

JOURNEY TO MARSEILLES

A Novel

by Dennis Billuni

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Published by Hellgate Press
(An imprint of L&R Publishing, LLC)
PO Box 3531
Ashland, OR 97520
email: sales@hellgatepress.com

Book design: Michael Campbell
Cover design: L. Redding

ISBN: 978-1-55571-874-9

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DENNIS BILLUNI

*Some must be warriors,
that others may live in peace.*

MERCEDES LACKEY, EXILE'S HONOR





*For Dad and Mom,
Sam and Betty Billuni,
both WWII POWs.*

*With eyes wide open,
they did what needed to be done.*

*Their courage and perseverance
in the face of perilous circumstances
inspired these pages.*



JOURNEY TO MARSEILLES



ONE

December 12, 1941 — Detroit, Michigan

“YOU COME FOR your gun, Jimmy?” Sam DiFranco asked through the screen door.

“I might have to get out of town till things blow over, Sam. I need you to keep it for a while yet if that’s okay.”

Sam stepped out onto the stoop. Jimmy Alexis was just a dope, he thought. A funny, friendly, generous dope, but still a dope. He’d stashed his .38 with Sam when he and a couple of his shady pals had gotten themselves into a scrape with the law. Sam never could figure out why his friend did what he did with those lowlifes. Jimmy’s folks ran a successful restaurant in Detroit’s Greektown, and he was sure never hurting for cash.

“Who’s a-there, Sammy?” asked Ma from inside. He could hear Ma’s favorite Glenn Miller tune, “A String of Pearls,” playing on the radio.

“It’s okay, Ma. It’s just Jimmy.”

“Hi, Mrs. D.,” Jimmy said, flashing his best smile at Sam’s mother, a short, heavyset woman with black hair and piercing eyes.

“What you want?” Mrs. DiFranco said. She didn’t return the smile.

“I just need to talk to Sam for a minute if that’s okay, Mrs. D.”

“Sammy, you wanna talk to you bum friend, go ahead.” She walked away.

“How come your mom always calls me a bum? I thought she liked me.”

“She does. That’s just the way she talks,” Sam said. “Come to think of it, she never calls Bob a bum.” While he enjoyed ribbing Jimmy, he didn’t think of him as his best friend, because nobody could be a better friend than Bob January.

“Jesus. Bob January, Bob January. What’s with that guy? Does he walk on water or what? He’s just a nigger, ain’t he?”

Sam took a step forward, grabbed Jimmy with both hands by the front of his white shirt, and jerked him up against his chest. Jimmy’s face turned ashen, and his eyes bugged out.

“Jimmy, you’re my pal,” he said, his eyes narrowing, “but if I ever hear you talk about Bob like that again, I’ll wipe the street with you. You know I can do it too.”

“Okay, okay. Lemme go. I didn’t mean it. Jeez.” Sam released him, and Jimmy stumbled back. “I just get so tired of everybody talking about the great Bob January. How about the gun?”

“I don’t mind keeping it, but I might not be here when you get back,” Sam said. “I could tell my brothers about it, and you could get it back from them.”

“What are you talkin’ about, Sammy? Where you goin’?”

“You know there’s a war on, don’t you?”

“Yeah. What’s that got to do with anything?”

“I’ll *tell* you what. First the Japs, and now Hitler declared war on us yesterday. Did you think the Nazis were gonna stop with Poland?” he said. “France and Holland last year. Greece not too long ago. You still got family there, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” Jimmy said, looking down.

“Well, they need to be stopped, and I wanna do my part. I’m eighteen now and I’m gonna enlist.”

“Jesus, Sammy. Enlist? That’s a big decision.”

“I’m not waitin’ around to be drafted. And what you got going? The cops are on your tail, and you’re leaving town. Anyway, Bob and I are gonna enlist together. I already talked to him.”

“Bob? Jesus, him again.”

“That’s right. Bob. He’s ready to stand up for what’s right too.”

“What? You don’t think I am?”

“I don’t know, Jimmy. Are you?”

“I’ll have to think about it. I guess if that... uh, Bob is willing to go to war... well, I guess I am too.”

“Don’t do it because we are, Jimmy. Do it because it needs to be done. Maybe your knack with guns will come in handy for something besides stickin’ up candy stores.”

“Jeez, I didn’t know you was such a patriot, Sammy. Anyway, I didn’t stick up no candy store. We heisted a truckload of fur coats. Whaddya think of that? We oughta make a couple thousand each.”

