelique was the most exciting woman he had ever met. He reached the proper door, knocked, and entered after hearing Hastings' muffled response.

He found Hastings seated behind his desk and fumbling with the pipe-loading device on the desk.

"Come in, have a chair, old chap. We have a matter to discuss."

Ace could very well guess as to the matter, but he was puzzled by what appeared to be the one-armed man's apparent good humor. He sat down and waited for whatever was to come. He knew that Hastings would never reveal exactly what was on his mind, and the little piece that Ace was to know would not come until the pipe-loading ceremony was completed.

After the first puff of smoke, Hastings spoke. "You are aware that our battle for control of the skies over Britain is turning out to be a rather dicey business?"

"I've heard that," Ace said. "It's beginning to look like the winner is going to be the one who has one plane left when the other side has none."

"We have enough machines. The lads in the factories are keeping up. Our problem is pilots. We are sending up youngsters with only ten or twelve hours flying time in the Hurricanes. We are keeping the Spits for the more experienced fellows."

Ace decided to save Hastings from any further need to chase around the bush. "What you want is for me to become a fighter pilot."

"A good guess. We received a request from the government for a combing-out of our personnel to find anyone with flight experience or, better yet, anyone with fighter training or experience. All British home commands are involved in the process."

Ace's response was a flat, "Okay." He had never backed away from a challenge, especially if it meant flying. This time was different. His first thought was of Angelique. He must tell her that he would be gone for a while. He did not want to be away from her, but this was important. It was not spy work. It was time that he met the German once again in the sky.

Hastings was not surprised by the American's one word reply. The look on Ace's face was most curious, however. He appeared to be flat, devoid of any spark of enthusiasm.

"You will be posted to Leigh-Mallory's Ten Group up in the north. As yet, they have not been deeply involved in the battle, but it is expected that they will soon move south and reinforce Eleven Group."

"When do I leave?" Ace asked

"You are to report for duty tomorrow, as soon as possible."

Ace rose from his chair. "I better get busy. I've got to pack, and there's a few loose ends I need to tie up."

"Good show!" Hastings said as he rose from his chair. "Be careful up there. I need you back here after this emergency is over. We have a long war to fight."

After Ace left the office, Hastings reached over on one side of his desk and picked up a folder. It had several red flags on it. He set it back down again. The order to find fliers could not have come at a better time. He did not know how long the emergency would last, but surely it would be long enough for him to smooth over the troubled waters. Hastings looked up at the ceiling and whispered, "God, I am sending out what may be the last free spirit in the world. Please look after him. Thank you."

After leaving the headquarters, Ace returned to the safe house and packed for his trip north. He was not in a hurry. He had time to spare. It would be at least two hours before Angelique would be on duty at the French Canteen. He would see her and tell her not to worry. He would be back.

He had dinner at a restaurant followed by two drinks at a pub.

It was still early when he arrived at the French Canteen. He checked his kitbag with a young woman who stowed it in an open closet and gave him a ticket.

"I won't be long," he told the young woman. "Is Angelique here?"

Just as he asked, Angelique entered, "Ace! You have come to hear me sing, yes?"

"Is there a place where we can talk?" Ace asked.

"What is wrong?" Angelique responded quickly.

"I'm being shipped out," Ace said.

The young woman who was in charge of the closet understood immediately. Her eyes became sad and she reached out a sympathetic hand and touched Angelique's shoulder.

"Where are you going?"

"Fighter command in the north. I don't know how long I'll be gone. At least a couple of weeks, maybe a month."

There were tears forming in Angelique's eyes when she asked, "When do you leave?"

"Tonight. As soon as I leave here."

Angelique shrank back a step as if she had been struck. "So soon. So soon. We have so much we need to do. Oh, Ace." She could speak no more. She was crying. The tears ran down her face.

Ace took her in his arms and tried to kiss the tears away. "I'll be back, Angelique. I promise. And when I get back, we will start our lives all over again. I promise."

She raised her lips to his and they kissed. It was a long kiss, a wartime goodbye kiss that somehow combined love and hope and fear all into one moment of parting.

"I must go now," Ace said as they stopped kissing but still held each other. "I will always love you,"

"Goodbye, my Ace, my knight. Come back to me."

Ace turned and the young woman handed him his kitbag.

"Bon chance, Monsieur."

There was another person who had watched the tearful leave-taking. Cassie happened to be working late in the canteen kitchen, and she watched from the door.

It should not have been a long journey. Three hours would have sufficed in the time before the war, but this night the train did not move swiftly, and there were times when it stopped completely to allow a more urgent express to pass by with a great rush.

The train was crowded. Two soldiers and an old couple shared Ace's compartment. The soldiers were young. They reminded him of the French troops he had seen at the canteen.

He could tell from their muted conversation that both had been at Dunkirk and rescued off the beach. They noticed that he wore a different uniform and inquired about his branch of service.

"Canadian Royal Air Force," Ace replied.

"Blimey! You Canadians are a welcome lot," said one of the soldiers. "We're going home to see the folks. We got three days, and about time, I'd say. Hope Jerry can keep from invading us until we get back."

"You're safe," Ace said. "The Germans can't come until they control the skies."

The old couple followed the conversation with interest. The woman spoke. "My grandson was at Dunkirk. He didn't come back." She pulled out a handkerchief and wiped tears from her eyes.

Her words brought a quick and deep quietness to the compartment. Ace retreated from the reality of the train ride through the night, noting as he did so that rain was making rivulets down the compartment window.

He did not spend much time considering the problem that he would have with Joe. He knew that his love for Angelique would push his friendship with Joe to the breaking point, but he was sure that after the first shock, Joe would come to accept him as Angelique's husband.

He thought the word "husband" was a strange word. Events had happened so quickly. Why didn't it happen with Maggie? He thought he knew the answer to that question. Both he and Maggie held back a part of themselves, and then there was the problem of their not being equals. They were from different worlds. It was not that way with Angelique. They came from the same city, Paris. He had come to Paris as a young man, but not quite as old as Angelique now. After a fashion, both had grown up in Paris, except maybe it was a different Paris for her. No, that could not be true. Paris was always Paris.

Maybe after the war, they would be able to live in Paris. He knew that they could not possibly live in the States. He would never subject her to that kind of life. She was apparently unaware that she was not white. But, then, neither was she not colored. In Paris, it made no difference and life could be good.

The train stopped on a siding and another train passed by them, probably heading for London, and most likely carrying troops to reinforce those guarding the beaches. The rain was coming down harder now. His companions were dozing. Ace felt sorry for the old woman. Her son had probably served during the First World War, and he must have

survived. She probably thought she was lucky. Then along came another war, and her grandson was killed.

Maybe someday this war would be over. It might take years, but it would end. He and Angelique must have some kind of a future together after the war.

There was money. He would be able to find comfortable lodgings for them. Angelique could not live in the fashion he had endured for most of his life. She must have better. There had to be a way to make a living in Paris. He knew he could not return to his old occupation. Too much had changed since those days. There would still be people in Paris who knew him and trusted him. He had no doubt that they would help him, as long as he could be of some service to them. He would have to be careful, though.

Ace realized that his plans, or the rough mental sketches that might be crafted into plans, depended on the British winning the war. They might not even be able to hold their own beaches.

The train started moving again. The old man stirred and reached out with a hand and placed it on the old woman's hand. Her eyes opened and she smiled wanly at her companion.

The train moved, but Ace remained trapped in his thoughts. He was not comfortable, and would have welcomed any diversion, but none occurred. The silence remained. His mind was like the train compartment, speeding along on a rainy night to a particular destination that was a spot on the map, the spot being the future, and he knew the location of neither one.

Sleep came to his rescue. It was the one bolt-hole in this night's fabric and he slipped through. He did not awaken until the train jolted to a stop and the window showed a gray, drizzly morning outside.

Ace caught a ride in the back of an army truck present at the station to pick up arrivals. He was thankful that there was a canvas cover over the back of the truck. At the base, Ace was directed to his squadron and carrying his kitbag over one shoulder, he walked into the small building that housed the squadron duty office.

Inside, there was a small anteroom, a desk and chair, and a rather gruff appearing sergeant seated in the chair. He looked up from his papers on the desk. He was obviously not impressed by the appearance of a new officer.

"Captain McFetters reporting for duty," Ace said.

The sergeant nodded and rose from his chair and stepped over to the door and knocked. He opened the door and announced, "New replacement, sir. Captain McFetters, is here."

Captain Blair moved quickly to the door. "Captain McFetters, welcome, and come on in. Sergeant, find some tea for us, if you please, and have an orderly take the captain's kit over to his quarters."

The sergeant acknowledged the request which was, in the British manner, an order. Ace entered the office. He stood at attention even though both he and Blair were of the same rank. Blair was the commander.

Blair waved his hand at a chair. "Sit down, relax. We are a bit informal here."

Ace could see that the captain was a young man, maybe in his early twenties. He was tall for a fighter pilot, maybe six feet, two inches, but slender. His eyes were bright and he was the picture of a person born to command.

"I was just looking at your records. They came through this morning," Blair said as he sat down. "Most unusual for records to come through so promptly."

"I just learned of my transfer yesterday, myself," Ace said.

"You are rather old for this business," Blair mused. "I was not looking forward to having an older person in the squadron, but after I glanced through your records, well, most astounding. You've been an ace in two different wars? Quite remarkable."

"I got lucky," Ace replied.

"Well, I suppose that is always a part of the equation. My squadron, all put together, has shot down precisely zero Jerry's. I was able to bag three of the blighters when I was with Eleven Group in the south. Then I was assigned here to take over this squadron. It is my first command. I do not mind telling you; life was considerably easier when I was just a fighter pilot. By the way, what is the date of your commission?"

Ace laughed. He knew what was troubling the young squadron leader. "I've been a captain for a long time. I think I made captain about three days after the Wright brothers flew for the first time."

"I see," Blair said thoughtfully, his brows furrowed to the extent that his young skin would permit.

"But I wouldn't know the first thing about being a squadron commander. The only time my being a captain means anything is on payday."

Blair brightened perceptibly after Ace's declaration.

"Good enough," he said. "We will have you settled in today. We are standing down, but I expect we will be practicing formation flying tomorrow. You are checked out on the Hurricane?"

"I guess so," Ace replied. "I think I've got some two hundred hours in the Hurricane. I spent months back in Canada, uh, back home, as a flight instructor."

Blair shook his head. "I wonder if my chaps have that many hours all together. Now, your mechanic is a Corporal Carter. He is really very good with engines, but a bit surly. He is not at all fond of officers. I am certain he is a bloody socialist, if not worse. He drinks too much, and is an expert at finding alcohol where none is believed to exist."

There was a knock on the door. "Come in," Blair said.

It was the duty sergeant and he came to report that there was no tea available at this time and then exited, shutting the door behind him.

Blair shook his head. "I fear we are running a rather untidy show here."

The squadron bunkhouse was a plywood structure that had been hurriedly cobbled together. There were six rooms, a small room with two tables and chairs, and a latrine with minimal facilities. Since the squadron was not at full strength, he had a room to himself. His arrival brought the squadron up to a total of nine pilots. Because they had not suffered any casualties, Ace guessed that either some pilots had been sent south as replacements, or more likely, the squadron was new and was still being brought up to strength.

* * *

Ace was free for the day, and since most of the pilots had gone to town, so would he. There was shopping to be done. The moment he saw Captain Blair, he knew that his new assignment offered him an escape from the Canadian uniform. Blair had been dressed in

a brown sweater, light brown trousers, and he wore his blue Royal Air Force coat over his shoulders. His somewhat rumpled trousers spilled over the edges of his half-Wellington boots. Ace completely approved of his captain's attire.

On his way to an eagerly anticipated shopping trip, he walked over to the bays where mechanics were working on planes.

"Corporal Carter?" he called out in a strong voice.

A burly mechanic standing on a ramp, his hands in the oily guts of an engine, answered without turning around, "And who is it that be wanting me?"

Ace took off his jacket and laid it on the ground and rolled up his sleeves and climbed up on the ramp beside the mechanic. "What's the problem with this engine?"

"And who be you to ask me such a question, now?"

"I'm one of your pilots," Ace said as he pushed a hand in and took hold of a rod and turned it. "That'll help, I think."

The corporal pulled his hands out of the engine, stood upright, and faced Ace.

"You? You are a replacement? Well, now, you're the first pilot I've seen willing to get his hands dirty. What is your name?"

"Archibald McFetters, Captain McFetters, but Archie works real well." Ace stuck out his right hand.

Corporal Carter hesitated. He looked uncertain. There was something about this man with the terrible scar on his face that appealed to even his own surly nature and dislike of officers. He stuck out his hand, clasped Ace's hand, and quickly noted that the new officer had the handshake of a real man.

"It'll be my pleasure to be working on your plane, Archie. It's good to know we've got at least one man now in the squadron who doesn't need a wet nurse. Do you fancy a touch of the good stuff, man?"

"I wouldn't mind a good bottle of whiskey if I knew where to buy it."

Corporal Carter winked and with a following smile, said, "Irish or Scotch?"

"Irish, if it's available."

The shopping trip was more successful than Ace had any good reason to anticipate. When he returned to the base, he was a changed man. He sported a red sweater. It was not as red as he would have preferred, but it was close enough. Over the sweater, he wore a black leather jacket. Hanging down from his neck was a white scarf. He discovered in the store a true rarity, gray whipcord pants, and on his feet, a pair of half-Wellingtons. Only his Canadian Royal Air Force cap, perched jauntily on his head, remained. The rest of his uniform was in bags. Also in the bags were a new soft leather helmet, a pair of goggles, and a fleece-lined leather jacket for flying duty. In addition, he had two other sweaters, one yellow and the other green, and two pairs of corduroy pants.

For the first time in a long time, Ace was comfortable, although he missed the weight of the gun in the shoulder holster. The gun and holster were safely hidden in his kitbag. There really was no reason to carry the gun on base, and no reason to carry it while flying. The range of the Hurricane necessarily predicted that any combat would be over British soil, and if he were to be shot down, he would be coming down in friendly territory.

After depositing his newly acquired wardrobe back in his room, Ace sauntered over to the mess hall. He met Blair who took one look at him and shook his head.

"I thought that an older man might bring some sense of decorum to the squadron, but I see that is not going to be the case."

Ace smiled. "I just want to look like the rest of the outfit, including the commander."

Blair was certain that he was going to have a good friend in this Canadian fellow. Word had already reached him about the encounter between the Canadian and Corporal Carter. The Canadian obviously knew how to handle men.

"I forgot to warn you," Blair said. "If you have a penchant for taking strolls in the night, be very careful. Our base security is composed of Home Guard men, mostly old men from the last war. They fancy that there is a Jerry parachutist behind or in every haystack."

"Quick on the trigger?" Ace laughed. "We old-timers are that way."

"Sorry about that," Blair said. "But you are not in the same category, you see."

When Ace met the rest of the squadron, the other seven fliers, he was instantly struck by the contrast between himself and his fellow pilots. They were equally amazed, but Blair had planted in their minds a brief description of Ace's record. They were also greatly impressed by the scar on his face. Ace's casual approach to life and his obvious good humor made it easy for them to accept this colonial who was here, even if in his old age, to fight Jerry.

There were days when it rained and they did not fly. On clear days, they flew, practicing formation flying. The news from the south was not good. The squadron was ready, at least in the minds of the pilots. Blair was worried about their readiness and he occasionally inquired of Ace what he thought about the status of the squadron. Ace always replied that he had no idea. No one knew what to expect before the guns fired. He explained that all the formation flying practice was of doubtful value, except to provide more hours in the cockpit. Once the battle started, it was usually chaos.

Chaos arrived one day early in the morning. Jerry was coming, not for the bases along the coast or London, but for them. A German bomber armada was coming in from Norway. The duty room was filled with pilots listening to their last briefing. The mechanics and ground crews had the Hurricanes warmed up and ready to go. This would be a big show. Ten Group fighters from bases in the north were going up to meet the enemy. At the quick briefing session, Blair asked Ace if he had anything to add.

"I didn't think the Germans were this stupid," Ace said. "The distance is too great for them to provide fighter escorts. We won't be going up against the Me-109s."

The nine planes comprising the squadron roared down the wide grassy field and lifted off almost at the same time. Ace felt the same sense of fear that he knew very well from the past. The words, "There are no old pilots," tumbled from his lips as he gained altitude.

It was only a matter of minutes before they saw the German bomber stream, already under attack by other squadrons of British fighters.

"There they are, lads!" Blair's excited voice crackled in the headsets of his pilots. "Good hunting. Tally Ho!"

The nine planes of the squadron dived on the Germans and from that point on all thoughts of formation flying disappeared. It was chaos. Ace suspended thinking as they dived on the bombers from above. He had learned that to think was to beg a death warrant. Now everything was action and reaction.

He fired bursts of machine gun fire into the first bomber to fill his gun sight. Flashing past the bomber, he noted the winking lights of return fire from the enemy. In the same dive, he pulled up and came at another target from below and fired a long burst into the belly of the bomber.

He closed on another bomber which was trying to pull away. Just as he was about to loose another burst of fire, a British fighter flashed between him and the bomber. The fighter was so close to the bomber they bumped wings and both had to struggle to regain control.

There was no time to feel good about not having shot down one of his own planes. The German bombers were breaking formation, desperately trying to escape the fury of the British fighters. Some of the bombers were attacked by as many as five or six fighters at a time. Ace chased after a bomber trying to escape.

He pressed the button, but nothing happened. He was out of ammunition. He increased his air speed and pulled up alongside the bomber. He could see the pilot. He could also see the nose gunner frantically trying to bring his machine gun around far enough to open fire.

