

CHAPTER ONE

The silence awoke her. Marguerite sat up and stared at the rays of the early morning light filtering into the room from an adjacent salon window. A perplexing quiet. Where were the sounds of the street sweepers and the delivery wagons? Where were the moving and chattering pedestrians? Where were the loud noises of the previous day, the remote gunfire bursts, and explosions that vibrated windows of the late nineteenth century building? The clamor during the past week intensified her sensitivity to the absence of early morning sounds.

Disturbances in the streets interrupted her thoughts. Footsteps of several persons running on the stone pavement, a cracking sound, and loud shouts escalated feelings to alarm. A return to silence. She hesitatingly pushed aside the light cotton blanket, arose from the bed, and quickly crossed the room to a window. Her fingers spread apart the wooden shutters, and the space exposed the broad avenue below.

A street empty of people and happenings; no cart delivering merchandise and no person walking to work. Across from her building, faces pressed against windows, and eyes stared at the pavement below. A movement in that building's open door caught her attention. Three German soldiers dashed through it, turned right, and sprinted down the tree-lined avenue.

Armed civilians arrived from the other end of the street, rifles in their hands and upon their shoulders, as if they had been collecting weapons. The men shouted excitedly. One of them motioned to the others in which direction to move. More armed men came around the corner, and converted the street, in which people normally moved peacefully while talking and shopping, into a battleground.

Increasing numbers of armed persons entered the streets. Several came out of the buildings. As they assembled, bullets ricocheted off the sidewalk. The shots came from the roof and scattered everyone in the street to seek refuge in adjacent buildings. Commotion grew, and undetected persons fired more rounds of ammunition.

Marguerite leaned forward to observe the action more clearly and quickly stepped back to protect herself against the possibility that a stray bullet could hit her. The clamor in the streets stopped, and she peered through the partially open shutter. Out of a building at the south end of the avenue, a contingent of German soldiers walked through the garage-like doors that closed the courtyard to the street, with hands above their heads. Their usually stiff and well-pressed uniforms appeared rumpled and drab.

Could it be true? Had these Germans surrendered? Were all Germans surrendering? Not knowing how to react to the excitement that filled the air, Marguerite stood transfixed at the window for a short time. Then, sensing the cool morning, she moved to a bedroom chair, lifted a satin robe from its seat, and placed it over her body. Several steps back to the salon's open casement window and she obtained a view of the avenue. Crowds assembled in the streets. At the not too distant Pont d'Alma, groups of persons mingled and hugged. In the direction of the Boulevard Montparnasse, another crowd began to gather by the chestnut trees that lined the boulevard. The buildings aside of the tree-lined streets echoed a noise of increasing intensity. The thick veil of trees and buildings shadowed a file of marching men, vehicles, tanks, and trucks. France's allies had entered Paris and liberated the city.

Marguerite grasped the silk curtain and held it as a relief. The relief quickly dissipated. Thoughts of her missing husband Jacques raced through her mind, and the emotional surge made her sit and try to regain her composure. In a moment of losing joy and feeling self-pity, the words of her friend Stephanie revived her, "When you feel sad, get active."

She decided to dress and join the crowds. What would be appropriate to wear for the occasion? The tricolors came to mind, but her imaginative and artistic attitude steered her from the obvious. She needed something to make her feel happy, to sense joy — yellow, a yellow of the sunshine, yellow of the fields. Marguerite reached for the light cotton dress. It might be tight and a little short, but she was certain it would fit. The dress made her feel young and whimsical. It made her feel good. Almost seven years had passed since she first wore it, which was at her first Galerie Walker exhibition.

The gallery was located close to the Opera, on a street populated with hat factories and small shops. Its location created the impression of being a gallery for new talents, offering paintings at bargain prices. An English expatriate, who knew nothing about painting and everything about business, owned the gallery. He managed it well and the gallery gave him a comfortable living. Marguerite recalled his words, "I can sell all of your paintings if you stand next to them. You enamored me the moment I met you. Others will feel the same, and since many will be as old as me, they will want something of you to take home."

His remark made her decide to avoid the exhibition. Walker had been sarcastic and unflattering of her talent. He spoke as if he were selling her and not her creations. Claudia, one of her artist friends,

convinced her to continue with the exhibition. "It's a commercial gallery, but at least it's a start. Once you sell paintings there, you'll be known. It's worth a try."