“I hope you have fun spending it, Jimmy. Bob and I will be thinking of you while we’re killing Nazis.”

“Wait a minute. I said I’d go, didn’t I? What do you think I am, a welsher? I can shoot Nazis as good as you two. When you going?”

“The day after tomorrow.”

“That quick? Jeez, I don’t know, I need to talk to my folks, and — ”

“You do that. If you decide to join us, we’ll be at the recruiting office on the corner of Jefferson and Livernois on Friday. What do you want me to do with your gun?”

“Aw, just keep it. Maybe your brothers can shoot tin cans with it. I’ll see ya, Sammy. Friday probably.”

“I’ll see ya when I see ya, Jimmy.”



“You scared, Jimmy?” Sam said.

“Damn right, pal. Who wouldn’t be?”

“I don’t think Corporal Malinowski’s scared, but I feel like I might piss my pants.”

“Fuckin’ Malinowski,” Jimmy said. “That guy is nuts. I don’t think I woulda let you talk me into joining the army if I’d known it was gonna be full of guys like Malinowski.”

“I didn’t talk you into anything, and you know it. You made up your own mind, as small and twisted as it is.”

Their backs against a bulkhead, Sam and Jimmy sat on the deck of the attack transport *USS Leonard Wood* off the coast of French Morocco. Sam grinned and said, “Well, we ain’t in Kansas no more, Toto.”

“No shit. Gimme a smoke, willya?”

“What do you think it’s going to be like when we land, Jimmy?”

“I don’t know for sure, but it ain’t gonna be fun, you can bet on that, *paisan*.”

Sam shook a butt out of his pack of Luckies. Jimmy had been reluctant eighteen months ago when he told his friend that he and Bob January were going to enlist in the U.S. Army. As infantrymen in the Third Division during Operation Torch, Sam and Jimmy were about to jump off in the first Allied amphibious landing of the European Theater of Operations. Unfortunately, Bob wasn’t with them, having been shunted into one of the army’s all-black units when they arrived at basic training. Sam hadn’t heard from him since.

“DiFranco. Alexis. Whaddya want, a special invitation?” Corporal Mike Malinowski, the assistant squad leader, shouted. “Get your asses over here with the rest of the squad. It’s time to join the war.”

Sam and Jimmy put on their steel helmets, shouldered their packs, and grabbed their rifles. Fully loaded, the pack weighed seventy pounds, plus, strapped across the top, Sam carried the five-pound barrel and one ammo belt for the Browning .30 caliber water-cooled machine gun. His M-1 Garand weighed another ten pounds, a good load to haul up the beach when they landed.

“Second Squad!” shouted Staff Sergeant Jack Ritter. “Let’s get in the boats!” Ritter was a fifteen-year army veteran and ran his squad with a firm but fair hand.

“This is it, Jimmy,” Sam said as they hoisted themselves over the side and clambered down the rope cargo nets into the Higgins boat. They had practiced climbing down nets like these because more than one soldier had misstepped on the ropes and ended up with a broken ankle. Once they all piled in, the landing craft pulled away from the side of the troop transport and began its run to the beach.

“Oh, man, searchlights,” Jimmy said when he saw the vertical beams split the predawn darkness off Cap Fedala, Morocco. “They musta heard the landing craft motors and thought they were planes.”

“We’re gonna be in trouble if they spot us,” Sam said. “Can’t this thing go any faster? Our first action, and we’re gonna be sittin’ ducks.”

“Don’t worry about it, DiFranco,” Malinowski said. “Chances are you ain’t gonna get out of this alive anyhow.”

Sam made the sign of the cross and glanced at Jimmy. Although Sam hadn’t been to church in a while, he and Jimmy had been altar boys together at St. Anne’s. The two could have passed for brothers. Sam stood about five-five, a little shorter than Jimmy, but where Jimmy was slim and wiry, Sam bore the wide, stocky frame common to all the DiFranco men and more suited to pushing a plow behind oxen. They both had dark curly hair, dark eyes, and smiled a lot, but neither was smiling now.