Ace stared at the pilot for a moment. The German stared back. Then Ace saluted and swiftly banked his plane away and up. His day was finished.

The pilots in his squadron were jubilant. There were several bottles of whiskey on hand in the mess hall. Except for Blair and Ace, this was the first air battle for the other seven pilots.

Blair congratulated Ace. "The squadron is credited with nine Jerry bombers, and you got six of them! That is really good work. Better yet, we did not lose anyone."

When the other pilots saw the two men talking, they became quiet. Their faces reflected their admiration for this Canadian with the scar.

"Six? I thought maybe two. It's really hard to tell in a brawl like that," Ace said.

"Oh, no," Blair replied. "It's been confirmed. You're an ace again. You've been an ace in three different wars. It must seem all the same to you."

"No, it's not the same," Ace said as he took a long sip of whiskey from the glass in his hand. "I got shot down in the other two wars. So far, I've been lucky."

Nothing sits so well with men of this caliber as a modest hero. Word of Ace's exploits would spread around the base and perhaps beyond. The number of bombers he was credited with would never be less than six.

It was nearly dark when Ace left the mess hall. He had not gone far when he saw Corporal Carter approaching. The corporal had a big grin on his face and a bottle of whiskey in his hand.

"You did us quite proud. The boys in the bays are a-buzzing about you," Carter said.

Ace smiled. There was no doubt that Corporal Carter had been celebrating just as hard as the pilots. It would be a drunk base this night, and there would be some sore heads tomorrow as the whiskey wore off.

"Me boys have got together and bought this bottle. It is for you." Carter hesitated, and then proudly added the word, "Sir."

Ace accepted the bottle. "Tell the boys that I thank them and you. My plane never missed a beat. It flew like a fine bird, an eagle, I'd say. My thanks for everyone's fine work."

Corporal Carter drew himself up to an unsteady attention and saluted Ace who returned the gesture. It was not often that the corporal saluted an officer, and on the rare occasion it did happen, it was really not much more than a passing wave of the hand at best.

It was almost dusk now, and one lone plane came in over the field in a landing pattern. It was a Spitfire. Ace could tell not so much by sight as by the sound of the engine. The plane landed and taxied up to the work bays. The engine shut down, the canopy opened, and the pilot climbed down. A duty officer came running with a clipboard which the pilot signed.

It was dark enough now that the duty officer had to use a flashlight. The pilot took off the soft leather helmet. It was a woman. The flashlight passed over her face.

Ace shouted, "Maggie?"

The woman responded instantly, "Ace! Is that you, Ace?"

They were in each other's arms in an instant.

She pulled back and tried to look at him but there was not enough light. "I'll bet dollars to donuts you've got whipcord pants and boots."

"You'd win that bet. It's good seeing you, Maggie, but what the hell are you doing here? You and your Spit, I should say?"

"I'm delivering the Spit so you flyboys will have something capable of taking on the Me-109s. Is that a bottle of whiskey in your hand?"

Ace laughed. "It's a gift from the mechanics. We had a good day today."

"I heard that an attack was coming in up here in the north. How did it play out?"

"We stopped them. They got shot up pretty bad. Want a drink?"

"You bet I do. Where can we go?"

"I know a really nice haystack."

"Ace, are you kidding me? A haystack, and at our age? Oh, what the hell! We're fighting a war, right? Lead me to the nearest haystack, you devil, you."

The haystack was not far away. "It wasn't so long ago there were cows here instead of planes," Ace said as they settled into the hay. Maggie thought the hay smelled musty, and she wondered about bugs, but she mentioned neither. This was a pleasant moment, she and Ace and a bottle of whiskey. She had much to tell him.

Ace unscrewed the top of the bottle and offered it to Maggie. "Sorry about not having any glasses."

She laughed as she took the bottle. "The next plane I ferry in, I'll bring a couple of glasses." She took a stout pull on the bottle and handed it back to Ace.

After he had his turn, he fished out a pack of cigarettes and shook several up and offered the pack to Maggie. Ace lit her cigarette and then his own.

"I see you've still got your lucky lighter."

"Yeah. Can't seem to lose it."

"Last I saw of it, Angelique had it."

"She gave it back."

"I thought she might." Maggie paused, took a puff on her cigarette and then looked at it. "Should we be smoking in a haystack?"

"Probably not," Ace replied as he handed Maggie the bottle.

After she drank and then handed the bottle back, she said softly, "Ace, I got a letter from June. It had some bad news in it."

"You keep in touch with June? After all these years?"

"Not often, but this last letter came about a week ago. Virgil is dead."

"What? No! How did it happen?"

"He was working in a saw mill and there was an accident."

Ace took a long pull at the bottle and then offered it back to Maggie. They drank in silence. Ace carefully stamped out his cigarette and sat up from his semi-reclined position and stared out into the night.

"Damn. Virgil was a good man. I'd kind of lost track of them. They must have needed money for him to go to work in the saw mill. I could have helped them."

"There was more in the letter about James Longstreet."

"Really? He must be almost grown up now."

"He's seventeen," Maggie said. "Virgil was able to get him into a flying program up at Atlanta. He's soloed and has a learning permit. He's going to be a pilot."

"Good for him," Ace said. "I'll have to write to June. She will need help."

"She mentioned you in her letter."

"What'd she have to say about me?"

"In part, it was about me, too. She gave me hail Columbia for letting you get away. She thinks that next to Virgil, you are the finest man alive!"

"Did she really write that?" Ace asked.

"God's truth," Maggie replied. "Give me the bottle. It's my turn."

"Have you seen Joe or Cassie or Angelique?"

Maggie drank from the bottle and then handed it back. "Oh, yes, I saw Joe the other day. He didn't look very good. He's never gotten over losing Elaine. They are still working at the French Canteen. There's a lot of French who are being sent off to a place in Africa called Chad."

"De Gaulle's Free French," Ace said.

"But there are still a lot of them left in London. Angelique is apparently a big star at the canteen. She performs most nights of the week. Joe's unhappy about that."

"Why?" Ace asked casually.

"Joe thinks she's got a boyfriend. Probably some young Frenchman. Maybe you've got competition."

"Competition?"

"Oh, Ace, don't be so damned naïve. She's madly in love with you. Always has been."

Ace started to reply when suddenly there was a beam of light in his eyes. Maggie raised her hand to try to block the light.

"Here now! What's this all about?" The voice came from behind the flashlight that was nearly blinding Ace and Maggie.

"Oh, sorry, sir." The flashlight was shut off, and they could see the soldier, rifle in one hand and flashlight in the other. "Thought you might be one of those Jerry pilots you shot down today. You be that Canadian the base is talking about. You made us all proud. Carry on, sir, and good evening to you and the missus."

The sentry strolled away on his rounds. Maggie laughed.

"We got busted! Here I am, forty years old, and I get busted for lying in a haystack with a guy. What's this all about, you making the British proud?"

"It's not much," Ace said. "I got credited for shooting down six bombers. I don't know. There were two I might have nailed. The action was so fast that I couldn't keep score. I almost shot down one of our own. Best of all, I didn't get shot down."

"I'm glad to hear that!"

Ace passed the bottle, by now much lighter, to Maggie, but she declined.

"I don't think so. The whiskey is beginning to get to me. I haven't had much sleep. I'll be up early in the morning to catch the train back to the factory."

"Pick up another plane? I hope you don't run into any German fighters on these ferrying trips."

"I'll be ready if it happens. The guns are fully loaded. We are not supposed to engage the enemy, but if I get a crack at it, well, maybe I'll get lucky."

"Maggie, you be careful up there."

"And now, Ace, I really must go. I think you have a lovely haystack. You must invite me up again sometime."

She tried to rise, but had some difficulty. Ace pulled her to her feet. She held on to him, looked into his eyes and said, "Goodnight, sweetheart."

They kissed. It was a warm kiss, a kiss for old times sake, but it was not a kiss between two people passionately in love, though one of the two still considered the possibility, at least in the most inner part of her heart.

They parted and each took a different path. Maggie was a little unsteady, the whiskey and fatigue taking its toll. She felt good about the evening, even if a little puzzled. Ace appeared warm and friendly, but it was unlike him to pass up such an opportunity. She wondered if he had ever passed up a haystack, a woman, and a bottle of whiskey? She smiled as she walked. She had a lot in common with Ace. She knew she would not have resisted had the evening taken a different turn.

She walked in the door of the duty office for the women's contingent on the base. The duty officer, an older woman, was pouring herself a cup of tea. When she saw Maggie, she moved from behind her desk and came up close to Maggie.

"Oh, now, just look at you! What a fine example you are for the younger women here. You've got hay in your hair, I do believe. You've been in a haystack with some man for sure. And judging by the smell, you had a bottle of whiskey, and the way you're standing, I'd wager you drank the most of it. Well, what do you have to say for yourself?"

Maggie looked at her and then did something she had not done since she was in grade school, and then only when the nun's back was turned. Maggie made a face and stuck her tongue out at the older woman.

The duty officer stared at her, and Maggie was just beginning to frame a very profuse apology when the older woman began laughing.

"It's the war, I suppose," she said after she stopped laughing. "Get yourself a cup of tea, dearie, and go to bed. You may have had quite a time this night, but in a few hours, you'll be paying the piper a fancy fee."

Maggie replied meekly, "Yes, Ma'am." She tried to salute, but her hand missed the side of her face.

The older woman chuckled and said, "Go on with you, now."

Maggie poured her tea and left the room and headed for the hall that contained a row of bunks.

After Maggie was gone, the older woman shook her head and sat down behind her desk. She heard someone at the door, glanced at a clock on the desk, and smiled. She brushed a careless gray lock of hair back into place.

The door opened, and a man, well into his fifties, entered. He had a helmet on his head and a rifle slung over one shoulder.

“Good evening to you, Sergeant Major. Would you fancy a cup of tea? I just made it.”

Maggie was settled in on a bunk. It was warm, almost stuffy, in the room. Nevertheless, the hot cup of tea was just what she needed to chase the taste of whiskey from her mouth and throat.

Ace really did look older and tired after the day's battle, she thought. It was his third war and he still survived. Clearly, he was damned near indestructible. She remembered June's letter and asked herself why she let Ace get away, even though she was reasonably certain that she knew the answer. She wanted Ace and everything else, but she could only have one or the other. Maybe some day a woman, maybe like June, would come along and, well, she did not want to think about that. What a turn things could have taken this evening, that is, if nature had taken its logical course. What would have been the consequences? She considered the possibility that she might have gotten pregnant. That would be a shocker. Then she told herself that such an event was most unlikely. She was forty years old, and while it might be possible, it would sure as hell be a long shot. Still, she thought as her eyes began to close and she carefully put the tea cup down on the floor, if it had happened, she would not be sorry. She would have a little boy, and she surely would not let the child anywhere near a damned airplane. As she drifted off to sleep, she had one last look into the future that could have been. She saw a little boy whom she could love as much as she did his father.

The air war over Britain intensified and squadrons from Ten Group moved south. Captain Blair's nine man squadron dropped to seven and then six. Blair went down and Ace took over the remnant of the squadron. He led in the air and left the details of managing what was left of the squadron to his adjutant.

In short order, the other pilots were either killed or wounded. Ace was the lone survivor of the squadron.

Much had happened in the time of flying and fighting over the English coast and the Channel. The Germans bombed London and the British retaliated by bombing Berlin. The terrible war of city extermination was no longer a pipe dream espoused by a few men on both sides who had preached in previous decades a policy of total war from the air. Now it was real. While he was not present at the event, Ace was aware of the little town in Spain called Guernica where the concept was first tried by the Germans.

The Germans attempted to bomb London by day, but the cost exacted by the British pilots was too great. It was much safer for the Germans to bomb by night. There was little the British pilots could do about it because only a few planes were equipped for night fighting. Consequently, the pressure on the pilots was greatly eased. It was the turn of the Londoners to face death every night that the weather was clear.

One morning a colonel walked into the duty office where Ace and the adjutant sat at a table having a cup of tea. The colonel told them that the squadron was not going to be rebuilt. There would be no more squadron. The ground crews would be assigned to other squadrons. He thanked Captain Archibald McFetters for his great record. His confirmed tally now stood at sixteen Germans shot down. Ace Mathews thought of the eight men in the squadron who had gone down and he knew the price had been terribly high.

Effective immediately, the colonel said, Captain McFetters was to report to his previous command for further assignment.

After the colonel left, Ace shook hands with the adjutant and went to his room to pack his kitbag for the return to London. Corporal Carter was standing near the door as Ace came out carrying his kitbag.

"So, it's true what they be a saying. You are leaving us, Captain?"

Ace nodded. "They're disbanding the squadron which means me. I'm being ordered back to my old outfit."

"It was a pleasure serving with you. I'll not be so lucky with my next officer."

Ace stuck out his free hand. "It's a pleasure to shake the hand of the best damned mechanic I've ever had."

The corporal carefully wiped his hand on his trouser leg and then solemnly shook hands with Ace.

"For sure, sir, I'll not have to repair so many bullet holes. Sometimes I think every German up there was a trying to have a go at you."

They parted company and Ace left the base. There was much that he regretted about leaving the squadron. Life was simple here. There were good men such as Corporal

Carter as well as the dead and wounded pilots. Nevertheless, he was ready to return to London.

During these weeks as the summer came to an end and fall had a good start, he had not heard one word from Angelique. He had tried to telephone the apartment, but he was unable to get through. He had also posted several letters to the family, but there was never a reply.

When the bombing of London began, he would not allow himself to think about Angelique. He needed his mind clear of all outside matters so he could concentrate on survival. Most of the time, he was able to hold to his resolve, but not always. Sometimes he had trouble sleeping at night, not because of reliving the fears of his day, but because of his fears concerning what Angelique was enduring.

It was still possible to find a taxi in London. The Germans were not bombing in the daytime, and a taxi was able to take Ace to the French Canteen, although several detours were necessary to avoid streets that were blocked by debris from bombed out buildings. He saw, with a sense of relief, that the canteen building was untouched. One of the windows was boarded over, however.

He opened the door and entered. There was only one dim light on in the room. One man sat at a table, a cup on the table in front of him. Without looking up, the man spoke in French, telling the soldier who had just entered that the place was closed.

Ace walked over to the table. "It's me, Joe."

"What?" Joe looked up. "Goddamned, if it isn't you! Ace, how the hell are you?" He rose from his chair and walked around the table. He took Ace's hand, and started pumping. "What have you been up to? Sit down. It's good to see you, and I'm damned sorry we haven't got a bottle on the table."

"How are Angelique and Cassie?" Ace asked as he sat down. "I've been worried about you people since the bombing started."

Joe nodded. "It's been pretty bad. Cassie's holding up okay, but I'm worried about Angelique."

"She scared of the bombs?"

"Sure she is. But hell, so am I. No, I don't think it's the bombs. I think she had a boyfriend, one of these French soldiers she probably met while she was singing for the troops here. They've about all shipped out now for Africa, so I guess her boyfriend's gone. She misses getting to sing here. She's as bad as you."

"I hope not!"

Joe laughed. "Hell, I didn't mean it that way. She's as crazy about singing as you are about flying."

"They are closing this place?" Ace asked.

"Yeah. All three of us are going to be volunteering at a hospital. It's close to where we are living. We'll be able to walk to work."

"Hospitals probably need a lot of help now," Ace said.

"That's the truth. Seems like almost every night the Germans come over and bomb the hell out of us. About sundown every night, I step outside and check for clouds. They don't come when the weather's bad. If it looks clear, we get blankets ready so we can spend the night in a bomb shelter. I don't know if it will do much good if we get a direct hit from one of those big bombs, though."

"It's a bad business," Ace said. "Maybe you guys ought to go back to the States until this war is over. You'd be safe there."

"Depends on what you call safe," Joe said. "I never felt safe there. My neck ain't made for some rope. I don't want to be a Christmas tree ornament. But, I did think of returning, not to get out of the war so much, but so Angelique could find a suitable man. There's not a lot of respectable, colored men here. There weren't very many in France, either."

"I'm sure there's some good men here and in France, too."

"Oh, sure there are, but they're the wrong color. Worse yet, Angelique doesn't seem to understand that she's not white. Either that, or she just doesn't give a damn about such things."

"I didn't know it bothered you," Ace said.

"Oh, it's not a prejudice thing. But, what becomes of us if we all turn white? I married Elaine, who I loved more than life itself, but when I look at Angelique, well, if she marries a white man, what becomes of my people?"

"I've never thought about it that way," Ace said. "Of course, that may be because I never had any people."

Joe smiled. "I never could figure you out so I quit trying. You are what you are. You are Ace, one of a kind and after they made you, they threw away the mold."

"Sometimes I think they kept the mold and threw me away."

"Listen," Joe said. "Why don't you come on over to our place for dinner? The girls would really like to see you, and I've got a bottle stashed away. It'll be like old times."

"I'd like that, but I've got to take a rain check. I'm in the middle of a transfer, and I have to report in at my new post. Actually, it's the same old post. I'm running a little late now, but that's okay. I wouldn't want them to think I'm a tame squirrel."

"Where have you been serving?" Joe asked.

"I've been doing some flying with the RAF."

"At your age?"

"Hey, I'm not that old."

Joe squinted at him. "You don't look your age, that's for damn sure. Hell, the only time you really looked your age was the day I hauled you out of that busted up plane. You looked like a kid, and that's because you were a kid. Hell, you couldn't have been more than sixteen."

"Probably seventeen," Ace said with a smile.

"You do any good flying with the RAF?"

"Some," Ace replied. "They credited me with sixteen. It's hard to tell, though."