Marguerite wore the yellow dress for the evening of the exhibition. The large number of persons who attended the opening created an exhilarating atmosphere. Walker stood in his standard position, on the far side of a room made immaculate by bleached white walls and a white marble floor. He leaned against the back of a desk, eyed the customers, and placed a price tag on each of them. The Englishman looked toward her, smiled when she entered and then grimaced. Marguerite looked around the gallery and searched for the reason for his fierce and angry look. Nothing abnormal. A talkative and joyful crowd. What could be wrong? Walker had always been courteous and jovial with her.

The Englishman walked quickly toward her, ignoring the customers who moved aside to accommodate his rushing pace. He spoke before reaching his objective. "You're a painter, not a model, my dear. Don't you understand that?" His eyes glared ferociously and his face wrinkled with pain as he spoke. "You paint well, but understand business poorly. Look like a person who paints the pictures and not like a woman who could pose for them. Don't confuse my already confused customers." He slightly pushed her and said, "Reverse yourself. Go home and change into clothes that make you more serious, less comfortable looking." Without waiting for a reply, Walker turned abruptly and returned to his perch. Marguerite reddened with embarrassment, left without a word, dressed as he had commanded and returned within one hour. Evidently, the dilettante knew the business. He sold several of her paintings that day.

Before going to the closet, Marguerite peered out of the window again. The crowd had grown in size and become wilder and noisier, exhibiting a commonality and carefree attitude of a huge neighborhood party.

Pharmacist Gaspar and his wife emerged from their store at the far end of the avenue, looked about as if surveying a spectacle, and joined the crowd. Before they passed her building, she called to them to wait for her.

The pharmacist's wife stopped momentarily and searched for the origins of the voice. Then, without responding, she and her husband went on their way. Marguerite called in a louder voice, but the street noise prevented them from hearing her.

Not wanting to walk alone, she considered seeking Madame Deat, the elderly widow who lived on the floor below. As Marguerite started

to close the window, a man in the crowd stopped his walk and looked up at her apartment. A faintly recognizable neighbor of the district also stopped, looked in her direction, shook his fist, and glared angrily. A man next to him spat on the floor and motioned to others to observe her. Another person pointed his hand to where she stood. Was she imagining it? Were they discussing her? Reasons for years of rejection, isolation, and loneliness returned. She shivered in the warming morning air and wrapped the satin robe more tightly about herself.

The crowd moved past the broad avenue below the window. In the distance, masses pressed together along the boulevards of the Left Bank. Liberating armies marched slowly besides their heavy armaments, upon which sat many Parisians from the cheering crowds. The sounds intensified. She closed the window and continued staring out.

Two men and one woman walked with rifles shaking on their shoulders as they came down the street. They seemed to talk loudly, laugh boisterously, and behave in a drunken manner. One of them halted and gestured toward her window. Moments later, she heard the large wooden door to the courtyard open and close.

Boots and shoes pounded upon the marble stairs. Were they coming to her? Probably. Where else could they be going? The building had emptied. She had heard the DeMolin family, who lived on the same floor, chatter wildly on the staircase as they descended to join the crowd. From the window, she had seen the widower, Mr. Samuels, walking to the bridge by the Seine.

Marguerite heard there would be revenge after the allies liberated Paris. Complaints evolved into accusations most often in the bread store, where customers complained about the quality of bread that contained little salt and had flour mixed with pits and millet. She always lingered until the others left, after which she received one of the few good loaves, a privilege given to her because of Jacques' status with the occupying Germans. "You have to accept the loaf," were her husband's words. "Otherwise the Germans will become suspicious." Her protests were of no avail and only displeased him more.

"I know why you have no sawdust on the floor of this shop. Your bread store had plenty before, but not now. Now it's all in your bread," Madame Donnet said to the proprietor with a chuckle and ironic smile. "But, I've seen real bread crumbs. Real, like the ones we enjoyed eating from our plates. They're scattered on the floor after certain people leave." Emphasis on the word *certain* triggered a stare that focused on Marguerite.

Three days ago, Madame Fauré spoke with anger and vindictiveness. “Let those collaborators have their bread. Soon they'll have shaved heads, shame, and water with their bread...in a prison cell.”