Squatting in the bottom of the Higgins boat, his M-1 upright before him, Sam leaned his helmet against the barrel and clutched the rifle. *You praying, DiFranco? I guess I am. You scared? Damn right I am, pal.*

The first rifle he’d owned had been a little single-shot .22 he’d had during the Great Depression that had descended on the country a few years back. Despite his youth, Ma and Pa had still expected him to help provide for the family. Although Pa had been lucky and kept his job on the Budd Wheel assembly line, anything Sam could add to the family pantry was helpful as the DiFrancos made every dollar stretch. He and his younger brother Tony made regular excursions to the railroad tracks near the Detroit River to hunt starlings and pick mushrooms and dandelions.

“Sammy, you shoot,” Ma had said, “but you only got six bullets, so don’t miss.”

“Don’t worry, Ma. I never miss.”

“Can I shoot the gun, Sammy?” Tony asked.

“No, you’re too little and you might miss.”

“Yeah, I know, but I’d sure like to.”

“I’ll find some extra bullets sometime and let you shoot, okay?” Sam said.

“You will? Gee that would be swell!”

“Go get the mushrooms and dandelions. We gotta get back so Ma can cook dinner before Pa gets home.”

It didn't take Sam long to spot a dozen or so of the glossy-black birds sitting in a row on a power line just as he'd hoped. He found a comfortable spot next to a couple of stacked railroad ties and reached into his overalls for his ammunition. He laid the cartridges on the top tie and broke open the breech of his single-shot .22. He loaded one shell in the chamber and closed the bolt.

Sam steadied the rifle against his left shoulder and lined the .22's sights up on the first starling at the end of the row. He'd noticed before that starlings weren't disturbed by the report of the gunshot.

Just like Pa had taught him, Sam took a breath and held it, squeezing the trigger gently. *Crack!* The first starling fell off the line. He always tried to hit the bird's head so Ma wouldn't have to dig the lead out of the body.

Six shots, six starlings for Ma's frying pan. He gathered the fallen birds and stuffed them in a sack.

You can bet the Nazis aren't going to hold still like those starlings. And they're going to be shooting back.

Sam stood next to Jimmy as they rode in the bobbing landing craft along with the other thirty-four men of Second Platoon. The bad weather and choppy waves gave the troops a rough ride toward the beach. Several bent over and puked in the boat, Jimmy among them.

The searchlight beams swung downward and onto the approaching American boats, which immediately began to take machine-gun fire from shore. Sam heard the bullets pinging off the side of the boat and whining over their heads. The Vichy French artillery batteries at Fedala and Pont du Blondin boomed as they began to fire on the advancing fleet.

The boat immediately to Second Platoon's left took a direct hit, and Sam saw bodies and parts of bodies catapulted into the choppy seas. It was his first glimpse of death in wartime, and he winced.

“Oh Jesus oh Jesus! We're fucked,” Jimmy moaned.

“Shut up, Jimmy. We're gonna be okay.” Sam grabbed his friend by the nape of the neck and squeezed. He gritted his own teeth, his gut clenching.

He'd give anything to have Bob January by his side right now. No blacks in combat units. What a stupid army policy. Fucking army.

Another round splashed just to their right and drenched them with seawater, but the Higgins boat forged ahead. Sam heard the guns of the Navy escort ships open up then. The big shells whooshed overhead, and within seconds, the searchlights went dark, and the machine-gun fire became sporadic and off-target. French shore batteries, one of which was Second Squad's main objective near the city of Fedala, soon ceased firing when the five-inch guns from U.S. Navy destroyers unleashed salvo after salvo.

"That's more like it!" Sam shouted. He felt the bow of the Higgins boat slam down as it crested a wave, and his heavy-laden pack jolted against his back. He slapped his friend on the shoulder. Jimmy managed a weak grin, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"I want the Browning set up a minute after you hit the beach," Sergeant Ritter shouted above the rumble of the engines and the roaring of the artillery surrounding his squad. "You got that, DiFranco? Alexis? Swede?"

"Got it, Sarge," Swede answered. Sam, Jimmy, and "Swede" Ekdahl made up Second Squad's machine gun crew.

"Ski, make sure they get it done," Ritter told Malinowski.

"My boot's gonna be right up their asses," the corporal answered.

"Get ready!" Sam heard the boat's coxswain yell, and then, "What the hell! You must be the luckiest dogfaces in the whole goddamn army."

Sam and the entire platoon hollered and cheered when their Higgins boat pulled up to a small wooden pier.

"It can't be this easy, can it?" said Sam. On board the transport they'd heard reports of a fierce sea battle between the American and French navies. He'd expected anything but easy.

"You call that easy?" Jimmy said. "I thought we were dead for sure. Look at those boats piled up on the rocks."