"Sixteen! My God, that makes you an ace again. Damned good work! I only wish I could do something more than this volunteer work. The way it looks now, the Heinies aren't going to try an invasion."

"Not this year. Maybe next spring they'll line up for another shot at it," Ace said as he rose from his chair. "I've got to be getting along now. Tell Angelique and Cassie I said hello, and as soon as I possibly can, I'll be in touch."

Joe walked to the door with him. "You take care of yourself, Ace. I don't know what we'd do without you."

The taxi carefully threaded its way through the streets of London, and Ace sat in the back, his mind working on how he was going to find a way to be alone with Angelique,

and the obvious main obstacle to their future, Joe. The racial business had never occurred to him. He was surprised to find that Joe had a problem with it. He felt sorry for Joe. It was clear that he had not recovered from the death of Elaine. It was also clear that he would not easily let Angelique go and especially to a white man. These were more complications than he was willing to cope with, and under any other circumstances, he would have solved the problem by walking away. He could not do that with Angelique. It was a relief when the taxi finally pulled up in front of the headquarters.

As he got out of the taxi, he noted with interest that there were two armed guards in front of the main door. The two small windows in front were covered with boards. London would be a good town to open a glass shop, he thought as he approached the guards.

It took several minutes for the guards to receive clearance for him to enter the building. Once inside, he proceeded to Hastings' office and knocked.

It was as if nothing had changed since the last time he had talked to Hastings. There was the pipe-holding device on the desk, and Hastings was attempting to load the pipe.

"Good to have you back," Hastings said as he tamped down the tobacco in the bowl of the pipe. "The RAF was not happy about returning you, and small wonder at that. You set quite a performance record. Sit down, we have much to discuss."

Ace sat down in one of the chairs facing the desk.

"I need a few days off. I've got to find a place to stay, and I have a few personal matters to take care of before I start something new."

"That is reasonable, especially after your fine performance in the air. I have taken the liberty of finding you a place, a small but decent town house. It will be temporary, of course, but it should serve for a month while you prepare for a new assignment."

"Another safe house?"

"Good heavens, no. When I learned that you were coming back to us, my greatest concern was to keep you out of a safe house. You have no idea of the paper work and the time I had to waste dealing with your antics and the senior commanders. I do not relish the idea of going through that nonsense again."

"You are hiding me away?" Ace asked with a smile.

"Something like that, yes."

"How much do I owe you for the cost of the town house?"

Hastings took his pipe out of his mouth, saw that it was out, shook his head, and laid the pipe back in the device. "These pipes are such a nuisance. Do not be concerned about the cost. There are funds for housing, and I dipped into that account. I dare say, the cost is not likely to have an impact on the war effort."

"Thanks. Would you like to try one of my cigarettes?" Ace reached inside his tunic and pulled out a pack and his lighter.

"I always become rather nervous when you reach inside your tunic," Hastings said. "Are you still carrying your pistol?"

"Not yet," Ace said. "The airbase in the north was guarded by the Home Guard, so I felt safe enough."

"If it were not for this position, I probably would be a major in the Home Guard," Hastings said as he waved away the cigarette offer. "Now, about your next assignment."

"Back to France?"

"No. We are sending you out to Yugoslavia."

“Where?”

“Yugoslavia.”

“I don’t even know where Yugoslavia is. I don’t speak Yugoslav,” Ace said.

Hastings laughed. “You do not speak French, yet you lived there and conducted business, mostly illegal, I might add, for years. For that matter, there are those who might claim that you barely have a command of English, though I do suppose you are reasonably competent with the American language.”

“What am I supposed to do in faraway Yugoslavia?”

“You will be assigned to our embassy in Belgrade. There will be several other officers going out with you. Your work will mainly consist of flying about the countryside. You should enjoy that.”

“That part sounds good. What’s the catch?”

“Catch?”

“Oh, yeah. There’s got to be something not so good here, something fishy.”

Hastings sighed. “I suppose there are a few problems. The Germans are not going to try an invasion here, at least not until spring, and probably not even then. There are those of us in the department who believe Hitler will turn to other objectives, maybe the Soviet Union, maybe Yugoslavia, or maybe both for all we know at the present time. The government is greatly concerned by the fact that the king of Yugoslavia is thought to be pro-German.”

“I get the picture,” Ace said. “This is going to be very messy.”

“Perhaps,” Hastings said as he moved to have another go at the pipe.

Both men were silent for as long as it took Hastings to reload his pipe and he exhale a puff of smoke.

“I have a favor to ask,” Ace said.

“What kind of favor?” Hastings answered as he reached for another match to restart the pipe.

“You remember the American general I brought out of France?”

“Of course. General Horne.”

Ace nodded. “I want his address. I think he’s somewhere here in London.”

Hastings put down the pipe. “Are you going to seek a transfer to the American army?”

“No, it’s nothing like that. I owe a favor to an old friend who recently died. His son is seventeen and he has a pilot’s license. But he doesn’t have any college. I want Horne to get him into the Army’s pilot training program when the time comes.”

“You think the American army will not accept your young friend because he is not of the proper class? That is interesting, indeed.”

Ace sensed the edge of sarcasm evident in Hastings’ remark and answered, “Yes, I’m afraid we won’t be as sensible about that sort of thing as you people. We won’t have flying sergeants who are not allowed to go into the officers’ club, but who can fly and die alongside their betters when there’s dirty work to be done.”

Hastings shook his head, smiled, and said, “If the Americans do come into the war, on our side, I fear it will be a most uneasy alliance.”

The meeting with Hastings ended on that note, and Ace left the building. He was curious about his new quarters. The taxi driver seemed impressed when he gave him the address. That was a good sign.

As the taxi moved slowly through the streets, he tasted the word 'Yugoslavia.' That was certainly a far-off place, but perhaps the assignment would not last too long. After all, if Hitler wanted it, he usually took such places in a matter of weeks.

Ace was happy about being able to do a good turn for James Longstreet Hockersmith. He owed it to Virgil and to June, too. Of course, there was always the possibility that the young man might not want to be a wartime pilot, but, if the boy was like the father, then that was not at all likely.

The possibility of asking Hastings for an assistant had crossed his mind. It would be good to have Corporal Carter as a sidekick, and he had no doubt that the corporal would have welcomed such an assignment. Something held him back from making the request, and he did not fully understand why, except maybe the favor he could do for the corporal might not turn out very well. The corporal had a reasonably safe job, reasonable, at least for wartime. This Yugoslavia business was a puzzle. There was one thing he knew for certain, however. If he was being sent there, the situation probably was not very good. Yet, he had set in motion the high probability of great danger for James Longstreet. How was that different? Ace's brow was furrowed over the deepening pool forming in his mind. When the taxi stopped, Ace was thankful.

The house was a two-story affair, connected on both sides to other houses for the length of the block. The same was true across the street. It was not a large house, and it had a small yard in front with a badly tended garden. It was by far the best accommodations Ace could ever remember. A little house with a garden somehow seemed like the fulfillment of new dreams. He wanted to find Angelique now, immediately, and show her the house. She would love it, though he doubted that she was much of a gardener, and would not be interested in restoring the little garden.

They would have thirty days. But others threw the dice that decided their fates.

Chapter 38

It rained that night, a good, hard rain and the Germans did not come. Ace slept well enough, and he was ready for the day. He made coffee in the pleasant kitchen and lit a cigarette. This was a taste of life that he had not often enjoyed, and then only when staying at a decent hotel.

The block that included this house was untouched by German bombs. He knew that it was not because the Germans had not targeted the area. Bombing at night meant that when the Germans were overhead, they dropped their bombs over a geographic area. The objective was to destroy the city, and one part was as good as any other.

A second cup of coffee was another luxury. He finished the cup, stubbed out his second cigarette, put on his tunic and cap and walked out the door, almost like a gentleman of some substance going off to gain a little more substance. Since he was playing the part of a gentleman, he did not think it necessary to wear his shoulder holster and gun.

Ace walked the short distance through the garden which was wet from the night's rain. There were leaves down on the path to the walk and the street. The leaves were changing color.

He caught a taxi and headed for Maggie's flat. It was early and maybe Angelique was there. If not, he would find out where she was working. He braced himself up in the seat of the taxi. Maybe this was the time to put his cards on the table and have it out with Joe. Sooner or later that would have to be done. He shook his head. Not now. That should wait until he returned from Yugoslavia. Why should he do it now and then disappear?

Joe came to the door to answer Ace's knock.

"Ace, good to see you. Come on in. Have you had breakfast yet?"

"Not yet," Ace said as he entered. They walked to the kitchen where Cassie was standing at the stove frying meat in a skillet.

"Sit down. I'll fetch us some coffee. Cassie, cut that piece of goat or whatever it is into three pieces and put on some toast for Ace."

"Angelique at work?" Ace asked casually.

Cassie turned around and stared at him for a moment and then turned her attention back to the meat.

"She was out of here early today. She's riding with an ambulance crew. I tried to talk her out of it, but she's a stubborn child. She's working too hard and it's damned dangerous. Too dangerous."

"She's learned a lot about putting on bandages and that sort of thing," Cassie said without turning around.

"She works out of the same hospital as you two?"

"Sort of," Joe replied. "They got a building about two blocks away. There must be about six meat wagons."

"Joe!" Cassie said sharply.

Joe laughed. "That's what we called them back in '18."

"They probably still do in the army," Ace said.

Cassie brought three plates with meat, one egg each and three slices of toast to the table.

"Ain't much," she said. "Food's getting hard to come by. Maggie or Rachel stop by once in a while with some groceries. Don't know where they're getting it. Must be some black market stuff, but it eats good enough."

"What they going to have you doing now?" Joe asked.

"Can't tell you that, Joe. It's a big military secret. I do have a question though. I was never very good at geography. Where the hell is Yugoslavia?"

"You going to Yugoslavia?" Cassie asked quickly.

"I didn't say that," Ace answered.

Joe laughed as Cassie said, "I think I understand. It's just across some water from Italy. I don't know the name of the water."

"Well, if you're going there, must be some bad stuff going to happen," Joe said.

"Maybe you'll get to meet a man there," Cassie said. "His name is Tito. That's not his real name, but he's going to be the leader of that place someday."

"A Bolshevik?" asked Ace.

"Maybe the best we got," Cassie replied. "Specially now that Stalin and Hitler are good friends."

"Never heard of no Tito," Joe said. "Myself, I kind of like this Churchill guy. He don't mind saying what he thinks."

Ace sipped his coffee, lit a cigarette, and said, "Personally, I don't trust any of them. That's what I always liked about flying. You get above them, and they can't touch you."

Joe laughed. "That's beginning to sound better to me all the time, except I'm still scared of flying."

"We better get going," Cassie said. "We may be unpaid help, but they sure keep a clock on you."

Cassie stacked dishes in the sink. "Get to them when I can," she muttered.

Outside, Joe looked around. "Good night, last night. The Heinies didn't come."

"It looks like your neighborhood's been spared," Ace said.

"We've been lucky so far. It's the hospital I worry about," Cassie said.

"See you guys later," Ace said. "Be careful."

Joe turned away, then stopped and moved closer to Ace, his voice barely rising above the level of a whisper.

"Ace, I got a favor to ask of you. If something bad happens to Cassie and me, like one of those damned Heinie bombers gets lucky, I need you to look after Angelique for me. She's got no other family. Without us and you, she'd be alone in the world, and this is a damned poor place to be alone."

Ace nodded. "Don't worry about that. I'll take care of her, but what's really going to happen is that someday, we'll all be back in Paris. Times will be like they were before, only maybe even better."

"That would be good," Joe said, "'Cept Elaine won't be there. You be careful, Ace."

"You too, Joe"

Ace watched them for a few minutes before beginning his walk to the ambulance center. He would go a few blocks out of his way so that Joe and Cassie did not see him.

He disliked deceiving Joe and Cassie, but he could see no other way to proceed. There was no point in bringing on a confrontation now. Joe did not look very strong. His hair had grayed considerably. His shoulders seemed to slump. He had aged since Elaine's death.

The walk was pleasant. Ace wondered what the winter was like in Yugoslavia. He missed not being able to dress the way he had during his flying stint with the RAF. The uniform did keep him comfortable against the damp and cool air, however.

The ambulance center was little more than a shed with a small office. As usual, there was a man behind a desk with piles of forms in front of him. War required an enormous amount of forms and files and desks, Ace noted to himself.

"I'm looking for a Miss Angelique Washington," he said to the man behind the desk.

The man looked up, squinted over the top of his glasses. "Have you come to take her home?"

"Is she okay?" Ace asked.

"I've got her resting right now, back in one of the ambulances. She had a bad morning. Appears to be totally exhausted. She's to go home as soon as she can and stay there for at least three days. I've had a doctor in to look at her. She's really not strong enough for this work."

"Which ambulance?"

"Come along," the man said.

They walked down the line of ambulances sitting ready for the upcoming night's work. The man stopped and pointed. "This one."

Ace hurried forward to the ambulance. The man followed. Ace opened the large back door and peered in. He saw Angelique on a litter. She appeared to be sleeping.

"Angelique?" he called softly.

She stirred and then raised up on her elbow. "Ace, oh, Ace, is it really you?"

"Are you okay, honey?"

"I'm just tired. I thought I'd rest here for a while. They want to send me home, but I do not want to be home by myself."

"Can you stand?"

"Yes, I think so, Ace."

She sat up on the litter and crawled toward the door. Ace gently took her by the shoulders and helped her out of the ambulance. She was unsteady at first, but then regained her strength enough to be able to stand. She stared at Ace for a second and then burst into tears and wrapped her arms around him.

The man who led Ace to the ambulance dabbed at his eyes and said, "The poor lass. She's a game one, she is, but she's seen too much. There's been too much dying the past week or so. Don't know how much longer we can take it. Could you see that she returns to her home? Keep her there for at least three days. She's been through too much."

"Get me a taxi," Ace ordered. "I'll take care of her."

The man took two steps and then stopped. "Who are you?" he asked Ace. "Be you her father?"

"No. I'm a friend of her father. He works at the hospital. His name is Joe Washington. Get word to him that Ace, uh Captain McFetters has the situation under control."

The man thought for a moment and then nodded. "Seems proper and all that. I'll have a taxi here as soon as possible." He hurried off to find a taxi.

There was a bench just outside the ambulance shed. Ace guided Angelique to the bench and sat her down. She looked up at Ace. "Please. Do not take me home. I do not want to be alone."

Ace nodded. "We'll go to my place, at least for a while. We need to get you something to eat. I've got a new place. You'll like it. I've got the makings of a good omelet."

His mention of an omelet helped her to regain some composure. She smiled, but it was a tenuous smile, almost as if it were an experiment that might very well fail.

"You can make an omelet?"

"Sure I can," Ace replied. "I'm a pretty good cook."

"Oh, Ace. I love you even if you are not a good liar."

He laughed, but he had heard words like that before. He could not remember when. He looked down at the young woman's face and instantly regretted having laughed. He saw the confusion and fear that was in her eyes. He doubted that she was really listening to him. He thought she might be about to go into shock. For one of the rare times in his life, he felt a surge of hatred pump through his body. The Germans had done this to an innocent, almost perfect human being whom he so desperately loved, and he wished that he was in the air and that there were German bombers to be destroyed.

To Ace, it seemed as if the wait for the taxi and then the ride back to his place took forever. Angelique did not appear to mind. She kept close to him throughout the ride, her head on his shoulder. He thought she was asleep, but at one point she said quietly, "Now, I am safe."

They arrived at the house and Ace helped her out of the taxi. She looked around and then at Ace. "Is this where you live?"

"For a while," he replied.

"It is beautiful," she said.

"Maybe someday, when this is all over, we can have a place like this in Paris."

"Do we have to walk this way and that before we go in?"

"No," Ace said as he smiled. "This is not a safe house. No one is watching us." He was not so sure about the last part of his claim, but he assumed that Hastings would not want reports coming in that had to be circulated among the senior officers at headquarters.

Once inside, Angelique looked about the place, going from room to room. "It is even better than Miss O'Malley's apartment." She paused, and then said with firmness in her voice, "I want to stay here with you, Ace. This is where we must begin our life together, I think."

Ace led her to the kitchen and seated her in a chair at the table, speaking as he did so. "I wish it could be, but Joe and Cassie would be worried about you. I'll have to take you back later, before the Germans come."

She shuddered at the thought, and Ace moved to her side quickly and reached down and took her hands. "Don't worry, I'll stay there with you and Joe and Cassie. If we have to go to a bomb shelter, we'll all go together."

"We must tell Poppa about us," Angelique said. "He must give us permission to marry."

"I don't think he would do that," Ace replied softly. "It will take some time for him to come around. Now, I will make us an omelet. I have eggs. There are four, I think, and some cheese and a little milk."

She laughed, and Ace was surprised. It was the laugh of the young and innocent woman he had known before the bombing had started. He thought it was a good sign.

With a quick move, she rose from the chair and moved to the small refrigerator. "You sit down, Ace. I shall make the omelet. I shall cook the meal for the man who will be my husband. It is the only way."

He was unsure about her trying to cook, but as she moved with sureness and control, he felt relieved and did as she ordered. He lit a cigarette and left the package and the lighter on the table. She came to the table with silverware and noticed the lighter.

"You still have the lighter. That is good. It is a charm you must keep if you are to live. But I hate the woman who gave it too you."

"Why do you hate the Countess?"

"Was she really a countess?"

"That's what she said. In some ways, she and you have a lot in common."

She turned away, "I do not want to hear about that."

She busied herself at the counter and then the stove and soon had the omelet ready. There was nothing to go with the omelet except two slices of bread and a small amount of butter.

