Autumn Fool

ISBN: 1-4196-6580-4
ISBN-13: 978-1-4196-6580-6
Library of Congress Control Number: 2007902866
Publisher: BookSurge, LLC
North Charleston, South Carolina

For more information or to order additional copies,
please visit: www.autumnfool.com.

Autumn Fool

Michael D'Emilio

For my family

This story is dedicated to the memory of

Mattia P. D'Emilio
and
Karl J. Reinartz

They were warriors, and eventually brothers.

Prologue

European Theater of Operations
September, 1944

I can still smell that sky of impossible blue, blue like you never saw over Germany back then. A twist of oil smoke hung on the air, just a faint tang of sulfur and gasoline drizzling through the prop wash and reminding me of the job I had to do. The fear built slowly, like a static charge. It gathered strength from Flixton to the mainland, where the battles started. Those yellow Four-forty-sixth tail fins would bob outside my open window, bullet-holed and beautiful, flying so close it looked like you could just climb out and jump from wing to wing. I never got over the roar of it all. Sometimes during takeoff the other waist gunner, Van Orden, and I would spit gum wads down onto the English hedgerows. For a few minutes, we'd forget that we were also carrying things that wouldn't just bounce off a cow's ass or stick to some widow's bicycle tire. Anna told me later how she came to dread cloudless days. When the sky began to rumble and hum she would try to picture a rainstorm on the horizon,

at least until the ack-ack started and the sirens wailed and she couldn't fool herself anymore. Four miles up, I pretended she didn't exist. She wasn't Adolf Hitler or Hermann Goering, just a girl like the ones I used to dance with back at the Pelican Club in Newark. Sixty years later I can imagine her peeling a potato and singing along with Ella Fitzgerald, struggling to sound American as our bombardiers zeroed their sights on her neighborhood. But not back then. I couldn't think about her then. A guy like me can't do that job with someone like Anna on his mind.

There was a picture of her husband on the living room wall, a serious young man in the field gray of the German infantry. Little innocuous swastika on his hat. Just a few lines on a little black button, banal and small, she said. But the more she stared, the hotter and more malignant it would become until what seemed like an afterthought was the only thing she could see. Behind that picture was a letter from a German officer. During a war, there are only a couple of reasons that guys with rank would write to the wives of foot soldiers. It's usually not good news. She had stopped looking at that picture long before September of Forty-four, but she just couldn't bring herself to take it down. Denial, maybe. Like singing to herself as the last seconds of quiet ticked into the first explosions on the edge of town. The machine gun on her rooftop would shake the apartment walls. She knew we were coming, but still she stood there and willed her voice to finish the song. That was Anna, a half-ton of audacity stuffed into a hundred pounds of pride.

Later that day, when she was halfway down the street and still in her apron, one of ours landed on the building

across from her apartment and detonated. A three foot block of stone blew right through her living room wall, right through the spot where her husband's smile reflected the mortal sincerity of every soldier on every living room wall. Little bits of plaster sprayed into the drapes across the room. There was nothing left but sky where a door-sized piece of her wall used to be. It's strange to think that bricks and beams and lathe and undercoat and skim coat and paint — three layers of paint, three colors, three moods I never asked her about because I didn't want to picture her husband standing there saying "I'm tired of blue. Whattaya think? Beige?" — that all of it could come crashing into her living room, or that all of it was even there beneath the surface. Invisible layers between her and the war outside. Some things you just aren't meant to see.

When I woke up that morning, a crackling blue energy already filled the English dawn. No one had to tell me we were flying that day. Our B-24, the *Maggie Baby*, was assigned to the Purple Heart Corner of a formation of bombers headed up from the south and into the western Rhineland. Everybody figured there would be fighter planes and flak, lots of both. You don't just waltz into someone's backyard and light it up without an argument. Still, I always believed that Maggie was charmed, or at least bulletproof. She was named for our pilot's wife. It was something about that love, maybe, or damned blind luck, but up until that day we always made it back. I always kept the same rituals, same prayers. I ate my powdered eggs, smoked two or three Luckies as fast as I could — because eleven hours in an oxygen mask is just too damn long — and then crossed myself at the door and piled in. After that it was just me and Van

Orden sitting on our parachutes, not needing to talk because we had said it all twenty-four times before.

Over the Channel, I pressed my thumb to the cartridge just outside the ammo feedway, not for any mechanical reason but just because I always did. I rocked the gun on its base to make sure it was stable. Through the gun sight, I took aim at a patch of empty sky. There was a prayer I would say just before I fired off a few test rounds: "God, please guide my aim, and if I kill anybody please forgive me." Makes no sense. It reminds me of the stories I heard around the West Ward about the guys my brother Vin hung out with. They would all pull the trigger at the same time so no one could rat for the shooting. Everybody's guilty. I never wanted to kill anybody, but I figured if God helped me do it then he couldn't hold it against me. So I prayed. There was a dent in the metal frame of the waist window from a flak fragment that had ricocheted in and cut the bridge of my nose. Thing must have been the size of a baseball. If it was between my prayer and some German gunner's, I guess I won that coin flip. Twenty-four missions and just a cut on my nose. Not bad. So I kept praying.

On our twenty-fifth run, the first enemy contact didn't come until we had rumbled up through France and into Germany. Mönchengladbach was just a little bull's-eye on a map, but we were ready to give it the royal treatment. Our little Mustang friends peeled off with no Luftwaffe in sight, but then just like that four Messerschmidt 109s dropped down out of the sun and onto us. Our top turret gunner hollered into the radio: "Two bandits, one o'clock high!" They had stacked up, so he didn't know there were four. I heard the pah-pah-pah of their cannons before I felt the rounds pop our fuselage.

Wheeling, firing, my thumbs pinned the trigger as the gun moved like an extension of my wrists. A flash of silver. Five rounds. Ten. Gotcha! Belly-up, Kraut! He's bleeding smoke like a speared fish. Whoa, Jesus! Where'd they come from? Three more 109s. Wheel and rip. They're getting away. Who the hell is that screaming?