Several of the landing craft had capsized in the high surf or smashed onto the rocky shoreline, the bodies of American soldiers floating nearby.

"Jeez, look at those guys. They didn't have a chance," Sam said. He could have been in the water, drowned before he could do what he'd enlisted for:

to fight for his country, to do the right thing, to make Ma and Pa proud of him. Not that they weren't. He'd always been the good son, the firstborn. He'd taken on that responsibility, though at times he'd chafed under it, felt the burden. He'd worked hard, looked after his younger brothers, Tony and Jock. This was different, though. If he was honest, he wanted to be proud of himself, and he couldn't do that if he drowned before he even fired one shot. Ma had said to be careful and don't miss.

Don't worry, Ma. I never miss.

"You guys quit your gabbin' and move your asses!" Malinowski shouted. "There's a French patrol boat a couple of piers over."

Second Platoon pounded up the pier and spread out along the shoreline. Sam, Jimmy, and Swede set up the Browning on a small rise that commanded a view of the entire beach. After he connected the barrel, Sam inserted the cloth ammunition belt into the gun's feedway until the belt held in place while Jimmy attached a hose and grabbed a water can from Private Robert "Jesse" James. Swede racked the cocking handle of the Browning twice, and they were ready to fire.

The French patrol boat had become aware of their presence and began to fire on the U.S. troops with a deck-mounted heavy machine gun. Two men from First Squad were hit and fell off the pier as they ran for shore.

"Goddamnit, Swede," Malinowski shouted, "return fire! Return fire!"

The Browning bucked in Swede's big hands as he opened up on the French boat. Sam saw French marines and sailors scrambling for cover. He had another belt ready to feed the gun.

"Get that bazooka over here and take that boat out!" Ritter yelled. The bazooka was a weapon so new and secret that nobody in Second Squad had even seen one fire before. It looked like a stovepipe.

He saw one man drop to a knee with the almost five-foot-long tube on his shoulder. A second man shoved what looked like a short rocket into the weapon from behind and tapped his partner on the helmet. Smoke belched from the front and rear of the tube, and a fiery streak shot toward the French boat. A direct hit amidships caused the enemy vessel to explode and catch fire. Several French sailors leaped to the dock and fled for shore.

“Get those bastards, Swede!” Malinowski ordered.

As the French ran, Swede swiveled the Browning and cut them down to a man. More dead lay scattered on the burning pier, flames licking at their blue uniforms.

“I don’t think they were even armed, Corporal,” Jimmy said.

“I don’t give a shit, Alexis. They got two of our guys. They’re the enemy. When I say kill ’em, you kill ’em. Got it?”

Ritter strode up and said, “Good job, Ski. Have the men break the gun down and let’s move up the beach. Nice shootin’ with that bazooka, guys.”

“You heard the man, Jimmy,” Sam said. “Let’s get up the beach.”

Second Squad gathered their gear and moved off the pier onto the soil of French North Africa. A half-hour later, they crested the top of a small dune and looked down the shoreline. The sun, a shimmering, glowing disk of gold, rose above the dunes and the distant mountains of Morocco.

“Jesus, Sam, what the hell are those?” Jimmy asked.

A company-sized formation of riflemen, dressed in brilliant white field uniforms, stood at attention just fifty yards off the beach. Some wore white turbans and red sashes while the rest sported red fezzes with black tassels.

“I never saw anything like that in my life,” Sam said. “Hey, Sarge, who are those guys?”

“Pipe down, DiFranco. Some kind of French North African troops, I guess,” Ritter said. “According to intelligence reports, the French have some black troops under their command. Must be them. They’ll shoot you just as dead as anybody, so prepare to engage on my command.”

“Right, Sarge. Swede, get that gun cocked and locked,” Malinowski ordered.

“They’ve seen us,” Ritter said. “I’ll be damned. They’re raising the white flag.”

“Don’t trust the bastards.” Malinowski didn’t trust anybody except Sergeant Ritter.

The three-man Browning team went into their act and had the gun set up in less than a minute.

“Hey, Lieutenant,” Ritter shouted at Second Lieutenant Howard Davis, the platoon commander, “whaddya wanna do about that white flag?”

“I’d shoot ’em and worry about the white flag later,” Malinowski said.

“I know you would, Ski, but you ain’t the lieutenant,” Ritter said.

Sam and Jimmy, on opposite sides of the machine gun, grinned at each other. Fucking Malinowski.