Ace was careful to take only a small part. He pushed his slice of bread over toward her plate.

"Are you not hungry?" she asked. "My cooking is good. You should eat. You need your strength."

"It's very good," he replied, "but I ate not long ago. You eat. We can't have food going to waste. There's a war going on, you know."

"I have heard that often," she replied as she ate hungrily.

When she finished, Ace heated the leftover coffee that he made earlier. He brought both cups to the table and set them down.

She sipped her coffee. "The food was good. I am an excellent cook. Momma trained me well. I am a better cook than Cassie, but she will not admit it. With Cassie, everything comes out heavy."

"Heavy?"

"Yes. There is too much grease, I think."

"How are you feeling?" Ace asked. It was not an idle question. Angelique seemed relaxed. The food must have helped. There was something about the way she occasionally glanced around, a passing fear that could not be hidden from him.

"I am fine. I am with you, and I feel safe. But I worry about tonight. The sky is clear, not like last night when it was raining, and the Germans could not come. They will come tonight, and bombs will fall. It is terrible, Ace."

At that point, she broke down. Tears began streaming down her face. Her body shuddered and then began to lean sideways on the chair. Ace swiftly closed the distance between them and caught her before she could fall. He picked her up and took her into the living room and laid her down on the couch. As they entered the living room, she screamed, "They are coming! They are coming! They are coming tonight! No. No. Not the little children. Please, God, not the little children."

He sat on the couch beside her and stroked her hair. He knew what he was seeing. He had seen men break in this fashion because of what they had seen or what they had endured.

"Tell me about the children," he said softly. "What happened to the children?"

"No!" she cried. "No, it is too horrible. No. Leave me, Ace. Go away. I want to die; I cannot live with this in my mind."

"Look at me, Angelique. Look at my face. See the scar that I live with everyday? Now you have a scar, only it is on the inside, in your mind. My scar healed because of the air and the medicine. We must heal your scar. The only way we can do that is for you to tell me about it. Then we can share in the healing."

She appeared to regain some control. She looked at Ace. "You love me," she whispered. It was not a question, but rather a statement that she believed was fact.

"Yes, yes, I do love you, Angelique. I'll change. We will settle down in Paris, maybe in a house like this. There will be a garden. We will have a good life."

She smiled and then several fighters roared low and overhead, and she began screaming again. "They are coming! The children, no!"

He wrapped his arms around her, held her up, and spoke softly.

"It's all right. It's all right. Those are our fighters up there. They will protect us."

She calmed down, and Ace continued with his efforts to make her tell him about the children. He knew that the longer she kept that bottled up inside, the deeper the wound would be.

"Tell me about the children," he said. She did not respond, and he repeated his question. His efforts seemed to have a calming effect on her, but he was not sure whether she was moving closer to talking, or finding new pillars in her mind behind which she could hide what had clearly become a terrible secret which she could not allow out from her lips.

Finally, she began to respond, slowly at first, and then only about the trips in the ambulance, the injured people whom she helped bandage on the way to the hospital. There were bombs falling, the flames, buildings collapsing, and the ambulance swerving, sometimes almost out of control.

She looked at Ace. "Sometimes they died on the way to the hospital. Momma died that way. I did not pray over her. I wish I had done so. There were so many. I stopped crying. I stopped praying over them. Night after night."

She paused and turned her head away.

"The children?" Ace prompted.

Angelique turned back slowly to face him. She seemed strangely pensive. "There was an orphanage. The bombs hit an orphanage. There were the little children. They died, one by one. I begged them not to die. I begged them, Ace. Please do not die. But they did, except for one who was blind. She wanted to know what was happening, and I could not tell her. She wanted to know where her little brother was, and I could not tell her. He was dead. He was one of the children I begged not to die."

She was quiet for a few seconds and then began crying, her body shaking as she cried.

"Go ahead and cry," Ace said softly. "It is good to cry. Let the tears wash away the pain. I am here, and I will hold you."

Slowly, her crying began to subside. Exhaustion brought the respite of sleep. Ace gently laid her down on the couch, covered her with an afghan that had been draped over

the back of the couch and then rose to his feet. He stood there for several minutes, watching closely. Her breathing was steady. She was asleep.

Ace walked to the kitchen and made a fresh pot of coffee. While he was making the coffee, he spied a tin of biscuits, cookies, behind several canisters. That was a happy find. He would at least have something to feed her when she awoke. He sat at the table and drank a cup of coffee and smoked.

The story about the children made him uncomfortable. It was a side of war that he had never faced, not in 1918, or in Spain, or in the recent fighting in the skies over England. Ace had never fought against women and children. It had always been against other men who probably were like himself. We were like the knights of old, he thought. Maybe we are the last knights. He shook his head. That was romantic nonsense. War had always been terrible, but not as terrible as now.

He knew that her telling about the children was only the first step in her recovery. The wound in her mind was deep and would take a long time to heal. For some, there was no healing. He had the time. Now, he had a cause that was a part of love, but maybe transcended love. He must spend his life making her whole again. It was a good way to spend a life.

A disturbing thought crossed his mind. When he was off on his assignment to Yugoslavia, he would probably be relatively safe. Yugoslavia was not in the war. The people he would leave behind, Angelique, his few friends, they would face the bombers. They had no protection. The air raid shelters were no guarantee of safety.

Ace began thinking of ways to avoid going off to Yugoslavia. Hastings had seemed a little upset when General Horne's name was mentioned. Could Horne spring him from this upcoming assignment and maybe arrange for him to be assigned to an American delegation in London?

Time passed slowly, but it did pass. He checked his watch. There were still several hours before it would be dark enough for the German bombers to begin their raids over London. He and Angelique could rejoin Joe and Cassie well before dark. They would be worried, although they appeared to accept that she worked long hours with the ambulance service.

When he returned Angelique, he would make sure that Joe understood that she was not to be working with the ambulances. Much more exposure to the horrible scenes she would necessarily see could destroy her.

That sequence of thoughts led to the need to come out in the open, to tell Joe that he was in love with Angelique, and that they would soon be married. It probably would not be a good time, but when was it ever going to be a good time? He was not happy about having to hide his love for Angelique. He had never hidden his feelings in the past.

All this thinking made him thirsty, and he drank another cup of coffee. He smoked one cigarette after another. There was too much thinking. He stubbed out a cigarette in the nearly full ashtray, folded his arms on the table, laid his head down and closed his eyes.

Ace suddenly lifted his head. There were planes overhead. It was too early, but when he glanced out the window, he realized that it was nearly dark. He had fallen asleep. He jumped to his feet and hurried into the living room.

The noise of the planes overhead had caused Angelique to stir. She sat up, trying to see in the gloom of the darkening room.

"Ace?" she called out, her voice trembling.

"I'm here, sweetheart. I think we need to get to an air raid shelter."

She sat up. "They are coming?"

"I'm afraid so."

"I do not want to leave my house. It is the only house I have ever had. I have my house. I have you. If we die tonight, let it be here. Can we not have at least one day in our house?"

There was no logic in what she was saying. Somehow, though, it made sense to Ace. Besides, he had no idea where the neighborhood bomb shelter was located. He did know what was coming, and it would not be very long in coming.

"This house has a small cellar. It will probably be as good as a bomb shelter. Quick now, get a bottle of water. Oh, and there's a treat for us on the kitchen table, a tin of cookies. Hurry!"

Angelique fled to the kitchen while he ran up the stairs and into the bedroom. There was a flashlight on the nightstand. He pocketed the flashlight and pulled the mattress off the bed. It was a soft, feather mattress. He was able to grab two blankets with the mattress. He hurried down the stairs and only with some difficulty kept from tripping over the mattress.

"Quick now, out the back door," Ace said.

Outside, he dropped the mattress and blankets and switched on the flashlight for a second. There was the cellar door. He wrenched it open and ducked down into the cellar. It was as bad as he thought it would be. It was a small room with old wooden shelves and rusty cans scattered about on the shelves. There were cobwebs, and the floor was dirt, but dry. There was one small window on the end near the cellar door. It was intact, but covered with dust.

"Come on down," he called to Angelique.

He held the flashlight so she could see the stairs. She moved cautiously.

"Will we be safe here?" she asked.

"Maybe. There are good beams holding the floor. It's probably as safe as most of the shelters."

Ace gave her the flashlight to hold and hurried outside to retrieve the mattress and the blankets. The air raid sirens were sounding their frightful warnings.

It still was not quite dark. The first German bombers would be carrying incendiary bombs. With just enough twilight left, they would have no problem finding London.

The incendiary bombs would start fires, and the flames would guide waves of German bombers through the night. There was no defense except for the anti-aircraft guns which were already beginning to pepper the sky with explosions in the hope of catching a lucky hit on a bomber overhead.

Ace spread the mattress on the dirt floor, and then laid the blankets on top of the mattress.

"Did you bring the cookies?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied as she sank down on the mattress beside him. "Should you close the door?"

"No, I don't think so. This place could use a little fresh air, and we may get some light from the outside. We won't have to use up the flashlight batteries."

The first bombs fell, and Ace was relieved. The sounds of the explosions were some distance away. Maybe they would escape the worst of the bombing runs to come because

the following bombers would guide on the fires now lighting up the sky. It was small comfort, however. He knew that the bombers would scatter some of their loads, especially if the German pilots felt threatened by the anti-aircraft fire.

Angelique moved closer, pulling his arm around her shoulder. "Hold me, Ace. Hold me tight. I shall try not to be afraid, I think."

"It's okay to be afraid," he said.

"I do not think you have ever been afraid, have you?"

"Sure, lots of times."

"You are the last of the great knights," she said. "But you are not a great liar. I do not believe you."

The first of the bomber waves with heavy bombs passed overhead. The fire from the anti-aircraft guns intensified. Then came the explosions, great thundering blasts that shook the earth. There were several close by explosions, the house shook, and dust drifted down from the beams holding the floor.

"Ace, now! Now is the time to make love to me. If we are going to die, let it be while we are making love. Please, Ace."

His reply was stopped by her lips pressing hard against his, and he could not speak. He wanted to say no, but he did not. Her body was pressed against him. The explosions, the flashing light of flames that he could see out the open cellar door, all collided in his mind.

He did not feel fear. He suddenly felt free, free from all constraints. He returned her kisses, and they made love. When they finished, they remained in each other's arms, an embrace in a timeless world of their own making.

Chapter 39

As the taxi neared Joe and Cassie's building the next morning, Ace turned to Angelique and kissed her. He squeezed her hand gently.

"It will be okay," he said.

"I do not want to leave you, Ace. Not now, not ever."

"We'll be together soon. When I get back from this new assignment, we will be married, I promise you. Until then, it's best that you are with your father while I'm gone. He will keep you safe until I return."

Joe and Cassie were out in front of the building when the taxi pulled up. They were just beginning their walk to the hospital.

When Ace and Angelique emerged from the taxi, Joe cried out, "Thank God! We were afraid you got hurt in the raid last night. It was a mean one."

"I am fine, Poppa," Angelique said. "Ace kept me safe. Is there anything to eat?"

Cassie hurried up in time to hear her say that Ace had kept her safe, and Cassie asked in a harsh tone, "Where?"

Ace answered. "I picked her up at the ambulance shed. She was in bad shape. Since you guys were at the hospital, I took her to my place. We didn't get started back here in time."

Joe looked at Ace and then said, "Cassie, take the child inside and get her something to eat." He watched until they entered the door and then turned back to Ace.

"You say she was in bad shape? What was wrong?"

"Don't let her go back to those ambulances, Joe. It's too rough. She saw too much. I was afraid she might have a breakdown, you know, like someone who's gone through too much in the trenches."

"My little baby? What the hell happened, Ace?"

"When I got to the ambulance shed, yesterday, they had her stretched out in an ambulance. She had collapsed."

"My God! I didn't know."

"I was not going to leave her by herself. She was crying a lot. I told the guy at the ambulance shed to get a message to you people so you would know she was okay."

"We didn't get any message," Joe said. "When she didn't come back last night, we figured she was working, helping with the ambulance work."

"Joe, there was one particular thing that she saw. It was bad. A bomb hit an orphanage."

"Oh, no," Joe said softly.

"Yeah. There were little children. It was bad. She said she begged them to live, and then when they died, she prayed over them, and there were too many."

"Enough," cried Joe. "I promise, there will be no more ambulance work for her. I don't even know if I could stand that kind of thing."

Ace lit a cigarette. "Don't push her on it, but the more times she tells the story, the better it will be. Don't let her lock it up in her mind. We've both seen men go crazy doing that."

"I'll watch her. I should have known better than to let her ride the ambulances. I guess I haven't been thinking too clear these days. We owe you so much, Ace. You always seem to be there to save us."

"We're old friends, Joe. That's what friends do." Ace paused, and then spoke, his voice soft but his words were steady. "Joe, I'm in love with Angelique." The words seemed to be almost casual, as if he were saying a simple comment about the weather.

Joe took it that way. He laughed. "Hell, half the goddamned French army is in love with Angelique. Everybody loves her."

"No, Joe, I mean it. I am in love with Angelique, and when I get back from this Yugoslavia business, we want to get married."

"You serious about this?" Joe asked.

"I mean it, Joe. Every word of it."

Cassie came out of the building in time to hear Ace's declaration.

"You mean what?" she asked, her eyes narrowing.

Joe turned to her. "Ace here wants to marry our Angelique."

Cassie looked at Ace. There was anger in her eyes. "You trying to kill this old man?" she asked bitterly. "He don't need any of this. You broke his heart when you got Elaine killed. What in the hell are you trying to do here?"

Joe turned to Cassie, "I ain't some old man, dammit." But when he turned to Ace, there was no anger in his voice. There was only sadness.

"It can't be, Ace. In some ways, you are the best man I've ever met. You got a streak of kindness in you. You treated me as equal without even thinking about it. You're the best friend I ever had. But you are hell on women. I'm not going to let Angelique be just another Maggie. Hell, Ace, how many women? You use them and then just walk away. I can't let you do that to Angelique. She's too good for that. No, this cannot be, and I won't let it happen."

"What about what Angelique wants?" Ace asked.

Joe shook his head. "Course she's in love with you. I don't doubt that. She's had that damned picture of you, the one the French woman made. She's had that thing since she was a little girl. She always thought you was some kind of knight like in the old days. Those damned nuns at her school were always stuffing her head with that nonsense. I didn't think anything about it then. I should have done something."

He turned slowly, his shoulders slumped and he walked toward the building. Cassie glanced at him, worry replacing anger in her eyes. When she turned back to Ace, the anger returned.

"If he dies, it'll be your fault. You will have killed him. You done everything you could to break his heart. I knew what you were up to all along. I saw you that one night at the canteen, but I didn't say anything 'cause I figured you'd get sent away, maybe for good. I wanted to keep it from Joe. But you betrayed him. You people always do that. I was never fooled."

"I love her," Ace said, but he got no further.

"You dirty bastard! What do you know about love?"

She stepped toward him, her arm raised, her finger pointing at him, her anger making her tremble. Her voice cracked out the words like a whip.

"You white bastard! You are no goddamned good! Get out of here. Get out of here. Never come back!"

Ace staggered back as if he had been hit by a heavy piece of wood. He recovered and for an instant, there was a flash of anger racing across his face. He turned red, the scar remaining a strange white emblem.

Cassie, seeing his reaction, began stepping backwards, clearly hoping to escape into the building. The anger in Ace's face passed as quickly as it appeared. The anger was replaced by tears streaming down his face. Cassie's words had struck hard and deep.

He turned and stumbled away, his mind filled with confusing thoughts, confusing images, none of which could be brought into a reasonable order. He walked for blocks before some sense of coherence began to shape his thoughts.

He could not possibly go on this mission to Yugoslavia. He would find a way to get Angelique away from Joe and Cassie. They could get married. The world could go to hell in a hand basket, he told himself. It would be okay. He had enough money so they could live comfortably for a year, maybe two, if necessary.

Cassie's taunts would not go away, even though he had not really been surprised by her outburst. She had always disliked him. He was not angry over Joe's remarks. Maybe they were close to the truth, but everything was different now. He had changed. Maybe in time, Joe would come to see that. Maybe time would be his best ally.

He hailed a taxi and returned to the house where he and Angelique had lived what might have been a lifetime in a day and night. It was their house of hopes and dreams despite the windows broken by the bombs during the night.

There was a car parked in the street in front of the house. Ace recognized it as one of the cars used by Hastings' headquarters. When he got out of the taxi, the driver in the car got out and approached him.

Ace did not recognize him, but he had no doubt that he was from headquarters. Most of the people at the headquarters seemed to him to be police. There was the same way they looked out at the world from behind their eyes, a badly feigned indifference to their surroundings, maybe even in the way they walked. When he saw the man approaching him, he thought it was entirely possible that he had been a policeman at one time and now was serving in a different role.

"They want you at headquarters," the man said. "I've been waiting here for hours."

There was no point in asking the man why. No one was supposed to know more than was necessary. Ace nodded and started toward the car.

"They want you to come packed, kit and all," the man said. "Best get on with it. They are a bit nasty when they're kept waiting."

Ace nodded and walked toward the house, saying as he passed the man, "Hell, they were born nasty."

It did not take Ace long to pack his kit. He took off his uniform jacket and put on his shoulder holster. He pulled the forty-five Colt, ejected the clip, checked it for dust and tension, and then pushed the clip back into the butt of the pistol. He had the gun almost in the holster and then stopped. He racked a bullet in the chamber. Carefully putting the hammer into a half-cock position, he checked the safety on the side of the weapon and then holstered it.