It was the top gunner. I called after him on the radio, but his voice just gurgled a little and then trailed off. I stood there, thumbs on the trigger, watching a small black dot emerge from the smoke of the plane I had just shot down. It mushroomed into a tiny parachute. I suppose I was disappointed at the time, but looking back I'm happy that pilot didn't die. And anyway, I'm not even sure he was the one who killed our top gunner. What a friggin' mess that gets to be, worrying about who got what justice. Lucky for me, I didn't have time think about it. A handful of 109s droned back in and cued another twitch-trigger symphony from our guns. My forearms were sore from squeezing the gun handles. The inside of my oxygen mask was wet from my breath against the cold rubber. The air in the plane was forty below. I reminded myself to breathe slowly, to relax my grip and feel the rhythm of the gun. The eyes see and the hands react, they taught us. Yeah, right. After twenty-five missions, the hands see.

Next to me and facing the opposite direction, Van Orden bucked against his machine gun. Between shots, I could hear him cursing through the radio squawk. Two 109s looped back in. He hammered at them until they crossed into my field and rolled to dive away. I knew then that we were headed into the flak field outside of Mönchengladbach. I turned to tap Van Orden on the shoulder and point this out, but just then a shell ripped a football-sized hole through the floor and smashed into a

steel rib above our heads. Shrapnel sprayed everywhere. Van Orden turned around with a confused look on his face. His eyes rolled back as a smiling gash opened on the side of his neck. Black blood pumped from a nickel-sized hole in his leather helmet and streamed down into the fleece of his collar. I wondered what the hell was keeping him on his feet. He stood there for what felt like forever until finally his head lolled to one side. I caught him and laid him carefully onto the floor, but I could tell by his weight that he was already dead.

"We just lost Van Ord—" I tried to sound professional when I spoke into the radio that time, but my guts surged up and choked off my voice. Thank God I didn't puke into my oxygen mask.

"Roger that, Mateo," the pilot replied. "Okay, fellas, got to be even more alert now. Keep 'em off us, boys. We're moving in on the drop zone." Now *he* was a pro. He was older than all of us, and one hell of a pilot. He had never called me by my first name before. Always, it was "Albero," or "Jersey," but for some reason he chose that time to call me Mateo. It was all he needed to say. I had just lost two of my closest friends, yet with that single word he kept me from falling apart. The sound of my first name struck a filial chord, like somehow he was stepping in as a father to handle those complicated emotions for me, for all of us. At the same time, hearing my name reminded me of the other guys counting on me to do my job. Our pilot was not a pep-talk kind of guy, but he was a great motivator, a great leader in battle. He knew better than any of us what it took to get the job done, and he knew *us*, what was in our hearts and heads, probably better than we did ourselves. With that kind of credibility, a leader doesn't have to say very much at all.

Without it, his words don't matter anyway. He taught me more about leadership with that one word than anyone had before, or has since. Restraint can be a powerful thing.

As we approached the initial point of the final run, he lined us up behind the lead bomber. Flak exploded everywhere. I dragged Van Orden's body off to one side of the steel floor and tiptoed back between the smeared blood trail and the hundreds of spent shell casings on either side of it. A patchwork landscape flashed through the perforated floor, while deep staccato detonation echoed ahead and to the rear. I peeked out to see if our wings were still intact, but wind blast and shelling chased me back inside. Carrying eight souls, two corpses and four thousand pounds of explosives, the *Maggie Baby* bounced like the sky was full of boulders. Twenty-five thousand feet below, Mönchengladbach hunkered down, well aware of the work we intended to do. "Bombs away" buzzed in my ears. I could picture the bomb tails swimming as they fell, zucchini-striped and swollen with destructive potential. We jinked sharp left, then right as the formation began evasive maneuvers on its course back to Flixton. A single drop of blood traced a burgundy line across Van Orden's back. I closed my eyes.

Behind my clammy mask, I could taste the cigarettes waiting for me back in England. Those first drags after hours at altitude always made me lightheaded. Then I started thinking about the cigarettes that Van Orden and I had bought from some Irishman on a walkway by the Thames, how good they had tasted in the December mist. When I opened my eyes again, I saw that the blood that had pooled on his collar had seeped over and stained his whole shoulder. Someone in another plane hollered over

the broadband: "Bogeys dead ahead!" He sounded like he couldn't believe what he was seeing. Seven German fighters were flying directly into the firing lanes of forty-six American B-24s. I watched one of the bombers on our wing take direct hits on two engines. One of his fans disintegrated as its motor housing was engulfed by a tulip of flame. Our pilot never budged off his line.

I chased the 109s with gunfire, but they had already circled way up high and headed back out ahead of us. Just when I thought they might have moved off for good, I felt the whole plane shake as they swung back and blasted away our cockpit glass. The pilot grunted into the radio and then went silent. The hundreds of shell casings on the floor started to roll forward as we nosed down into a dead-stick dive. Guys screamed over the radio about bailing out, but I didn't say a word. I don't know why I was so calm. I just clipped on my parachute and let the angle of the dive slide me forward to the bomb bay doors.

Ahead of me, our bombardier banged the lever to open the doors. Wind whipped in as we fell faster. The little ball turret gunner crabbed up from the front of the plane as the bombardier rolled out into the cold sky. When he fell, the bombardier smashed his right arm against the barrel of one of the belly guns and broke it mid-forearm. It flopped in the wind, like the only thing holding his hand on was his sleeve. My body tensed involuntarily, arms bent and tucked close to my sides. The ball gunner made it to the bomb doors, but then turned around and started to go back. He stopped and looked back at me with a weak grin.

“Forgot to turn off the power switches in the turret,” he said. "I was gonna go turn 'em off." Tears gleamed in the little man's eyes.

"Force of habit." I squeezed his shoulder.

He shook his head, crouched and fell out of the door. Almost as an afterthought, I pulled off my glove and reached back for Van Orden's dog tags. The chain clumped in a sticky knot as I stuffed it into my pocket. When I hit the prop blast, I shut my eyes until the lift of the parachute told me I could open them again. I watched the *Maggie* arc down, but I couldn't watch as she sheared and screamed and broke in half. I mourn my friends, my crewmates, but I also mourn that ship. I can't explain it. We were her children.