The footsteps approached. Loud knocks sounded on the door. Were they coming to take her away? It was not her fault. Hadn't she been against everything Jacques did for the Germans? Hadn't she suffered from his treachery? She could not do anything about it. She had not collaborated and argued with him furiously. When that had no effect, she ridiculed him in silence.

Marguerite stood helplessly and listened to the rapping on the door.

“Madame Low! Madame Low! Open the door!”

She waited and hoped that by not responding the group would go away.

“She's in there,” a female voice remarked. “I saw a woman at a window. It must have been her.”

The knocking started again. Hard bangs moved the heavy wood. Realizing there was no escape, Marguerite went forward and opened the door.

Three persons rushed into the apartment, looked at her and at the entranceway, concerned but not threatening. “Where is he? Where is your husband?” asked a small and thin young man. Apparently unable to focus on Marguerite, he looked about excitedly, and his head moved from side to side. She tried to speak but could not say a word. The small thin man examined her with an anxious expression. “Where is he? Where is he?” the man demanded.

“He, you mean Jacques, my husband?”

The man nodded.

“He's been gone for months,” said Marguerite. “I haven't heard from him. He went to Prague several months ago. That's all I know. I haven't heard from him for five months.”

“Yes, yes, we know that,” the young man said.

“That's all I know. I don't know anything else,” continued Marguerite, her voice reflecting the tension in her body.

The three persons became quiet and looked at one another. A tall and lanky woman, who had a rifle strapped to her shoulder, holster around her waist, and a soldier cap upon her head, spoke in an authoritative voice. “They told us not to question her too much. It's a delicate situation...those were the words...delicate, delicate. I don't know what it means, but if she doesn't want to talk, we have orders to bring her to the Prefecture at the Hotel de Ville.”

“That’s right, she could be afraid to talk to us. She doesn’t know who we are,” said the other man, the one who had not spoken until now, and was older than the other two people. Dressed with a white shirt and black pants, a beret on his head, and, together with a rifle, having a pistol residing in a case attached to his pant’s belt, he presented a commanding appearance. “Can you come with us?” he asked softly.

Marguerite did not answer immediately, unsure what the words ‘Can you come with us?’ meant, and too confused to ask why or where. What was the use? They are only acting on orders. She directed her words to the woman. “I must get dressed. You can see I still haven’t dressed.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” answered the thin man, his eyes surveying her with a mixture of sympathy and longing. Her eyes focused on him momentarily, sufficient time to break his gaze. He looked sheepishly at the others and exclaimed, “I’ll wait outside.” His words and actions moved Marguerite to grasp the reality in her situation. “I’ll be dressed in a minute,” she said.

Sunshine brightened the bedroom. Marguerite readily discarded the white robe, stepped to the provincial armoire, and chose the yellow dress.

Shouts indicated there were huge crowds nearby, but the avenue of morning alarm and celebration had emptied of people. “The Metro is not functioning. We’ll have to walk to the Hotel de Ville, the whole distance,” the woman said to Marguerite, who was too confused to listen and reply.

The small man spoke. “Marian, I suggest we walk on the side streets and then to the bridge.” He turned to the older man. “Most of the people are gathering about St. Michel, Boulevard St. Germain, and Notre Dame. We should avoid those areas, or else we’ll never get through.”

“I agree. I agree,” said the older man.

The empty side streets allowed them to proceed rapidly. Shouts of “Vive Leclerc!” “Where is DeGaulle?” “Americans!” came from adjacent streets. Accordions and trumpets played the national anthems of the allied nations over and over again. The intensity of sound raced through the air and gave it a life she could sense and touch.

Crowds packed the streets in the approach to the steel pedestrian bridge that linked the two banks of the Seine. Close to the bridge, a huge group blocked their way. Marguerite’s captors placed their rifles across their chests, swung them from side to side, and pushed themselves through the assemblage of people. They reached a

barricade, which consisted of broken furniture, stones from the roadway, clothing, and sticks. Men and women stood on top of the barricade singing 'La Marseillaise,' while children climbed upon the debris and played at games of war. It was New Years day, Bastille Day, and a glorious religious revival, all in one gigantic celebration.