Most of the time, he carried the pistol with an empty chamber. It would only take him a second to make the weapon ready for firing, but today might be different. He was being summoned back to headquarters after only having the freedom of barely two days when he was supposed to have a month. Something had changed. He really did not believe that

Hastings would play him false, but what if Hastings was no longer in control? There was another matter. He had been badly hurt by Joe and Cassie's reaction to his open declaration of love for Angelique. He could not bring himself to react harshly against them. The people at headquarters were a different matter. While he could not frame the matter in logical terms, he felt a need to strike out just as had been the case when he was a school boy and had faced that terrible word.

The driver took one look at Ace's face and kept his mouth closed during the ride to the headquarters building. Ace entered the building and quickly walked the long hallway until he came to Hastings office. He set his kitbag down and knocked. There was no answer. He opened the door. Hastings was seated behind the desk and staring intently down at papers on his desk.

"Oh, sorry. I heard your knock, but I was wrapped up in this business." He made a motion with his hand at the desk. "Come in. There's been a change in plans. The situation in Yugoslavia appears to have gotten a bit out of hand. We have to move swiftly, now."

Ace nodded and sat down in a chair in front of the desk. Hastings was suddenly aware that Ace's manner was not friendly. He sensed that there was danger, and that Ace was sitting like a cobra ready to strike.

"What's wrong?" he asked as his hand eased open the desk drawer where he kept the same old Webley that he had carried in the last war.

"You tell me," Ace replied. His voice was cold, flat, and hard.

Hastings leaned forward slightly, the move enabling his hand to close around the handle of the revolver in the drawer.

Ace shook his head. "Don't do that. You aren't fast enough. You would never get that gun out of the drawer before I could pull mine from my shoulder holster."

Hastings hesitated, then smiled and pushed his chair back from the desk. "I accept your analysis completely. Might we move on to the matters at hand now that we have decided not to shoot each other?"

Hastings eased his chair forward again and reached with his hand to bring the pipe-loading device closer. He then moved the tobacco canister closer and began the laborious but non-threatening effort to load the pipe.

Ace eased back in his chair. "I thought I was going to get thirty days."

"Oh, I say, you know how these matters go," Hastings replied. "The special delegation is going to leave for Belgrade in three days time. The situation there is damnably critical. The urgency comes down from the top. Winston is very interested in Yugoslavia." Hastings tested the load of tobacco with a finger then picked up the pipe, put it in his mouth, and tried without success to light it with a match.

He peered over the pipe at Ace and continued, "We, of course, hope this is not going to be another Gallipoli."

"Well, your Winston might have his plans, but so do I. I want to get married. I want out of this mission."

Hastings appeared surprised. He stopped during his attempt to light the pipe, holding the burning match in his hand while staring at Ace until the flame touched his finger. He snapped out the match, and said, "The French girl?" He phrased it as a question, but his words carried more surprise than curiosity.

"Yes. I've got a few problems to work out. I need more time."

"She is a beautiful young woman," Hastings said as he drew another match out of the box and struck it against an emery strip on the pipe holding device. He paused as he finally got the pipe to work correctly. He blew out a puff of smoke, and noting the curious look on Ace's face explained, "I've seen her picture. It is in the reports."

"Are they under total surveillance?" Ace asked.

"Not exactly. The person named Cassie Washington is of interest because of her connections to the Communist Party. She is an active member. In point of fact, she makes no secret of it."

"I doubt that she's much of a threat to the British Empire," Ace said.

Hastings looked at his pipe. It had gone out. He shook his head. "Damnable things, pipes." He put the pipe back in the device, stared at Ace and said, "There is not an option on this matter. The senior commanders specifically want you on this mission."

"Why? The whole thing sounds political to me. I fly airplanes. I don't even know where this, what was the name of that town?"

"Belgrade," Hastings said. "It is the capital of Yugoslavia."

"Okay, whatever it is. I don't even know where it is. I've told you that." Ace stopped talking. Another possibility entered his mind, and he quickly asked, "Am I being sent there as some kind of punishment?"

Hastings reacted quickly. He appeared to be surprised. "Punishment? Good heavens, no! You are well out of the doghouse. In fact, you are in such good standing that you have been promoted."

"Back to major?"

"Better than that. You are now Lieutenant Colonel Archibald McFetters."

"Wonderful, I've gone from being a make-believe captain to a make-believe lieutenant colonel."

"Oh, I say, not quite so make-believe as you might think," Hastings said as he reached for his pipe.

"For God's sake, don't pull that pipe routine on me again. I can just see you driving a prisoner crazy with that routine. A flat out beating would be easier to bear."

Hastings withdrew his hand from the pipe. "It really is not part of a technique, though you are not the first one to make that observation. Miss Trombley was quite fond of making points about the pipe, and always at my expense."

"Is she doing well on her new assignment?"

Hastings looked at Ace. He appeared to have trouble finding the words he desired. Finally he spoke. "Miss Trombley is dead."

Ace felt his stomach turn. He clasped his hands together and twisted them. "How?" he asked.

"Four nights ago, German bomb."

"Damn!" Ace unclenched his hands. His eyes studied the floor for a moment and then he slowly raised his head. "Is this a trick?"

"Trick? I do not understand."

"Is this just another way to get me to go on this mission, a reason for me to go? To do something to honor the death of Miss Trombley?"

"Is that what you think?"

"Maybe," Ace replied. "I don't trust you people, even you. I know you've got superiors to answer to, and even if we come close to being friends, you will sacrifice me if necessary."

"And that, sir," Hastings said sharply, "Is precisely why the senior commanders desire your presence on this mission, and I concur with their logic."

"That doesn't make any sense," Ace said.

"On the contrary, it makes perfect sense. We have available ample numbers of highly trained men, proper families, the most proper schools, men of substance and experience in the ways of London. But they are poorly equipped mentally to go up against their counterparts from the Balkans who have a much different perspective on what is proper. Some, perhaps most, of the men in the Balkans have come up from rather desperate backgrounds. You will know and understand these men far better than our gentlemen. Your thoughts on the matters there will be of considerable value. Moreover, your expertise regarding airbases and planes that happen to be on those bases, as well as the quality of the pilots will be of great interest to the RAF."

Ace smiled. "You expect all that from me? Even if I could do all that, I'll bet you dollars to donuts your proper gentlemen won't spend five minutes considering anything I might have to say."

"That is always a possibility," Hastings said. "That is probably why the seniors here decided to promote you to lieutenant colonel. I thought perhaps a full colonelcy would have been better."

"It is an empty rank. No matter how you gild the lily, I'm still going to be Ace Mathews."

"Not quite true. Lieutenant Colonel Archibald McFetters is carried on the actual list of Canadian Royal Air Force officers. It may only be on paper, but in official circles, paper has great weight. In point of fact, you are quite a hero. Our make-believe and your actual exploits in the skies overhead have combined to make the most curious of realities. There is the matter of your pay and a pension. You have had a make-believe career. We could not just create you without having a suitable past. You have had a long career with excellent reviews, except for that unfortunate adventure in Paris, of course."

Ace was dumbfounded. He stuttered, trying to find words. A short and simple statement escaped his mouth.

"You people are insane!"

"There, you see it clearly. That is what we need from you. Of course we are insane. If I was not insane, I should not last a fortnight in this position."

There was no quick response from Ace. An idea was forming in his mind. He broke the momentary silence.

"There is an increase in my pay coming, and there is the possibility of a pension. How many years before I could receive the pension?"

"I would have to check on that. I believe it is something like five more years."

Ace nodded. "After this war is over, I want an appointment, a permanent post, to some group or maybe embassy in Paris. You people will have a need for well-placed, uh, observers, in France. Hell, you've always had people in France."

"I understand where you are going with this stratagem," Hastings said. "I cannot promise anything, but I have no doubt that your request will receive a sympathetic hearing."

“Okay. We have an agreement. I get the rank made permanent unless the colonelcy can be arranged, and the hope of a permanent post in Paris after the war. In exchange I do the job.”

“An interesting proposition. There is no doubt that if you complete this mission, you will be promoted to the rank of colonel. I cannot guarantee anything concerning after the war. Your idea is not without a certain logic that probably will fit the time.” Hastings smiled, then bowed, and after performing the bow, he continued, “On behalf of his Majesty’s government, I accept your proposal, and thank God this is over.”

“Not quite,” Ace said. “I need twenty-four hours. I need to talk to a certain young woman.”

Hastings sighed. “That is impossible, of course. We are proceeding on the hope of at least a modicum of secrecy. Whatever you tell the young lady will most likely be passed on to Cassie Washington, her aunt. News of your coming to Belgrade will be there before you arrive.”

“I have to see her,” Ace insisted.

“You could write her a letter, a very carefully worded letter, and I would have to read it to make certain there are no security violations.”

The matter was not negotiable, and Ace was aware of that fact, and he was not quite as disappointed as might be expected. He did not relish the idea of a tearful parting from Angelique. The more he thought about it, the better he appreciated the letter idea.

“There’s a problem with the letter,” Ace said. “Neither her father nor her aunt must know about the letter. It will have to be done secretly.”

“Ah, yes. We do have a certain expertise in these matters. It will be done as you wish.”

“And, while we are in the letter-writing business, I need you to get a letter to General Horne for me. I think he is still in London, but he might have returned to the States.”

“What is the subject of your letter to General Horne?” Hastings asked.

“Don’t worry,” Ace replied. “It’s about getting the son of my friend into pilot training.”

Hastings nodded. “I remember your concern about the young man. It will not be a problem. We are also adept at finding stray American generals.”

Blank stationery and a pen were produced by Hastings after a quick rummage through the desk drawers. “I’ll give you thirty minutes to compose your letters. When I return, we will begin a detailed briefing on your mission.”

After Hastings left the office, Ace quickly wrote a brief note to General Horne. The second letter was not an easy piece of work.

Hastings returned in less than half an hour. Ace was finished. He handed Hastings the two sheets of paper.

“I shall have to read them,” Hastings said.

“Don’t worry,” Ace answered agreeably. “There is no secret coded message in my note to Horne.”

“I am delighted to hear that.”

Ace nodded. “I’ve made my deal with the devil, and I’ll keep my part of the bargain. Now, you have to do what you can to see that the devil keeps his.”

Chapter 40

The letter reached Angelique four days after Ace had scribbled it in Hastings' office. The letter arrived by clandestine means. She found it one morning under her pillow, and she had no idea how it got there. Obviously, someone had entered her room during the night and slipped the letter under her pillow. If Ace had done it, why wouldn't he have spirited her away? She read the brief letter over and over again until it was memorized. Each time she read it, she cried. She thought about burning the letter. It would not help her situation if either Poppa or Cassie found it. She could not bring herself to take such a drastic action. The letter, the one piece of paper, was all she had to cling to for the weeks ahead until Ace returned. She hid the letter with the ring, and the faded magazine picture of him that she had carefully saved.

Poppa had absolutely forbidden her, but in a gentle way, from going back to work with the ambulance service. He and Cassie had taken her to see a doctor at the hospital. The doctor was busy and gave her a quick checkup which consisted of looking in her mouth, and listening to her heart. He said she needed rest and gave them a tonic which was to be taken every day. He also said there would be no more ambulance work for her.

She tried to talk to Poppa about Ace, but he would not have it. If she persisted, he left the room. If she followed, he left the apartment. She stopped trying to make Poppa understand her love for Ace and what was surely to come when he returned. Cassie was an even tougher case. Just the name, Ace, brought a scowl to her face and a stony silence.

Weeks passed. The air raids were not as fearful as before. London was still hit hard, but the area where the Washingtons lived was mostly spared. The fear of invasion had receded. Angelique felt stronger, and she took on most of the housekeeping duties.

One morning Angelique slept late. Cassie was still in the kitchen, but Joe was already on his way to the hospital.

"You sure slept in this morning. I'll heat up some breakfast for you."

Angelique sat down at the table. "Do you know that soon I will be twenty years old?"

"I know that," Cassie replied. "I was there when you were born. Never forgot that night." She brought the frying pan to the table and spooned out the food on the dish in front of Angelique who looked at the food and bolted for the bathroom.

Cassie watched her hurry to the bathroom. "Now what?" she muttered as she walked over to the table and looked down at the food on the plate. "There ain't nothing wrong with that food."

She leaned down and sniffed the food. As she straightened up, her hand passed in front of her mouth. "God damn that son of bitch!" She hurried to the bathroom.

The door was closed, but she could hear Angelique vomiting. She knocked on the door. "Child, you okay?"

There was no answer, but Cassie heard the toilet flush and then the sound of water running in the lavatory. She backed away from the door.

Angelique came out of the bathroom and saw Cassie waiting a few steps away. She smiled weakly at Cassie and said, "I have an upset stomach, I think. I hope I do not have the flu."

Angelique walked back to the kitchen and sat down at the table. Cassie brought her a glass of water.

"Thank you," Angelique said and then took a sip from the glass.

"I got to get to the hospital," Cassie said, "And you need to come with me. We need to see a doctor."

Angelique shook her head. "I am fine. The sickness goes away. It happened yesterday, too. I think it is the tonic we got from the doctor. It tastes terrible."

"How late are you on your period?"

"Period? Oh, the bleeding. I am a little late, I think. But, I am not certain. I have never been like a calendar person. Sometimes I am a little early and sometimes a little late. Momma thought it was strange."

"We got to see a doctor."

"I do not want to go to the hospital. It is a frightful place. Sometimes I see it in my dreams."

"You getting the hospital mixed up with the ambulances. It's not the same."

"People die there. I do not want to die."

Cassie almost smiled. "Sometimes, maybe. Some people do die, but most get better and walk out the door. It's not a bad place."

"No. I am fine."

"No, you ain't. I think you're pregnant."

"What?"

"You heard me. You're doing what pregnant women do. You're going to have a baby, and you ain't much more than a child, yourself."

"Do you really think it is possible?"

Cassie was taken aback by the response. Instead of being worried or frightened by the prospect, Angelique seemed excited.

"You don't understand, child. This means trouble."

Angelique clapped her hands as if applauding her good fortune. "Now I know for certain he will come back. He will come back for me and his son."

Cassie sank wearily into a chair. "He ain't coming back, child. They never come back. You and that baby are going to be all alone, except for me and your father. We still got to raise you and now that baby, too. How we going to do that?"

Angelique's mood changed from joy to defiance. "It is not true. Ace will come back. He has always come back. He came to get us out of Paris, yes?"

"And got your mother killed," Cassie said. "Now, I don't want your father to know about this just yet. He's already got enough on his mind, what with losing the bar and your momma's death, and all. He's doing poorly. We can wait a while before he needs to know."

Within a few days, the doctor at the hospital confirmed what Cassie had guessed and what Angelique regarded as truly being a gift from heaven. Just as Ace had seen a way out of his problems, a pathway to the future, so Angelique saw her pathway that would lead to the same future. She was certain that Ace would come back for her even if there was no child. More importantly, by all the laws and customs that the nuns had taught her,

now there could be no question about the marriage. Poppa would have no choice in the matter. He would have to give his approval. He could never refuse to approve the marriage because to not do so would cause her to be a social outcast. Who would ever marry a woman who had a son with no last name?

* * *

It was winter, and Ace had been gone for better than four months. The weather was terrible which was good because the Germans could not fly and there were fewer bombs falling. Poppa told Angelique that she was getting better. Her spirits were up, and she appeared to be putting on a little weight.

"It's Cassie's cooking," he said.

Angelique smiled. She started to tell Poppa the truth, but Cassie's stony glance reminded her of the need to keep Poppa in the dark as long as possible.

"It must be the tonic," she said.

Three mornings later, Angelique was busy doing the breakfast dishes. Joe and Cassie were at work at the hospital. The door bell rang. Angelique nearly dropped a dish. She was startled by the sound, and then she quickly put down the dish, and rushed to the door. She was sure that at last, it was Ace.

She flung open the door. It was not Ace. Instead it was possibly the last woman on earth Angelique would have expected, and certainly, not one she wanted to see.

Maggie stared at Angelique. Joe might not have understood the reason for Angelique's shining countenance and weight gain, but Maggie could easily make a good guess about Angelique's condition and the name of the father.

"Hello," Maggie offered.

Angelique stared back at Maggie. She recovered her manners. "Hello. Come in. We have not seen you for a long time."

Maggie replied that she had been very busy. She entered. "You've done a good job keeping up the apartment."

"Come in, please. I shall make us tea, yes?"

"That sounds good," Maggie said as she took off her coat.

"Please," Angelique said as she held out her hand for the coat. "Take a chair. I shall have the tea made in a few minutes."

"Kitchen table's fine for me," Maggie said.

"It is a comfortable kitchen," Angelique responded. "We spend most of our time in the kitchen."

"Ace never really knew what a living room was. He always sat at the kitchen table. Have you heard from him?"

Angelique shook her head. "I am so sad. Everyday there is nothing in the mail. When you pushed the buzzer on the door, I thought it might be him. But, no."

Angelique prepared the tea. She had her back to Maggie, who asked. "When are you due?"

Without turning around, Angelique asked, "Due?"

"The baby," Maggie offered as further explanation.

Angelique turned slowly. "You can tell?"

"Yes. What does the doctor say?"

Angelique brought the kettle to the tea pot and poured. "He believes June, perhaps July. I wish Ace would return soon." She let the tea steep. "Milk?"

"No, thanks. Are you and Ace going to get married, or are you already married?"

Angelique poured tea and sat down opposite Maggie. "We were going to be married, I think, but he was sent to Yugoslavia. That was a cruel thing for the British to do. Ace wrote me a letter. It was very strange."