A hint of moist soil wafted up through the scorch. I looked down at the city I had just helped to devastate. Fighting down panic, I forced myself to talk through the drill. Land someplace secluded. Hide the chute. Escape... Jesus, to where? I looked at the blood on my hand and felt fear begin to constrict my breathing. "Come on!" I shouted. Focus on the ground, look for landmarks. Entire blocks of the city were crushed beyond recognition. There. A park. What's that, a museum? Trees. Jesus, *Germany*. I thought about the silk map they gave us in England; it had most of Europe sectored off. I kept mine tucked next to a St. Christopher medallion, a Zippo lighter and a picture of my family. In that photo, Pop stood with one arm cocked behind him just like all the old Italian guys, like it was a rule that someone in Europe came up with when the camera was invented and everyone just followed along. There was Mama, next to Pop. And my sisters. Me. All standing on our stoop on Tenth Street in Newark. I wondered if I would ever see New Jersey again. Mönchengladbach drifted closer and closer. My God, we tore the crap out of that town.

Leaves and thin branches slapped at my face as I crashed through and snagged on a big oak limb about forty feet off the ground. I dug in my pocket for a knife. When I reached up to cut the parachute cords, the relative quiet of the moment made me realize how chaotic the previous hour had been. Our formation had moved on. Not too far away, massive fires made a sound like wind blowing. I caught the low whine of a distant siren. A few Germans were still taking potshots with their eighty-eights. The moment was framed with sounds, but to me it felt like utter silence. No machines roaring in my ears, no gun barking under my chin. No screaming. The stillness left me feeling even more alone. Suddenly, I didn't really want to come down from that tree. I knew that the bombs had stopped and that people would be out in the streets soon, but I kind of didn't care. It was so peaceful.

That's when I heard a small voice, singing. I shook my head to clear out the hallucination, but it was still there. Then I caught a glimpse of Anna through the leaves. My heart jumped, she was so beautiful. She was walking along a path about twenty yards away, wearing a kitchen apron and singing at full voice. In the middle of a city ripped by war, I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I thought maybe I had died, and that she was an angel coming to claim my soul. As she got closer, the muddy tears on her face made it clear that she was human — innocent and alone and forcing a smile through the same madness that had swept me up and left me dangling so far above the ground. She was wearing an apron and singing a song by Ella Fitzgerald. Doing a pretty spot-on imitation, too. I had to smile when I heard that broad Harlem "A" mixed up with the German "S" for "TH."

She even bounced a little between each step, trying to swing through the music.

I looked back up the path, wondering where she had come from. Beyond the park, her charcoal city glowed under heavy smoke. How bad is it out there that she has to walk in here? I thought of the girls I knew who sometimes danced and sang in Branch Brook Park. *Newark*. It hit me then, how utterly alone and far from home I really was. I squinted through the treetops for another snagged parachute. Up in the smudgy sky, there was no sign of our squadron. I told myself it was good, that at least they wouldn't drop on my location, but the icy knot in my gut knew better. Maybe that's why Anna's singing struck me so deeply. Her song — Ella's song — was the last thin connection I had to America. I wondered if anyone else had made it down safely, if the bombardier's arm felt as bad as it looked, if the little ball gunner was okay. It wasn't like I could just wander around calling their names. Jesus. I was a sitting duck. Watching her walk up the path, I felt ashamed to be worried about my own safety. Still, I knew I had to cut myself down before someone spotted my parachute and captured me.

As I reached up again with the knife, I heard a second noise on the ground. A man in a black Nazi coat darted from one side of the path to the other, oblivious to the presence of his enemy directly above him. His uniform was dirty and torn, and he had a thick scar on his cheek. He dragged his left foot a little but still moved quickly, as if he had long since learned to compensate. I watched him creep up behind her, cup his hand over her mouth and pull her down into the bushes. She bit his palm, then shrieked when he pulled it away. Her scream snapped me

out of my shocked fugue. I sliced one of my parachute straps and let my weight swing me away from the heavy limb directly below. Through the trees, I watched her struggle frantically in the underbrush. She knocked the Nazi's hat off and grabbed a fistful of his white-blond hair. He batted her grip loose, but she clawed at his face again. After he pinned her hands, he reached down and started to fumble with his zipper.

That did it. Teeth grinding with rage, I cut the other strap. When my ribs slammed onto the limb below me, I clawed at the rough bark and held on, feet dangling free. There was a flash of silver where my knife landed. I hugged my way across to the trunk and shinned down to the ground. Knife. I found it, then looked for the Nazi. There, between the leaves. White-blond hair. Something inside of me felt dark and cold as I started up the path. Sprinting the last few yards, glaring at the scar that framed that predatory sneer, my eyes went black.

Part One: Blood

One

Newark, New Jersey
December, 1941

Less than a month away from Christmas, Nineteen Forty-one. I remember it like it was yesterday, walking my fingers through a streak of sunlight on the dining room table. God, I love that Jersey light. There's something it does on a cold, clear day, some way it plays across the red brick storefronts that washes the mundane out of everything. It shines through the bare treetops and down the long stretches of boulevard and reminds you that the West Ward sits on a hill above downtown Newark, and that this little bit of elevation puts you closer to something and not further away from something else. The sunrise coaxes the blue sky down for a visit, down to the pavement where you scuffed your hands that day you slipped and fell running home from school. Down to the sidewalk where a breakup crushed you between the hanging fog and the Sunday blues. Just when you thought maybe God forgot about you, that Jersey sunlight angles its way through the morning and even the trash has a

poem to tell. People from other places might not notice, but Jersey people know what I mean. No one is denied redemption when the sun shines in New Jersey.

Nineteen years old. I was sitting at the dining room table, fingers grained black from a night on the job. Mama said scrub and I did, but that sooty fireground water soaks right through leather and finds its way into your fingerprints. It's humbling. That was the first lesson I learned as a fireman: "On your knees, boy!" It's not like you stride in, scoop up a frightened baby and walk out of a burning building. No, you crawl through the black smoky mess on your hands and knees, blind, wet and scared. You're either soaked or singed, and you better hope it's the first one. I watched the smoke trail up from my Lucky Strike and into that blessed morning as a little orange coal pumped under a hang of ash. It dropped onto the lace tablecloth, the first ash from the first cigarette of the first Sunday in December. Why I thought that, I don't know, but it's what I remember thinking. All this 'first Sunday' business they talk about in church puts it in your mind, I guess. I blew on the ash and it scattered.