“Wait till the flag bearer and the officer advance a little more and we’ll see if they’re serious,” Davis said.

“Hold your fire, Swede,” ordered Ritter.

“Purty, ain’t they?” Private John “Smitty” Smith said. “I got me a bead on the gold button right in the middle of that officer’s beeyootiful white jacket. Want I should gobble at him like Gary Cooper did in *Sergeant York*, Sarge?”

“Shut up, Smitty,” Ritter said. “And keep your finger off that trigger.”

Smitty was always saying dumbass things like that, and Ritter constantly had to tell him to shut up.

The pair of white-suited soldiers marched another ten yards, and the lieutenant rose from his position and approached them. They stopped, and the officer saluted, which the lieutenant returned. The French officer drew a gold-hilted sword and presented it to the American platoon commander.

“That’s it, boys. The war’s over,” Jimmy said. “We can all go home.”

“Shut up, Alexis. You see any krauts here?” Malinowski said.

Sam watched the French officer return to his troops and shout an order. The entire formation did a snappy left face and began marching up the beach, rifles on their shoulders and their left arms swinging in perfect harmony.

“I think Swede scared ’em off. They never saw anybody that big before,” Jimmy said.

“Very funny, Jimmy,” Swede said. The biggest man in the platoon, he stood six-seven barefooted, almost six-nine in his boots.

“Haw-haw, you kill me, Alexis,” said Smitty. “They sure do march nice, though.”

“Why do they still have their weapons?” Sam asked. “What happened?”

"I'm gonna find out right now," Ritter said. "Ski, keep the squad set up in a defensive position, but be ready to move out. I'm gonna talk to the lieutenant."

"You heard the sergeant. Dig in! You three stay on that gun."

Ritter went to confer with the lieutenant and the other squad leaders. He returned ten minutes later, shaking his head, a smile on his face.

"What's the scoop, Sarge?" Malinowski asked.

"You were right, Alexis," Ritter said with a grin. "Swede scared the shit out of 'em."

The entire squad broke into whoops of laughter, and Jimmy pounded Swede on the back. The big man just smiled a sheepish grin.

They broke the Browning down, joined up with the other squads of Second Platoon, and marched up the coast road toward the French shore battery at Cap de Fedala.

"Planes!" Sam yelled.

"Ours or theirs?"

"Theirs! Hit the dirt!"

TWO

Amsterdam. — 1942

REBECCA SMIT LOOKED UP and smiled when her cousin, Martin Bleeker, approached the reception desk of his downtown Amsterdam dental office.

“Come on, Rebecca, we’re going for a ride,” he said. “The goddamned Nazis can’t stop us from doing everything, and I have to pick up a package at the train station.”

“I’d love that, Martin!” Just out of high school, she enjoyed nothing more than riding with her favorite cousin on his motorcycle.

“Great. I got some petrol, and we’re going to enjoy it, maybe even have a little excitement,” he said with a grin.

“Where did you get the petrol?” Rebecca asked.

“You don’t want to know.”

“You worry me sometimes, Martin, but I still love you.” Rebecca figured he’d gotten the gas on the black market and just didn’t want to say. Black-market dealings could be risky, and he was constantly trying to shield her. When he mentioned excitement, it could sometimes involve reckless behavior. Although she felt safe with him, she had seen him become aggressive when it came to dealing with the Nazi troops that occupied the Netherlands.

While Adolf Hitler had publicly professed a policy of nonaggression toward his Dutch “brothers,” he nevertheless invaded the smaller nation on May 10, 1940 and crushed all resistance in five short days. The Nazis killed several of Martin’s friends, all members of the black-clad Royal

Dutch Marines, during the battle for Rotterdam. So fiercely did the vastly outnumbered Dutchmen fight that the German commander had saluted their bravery.

Rebecca thought Martin felt a little guilty for not having been with his friends, and she knew he harbored a seething resentment toward the invaders. She figured that he now worked with the Dutch Resistance because she couldn't come up with another reason for his irregular comings and goings and the huddled conferences with Aunt Fie.

Rebecca had her own reasons for hating the Nazis. They had sent her mother, Angelina, and her sister, Hannah, to a civilian POW camp the year before, and only because she had been visiting a friend in the countryside did Rebecca escape Nazi internment. As American citizens living in Holland, she and her family had a certain value to the Third Reich. Martin put her to work in his dental clinic, and his wife, Liesl, watched out for her too. But she still went home to a lonely apartment at night. *When this stinking war is over, I'm going back to America. I just hope Mother and Hannah will be there when I get home.*

Martin picked up his hat, gloves, and scarf and stood by the back door of his downtown dental office, his keys in hand.