"I never thought of Ace as being a good letter writer," Maggie said. She smiled and made a slight motion with her hand so that Angelique would understand she was not saying something unduly harsh about Ace.

"No, no, I do not mean his writing. He is not a foppish man. He is a knight, not a poet. What I mean is the way it was delivered. I found the letter under my pillow, and I do not understand how anyone could have put it there. If it was Ace, why did he not awaken me?"

"That is strange," Maggie agreed. "It sounds like something the people he works for would do. I wonder why he just didn't mail the letter."

Angelique stared down at the tea leaves in the bottom of her cup. "The mail would not be good."

"I see. You haven't told your father or Cassie?"

"Cassie knows, but Poppa, no, not yet. Cassie is afraid it will not be so good for his health. She worries about him."

"Poor Joe. He must be having a hard time. He was very much in love with your mother. I miss her, too. She was my good friend. I'm very sorry that she is gone."

"She is in heaven. I miss her so much. When my time comes, she will not be here."

"You'll have Cassie."

"That is true, but she has a hatred for Ace. I fear she will hate my baby."

"Oh, I hope that's not the case," Maggie said. "And, your father will be there. I'm sure he'll be happy to have a grandchild."

Angelique shook her head and Maggie noticed that Angelique's eyes seemed to be damp.

"Poppa, he is very angry with Ace. They talked, and Poppa said he would never permit Ace to marry me."

It was almost more than Maggie could bear. When she saw that Angelique was pregnant, she had quickly guessed it was Ace. Briefly she had hated both Ace and Angelique, but Ace most of all. She had thought that it was simply a case of a middle-aged man trying to be young again by sleeping with a young girl. That Ace was serious about Angelique and actually wanted to marry her came as a surprise to Maggie.

Maggie looked closely at Angelique. She was suddenly very concerned about this young woman, and that too, surprised her. She knew she should hate Angelique, but it was impossible.

"Are you okay?" Maggie asked.

Angelique quickly brightened. She brushed her hand across her eyes and smiled. "Yes, yes, I am fine. Everything will work out. Poppa will not approve my marriage to Ace, but when he knows that I will have a baby, he will have to approve. And Ace will take us back to Paris after the war. We will live in Paris, and you can come and visit us."

"I'm sure you will be very happy," Maggie said.

"Would you like another cup of tea?" Angelique asked.

“No, thank you. I should return to the dispatch center. There might be planes that need to be flown to the airbases.”

Maggie rose from her chair and Angelique followed. As they moved into the living room and Angelique handed Maggie her coat, she smiled and said, “You are a very nice person. When I was young, I hated you, and I should not have done that.”

“You hated me? Why?”

“Because you had Ace. I feared you might marry him. I was too much in love with him then.”

Maggie took Angelique’s hands in hers. “It was a long time ago. What was between Ace and me has been over for years. You and I must be friends now.”

“I thank you,” Angelique said. “If it could not be Ace who was at the door, I am happy that it was you. Maybe someday, it will be Ace. It has been so long, and I have heard nothing.”

“Be patient,” Maggie said as she stepped out the door. “Ace said he will come. He will be here.”

As she walked to her car, Maggie put her wits in order. She had learned over the years to push down emotions in order to bring logic into her thoughts. It was a difficult assignment on this day.

The discussion with Angelique had clarified one matter that had puzzled Maggie. When she and Ace were in the haystack with a bottle of whiskey, the whiskey and the straw were given a good tussle, but nothing had happened. At the time, she thought it was because they were both tired. She also considered that maybe she was older and not a woman of interest as far as Ace was concerned. It had never occurred to her that Ace was being faithful.

“Damn!” She uttered the word aloud, and then looked around to see if anyone overheard her as she got into the car.

On her way back to the dispatch office, Maggie smiled when she thought about the letter that Ace had written to Angelique and then had delivered by a proper spy method. Her smile disappeared when she thought back a long time ago when she had received a letter delivered by Joe. She had leaped to the wrong conclusion then, but Angelique made no such leap. The child had a simple faith that kept her from making bad mistakes, maybe.

Poor Ace! He had been forced into the mission for the French. He would not sacrifice his friends for his own sake. This mission to Yugoslavia was like the mission to Spanish Morocco. What had the British threatened Ace with in order to persuade him to go? She sighed. She was aware that she was weary, tired, worn down by the war, the flying, and now this entanglement with the intelligence people.

Maggie’s foot lifted from the accelerator and the car slowed. She remembered Miami, well, the little place near Miami where she and Ace had spent wonderful days. No, she could not live in that primitive a fashion. Perhaps a fine but secluded house in Miami, but after the war. Yes, after the war. She would tell the lawyers and managers in her corporations to go to hell. Maybe she could keep the foundation, but keep it an arm’s length away, and herself a long way from Washington. There was a gentle sound of a polite horn from a car behind her. She glanced up and resumed speed.

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Maggie wondered how long it would take Rachel to find the location of the secret headquarters where she knew Hastings had his office. As it turned out, Rachel reported success after forty-three minutes. It was time for another meeting with Major Hastings.

Under most circumstances, she would have had a difficult time meeting a man who worked in that building. Only people who were sent for gained access to the building, but when Hastings heard that Maggie wanted to see him, he was quite intrigued. It had been years since he had seen Miss Mary Margaret O'Malley. He was reasonably certain that he knew what she desired, but with the young French woman in the picture, he was most curious.

When Maggie entered his office, she was a little unnerved by his appearance. He was dressed in a uniform and the empty left sleeve was pinned up. His face was drawn and pale, and he had lost hair. Still, she measured the number of years since the last time she had seen him and judged that time was not working for him. She was also aware that time had not been very kind to her, either.

"Miss O'Malley, it is a pleasure to see you. It has been quite a while since we last met. Please, sit down."

"Thank you," Maggie replied. She watched as Hastings put his pipe in the device on his desk. She quickly moved to the desk and picked up the pipe.

"Allow me," she said.

Hastings smiled. "Of course."

Maggie carefully loaded the tobacco in the bowl of the pipe and tamped it down. She handed the pipe to Hastings who put the stem in his mouth and reached for a match, but Maggie was ahead of him. She had a match in her hand and struck it against the emery and held the match to the bowl of his pipe. Hastings stared at her over the bowl of the pipe. She stepped back as he drew on the pipe with considerable success.

"Thank you," he said. "It seems to be working fine. I would almost suspect that you are a confirmed pipe smoker."

"No," Maggie answered. "When I was a child, I was Daddy's chief pipe loader. He had strong, large fingers, the fingers of a brick layer, and when he loaded his pipe, he left as much tobacco on the table or the floor as in his pipe. Besides, I thought if I loaded your pipe, I could spare myself the routine you use to mask your thoughts or to try to read mine."

Hastings took the pipe from his mouth and watched as the smoke continued to curl up from the bowl. "Quite remarkable," he said. "It has not gone out." He smiled at Maggie and added, "Mr. Mathews also thought that I used the pipe as a tool."

"Thought?" Maggie said. "Are you speaking in the past tense?"

"Oh, I apologize. No, no. Mr. Mathews is very much alive."

"When will he be coming home?"

"There is a slight problem at the moment. I fear that in the not too distant future, a few weeks or so, all our people will be coming home. It is no secret that the Germans are preparing to invade Yugoslavia."

"Then Ace will be coming home in a couple of weeks?"

"There is a problem in his case. A band of Croats were able to kidnap him. They are holding him for ransom, and of course, his Majesty's government does not negotiate with such people, and never countenances the payment of ransoms."

“Oh, really?” Maggie smiled. “If his Majesty’s government was to pay such a ransom, how much would it be?”

Hastings puffed on his pipe, took it out of his mouth, and looked at the smoke which continued to curl upward. “Quite remarkable,” he muttered. He looked back at Maggie. “Ten thousand pounds.”

“Ace is worth ten thousand pounds?”

“The Croats think so. They might take less, but there is no way I can produce that kind of money. I have access to some small contingency funds, but nothing even remotely close to that amount.”

“Then his Majesty’s government is prepared to leave Ace in the hands of the Croats?” Maggie asked. “My guess is that they will either kill him or sell him to the Germans. Have you measured the consequences of his falling into German hands? When they break him, what will he be able to tell them about your operations?”

“Oh, not very much. He has never had access to information that the Germans do not already know. I fear he is expendable. We are all expendable, depending on the circumstances.”

“I’ll pay the ransom,” Maggie said. “Just get it done and get him back here as soon as possible. He’s got a wedding to attend.”

Hastings was surprised. He carefully set the pipe down in the device and looked up. “You would be prepared to pay the money?”

Maggie opened her purse and pulled out a checkbook. “A check for the amount is okay?”

“No, no money now. Allow me some time first to find out just how serious the Croats really are about the ransom. The trick in these cases is not to allow them to drive us above the amount they want. If we go in with the ten thousand pounds, they will suddenly discover that they want fifteen thousand pounds.”

“For a government that does not pay ransoms, you seem to have worked out the details rather nicely,” Maggie said.

“There are always hypothetical cases,” Hastings said. “By the way, just who is getting married?”

“Ace.”

“To the French girl? You are indeed a most generous woman.”

“I think of it as a wedding present,” Maggie said.

After Maggie was gone, Hastings sat at his desk and considered what he had just witnessed. Here was a woman willing to pay ten thousand pounds to save a man she loved, but the money would buy the man for another woman. He changed his mind about remarkable. He now thought it quite bizarre. He was convinced the Americans were indeed a different people, perhaps even a peculiar people. What strange hold over women did this man have that would cause these bizarre reactions?

There were no guarantees that the American could be ransomed, although the Croats would certainly find the money interesting.

There was no doubt in his mind that he made the correct decision when he prevented Ace from returning to the French girl before leaving on his mission. They might have found a way to get married.

He could not keep from remembering his own past. He had been young and very much in love with a woman named Alice. Just before he left for France with his

company, they were married. It was a very romantic moment. He still had old photos of the wedding. When he came home from France, minus his company for they had all been killed, and minus his left arm, Alice had been very brave. She pretended not to notice the empty sleeve. That first night when they were in bed she saw the naked stump where his arm had been, and she recoiled from him, a look of revulsion etched like a mask across her face.

The scar on the American's face, earned in the same war, did not seem to repulse women. "The bloody thing is like a beacon," he murmured aloud. The thought caused him to chuckle, but it was almost a mirthless effort. He continued, and the chuckle grew into a laugh which then evolved into hysterical laughter. He beat his fist against the desk, his head back and his face lifted up toward the ceiling, the peals of laughter continuing.

Finally, he got control of himself. Now there were tears in his eyes. Again, he spoke aloud, "How many more will I send out to their deaths before this insanity comes to an end?"

Chapter 41

Joe sat at the table. He stirred the last half of his second cup of tea even though it was cool. It had been three weeks since he last visited Elaine's grave. The weather was bad. The work at the hospital was hard, and the hours were long. He would have to find time to visit the grave again. He no longer had tears in his eyes as a result of thinking about Elaine, but there was still a deep sadness that pressed in against his chest and made swallowing difficult.

He did not notice that Angelique was sitting at the table across from him and staring at him. Cassie noisily scraped the frying pan, but the noise did not interfere with his thoughts. The noise acted as background music since the sound was so familiar. He could remember it from his childhood onward.

"Poppa?" Angelique asked.

Cassie instantly stopped scraping the pan and turned so she could see Angelique's face.

"Poppa?"

Joe looked up. He smiled. "What is it, child?"

"I have to tell you something, but I fear it will make you angry."

Joe remembered the routine. When Angelique was a small child, she learned that when she was in trouble, the best way to keep Poppa from becoming too angry was to tell him he was going to be angry because of something she had done.

He put the painful thoughts about the cemetery and Elaine out of his mind. This was a welcome distraction.

"Have you done something bad?" he asked as he drew himself up and put a fearsome scowl on his face.

"No, Poppa, not bad. Not really bad."

"Then why would I be mad?"

"Poppa, I am going to have a baby."

Joe was silent. He stared at Angelique. "That's a bad joke, child. Don't go joking like that."

"No, no, Poppa, it is true. I am going to have a baby. I am going to have Ace's baby."

Joe's chair screeched back and tipped over as he sprang to his feet. "You what? That goddamned Ace got you pregnant? I'll kill the son-of-a-bitch, so help me God!"

Angelique ran sobbing from the kitchen. She slammed the door to her room.

"She okay?" Joe asked, his anger quickly changing into anxiety.

Cassie nodded. "I guess so. Women in her condition do a lot of crying, or so I'm told. Crying won't hurt her. Are you okay?"

Joe picked up his chair and sat down. "Sure, I'm okay. It's a real good morning, isn't it? All I need now is for some Heinie bomber to come over and drop a big one right down my goddamned chimney."

Cassie moved around the table and took the chair just vacated by Angelique. "I think Ace has got us nailed to the wall. You can't kill him, that's for sure, until after the wedding. That baby needs a name."

“Well, he ain’t going to marry my daughter. That’s final. The name don’t make any difference anyway. Hell, where’d our last name come from? We can fake a name and claim the man died in the war. People are sure as hell doing that every day.”

“It might work,” Cassie admitted. “Wonder what the child will look like?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s most likely going to be lighter than Angelique. That’s the way it works.”

Joe nodded. “Remember, I told you I had thought about returning to the States so we could find some good men for Angelique to choose from?”

Cassie sniffed, “I notice that after the last war you somehow forgot to find a good woman in the States.”

“That’s different,” Joe muttered.

Cassie’s response was a quiet, “Uh, huh.”

Joe suddenly looked at Cassie. “How long have you known about this?”

“I knew about Ace and Angelique months ago. I saw him with her at that French Canteen.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“‘Cause I was afraid you’d have a heart attack or something like that. Besides, I was hoping that he’d get killed off on one of those things he does for the British. Then, there was always the chance some other woman might come along.”

“We should have done something,” Joe said wearily.

“Yes, you are right there,” Cassie responded. “That night back in Paris, the night Angelique was born, remember? We should have called the police. They would have hauled his ass off to Devil’s Island. That’s what we should have done.”

“That was no good, Cassie. I wouldn’t even send Ace off to Devil’s Island, and don’t forget about his friends. What do you think they’d have done to us if we turned him in and they lost those diamonds?”

“I guess so. Maybe if you hadn’t been a hero and saved him, that might have helped. I never could figure out why you had to risk your own life to save a white man, anyway. Whatever possessed you to do that?”

“He’s a brave man. I can still see him pitching into those four Heinie planes. He didn’t have a chance in hell, but there he goes right at them.”

“Maybe he just didn’t know any better.”

“No, that’s not true,” Joe said. “He was so good to us. Give us the shirt off his back if we asked. I thought he was the best friend I ever had. It didn’t seem to make any difference at all if I was colored or not.”

“Uh, huh. Seems he’s collecting a pretty high interest payment on his money.”

Joe ignored Cassie’s last comment. A concern had just occurred to him. “She see a doctor?”

“A couple of months ago. There’s no doubt about her being pregnant.”

“Again, you didn’t tell me about that,” Joe growled.

Cassie got up from her chair and walked over to the stove and took the tea kettle off the burner and filled it with water. “We are going to have us a sick day today,” she said. “I’ll make more tea. Then you can get some rest.”

“That’s a good idea. Another cup of tea and then I’m going over to the cemetery. Haven’t been there for a while. I’ll talk to Momma about this. Maybe she’ll know what to do.”

Cassie hoped he was trying to be funny.

* * *

Winter was giving way to spring, and the baby inside Angelique continued to grow. There was still no word from Ace. Maggie had made a second trip to see Hastings. He could only report that these matters took time. Then when Angelique was in her seventh month, Maggie was informed by Hastings that Ace had been freed and the group he was assigned to was pulling out ahead of the Germans. There was one small problem. Ace had been hurt. He was taken to a hospital in Cairo, Egypt. He had been shot in the hip, but it was not life threatening.

When Maggie arrived at the apartment to tell Angelique the good news, she found Angelique appearing wan and very tired. The news about Ace cheered her up, though, and at least temporarily restored color to her cheeks.

When Angelique retired to her room to rest, Maggie asked Joe and Cassie about Angelique's health.

"What does the doctor say?" she asked.

"He thinks she's got some kind of heart condition," Joe answered. "We're supposed to keep her in bed as much as possible. I asked about getting her in the hospital, but they're full up. We're getting a lot of soldiers coming in now, men who've been wounded pretty bad out in North Africa. They come to our place for a while before being sent on to rest centers where they can complete their recovery."

"You say Ace is coming home?" Cassie asked. "That for sure?"

"Yes, that's for sure," Maggie replied.

"Then what we going to do, Joe?" Cassie asked.

"I don't know. I just don't know. I don't want him coming around Angelique. He's going to hurt my child just sure as anything."

"You might be wrong there, Joe," Maggie said.

"He sure as hell didn't do right by you," Cassie noted.

"That's a different matter," Maggie said sharply. "That business was as much my doing as it was Ace's. There was a time, after the Spanish prison matter when he was very serious, but I'm the one who said no."

Joe was surprised. "I didn't know that. You sorry now about it?"

"Sometimes," Maggie admitted. "But that's history. I think Ace is serious about Angelique. I think for the first time in his life, he really is in love."

"He's way too old for her," Cassie argued.

"Probably," Maggie agreed. "So what? She will make a very attractive widow someday. Better yet, Ace has some money. He's always had money. He can take care of her and the child. If you will just give this a chance, maybe someday you will all be back in Paris and living the good life."