Roaring airplanes punctuated the festivities. Tens of planes, B-24 bombers, escorted by Hurricanes and Spitfires, rumbled forward through the clouds, moving as if knowing they had no obstacle. The Germans could not stop the allies. Soon, there would be a new Paris, a new France, and a new Europe. The military planes and deafening noise energized the crowd into greater expressions of patriotism. Multitudes of persons raised their voices and more of them joined in to sing 'La Marseillaise.'

Patriotic fervor contrasted with a macabre scene occurring beside the barricade; dead bodies lay under blankets and family members mourned beside them. In addition to what were undoubtedly several French casualties, the boots of two German soldiers protruded from the blankets.

"When did this happen?" Marguerite asked the woman .

"This barricade, probably erected this morning, but others have been up for days. There are hundreds of these barricades in Paris, few in the Left Bank districts, none in the seventh arrondissement where you live, and none in the districts next to yours." Several persons peered regretfully at the dead bodies. Some of them moaned and some of them cried.

Marguerite's three captors used their weapons to force themselves through the crowd. "We're the Free French Forces of the Interior. Let us through," the thin man shouted.

"Long live the FFI. Let our heroes through," exclaimed an elderly man, who placed his body as if he were clearing the way.

The group crossed the bridge to the other bank of the Seine and mingled with crowds that exhibited an air of excitement and violence. A contingent of German soldiers stood uneasily with their heads to a wall, guarded by civilians who pointed guns toward the captured soldiers. "Shoot them now!" shouted an elderly woman. "They assassinated our men here in the city and in the forests of Boulogne. Shoot the murderers of our youth," screamed another woman. "Let's shoot them," loudly shouted another in anger. Several persons stood silently and observed the scene, as if out for an afternoon walk.

They walked through gardens and turned right onto a broad street littered with burnt out military cars, smoking wood, and piles of refuse. Traces of floating carbon, an odor of burning tires, and a hint of danger

permeated the air. Along the normally busy boulevard of shops and shoppers, quarrels erupted everywhere. Small groups pushed and beat helpless persons. Others shaved the hair and tore the clothing of crying women. One man pushed a woman against the wall and shook her ferociously.

“Let us see what her German soldier lover will think of her now,” said Marguerite's female captor, who stopped momentarily to curse and spit at the shaken woman.

Dense crowds filled the avenues near the Hotel de Ville. By force, the trio's woman leader pushed Marguerite to the end of a line, one of many lines of distraught persons. In the lines were young, old, poorly dressed, and well dressed. Some women had shaven heads; others had bruised faces. Pedestrians observed them threateningly, but the FFI contained the crowd and allowed only an occasional kick or slap. The captors shielded their captive against an attack, gathered around her, and funneled themselves into other lines. The crowd pushed them forward, and when she stumbled on the cobblestone, the young and thin man held her arm and prevented her from falling. After a few minutes, they reached the Prefecture corridor.

“Wait. Don't move, just stay.” said the woman. “Michel, come with me. André, you stay with her. I'll find the commander and tell him she's here.” Michel walked close to the quickly hurrying female soldier, while André languished next to Marguerite.

Quietly, with her head bowed and a self-conscious look on her plaintive face, Marguerite removed the flat-heeled shoes, whose thin soles had not protected her feet from the jagged street pavement. After a few minutes, she lifted her head and surveyed the persons lining the corridors. Were these traitors or were they average citizens? Some were young housewives who must have felt they were not doing anything more than trying to survive. A few wept softly; a few shouted; and others recited that wrongs had been committed against them. A soft murmur, a requiem of pleading voices floated through the halls. One young man chanted repeatedly in a changing voice, “Sur le Pont d'Avignon. Sur le Pont d'Avignon.”

An immaculately dressed man in a dark suit, white shirt and tie, which seemed out of place for the warm day, self-possessed, and with the cool detachment of an aristocrat, muttered, “But, I'm a true patriot. How can this be?” There was even a priest, or at least a person dressed in a black shirt and white clerical collar.

Hallways had streetwalkers, pimps and two sinister looking men, each of whom had undoubtedly traded something of themselves for only one reward – survival. How ironic she thought; these people could

survive under any circumstances, anywhere, and at any time. She looked at her clean white hands, smooth to the fingertips, the fingernails slightly uneven from lack of care, and stroked her fingers along her face and cheeks as if to make sure they were still in place and had not lost their texture. Unable to keep her hands immobile, the fingers slid along full lips and around the narrow cleft in a chin.