"I'm ready to go," Rebecca said. Over her blond curls, she wore the red beret and matching scarf Hannah had knitted for her.

Rebecca had spent the previous evening at Martin's apartment, where Liesl had somehow managed a meal of stewed rabbit with onions and potatoes. With food less than abundant in Amsterdam, any meat dish delighted Rebecca. After dinner, Liesl made up the living room sofa for her to spend the night because the Germans enforced the curfew after dark. Even Martin wouldn't purposely venture into the streets after dark if he didn't have to.

Martin kept his motorcycle, a big BMW, behind the building in the alley. He straddled the bike, and Rebecca hoisted herself onto the rear jump seat.

"How much petrol did you get?" she asked.

"About eighty kilometers worth."

"That's enough to go to Arnhem," she said. "Wouldn't that be fun? Did you know that their town hall is over 400 years old?"

“You did learn something in school, didn’t you?” Martin teased.

“Yes I did. And I’ll bet you didn’t know the town hall has satyrs carved into the stone face of the building, and that’s why they call it ‘the devil’s house.’”

“I did not know that. What the hell is a satyr, anyway?”

“They’re half-man, half-goat creatures you see in books.”

“Oh, those. Sure. I read about them all the time.”

“You silly goose. You’re just making fun of me.” In the middle of the Nazi occupation of their home, he still tried to keep things light. She knew he felt responsible for her, and she loved him for it. What he didn’t know, though, was that little Rebecca was grown up enough to realize his involvement with the Resistance.

“Pretty smart... for an American.”

“I am an American. And smart too.” Though she hadn’t seen her homeland in more than ten years, she still felt a strong attachment to the United States. And she missed Papa every day.

“I am well-read, you know,” she said. “I just finished reading my favorite novel again. Almost seven hundred pages.”

“That’s impressive,” he said. “Do you ever read anything besides *Gone With the Wind*?”

“I read Shakespeare’s *Henry IV* before that.”

“Now I am impressed.” He laughed and kicked the starter. The BMW roared to life.

Rebecca grabbed him around the waist, and down the alley they sped until he made a left into the main business district. Approaching the center of town, she could see people gathering in the street ahead. He stopped the motorcycle as they neared the edge of the crowd, which had grown larger, and she could hear a lot of shouting. German soldiers stood on the sidewalks but so far had not interfered.

“What’s going on?” Rebecca asked.

“I’m not sure, but I did hear that there might be some sort of demonstration today.”

“What for?”

“What for?” he shouted back. “Maybe because of the 5,000 Jews they rounded up and deported.”

“Let’s not get any closer.” She felt the excitement of the crowd, but it made her a little fearful too.

“All right, but you’re going to miss all the fun. Here, I’ll park the bike next to the building so you can see. Climb up on the seat.”

From her perch on the motorcycle, she could see over the crowd where it surrounded a deserted streetcar, which rocked from side to side as the crowd surged and shouted. A couple of the German soldiers began to move forward.

“Oh my God, they’re going to push it over!” Rebecca heard a loud crash and saw flames erupt from one end of the streetcar. “It’s on fire!”

“Homemade petrol bomb,” Martin said. “I think it’s time to go. Get down. Come on.” He started the BMW.

She heard blaring klaxons and saw several German Kubelwagens racing toward the commotion. The crowd scattered, and she saw a steel-helmeted soldier club a fleeing woman in the back of the head with the butt of his rifle. The woman went down in the street, her face scraping along the rough cobblestones. Rebecca saw the surprise on the woman’s face and the brightness of her blood staining the stones. Rebecca hugged Martin tightly and buried her face against the safety of his back. He wheeled the bike down the street and maneuvered through the running crowd.

As they sped away, Rebecca thought the Nazis weren’t overly bright, but they were effective at keeping the citizenry off balance. For the last two years, they had driven up and down the city streets on their nightly patrols and tossed the random grenade at sides of buildings just to terrify the civilians. Many of the damaged storefronts stood vacant since Dutch businessmen had quit and locked their doors.

“German patrol car behind us!” Rebecca shouted above the roar of the motor.