That was a day for remembering the little things. For years, I walked around thinking everything changed on that day because that's what they told you — that our country would never be the same again. They get that stuff in your head and you believe it. Maybe it is true, maybe everything did change that day, but for me, looking back, it was the same then as it was the Sunday before and as it was the Sunday after. I crawled through a fire and dumped enough water on it to keep it from burning down the house next door. I made sure my buddy and I followed the hose line back out to the street. I knocked off my shift at six a.m., walked home,

showered again, and slept a couple of hours. I sat at the table while the women took the children to church and Pop made his rounds for anisette and biscotti at every house on Tenth Street. Mama's unattended gravy filled the air with the scent of heaven. I stared as my hands relaxed in the light of God.

And the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

But what the hell did I know? Nineteen years old. It's a damn big country we have, and all the Japanese bombs in the world wouldn't have made a ripple in my coffee from that far away. I lived my life between the lines that were laid out for me, sidewalks and sidelines and Sundays on Tenth Street. My house was full of the same superstitions as that of every other family on the block, traditions and habits that flowed from our southern Italian heritage and mingled like the flavors of the gravy that cooked on every stove. You trust God to bless your family, but you make sure you watch the butcher when he grinds the pork and veal for the meatballs. You go to church with the women until you are old enough to earn like a man. That morning, my big sister Carmela dragged our brother Vin along with her own kids to St. Antoninus again, even though at fourteen he was already hustling more pocket money and better confessional stories than people twice his age. I sat back in my chair and waited for them to return.

The corners of our pressed tin ceiling curved down to meet the wall. Across the span above me, individual plates had been stamped with a pattern and fabricated into one big sheet. I stared at the ceiling, seeing it but not thinking about it. There was a row of bedrooms along one side of the flat. Railroad, they called it. You could fire a shot into our front window and hit nothing but glass as

it sailed through the living room and into the dining room, over my head, into the kitchen and out the back window. Carmela lived in an identical flat upstairs. Her son Mickey, the oldest of three boys, had just turned five. His favorite thing was to run and slide down the hardwood hallway into a throw-rug second base, squealing "DiMaggiooooooo!" The kid did that all afternoon. Pop would stir in his easy chair, look up from his *Il Progresso* and slap the wall with four sharp whacks that shook the crucifix by the door and reverberated through the upstairs. Carmela always ignored Pop and let Mickey keep running the bases. It was easier than singing him to sleep for an hour at night.

On the table in front of me lay a weathered copy of *Les Miserables*. Halfway through the twelve-hundred page translation, I had stopped seeing it as an athletic challenge and started to simply enjoy the story. The guys at the firehouse called it my "brick," but none of them even had a library card, so what did they know? Still, more often than not I listened to them. They were the older brothers I never had, and they lived the ideals that Hugo only wrote about. It all made sense to me back then — skipping the end of senior year to join the fire department, but also enjoying books that honor students struggled to finish. You worked, and *then* you played. I was the quarterback for two West Side High city championships and even made a couple of all-star teams. My grades were good, when I tried. But when the coaches from Fordham and Rutgers came around, I smiled and nodded and declined their invitations to apply. College was never an option. Instead, I stood in front of the bathroom mirror and buttoned a dark blue uniform shirt, staring at the fire department patch Mama had sewn

onto the shoulder. I crouched to let her pin the brass "NFD" onto my collar. No letterman sweater would have made Pop smile that way. It was like that back then. You worked.

I took another drag, blew the smoke through the morning sunbeams and opened the book. My mind wandered back to the concrete horseshoe down on Bloomfield Avenue. City champions. Faded jerseys, ours white with dark green numbers, theirs white numbers on pale blue. My own voice barking cadence. The feel of the ball. The angry chuffing of linemen and beyond that, further away, the rush of the crowd. That was the sound of the running lane opening up, like when the surf rolls and breaks and you find yourself suddenly dry and alone on sand. All that sound just sucks you along. On the field, you get a quick glimpse of green. There's an odd, cool wind on your face as you pick up speed. Then comes that rapid-fire moment of freedom when you know, just know, that they aren't going to catch you. The blur of the sidelines. The sprint. The score. Such an odd sensation, how small the field is at that moment. It was on you in an instant, that bastard shifting goal line. You wonder if you'll ever remember how to shrink the field again, how to make third and five feel like wide open second and one, or first and ten, or whatever down it was when the walls parted and the hands lost their grip and the wind blew just enough to sail you through. It happens, but not nearly enough. And you never know when. So you just grind and gasp and bleed and keep that diamond moment in your mind so you'll know it when you see it again.

Touch. That was the other thing. You either had that on a given day, or you didn't. When you did, your fingers were safecracker fine and the ball stayed right on a thin

little bead between your eyes and the receiver's hands. You didn't even have to throw it. It threw itself. You'd see a white blur separate from a light blue patch forty yards away and your hand would just reach through the tunnel and set that ball down between the elbows and the chest. On a dead run. If you really had it — touch, I mean — you even sped him up just a little. My God, sixty years later and I can still feel it in my wrist, my elbow, my hand. You're five, throwing a wadded-up rag to a kid on a vacant lot. Or you're twenty-eight, and you hit a grown man on the fly with a brand-new Wilson Duke. Or you're eighty-something and the page you just screwed up lands exactly where you wanted it to in the can across the room. Man, I'm telling you, your heart sings. You never knew the grace of God had a name, but it does. It's Touch.

I can't remember not loving the game of football. My friends grew up swinging broomsticks at tape wads, waiting for the decks of Yankee Stadium to explode when they connected with a game-winner. Me, I grew up dodging Redskins that looked like Buicks, up and down my very own Tenth Street Polo Grounds. The Giants were always a *football* team to me. I stubbed out my cigarette and glanced at the radio over in the living room. In a couple of hours, Tuffy Leemans was going to lead the Giants against the Brooklyn Dodgers in their final regular season game of Nineteen Forty-one, and I would listen as fifty thousand people cheered them into the championship playoffs. Nineteen and a working man, I still got excited for that moment when the radio announcer called the opening kickoff. I felt my own too-clean jersey, tight against my pads. I smelled the grass after the first good tackle, when you knew it was *on.*

Three hours at the center of the universe. Nothing else mattered.