Joe's anger softened. Maggie's unexpected support for Ace had an impact on him. He visited Elaine's grave and explained the situation to her, and he truly believed that his time spent there in deep thought was important. He knew that Elaine was not talking to him. He was not hearing voices. It was a different kind of communication. Somehow, talking to Momma eased his mind. His left arm did not ache. He knew from past

experience that the relief was only temporary. The problems would still be waiting for him after he left the cemetery.

Angelique was obviously not doing well. She still insisted that she and Ace would be married. Joe did not argue with her. He simply reassured her that somehow, everything would work out. He did not want her to worry, but he was still a long way from giving his approval.

* * *

It was a night early in the eighth month of Angelique's pregnancy. There had been scattered bombings in parts of London, but none were close to the apartment. They sat at the kitchen table with a candle providing light, the blackout curtains ensuring that this tiny little flickering light would not guide a German bomber.

"That one sounded closer," Joe said as the dull noise of an explosion reached their ears.

"House ain't shaking," Cassie said. "No need to go to the bomb shelter. I hate that place. There's always a baby crying."

Angelique looked up when Cassie mentioned the word 'baby.' "I need a drink of water," she said as she got up and headed for the counter where there was a pitcher of water. The pitcher was always filled each night in case the water line was broken.

Joe rose. "I'll get it for you, child. You sit back down."

Angelique shook her head. "I'm fine." She took two steps and sank to the floor.

"Oh, no!" Cassie cried.

Joe quickly stepped to Angelique's side. Her eyes were open. She appeared to be surprised, but not in pain. Joe picked her up and carried her to the couch in the living room. Cassie followed.

As he laid her down on the couch, he said, "You stay here with her. I'm going to get help. We got to get her to the hospital."

Cassie leaned over Angelique. "Can you talk? Say something." Angelique reacted; she looked at Cassie but said nothing.

"Hurry, Joe. I don't like the look of this."

Joe rushed out into the night. He had no idea what he was going to do at first. Then he resolved to run all the way to the hospital. But after the first fifty feet he was panting and his chest and side ached. He stopped, bent over, his hands on his knees, his lungs struggling to find more air.

"Here, now. Why are you out and about? There's still a warning laid on, you know." The voice came from a man who approached rapidly. He wore a steel helmet and had an armband around one arm. He shined a small light briefly in Joe's face. "Are you all right?"

Joe straightened up. "It's my daughter. She just passed out. I think she's going to have a baby. I've got to get her to the hospital."

"Come with me," the man said. Joe could not see the smile on the man's face, but he could hear him chuckle. "Jerry will have to wait his turn this night while nature takes her course."

They walked a short distance to a call box. The air raid warden put in the call and was told that an ambulance would be on the way.

“Tell them that it’s Angelique. The ambulance people know her. She was a volunteer there,” Joe said.

It seemed to Joe that it was taking forever for the ambulance to arrive, but it was only a matter of minutes. It had been a lucky break, the warden coming along when he did. The telephone line from the apartment did not often work. The call box line had a much higher priority level.

When the ambulance arrived at the apartment, the driver jumped out and shouted, “Where’s our Angel? We haven’t seen her in a while.”

The hospital was busy. Ambulances were arriving from other parts of the city bringing in people who had been hurt by the random bombings. These were not badly injured people. They could stand the long ride in the ambulances.

Angelique was taken to a room and placed on an examination table. A nurse ushered Joe and Cassie out into the hall. Soon, the nurse was joined by a doctor. After about ten minutes, he came out. He asked Joe,

“Are you people family members of the young woman inside?”

“I’m her father,” replied Joe. “And this is my sister.”

“Well, your daughter has not gone into labor. We are going to put her in a bed, and I do not want her getting out of it until it’s time to deliver the child. Your daughter has a heart condition, a serious matter, I fear. The good news is that the baby seems healthy enough. How long has your daughter had this heart problem?”

“She’s always had some problems,” Cassie said. “Ever since she was a little girl, we’ve been giving her a tonic.”

“Tonic?”

“We lived in Paris then,” Joe said. “The doctors claimed all she needed was a tonic. Never did know what was in it. Seemed to pep her up, though.”

“I see. Well, for now we want her to have complete bed rest. You can see her tomorrow. Visiting hours here are very flexible. The war, you know.”

Joe nodded. “We work here as volunteers. It won’t be a problem.”

The doctor smiled. “Yes, of course. You are the Americans here with Miss O’Malley. I thought you looked familiar. I have a sister who is one of the women who ferry planes to the bases. She greatly admires your Miss O’Malley. I wish more Americans were over here helping us.”

“I’d guess it won’t be long before there will be a whole lot of us over here,” Joe said. He motioned for the doctor to step away from where they were standing. The doctor followed him.

In a low voice, Joe asked, “You a Catholic?”

The doctor was puzzled by the question. “No, Anglican, Church of England.”

Joe nodded. “That’s good.” He reached out with his hand and took hold of the doctor’s white coat. “If this goes bad, you save my daughter. Don’t you worry about that baby. It didn’t get here the right way.”

The doctor kept his composure. He put his hand atop Joe’s and removed it from his coat. The movement was smooth and done without arousing a counter motion from Joe.

“We will do our best to save both the mother and the child.” He spoke firmly, but his measured tone was calculated not to cause a problem.

Joe stared at the doctor for a second and then muttered, “Good. Good.”

When the all-clear sirens announced the end of the German activity over London, Joe and Cassie began their walk back to the apartment. The night air was cool, but it felt good. It was May and should have been a time of joy, but the war tempered the feelings of most people.

"What did you say to that doctor?" Cassie asked.

"Nothing."

"You said something. I saw him stiffen up."

"I just wanted him to know that if worst came to worst, he's to save Angelique. That baby can go to hell as far as I'm concerned. I'm not so sure it didn't come from there."

"That's your grandchild you're talking about. I don't like this anymore than you do. But the baby didn't have nothing to do with it. It didn't ask to be here, you know."

"I thought you hated Ace's guts," Joe said.

"That's right. He should have been razor bait. But that don't have anything to do with the baby."

They heard a plane overhead. "Is that one of ours?" Cassie asked.

"Don't know," Joe replied.

There was a sudden whistling noise, a noise Joe remembered from the last war. "Get down," he shouted as he shoved Cassie to the ground. He fell on top of her in an effort to shield her from the explosion.

There was no explosion. Instead there was a great noise and the ground shook. Dust was rising unseen in the night.

"A dud. A goddamned dud," Joe said. Then he jumped to his feet and pulled Cassie up. "Quick. We got to run like hell. It might still go off."

They hurried back the way they had come to an intersection. "This way," Joe panted. They turned and walked quickly. Cassie tried to help Joe as he frequently stumbled. When Joe could go no farther, they stopped to rest.

"What happened?" Cassie asked.

"It was a bomb. Must have been a big one. Somebody got hit. It didn't go off. Sometimes they don't."

"You mean it's just sitting there ready to explode?"

"That's right," Joe replied. "Course, it might be a delayed fuse. The Heinies use those sometimes. It could be set to go off tomorrow or maybe later."

"That's awful," Cassie said.

"That's for sure. Come on. I want to put some more distance between us and that damned thing."

The next morning, Joe picked some flowers from a bed in front of the building.

"They ain't much," he told Cassie as they started their walk to the hospital. "Maybe they'll help cheer up the child."

They did not walk very far before they were stopped by a soldier.

"Sorry," the soldier said. "You will have to go around this area. We have a bomb disposal team about to go to work here."

Joe nodded. "We almost got hit by that damned bomb last night. We couldn't have been more than half a block or so away when it came down."

"You're lucky it didn't go off," the soldier said. "It's a big one. Must be a thousand-pounder."

It was a long walk around the posted area, and by the time they got to the hospital, Joe said, "I feel like I've done a day's work already."

The hospital was busy as usual. The lobby was filled with people. Most of them were relatives of patients who had been brought to the hospital after raids on other parts of London. They were seeking information.

Suddenly, a great explosion shook the hospital. People began running in all directions. The screams of frightened people bounded off the walls. Joe and several soldiers who were among the crowd did what they could to restore order. Finally, the crowd realized that the hospital was not under attack.

Joe turned to Cassie. "Remember the bomb disposal team?"

Cassie nodded and then realized what Joe was thinking. "No!"

"Probably. I wonder who they were. Usually those teams have two men. They must have cut the wrong wire."

"We better find out where they've got Angelique," Cassie said. "She'll be frightened out of her wits."

Chapter 42

A hallway on the second floor of the hospital had been converted into space for a maternity ward. Women waiting to deliver were kept there for the hours before delivery. Angelique had a bed that was wedged in between a wall and another bed. The staff at the crowded hospital had to make use of every possible square foot of space. There was barely room between beds for a nurse to be able to check on the patients.

Angelique was awake. The nurse in charge explained to her that she had to stay in bed.

"We'll get you into a proper ward, dearie," the nurse told Angelique. "This is just temporary."

The woman in the next bed was in labor and having a hard time of it. Her cries were unnerving, and Angelique tried to cover her ears with her hands. Relief came when the woman was taken on a stretcher to the delivery room.

A hospital volunteer came and changed the sheet on the bed. She was a young woman who smiled at Angelique as she worked to prepare the bed for the next woman.

"You're not in labor yet, are you?" she asked Angelique.

"No, I do not think I am. Will it hurt so much?"

"Seems to, I'd say. Never been pregnant myself. Married me man just before he left for North Africa. Guess we weren't together long enough or at the right time."

It was not long after the bed had been made that Joe entered the hall. He did not see Angelique at first, his eyes drawn to the line of beds along one wall and his mind clouded by the confusion of people using the rest of the hall to move about the second floor.

"Poppa!"

Joe looked around and saw his daughter in the bed in the corner, one end against the back wall and one side against the partition.

"Angel? There you are. I didn't see you at first. How are you?"

"I want to go home, Poppa."

Joe stood at the end of the bed. People were passing by behind him. He looked at the empty bed next to Angelique, shook his head, and then moved between the beds and worked his way down so that he was on his knees between the beds.

He reached out to her and just as when she was a little girl, she reached for him and they hugged.

Joe whispered in her ear. "It's going to be okay, child. When Ace comes back, I won't stand in the way of you two getting married. I promise."

Angelique drew back. "Oh, Poppa! Now I am truly happy. Thank you so much. I could never go against your wishes."

Angelique laid back down, her head resting on the pillow and turned toward him. There were tears in her eyes, but her lips formed a smile.

"I want to go home," she said. "I will have to plan for the wedding, I think."

Joe smiled. "It will have to be in a Catholic Church. Your Momma would not be happy if we didn't do that."

"That will be fine. Cassie can be my maid of honor."

Joe kept from frowning by forcing a smile. Persuading Cassie to go along with being a maid of honor with Ace as the bridegroom would not be easy.

"Are they treating you okay?" he asked.

"They are very busy," she replied. "They try very hard. Did you hear that terrible explosion this morning? We were all frightened. We thought the hospital was being bombed."

"It was a bomb that fell last night," Joe explained. "It didn't explode, so this morning the British blew the thing up."

"Oh, I am happy that no one got hurt."

A nurse appeared at the foot of the bed. "You will have to leave now. We are bringing in a patient for this bed. It's been empty about as long a time as I've seen."

Joe pulled himself upright and looked down at Angelique. "I'll be back later, tomorrow for sure. You get some rest."

As he edged sideways out from between the beds, Angelique called to him, "Goodbye, Poppa."

"See you later, child."

As he returned to his work station, Joe thought about how easy it had been to lie to his own child. It really was not a lie, he told himself. He had decided that there really was no point in opposing the marriage. He had been surprised to hear her say that she did not want to go against his will. The story about the bomb was not really a lie, either. The British did blow the thing up, but at least two men surely must have died. Angelique did not need to know that.

His decision not to oppose the marriage had come to him during the night, but he had not told Cassie about it this morning. That would have to be done later. He smiled when he thought about having to hide that damned razor.

There was no question about whether or not Ace would return. He had more lives than a cat. It was what would happen after the marriage that had caused him to change his mind. He did not doubt that Angelique would be hurt. Ace was good at that. Then after he left her for another woman or another war, Angelique's life would have to be put back together again. He and Cassie could do that job.

He shook his head. It was a lousy decision, but there was no other way out of it. He did not want to lose Angelique forever. He would have a hard time explaining that to Momma when he went to the cemetery to visit her.

During the days that followed both Joe and Cassie checked in on Angelique. Each time there was a different woman in the bed next to her. They were not the only visitors. Maggie came to see Angelique. It was a short visit but one that caused Angelique to rise up out of her lethargy. Maggie told her that she knew for certain that Ace would be here any day now. He was on his way back to London from Cairo.

Angelique had been in the hospital for nearly a month and then one night she awoke from a fitful sleep. There was a terrible pain in her chest and in her stomach. She screamed and kept screaming. The woman in the bed beside her was frightened by Angelique's screaming, and began yelling at the top of her voice for the nurse to come.

Others in the ward took up the cries for help, and a nurse arrived. She made a quick check of the scene, and ran out of the room to find a doctor.

Men came with a stretcher and lifted Angelique onto the stretcher which had to be laid on the open floor at the foot of the bed.

Angelique's arms and legs were thrashing about. Her screams were replaced by gasps for air. With two men carrying the stretcher and a nurse on each side trying to hold her arms and legs tight, they proceeded out of the hall, down the stairs, and through another hall to an operating room which happened to have just been vacated by another patient.

The doctor rushed into the room, and two nurses followed. All three had blood on their smocks and pants from the prior operation.

As she was being examined, Angelique briefly found her way back to semi-consciousness.

"Ace? Ace? Where are you?"

The doctor and nurses worked feverishly to prepare Angelique for an operation. The doctor had decided that the only hope for either the mother or the baby was a Caesarian birth.

Angelique suddenly sat upright. Her long black hair streamed down from her head. Her eyes were shining. She stared off into a place the others in the room could not see.

"Momma! Oh, Momma, wait for me!"

She fell back and her eyes stared up at the ceiling.

"Quick, now!" the doctor said.

* * *

Joe trudged up the stairs at the hospital on his way to visit Angelique. When he entered the hall, he saw that she was not there and that her bed was gone.

The woman in the bed next to where Angelique's bed had been was awake.

"What happened to the girl who was next to you?" he asked.

"Don't know about that now, but she was taken sick during the night, she was. They came and took her away. She was screaming something awful. Then this morning, they came and took the bed."

Joe turned and hurried out of the hall and down the stairs. Fear clouded his eyes. He stumbled on the stairs, caught the railing, recovered, and then hurried to the hospital office. Volunteer workers behind the counter were trying to deal with the requests for information.

Joe bullied his way to the counter.

"Where's my daughter?" he asked harshly. "What's happened to her?"

There were murmurs of disapproval from the people waiting, but no one challenged Joe's position at the counter.

"You'll have to wait your turn, sir," said a woman behind the counter.

"Wait, hell! Where's my daughter?"

The woman looked around, but she could not see any of the hospital guards. She sighed. "What is the name?"

"Washington, Joe Washington. My daughter's the patient. She's not in her bed. Hell, her bed's gone! What's happened?"

The woman checked a card file. She found the card she was looking for, studied it for a moment, and turned and looked at Joe. There was sadness in her eyes, and when she returned to the counter, she was polite.

"You are to see her doctor. His name is Doctor Winslow Everly. He is in room 114. That's on this floor, just to your left as you go out the door here."

"What's that card say?" Joe asked.

"I'm sorry. I'm not supposed to give out that kind of information. You will have to go see the doctor."

The room was not far and Joe opened the door and looked in. It was a tiny room. There was a small table that served as a desk, a stack of boxes that held files, and two chairs.

The doctor looked up. "What can I do for you?"

"You Doctor Everly?"

"Yes."

"I'm Joe Washington. What about my daughter? What's happened?"

The doctor rose from his chair and walked around in front of the table. "Sit down, Mr. Washington. We have to talk."

Joe sat down. His hands gripped the edges of the chair. "My daughter, Angelique?"

The doctor returned to his chair. He stared at Joe for a moment, then took off his glasses and laid them on the table.

"I have some bad news for you, Mr. Washington. Your daughter died last night. We did everything possible to try to save her, but her heart just gave out. I am so sorry. She was a fine young woman."

"You saying my daughter's dead?" Joe asked. He could not believe what he was hearing.

"There is good news, too," the doctor said. "We were able to save the baby. You have a healthy grandson."

"My daughter's dead. Angelique is gone." He put his head in his hands and muttered, "My child. She's gone."

"Are you all right, Mr. Washington? Did you hear me? You have a fine, healthy grandson."

Joe raised his head. "What? What? A grandson? I don't want it. It's the spawn of the devil. Why didn't you kill it instead of my daughter?"

He rose from his chair and looked wildly about the room. The doctor edged his chair back, but Joe did not move toward him. Instead, he turned and rushed out the door and back down the hall to the hospital's entry doors. He pushed the door open and fled outside. He had to hurry. He must get to the cemetery to tell Momma about Angelique's death. He must tell Momma to look for their child.

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That afternoon, Maggie arrived at the hospital. She stopped at the office and found Cassie there signing a form.

"I came as soon as I heard," Maggie said. "I'm so sorry."

Cassie stared at her for a second and then nodded. "Thank you for coming. We about have everything done that needs to be done."

"Where's Joe? How is he taking this?"

“‘Bout the way you might expect. He’s gone off to the cemetery. He goes there too much. I don’t want to have to bury him, too.”

“Will she be buried in the same cemetery as her mother?” Maggie asked.

“I hope so. There was an open plot right beside Elaine’s. Maybe we can get it.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll get Rachel on it right away. Don’t worry about the cost. “

“You’ve been good to us. We can’t possibly repay you for all you done.”