Martin craned his neck around. The Kubelwagen was about a block away. When he reached an out-of-business, vacant bookstore, he slowed the bike and stopped in front. He slammed the front wheel against the double

French doors and maneuvered the bike inside. Rebecca dismounted and closed the doors behind them. She could hear the patrol car approaching and also the occasional crump of a “potato masher” grenade.

“Quick, shut the doors and get out of sight.” He laid the heavy bike on its side behind some once-laden bookshelves. The Kubelwagen rolled by, and they heard the clank of a grenade against the bookstore’s façade,

“Get down!” he shouted.

They both hugged the dusty floor, and Martin threw his arm over his young cousin. The deafening explosion rocked the bookstore, and the French doors blew inward with a hot blast. The stench of burnt gunpowder filled Rebecca’s nostrils, and the concussion battered her ears. She felt the shock through her body, and she was afraid her heart would stop. Shattered glass, pulverized plaster, and dust showered them, and she felt Martin flinch.

“You’re bleeding! Oh my God, are you okay?” Rebecca panicked at the sight of her cousin’s bloody neck.

“I’m fine. Goddamn! It was stupid of me to bring you here,” he said. “Come on, let’s see if we can get out a back way.”

Rebecca, her ears still ringing and a little dizzy from the grenade blast, found the back door that opened onto the alley. Martin hoisted his motorcycle onto its wheels, brushed off the debris, and jockeyed the bike’s handlebars through the narrow back door.

“Your neck is still bleeding.”

He took a handkerchief from his back pocket and pressed it to his neck. Wincing, he held it for a few seconds.

“Let’s just get back to the clinic.” He mounted the BMW and kicked it into life. “Hop on and let’s get out of here.”

“What about the package you were supposed to pick up?” Rebecca asked.

“Tomorrow.”

They made the short trip back to the office without encountering the Nazi patrol car again. Martin threw a canvas tarp over the bike and unlocked the back door. Inside, they went to a treatment room where he inspected the wound.

“It’s not too bad. I think a couple of stitches ought to do it.”

Accustomed to working in a mirror as dentists are, Martin extracted an inch-long sliver of glass and stopped the bleeding by applying some styptic powder. He sewed up the wound while Rebecca held the mirror.

“Are you sure you’re all right? I hate those dirty bastards!”

“My, my. Is that my sweet little Rebecca?” He held her face between his hands and kissed her on the nose.

“Don’t treat me like a baby, Martin. I’m not one.”

“You’re absolutely right. I’m sorry. Let’s get you home before curfew,” he said.

They remounted the motorcycle and drove the few blocks to Rebecca’s walkup apartment.

Martin stopped the bike and they dismounted. “I’m sorry things got out of hand,” he said. “I should never have exposed you to a situation like that.”

She shook her head. She didn’t want him to be so protective of her. “I’m glad you did. I’m glad I was there and I’m glad I saw how the Nazis treat us.” At that moment, she decided to talk to Martin and Aunt Fie about getting involved with the Resistance.

“Will you be okay by yourself tonight?” he asked.

She looked up at the empty windows of her apartment and sighed. A BBC broadcast on her hidden and forbidden wireless had reported that the American army had landed in North Africa. At last! Maybe they’d be in Europe soon, and she’d be able to go home again.

“It feels a little empty, but I’ll be fine.” She stood up straight and pointed her chin. Martin smiled.

“You could come and live with Liesl and me.”

“It’s wonderful of you to offer, but this is still home to me.”

“I’m going to wait right here until I see you in the window upstairs. Tomorrow is Liesl’s market day, and we have some special ration coupons. Come and eat with us again.”

“That would be great. Dinner tasted scrumptious last night, with the fresh vegetables.”

“I’m glad you liked it. How about the rabbit?” he asked, a big grin on his face.

“Delicious.” This was the Martin she liked being around.

With an even wider smile, he yowled a drawn-out, “Meooooow!”

Rebecca shrugged her shoulders. “It was still tasty. See you in the morning.”

Upstairs, she looked out the window and waved at Martin. She watched until he disappeared around the corner. Today was scary. A little shiver went through her, and she swallowed hard. She didn’t know if it was from the near thing at the bookstore or the realization that she’d eaten a cat. Things were bound to get scarier, though, after she talked to them about the Resistance. Mother wouldn’t approve, but Rebecca knew she had to make her own decisions.

She remembered what Scarlett O’Hara said: “I won’t think of it now... I’ll think of it tomorrow.”