I gave up on Victor Hugo and walked over to flip on the radio. Benny Goodman. Toe-tapper for sure, but I preferred Ellington. I believed Duke was a guy who had been there before. Where? Everywhere. He was confident, not frantic. His music let you know that it was damn hard to rattle him. And from the way he worked, you can be sure he knew the price of greatness.

My watch told me I had time for one more smoke and maybe a cup of coffee before my solitude ended and the family returned. Pop would shuffle back down Tenth Street, crust of biscotti in his hand. Mama would bustle in and check the gravy. At the stove, I lifted the coffee pot and stared at the black liquid as it rolled across the bottom of my cup. Out of habit, I glanced at Pop's seat when I sat down. My match flared and touched the end with the writing. I had the cigarette reversed, but it didn't matter because there wasn't any filter anyway. Pop had decided when I brought home my fire department patch that I could smoke at the table. "You have'a the good job," he had rumbled, waving me over with the back of his hand. "Sit, sit." Above all things, Work. There were no saints with soft hands. Pop said maybe ten words on a given day, so the fact that he had spent seven of them granting my newfound habit a place at the dining room table was a big deal. I played it off, nodding in detached silence as I set my ashtray down. Think of Duke, I reminded myself. Act like you've been there before. But I knew it was eating at my brother. Even Carmela gave me deference that day. Pop's respect was never given lightly, and never fully unless it was somehow connected to hard labor. I looked down at the cover of the book and

imagined Jean Valjean busting up rocks in Toulon. Pop would've loved that guy.

On the side table, Pop's *garavone* squatted like an upside-down mushroom, gleaming in the sun. It was a clear sipping bottle, pinched at the neck. He would fill it with the red wine we made each fall and stored in wooden barrels in the cellar, then lift it to his lips with the hand that was missing an inch of index finger. His stump fit perfectly in the pinched notch. Hunkered at the end of the table like Vesuvius in an undershirt, his subterranean smolder cast a shadow under which all laughter might cease at the first rumble. Forearms hardened by a life of manual work. Finger severed at the second knuckle by a garment factory steam press, a casualty of the dangerous work left to immigrant hands. The story was repeated like a liturgy in our family. Without complaint, Pop had slid the crisp new shirt out of the press and wrapped it around his hand, then put on his hat and walked ten blocks to St. Michael's Hospital. When I was five years old and heard it for the first time, I asked if he had just left the severed finger in the steam press or if he had taken it with him. Carmela had slapped me hard on the top of the head. You don't question scripture, no matter how implausible.

For nineteen years, I bristled under Pop's dominion. My furtive rebellions were conducted in the angles between his linear perceptions. He was the patriarch. The impact of that role and of men like him rippled through the lives of every family on Tenth Street, washing back to the hazy coastline of old world tradition and returning again, its force redoubled. In the church confessional, women begged forgiveness for failing both their Lord and their master. Children spoke in whispers of the rock-

handed impatience brought home by fathers laboring in soul-rending ambivalence, scratching for currency in a place that did not value ancient custom. Postponing modernity, families like ours throughout the West Ward huddled around these men and fanned the thin flame of reverence. Fashions change faster than hearts.

"Hey, Mat! Tell me about the fire!"

The door banged against the wall as Vin's demand cracked the rhythmic ease of an Ella blues. He was my little brother. Despite his wild streak, he had a touching reverence for some of the stories I told him. He mimicked my passion for swing music, feigning interest in every puff-cheeked drifter who so much as honked out Reveille in four-four time. His taste needed work, but his spirit was there. I used to pride myself on always having answers for the hundred questions he asked — even if they weren't always right. When we first heard "A-Train," his head snapped around as fast as mine did. That simple little piano riff told me it was Duke, but I had to fudge the title when Vin asked. He didn't care, or remember. He just sat there like me, head bobbing back and forth, fingers tapping quiet time with every other beat of the bass drum. When those horns rolled through, just gleaming with urbane sophistication, we were hooked. At nineteen, I knew two things for sure: Duke Ellington was the king of American music, and that music came from a place I just had to see.

Jazz music was the second of three great passions in my life. The first was football, and I'll get to the third later. Jazz, to me, is the finest work that Americans have ever done. It is the unifying beat of millions of disparate hearts, the one communal passion in three centuries of raucous individuality. It runs through the blood of this

land, animating and strengthening us, reminding us all that no matter who we might hope or aspire or pretend to be, we all carry the same dominant and recessive strains of that thin little tune called Liberty. Black or white, rich or poor, the tincture of freedom washes us all with the same glowing hue. And jazz explains all of that. Driven by the tempo of supreme talent, hands working valves and sticks and keys, minds seeking and finding the one true beat, jazz is America laid bare. It is ambition, but also cooperation. It is the guiding example of how so many people, with so little in common, can stand together like brothers and love the same thing the same way at the same time, not because it's better than us, but because all of it, every little bit of it, *is* us.

My little brother understood that back then, but I think he forgot about it as he got older. Bounding into the living room and tearing at his collar of piety, he wasn't necessarily conscious of what drove him. Neither was I, all the time. But it was the same thing: that American beat. There was that feeling of Okay, I'm home again, but there was also that promise of what's Out There, that dream of Big Time America. Ella's fecund warmth and Ellington's rolling brass.

Vin wanted to hear about the house that had nearly burned down around me the night before. I slapped the seat next to mine. When he sat, I started to tell him in hushed tones — in "don't alarm Mama" tones — about the searing black inside the foyer, the glow that had danced in the kitchen as I crawled closer, the explosion of a flashover that sent me diving for the floor. I embellished, pausing to let Carmela set the plates down, watching to be sure that Mama didn't hear the part about the beam that fell and snapped our big Irish lieutenant's

shinbone. I ducked to let Vin see the blisters on my ears, the scorched stubble where my hair used to curl at the ends. I finished the story as Mama set down a huge bowl of pasta and frowned at me for the astonished pallor on her younger son's face. Leaning back, I lit another one as Pop shuffled in, reveling in the privilege that work, dangerous work, had conferred upon me.