Many persons gathered closely along the corridor. Some begged, some pleaded, and some acted nonchalant. Most seemed confused. Marguerite wondered how many were blameless. To which group did she belong? A touch of a hand upon a shoulder startled her. It was the man called André. "I didn't mean to bother you. You were in a trance, Madam Low. You didn't hear me telling you to follow me."

André led her along a marble-floor corridor, up the stairs to another corridor, turned right and then left, until they finally arrived at a small room crowded with cartons that surrounded a uniformed man seated behind a plain wooden desk. His shirt had epaulettes, but the open collar and unshaven face indicated a lack of professional military discipline. In one corner of the room, another man sat on a stool, a beret in his hand and an amazed expression on his face. The escort remained, a rifle slung over his shoulder, his eyes focused at the windowless and barren wall.

The man behind the desk rose slowly. "We hope we haven't made you too uncomfortable in bringing you here, Madame Low. We are, I have to admit, still not well organized and not able to function smoothly. I hope you will forgive us." He paused momentarily to catch his breath. "I am Jeans Levy, provisional commander of the Paris battalion of the Free French Forces of the Interior. Command has requested me to bring you here on the advice of this gentleman to my left, who will speak to you."

The other man lifted himself from the chair. He was not more than five feet tall, physically round but not portly, as if he had been losing weight, a Frenchman of the masses, obviously allied with the working class. Somehow, he looked familiar, but there were many country people of his type.

"I'm delighted to see you, Madame. Low, as you can imagine, very delighted." He stopped to drink water, drank slowly, and inhaled. "You can....you can understand why we brought you here. We need information, anything you can tell us concerning the whereabouts of your husband Jacques. Anything will be helpful." The talker patiently waited for a response, and finally prompted Marguerite with a "Well?"

Marguerite surveyed the room, as if searching for someone else who could supply the answer. A bewildering situation and a tiring walk

had left her numb, with nothing more to say than what she had told the captors in her home. "I would be grateful to receive information myself," she finally said. "I've told you all I know, and your people seem to know the same facts. He left five months ago, and I haven't heard from him."

"Don't be fearful," the man behind the desk said. He nodded for the portly man to continue speaking.

"You know you're in sympathetic hands and you can understand why we need the information. And we need it desperately." The man walked back and forth in front of the desk. "Desperately. Desperately! We need the information desperately." The words rang sharply in Marguerite's ears.

The day's events began to take their toll. She tried to talk, but her voice choked. As small tears flowed from her eyes and caught the edges of her eyelashes, she paused to regain her composure.

"Please, Madame Low!" The man's brow creased and his expression tightened. Had agonies of the day also gotten to him?

"I repeat, I have said all I know. Besides, what difference does it make now? It's all over. Paris has been liberated. Revenge won't do any good. He's probably dead anyway." She reflected as she felt the impact of her last words. "Or, at least he won't be coming back." Another pause to reflect. She never demanded sympathy and lived by conventional rules, especially those that tied a woman to the actions of her husband. But now it was different. There were no rules. There was no husband. "It's true. I was his wife. I was aware of his activities, but he did not confide in me all of his plans. He didn't tell me where he would be."

The three men looked at each other as if confused. Jeans Levy stiffened his expression and spoke. "We must find him. You can understand the reason for that."

"What good will it be?" said Marguerite.

"What good will it be?" replied Jeans Levy. "What good?" he repeated in a heightened tone that changed to amusement. "Paris has been liberated. The war is almost over. Isn't it a day for him also? Shouldn't he be here to enjoy it? After all Madame Low, your husband Jacques is a hero, one of the recognized leaders of our French *Résistance*."

She remained silent and uncertain. Had she heard correctly? The physically round man repeated over and over again, "A hero, a hero," and calmly followed his words with an entreating, "Yes?"

Marguerite's mind revolved in confusion. The room spun with bewildered faces, and she clung to the desk to keep from falling.

Finally, the merry go round stopped and her body began to take control. She hesitated for several seconds and finally spoke. "What are you saying? What do you....?" Words stopped flowing when she felt faint.