“Don’t even think about it,” Maggie responded. “You people are the only real family I’ve got. How is the baby?”

“He’s doing just fine, they say. I haven’t had time to go up and see him yet. You want to go along? They say we can see him anytime.”

“Yes. Yes, I would like that.”

As they walked up the stairs, Cassie said, “The doctor claims it was her heart. She was never a sickly child, exactly. But she never was quite as strong as she seemed. Joe and I had an aunt who was that way. One day she was fine and the next she was gone, just like that.”

“What does Joe think of his grandson?”

“Don’t know what he’s thinking right now. I know what he thought while Angelique was still alive.”

“Is there going to be a problem?”

“I guess so. He hated the baby before it was born. I know he told the doctor that if there was any trouble, he was to save Angelique and let the baby go back to hell where he came from.”

As they arrived at the maternity ward, Maggie asked, “What are you going to do about it?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t know. I may have to put the baby up for adoption.”

Cassie stopped at a table outside the maternity ward. There was a volunteer there, an older woman. Cassie filled out a short form and handed it to the woman.

The woman pointed down the hall. “There’s a viewing window there. It’ll take a few minutes to bring the baby to the window.”

They walked to the window and waited. They could see rows of babies wrapped in blankets and snug in what appeared to be wicker baskets.

Cassie kept silent, and Maggie was wrapped in her own thoughts. This was Ace’s baby as well as Angelique’s. She let her mind wander and then sharply reined it in when thoughts about what kind of baby she and Ace might have produced sketched unexpected designs.

A nurse brought the baby over to the window. Cassie gasped. Maggie said, “There must be some mistake.”

“It’s a pinkie!” Cassie said, her voice carrying the full freight of astonishment.

“Pinkie?”

“Yes, that’s a pinkie,” Cassie said softly. “A colored baby that could grow up and pass as white. The poor child!”

“Are you sure about that?” Maggie asked.

Cassie looked at Maggie; her eyes flashed with sharp edges of scorn. “I’ve seen it before, once or twice. It’s real bad when the child is exposed as a ‘nigger’ and about as bad with the colored folks who won’t accept it, either.”

Maggie heard the words coming out of her mouth almost as if she was another person standing nearby. "I'll take the baby."

"You what?"

"I'll take the baby. I'll raise it."

Cassie shook her head. "You don't know what you're talking about. How you going to raise a colored child?"

"You said he could pass for being white."

"Maybe, but there's always things like birth certificates and that sort of thing. Something always comes up. Then what're you going to do with the child?"

Maggie's mind raced through the possibilities. She had been trained since her own childhood to search quickly for solutions. She remembered Hastings saying that de la Reyes, the military attaché at the Spanish embassy in London had died recently in a plane crash. She had attended two dinners and an embassy event with him. He was a pleasant man, but nothing had ever come of their casual friendship. She wondered if the plane crash was part of an assassination plot. She remembered the Spanish officer at the prison camp who hoped to replace de la Reyes.

"Cassie, I have a secret to tell you. Of course, it won't be a secret much longer. A year ago, I was quietly married to a man named Reynaldo de la Reyes. He was a military attaché at the Spanish embassy here in London. We had to keep it secret, you see, because of political matters. Sadly, he died recently in an airplane crash. Now, I am a widow with a baby. God knows there are plenty of those around these days."

"What? What are you saying?" Cassie asked.

"I'm saying that this is my child. His father is De la Reyes. And I am going to raise my son."

"You can't do that!" Cassie argued, but even as she spoke, she knew she was not in control of this situation. "It ain't right."

"Maybe not, but it will work."

"What you going to do about birth certificates and that kind of thing?"

"Oh, Cassie, that's the easiest part of it. Look at Ace. He's got enough phony paper to wallpaper a room."

"You think we're just going to give this baby up without a fight?"

"There is no fight, Cassie. Joe will ruin this child. You are talking about giving him up for adoption. This way, Sebastian will grow up and have a better chance at life than most children. I'll see to that."

"Sebastian?"

"It's a good name. I like it. He will be known as Sebastian de la Reyes."

Tears began forming in Cassie's eyes. "He is Angelique's child. She had the baby, not you. What about her memory?"

Cassie had scored a harsh blow. Maggie was silent for a few seconds. When she spoke, the words came out softly but from a deep pond of emotion.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what to do about Angelique. What has happened is terrible, but what I am talking about is the living, not the dead. This child deserves a chance in life, and I can give him that chance. Now, here is what I am going to do. I'm going back to the States and I'm taking the baby with me. You and Joe can stay here. You can keep the apartment. I'll pay for it. You and Joe will continue to be employed by me. When the

war's over, you and Joe can go back to France. You can take Elaine and Angelique back to Paris and put them in a French cemetery. I'll help you get started again."

Cassie bowed her head. "I don't know what to do." Tears rolled down her cheeks. "White people always win."

Chapter 43

The dispatch center for new and repaired planes to be flown out to air bases was like hundreds of other temporary wooden structures that had been hastily constructed since the start of the war.

Rachel was alone in the office. She was trying hard to close a box that contained more than it could hold. Her back was to the door. She heard it open and quickly straightened up and turned to see a man standing at the counter.

"Well, look at this. Ace! It's good to see you."

"Hello, Rachel. Maggie in?"

"She had some business over at supply. She'll be back in a minute. Come on in. Have a seat. You just get back?"

"Last night," Ace replied as he moved to a chair and sat down.

Rachel noted that he used a cane and that he limped when he moved.

"You just missed the funeral. Poor Angelique! It's really sad. I think you two would have been a swell couple."

"Things just don't seem to work out sometimes," Ace said. His words came out slowly, but unmeasured by any intent, being more like the weary end of a long and deep emotional disturbance.

"We're packing up," Rachel said. "We're leaving in a few days."

Ace quickly asked, "What's up?"

"We've done about as much as we can here. The pressure is off now that the Germans aren't coming in waves anymore. So it's back to the States for Maggie. She's going to try to get the Army Air Corps to use women pilots to ferry planes in the United States. She's got a tough sell on that one."

"What about you?"

"Me? I'm going to Palestine."

"Palestine? Why there?"

Rachel laughed. "It's a Jewish thing."

"What are you going to do there?"

"I'll probably work on a kibbutz, but I hope to do what I can to make Palestine a Jewish homeland, maybe even a nation."

"That'll mean another war," Ace said. "At least if the Arabs there are anything like those I met in Morocco."

"I hope not," Rachel said. "If so, I hope you'll come and help."

Ace looked down at his hip. "I think I'm about ready to retire. I've been thinking of returning to the States and maybe buying a small farm."

Rachel put down the ball of twine she was using to tie shut the box and laughed.

"I can just see that. In three days, you'd be bored silly and trying to figure out how to make a tractor fly."

The door opened and Maggie entered.

"Ace, finally! You're back and alive. I see you need a cane?"

"For a while, I guess." He reached for the cane and stood up. His movement was awkward and both women moved to help him, but he recovered before they could reach him.

"Come on in my office," Maggie said. "We have a lot to talk about."

Ace nodded and followed her into the office. Rachel watched them until the door closed. He was much thinner than she remembered. They probably didn't feed him very well when they were holding him prisoner, she concluded. She thought back to that day in Paris and asked herself, was it really that long ago, 1933? What if Maggie had not discovered Ace sitting at the sidewalk café table? She blocked what might have been from her mind. That was the past. The future for her was about to begin. It was not going to be Jerusalem next year. It was going to be Jerusalem in a couple of weeks.

Maggie's office was not set up like a formal office. There were two small padded chairs, a coffee table and two more chairs against the wall by a filing cabinet.

She motioned to Ace to sit down in one of the padded chairs. He smiled and pointed to one of the straight back chairs against the wall. "It's easier for me," he said.

"Of course, I'll get it. You stay right there."

He nodded as Maggie pulled a straight-backed chair over to the coffee table.

When they were seated, Maggie asked, "Are you holding up okay?"

"I guess I'm okay now. Last night was the worst night of my life, for sure. When I got in the first thing I did was meet with Hastings for a briefing. He told me that Angelique had died. He seemed genuinely sorry that he could not get me back in time."

"Hastings is a strange man," Maggie said. "Whenever I talk to him, I always think I'm looking at a man wearing a mask, and if the mask slips a little, it is only because he wants it to."

There was silence. The old friends and one-time lovers found themselves uneasy in each other's presence.

Ace broke the silence. He stared down at the floor as he asked, "It's the baby. What is to become of the baby?"

Maggie waited until he looked up at her. She hoped she had the right words for what she had to tell him.

"Ace, the baby is what Cassie calls a 'pinkie'."

"Really! I guess it figures. Angelique was half white and near as anyone could ever tell, I'm white. Figures the child would be white or almost that way."

"I never heard of the term before in my life. How did you know about it?"

For the first time since he had arrived at the office, he allowed a weak smile to take hold of his face. "Guess we travel in different circles. I heard the word back when I was a little boy in the orphanage. I don't remember much about the details, but it seems as though somebody tried to put a child in the orphanage without saying that he had colored blood in him."

“What happened?” Maggie asked and immediately wished she had not because she was reasonably sure of what the answer was going to be.

“They kicked the boy out. I don’t know if the county even had an orphanage for colored kids. Maybe, but I doubt it.”

“No one is ever going to kick Sebastian out of anywhere,” Maggie said angrily.

“Sebastian?”

“That is your son’s name, Ace. I am taking your son. He will be my son.”

Ace was alert. The apathy that gripped him was gone.

“How in the hell are you going to do that?”

“Most of it is already done. I have custody of the baby now. The proper paperwork is being prepared at this time. I’ve got some of the best people in the business working on it.”

Ace shook his head. “I didn’t know Digby was in London.”

“He was the forger you met when you were with the circus?”

“Yeah. He was the best. But, Maggie, even with the proper papers for adoption and all that, how are you going to show up back in the States with this kid? There will always be the chance somebody will catch on, and then there will be hell to pay.”

“I have a lot of documents. I’ve got a document that says I was married about a year ago to a man named Reynaldo de la Reyes. He died recently in a plane crash. I’m a widow now, a widow with one child named Sebastian.”

“That’s a pretty smart plan, Maggie. I’ve got to hand it to you. Maybe you ought to be working with Hastings. But there’s still a problem. How are you going to bring my son, and he is my son, you know, even if I can’t do a damn thing about it, how are you going to take him to Philadelphia? The bluebloods will cut him to pieces.”

“I’m not going back to Philadelphia. There’s nothing for me there. The business can run itself. I’ve already told them to go to hell. I’ve taken enough money out of it so that we can live very well. I’ll be in Washington, probably until this war is over. Then I thought we’d go down to Miami. That is where I’ll make my home.”

“It might work, Maggie. You’ve got enough money to really make it work. Do I have a place in all this?”

This was going to be the hard part that Maggie had dreaded. There was no backing away now. It had to be done. Maggie stared at Ace. There was sadness in her eyes, but the set of her body could leave no doubt that a decision had been made and was irrevocable.

“Ace, you’re the only man I ever loved in my life. I do not doubt that I’ll be in love with you until the day I die, but you and I can never be like you and Angelique. It just will not work.” Maggie paused, looked away for a second and then back at Ace. “I do not want Sebastian to know you are his father. If you ever tell him, well, I will be hurt and so will he. The best way you can protect your son, ensure his future, is never to tell him that you are his father.”

Ace rubbed his hands together and stared down at the floor. Without looking up he muttered, “Am I that bad? I never set out to hurt anyone, but that seems to be all I’ve done my whole life. It seems like every time I tried to help someone, all I did was get people killed. Poor Joe! How he must hate me.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Ace. You did help a lot of people. There was some bad luck, and don’t forget, you went to bat against some of the worst people in the world

while the rest of us were sucking our thumbs. No, it's not because of who you are that I want you to keep this secret. It's because I could not be his mother if you are his father. It would never work, even though, in its own strange way, it is probably closer to the truth than the truth." She stopped talking for a second and smiled. Then she added, "Or something like that."

"He will have a name. He won't be like me. I understand what has to be, Maggie. Maybe someday, I can see him, you know, just to see how he's turning out?"

Maggie suddenly found herself trying to hold back tears. She was probably the only other person in the world who understood how deeply this matter had hurt him. She knew that he was trying to deal with the fact that, even if not by intention, he had done to his son what his unnamed father had done to him. Ace had completed an unwanted circle.

"Of course, you can see him, but the secret must be kept."

"I understand," Ace said. "It's getting late. I want to go over to the cemetery and pay my respects."

"You know the grave's location," Maggie asked.

"Yes. Hastings told me."

As Ace rose awkwardly from the chair, Maggie quickly stepped forward to help him. She had a hand on his arm. He dropped his cane and wrapped his arms around her. It was a gentle kiss. Afterward he carefully leaned down and picked up his cane.

"Goodbye, Maggie."

As soon as he was gone, the tears came, and she could not stop them.

* * *

There was not a taxi in sight, and Ace decided to walk to the cemetery. It was about a mile away, and the skies were darkening. It would rain soon, probably before he could walk the mile. He walked four blocks and knew that he could never make it before his hip gave out on him or the rain soaked his uniform.

He limped slowly, the cane being worked hard to support him. His eyes searched for a taxi, but none was in sight.

Angelique's face, her eyes, kept coming up in his mind despite his effort to think about something else. The same questions that had been with him since his return last night marched in review, unbidden, through his mind. Why did she have to die? Why didn't he get there in time? Why, why, why, did he agree to that assignment to Yugoslavia?

Now, there was his son to think about. He really did not have a son, not legally, at least. He had no claim that would ever hold up in any court. Why did Maggie name him Sebastian? It had a foreign sound. He guessed that it was supposed to. The Spanish name, Reyes, or something like that. What was that all about? Maybe it was someone she had really known. Why was Maggie still single? Hell, she went from being single to being a widow. Only Maggie could do that. He smiled briefly at that thought even though his hip was painful, and there were scattered drops of rain falling.

Just when he thought he could go no farther, a taxi appeared. Ace gratefully climbed in back and rode the rest of the way.

The driver was a kind man who had two sons serving abroad. He had noticed Ace's cane and guessed the Canadian officer had been wounded in battle. He drove the taxi up the long lane that led to a circular drive before letting Ace out.

The rain drops continued to fall in small numbers, a scattering of rain rather than a shower. There were deep rumbles of thunder and each one was a little closer than the last.

He vaguely remembered the location of Elaine's grave, but it had been months ago, and he had not been under any particular obligation to remember the location. It was a terrible memory for him. He still blamed himself for Elaine's death.

There was only a small head stone to mark Elaine's grave. Maggie had offered to find a better stone, but Joe had insisted that it only be a small marker because after the war, he was going to take Elaine home and bury her in a French cemetery somewhere in Paris. It would have been easy for Ace to miss the site, but he saw a man kneeling near a marker.

As he moved closer, he could see that it was Joe. There was a grave beside the marker that was covered with fresh dirt. Mother and daughter rested beside each other.

He called out, "Joe," but as he did so, there was a lightening strike not far away and a sharp burst of thunder. The rain turned into a light shower, still not much more than a drizzle, but enough to begin wetting the grass.

Ace called again, and this time Joe heard him and looked up. He recognized the man leaning heavily on a cane and limping toward him. Joe rose to his feet and moved to the front of the two graves.

"You go away from here!" he shouted. "This is holy ground. You can't come here. No. No. Go back to hell where you came from!"

Ace continued to limp forward. "Joe, I'm sorry about this. I loved Angelique. I've come to say goodbye to her."

"You killed poor Momma. You killed Angel. Now you want to defile their graves. I'm warning you, get away from here or I'll kill you with my bare hands, so help me God!"

Another crash of lightning and a quick burst of thunder caused both men to cringe. Ace recovered and stepped forward, the hand not holding the cane extended, palm up. "Joe, we've been friends. We've been like brothers."

The storm descended upon them just as Joe rushed forward swinging his fists wildly. Ace dropped his cane and tried to ward off Joe's blows. Then Joe kicked Ace's bad leg and Ace crumpled to the ground. He quickly tried to crawl away and found himself atop Angelique's grave, the dirt under his hands turning to mud. He raised himself up and took most of Joe's flailing blows on his shoulder, but some landed on his face, and he could feel warm blood running down. He struggled to his feet.

The two men grappled with each other, locked in an embrace that could mean death; two older men, and their feet trampling the mud atop the fresh grave. Their elemental struggle was accompanied by the drums of heaven.

Joe fell and Ace was atop him. Ace cocked his right fist back for a hard blow that would surely bring an end to this struggle.

Joe was still. He looked up at Ace. He spoke.

"Why have you done this to me?"

The blow was arrested. Ace looked down at the man he had been about to strike with all his might. He shrank back, and a sense of revulsion for what he had been about to do

filled him. He crawled away, found his cane, and then limped off in the rain as quickly as possible.

Joe continued to lay on the ground, the rain pelting his face. Slowly, he rolled over, his cheek pressed to the cold, wet earth, his tears joining the rain.

Two men of different colors came to this end, but they almost achieved a noble end. They were strangers who became closer than brothers. They were strong men, but their strength meant little in a world gone mad. Both tried to escape their times, Ace by flying and Joe by living in Paris. They could not escape. They played the game as best they could, but could not succeed. And yet, perhaps they did make a mark that would one day be noticed by the world. For, even as they fought their battle in the rain and mud atop the fresh grave, there was a baby boy whose name would be Sebastian. Their blood flowed in his veins. The two men were united. The infant was fresh and new to the world. His life was not yet written. Even so, the baby did inherit a great danger. Someday, he would have to find the truth, and the truth could destroy him or perhaps make him a man of great accomplishments.