You can call it the sin of pride, and maybe I would have bought that at the time, but I don't see it that way now. The way I figure it, a guy has so few chances to feel his place in the world, to really see his impact on things. Let him enjoy it. Yeah, maybe that look on my face sparked something in Vin. Maybe all that stuff he did later came from thinking, Hey, *I* wanna be the big guy. Okay, maybe. But what the hell did I know about that? I used to talk to Vin about the Big Time, about "Slappin' Seventh Avenue with the Sole of My Shoe" like Ellington. I used to tell him about New York City, where men in long coats walked beautiful ladies down boulevards chromed with Cadillacs. Where granite was piled to the sky and cigarettes dangled from mouths untainted by accents and sloppy tomato gravy. Where they tipped their hats and whisked their dates onto dance floors. Every step pulsed with rhythm, no movement awkward or unrehearsed. Out there in Big Time America — a place we had never seen. It was just beyond the limits of what we knew, beyond Newark, where a lucky man had a job and a really lucky one had clean hands with all ten fingers.

"Padre, e figlio, e spirito santo..." My hand jumped to my forehead and darted around my torso to catch up with Pop's mercifully slow intonation of the Sign of the Cross. I prayed as I always did, for my family. I looked at Carmela, twenty-four and already the established

matriarch of her own small brood. Her husband was in the South Pacific, on a Navy battleship docked where a small volcanic island had just met the lapping tide of history. His part of the prayer came a few hours too late. I looked at Federica, my younger sister, whose light spirit was as beautiful as her physical form. Sweet Rica, God save your delicate heart. And Mama, from whom her sons received the untamed Sicilian blood that would torture her cautious soul. And Pop. Always, Pop. And Vin, little Prince of Illusions. How many of those illusions came from me? From all my bullshit about Big Time America? Later on, while I was still dreaming about slapping Seventh Avenue, my brother Vin would land in and out of jail trying to steal his way there. Did my pride have something to do with that? I don't know, maybe. You'll have to hear the rest of the story, then you decide. It all started that day. December Seventh, Nineteen Forty-one. I didn't know it then, but on that day things were happening thousands of miles away that would change my life forever.

Two

Mönchengladbach, Germany
December 1941

I can see Anna now, smoothing her dress and staring into the mirror at its clean white lines. Simple, elegant, like everything else about her. Her eyes found the flowers on the table behind her. The walls of the sitting room, oaken and warm, were too close for her. They were crowded with smiling photos of hearty German drinkers at long tables. One was packed with soldiers in the dress uniforms of the Third Reich. I know her smile faded when she saw that. Picking at the seam that circled her waist, her gloved fingers began to tremble. A single teardrop darkened her bosom. She looked up. The mirror blurred, but stubbornness and wedding day jitters helped her fight off the melancholy. For now. The lace of her handkerchief blended with her silken gauntlet as she dabbed her cheeks dry and smoothed the makeup that had begun to streak. Her hand stopped. For some reason she thought of her mother, wishing just once to hear that cautious, urgent murmur again. The walls moved in on her. Her chest tightened as she struggled for air and

rushed to the window to breathe deeply of the dark winter chill. It did not steady her shaking hands. She was completely alone.

In a few minutes, a thin band of gold would encircle the third finger on her right hand. Her fiancée's booming voice echoed through the heavy door and around the back end of the restaurant. Another man bellowed back, equally loudly. German men, always puffing their chests and blowing hot air. Let one of them whisper to me, she said, and he will own my heart. Her cheeks flushed with shame. She had already promised her heart to a man who was anything but quiet.

Once there had been a quiet man: her father. She smiled at the crystals on the black window as she thought of his laughing eyes. Her pulse settled. He had loved to listen to her sing, and to watch her jitterbug across the room to raucous American music. His hands had earned his living, forming wood into the skeletal frameworks of houses and buildings as his mind and voice lay still. Evenings found him peaceful, exhausted from fingertips to toes but refreshed by time alone with his thoughts. Each day, the other carpenters chattered away as his own silence lent him the refuge in which he found his meditative rhythm. She had loved to watch him, high in his rafters and smiling patiently at the idle banter. But one November day in Nineteen Thirty-eight, when the conversation turned ugly, he broke his silence and paid dearly for it. There had been a week of violence in the streets of her country, violence against Jews. Everywhere, even on his work crew, the brownshirts had crowed about it. In the end, her father's caution had yielded to basic human outrage.

"Swine," he had declared. "You are swine."

For that, they hurled him from the roof. The courts ruled it an accident, but Anna knew better.

Early in Nineteen Forty-one, her mother joined him. Friends tried to comfort Anna with assurances that her mother had died of a broken heart, so deep was her love for Anna's father. But Anna believed her mother had died of fear and guilt — simple, selfish emotions made lethal by the sacrifice Anna's father had made.

One final, deep inhalation of the December night, another smoothing of the dress, then Anna took three unwavering steps to the door and jerked it open. Her bridesmaids gasped at the intensity in her eyes, but when Anna saw Karl her expression softened to concern. The skin on one of his cheekbones was blackened around a swollen gash. He fingered the wound and shrugged with a sheepish grin. She could not suppress a smile. He had a chest like an oaken barrel and thick, rawboned limbs that strained even the most perfectly tailored clothing. His army dress grays barely conformed to his awkward figure, and his bristling mop of hair nearly brushed the door frame above him. He seemed unkempt despite his best efforts to button up and comb down, as if his wild soul were unable to tolerate a polished exterior. But it was his voice that truly could not be contained. It roared from him at all but the most intimate moments, yielding only when he applied his entire will to the task of suppressing it.

Next to Karl, Anna felt safe and small. Part of her was no less alone in his presence than when they were apart, but she chose to ignore that feeling and to focus instead on the comfortable familiarity they shared. They had known one another for most of their lives. Their childhood relationship was rooted in a mutual passion for

boundless exploration, but while his sense of adventure was entirely physical, hers was primarily spiritual and intellectual. Through adolescence and early adulthood, they had grown apart. She needed more than his raw instinct for freedom to hold her attention. She sought understanding, reflection. He wanted simply to keep roaming and playing. She grew restless. He struggled for control, for more than mere acquaintance. She edged away, then ran.

And then her father's death changed everything.

Before and after he died, there had been others; awkward young men who chased her beauty without considering what lay beneath. They were a series of snapshots, not companions. She barely remembered any of them, but each time she saw the Nazi flag she thought of one boy, and one lonely night. He had sat on the edge of her couch and leaned into a note on an old saxophone. Her hazel eyes, usually flecked with gold, were darkened by the weariness of grief and apathy. As she watched his pale cheeks redden with effort, she wondered what it was that drew such extremes of desire from some of the men she met. Her complexion was slightly olive, and her thick brown hair fell in long waves around the angles of her face — hardly the Aryan ideal. Her shoulders, as ever, were squared with haughty defiance. She was barely a hundred pounds, just a hair over five and a half feet tall, but she held herself as if she alone were responsible for the world around her, as if with a wave of her hand she could silence or mobilize those who stood nearby. Confidence. That's what it was. But she didn't know that, not back then.

They had come to her with music, at least the ones who took the time to learn what she loved. She was

blessed with a voice that could reach into a man's soul. Her young heart was just beginning to grasp what it awoke in those shadows. They were drawn to her ethereal sweetness, but also to her steely resolve. At first, most of them would have been frustrated by their inability to solve the riddle of her. Then they would be angry, either at their own failure to possess her or at the absence within themselves of even a fraction of her self-assurance. On those rare occasions when she was greeted with a male personality that did not require the augmentation of her own, she had allowed herself to toy with the idea of real love. But in her heart, she held little hope for even the most promising advances. She had always felt that she could never truly fall for a German boy — even one with enough skill to mimic the simpler elements of a jazz tune on a saxophone.

With academic dispassion, she had studied the effete young musician on the couch across from her. He was sixteen, still undetected by the war machine ravaging her country's male population. Really just a little boy, she thought. Once again, she contented herself with the notion that true love was in some far-off place preparing itself for her. For now, at least there would be music. She had stared at the mantelpiece photo of her father, feeling that familiar tightness in her chest at the sight of her mother's Rosary beads hanging on the frame. Each morning when her mother passed that picture, she would make the Sign of the Cross. It was a gesture that made Anna rage at the sky. Why?! Why would You take him and leave her here with her hypocritical superstitions? Anna had never forgiven her mother for the relief on her face when she learned, after hearing the news of her husband's death, that all he had said was "Swine." Anna

had wanted to grab her mother by the shoulders, to scream into her face: "He died defending you! And all you feel is relief? It would have been better if he *had* told them that your mother was a Jew!" But Anna had said no such thing. She knew she didn't have to.

Instead she had stared at the picture, missing her father with all of her heart and ignoring the feeble affections of those incapable of such love. She had not noticed when the blond boy stopped playing his saxophone. When his thin hand found hers, his eyes were wide with concern. She dismissed his empathy with a toss of her head, turning away to wipe the tears from her cheeks. But when she looked back at him, the words began to pour from her lips — at first merely the facts of the event without comment as to its cause, and then nearly, so nearly, more. But he cut in before she could reveal her grandmother's religious identity, blurting a story about his own uncle who had died in Poland. A brave man, the boy said. A proud lieutenant in the Waffen SS. Anna recoiled as he spoke. *SS!* A whirl of images swam through her mind. Old women dragged by the hair into the streets, their flimsy nightgowns torn open to the November air. Children wailing as fathers were beaten and houses burned. Everywhere, broken glass. Night after night of broken glass...

Two years later, at a safe remove from that terrifying evening, Anna stood in the hallway of the restaurant and shivered in her wedding dress as she recalled the conversation and the images it invoked. She looked at Karl, laughing with two other uniformed soldiers, and thought about the last time she had seen the blond boy. A few months after their date, she had waited by the side of a broad boulevard for a parade to end so she could

cross the street. She looked up and saw that familiar, androgynous face marching with a troupe of Hitler Youth, blond hair cropped close, smooth cheeks flushed with pride. His young eyes had still seemed free of cruelty, yet he passed the Nazi flag with his arm outstretched to salute that broken crucifix floating in its sea of blood. He must have known what it stood for, she thought. Yet his face had been serene, untroubled.

Forcing the memory away, she brushed at one last tear and inhaled to her full height. At the end of the hallway, the man she was about to marry wore that same twisted symbol on his lapel. She closed her eyes, but the image lingered. Karl might not have chosen to wear the swastika, but it was there nonetheless. As the crowd in the main room fell silent, he looked back at her with love in his eyes. She kept her eyes on his, away from the uniform and focused on the soul who had no choice but to wear it. She felt cold. Somehow her legs found the strength to follow him down the aisle. Years later, that would be the last thing she remembered about that night.

❖

As he watched his bride walk toward him, Karl felt the bruise around his eye begin to throb. He was grateful that the small gathering would be looking at her and not him. No one noticed the cuts on his right hand. No one knew how badly he had injured the man who had attacked him three nights earlier. He licked the cut on his lip, suddenly parched with anxiety. His eyes spoke his doubts. A woman like her, marrying me? She saw his fear and smiled to reassure him.

Karl Eisenstark was not a man given to worry or

introspection. He had risen fast in the German infantry through fearlessness and an instinctive awareness of even the smallest details of a combat situation. He fought without remorse, led without hesitation, and slept soundly at the end of it all. Anna knew there was no little voice in his heart that bemoaned the circumstance of his military service; he had accepted it as his only possible choice, other than death by firing squad. Still, she also knew that not even the tiniest part of him enjoyed anything about it, except perhaps the occasional friendships with other soldiers who, like him, despised the authoritarian government they had been forced to defend. He was intelligent enough to recognize the futility of his situation — the irreconcilable difference between who he was and what the Reich required him to be — but he gave it as little thought as he could and vowed only to survive.

Three nights earlier, he had been in good spirits at an encampment along the Rhine. There was talk of an offensive involving his regiment, but then there was always talk of that. A few times, the word "Russia" had been whispered around. He was unfazed. The dimming sky was crisp and clean, the enemy was miles away and he was headed home for three days' leave. He and two friends had found a dry, secluded patch of ground by the riverbank to sit and share some smoked landjäger and a small flask of schnapps that one had received from home. As Karl took a sip of the liqueur, a dark shape darted past him and pounced on the precious bundle of dried sausages. Before he could react, the dog had devoured most of the meat. Karl dropped the flask, grabbed two handfuls of fur and flung the dog high in the air. It grazed a tree trunk and landed awkwardly on a gnarled root, but

immediately jumped back up and attacked. He barely got his forearm between the dog's teeth and his own throat. In one motion, he turned his body and used the dog's momentum to swing it out toward the freezing Rhine. Still clutching a piece of Karl's sleeve, the dog hit the black water and was quickly swept downstream.

"You!" The voice had come from the shadows behind the trees. Two soldiers in SS black stepped forward. Neither one outranked him, so Karl ignored them and picked at the gray flannel in the lacerations on his arm. "You there!" the man persisted. "Asshole! Look at me."

Karl smiled but did not look up. From his blind side, the other soldier swept a backhand across his face. The man was wearing a ring on the outside of his leather glove. Karl's friends edged closer, but when he shook his head they stopped.

"Who are you, the fucking Queen of England?" Karl growled. "Wearing a ring like that?" He licked his split lip.

"That was his dog," the man said as he straightened the ring and wiped it on his trousers.

"That was our landjäger," Karl shot back. He turned his attention to his shredded arm, but his awareness never strayed from his adversaries. The first punch came from the dog's owner, a wild right that Karl slipped easily. Karl countered with a tight jab that emptied the man's lungs. Before Karl could get his hands back up, the other man landed a ring-studded punch just below his eye. Karl ducked behind his upraised fists and flicked two quick lefts into the man's nose. He drove a right up through the man's chin, grunting at the crunch of breaking teeth. When the weight of the first man hit his shoulders, he ducked forward instinctively, bulled his neck to break the man's chokehold and flipped him onto his back. The

soldier struggled once more for air. Karl straightened up and let his hands fall to his sides to signal that his point was proven; no more violence was necessary. But then he realized that these were not reasonable men. They were Waffen SS.

As the soldier on the ground recovered slowly, the one with the ring and the shattered sneer drew out a knife. Karl's friends stepped forward again, but again he motioned for them to stay back. Circling, Karl dodged one slash, then another. Without lowering his eyes, he studied the man's feet. When the blade flashed a third time, Karl slid past the weapon, stepped behind the man's forward leg and lowered his weight onto the extended knee. With a shriek, the man released the knife and crumpled to the ground. The entire movement happened so fast that Karl's friends wondered if it had been an accident. Karl picked up the knife, glanced at the death's head on its handle and tossed it into the river as its owner writhed on the ground. Turning to his other opponent, Karl waited patiently. The man closed his eyes and shook his head, then crawled over to his battered comrade. The latter roared at Karl with unintelligible rage. Karl waved him off, bent to pick up the flask and sat down with his friends as the SS troops limped away.

The next morning, Karl was awakened by the sound of screaming. It was a few seconds before he realized that he was hearing his own name.

"Eisenstark! Where is Eisenstark?!" The lieutenant's accent was Bavarian, his boots patent leather and barely worn. His pale hands and soft paunch emphasized the fact that his officer's commission had been the product of political largesse, not combat experience. "Eisenstark!!"

Karl slid backward out of his bedding and shrugged himself up to his full height. His chin was level with the top of the screeching Nazi's cap. “Ja, here I am,” he mumbled, his salute anything but crisp. A beat too late, he added “Sir.”

"Working class turd," the lieutenant spat. He peeled two sheets from a portfolio and slapped them across Karl's face. "Here, learn about Russia. It's where you will die." Karl took the papers, saluted and started to read them as he turned away. “Did I dismiss you?!” shrieked the lieutenant. “You do not turn your back on me! *I* turn first! Not you!!”

"Yes," Karl said, now fully awake. He held up the orders. The mission was to begin that afternoon. "Actually I —"

“You will listen to a commanding officer! Listen to me!!”

“Javoll,” Karl said, "but —"

“Javoll, *Herr Leutnant*! Say it!!”

“Javoll, Herr Leutnant.” He held up the papers. "But this is today."

The lieutenant's face flushed with rage. Karl didn't blink when the little officer cracked his riding crop against the side of his shiny boot. He stood still as the lieutenant began to pace back and forth, breathing loudly through his nose and occasionally pointing with his short whip. After a few turns, the pacing stopped. The lieutenant glanced around at the troops who were watching with groggy amusement.

“I am an *officer*!" he shrieked. He turned and jabbed a finger in Karl's face. "You! I’m going to make an example out of you. You arrogant dogs will show me respect!" Standing on tiptoe, he leaned close to Karl and let his

voice drop to a snarl. "You think because you have been in battle that I do not have authority over you? Huh? Do you?"

Eyes lidded with indifference, Karl didn't seem to notice as the lieutenant stepped back and turned. When he whirled and lashed his riding crop at Karl's sleepy face, Karl dodged backward and to the side and let the whip sail harmlessly past. As the lieutenant stumbled, several of the soldiers behind him snorted to suppress their laughter. Karl remained still and impassive, his expression unchanged.

"You—!" The lieutenant choked, his face as red as the flag on the pole behind him. As if realizing for the first time that he had a sidearm, he broke off his breathless rant and fumbled at the clasp on his holster. He used both thumbs to cock the luger and then aimed it at Karl's forehead with one shaking hand. Karl did not flinch. His eyes remained fixed on the same spot they had held since the lieutenant started pacing, but his arms relaxed slightly and hung loose, ready to deflect the weapon. The lieutenant muttered as if his words were part of a long-standing inner monologue. "I should shoot you, you smug bastard. I should shoot you now."

"You will shoot no one."

The clear baritone of authority sent a flash of terror across the lieutenant's face. As the major strode between the troops, his junior officer holstered his weapon, saluted nervously and stood at attention. Gray hair at the major's temples reflected his forty-one years, but his athletic build had been kept lean by a long career of military discipline. He had served with courage in several campaigns along the western front during the First World War. His opposition to promoting unseasoned officers

was widely known, and his disdain for politicians, if less outspoken, was every bit as vehement. He had commanded Karl's regiment in battle, and while Karl had little contact with him, he respected the evenhandedness of the major's leadership and the obvious intelligence of his tactics. The major put one hand on the lieutenant's shoulder and steered him to a spot where only Karl could hear their conversation.

"*Herr Major*," the lieutenant stammered, "this man's insubordination..."

"You mean his desire to go home and get married?"

"But..."

"You know as well as I that he has been granted leave."

"But he has upset the commandant of the Waffen SS." The lieutenant's eyes narrowed as his voice gained confidence. "He has made enemies in higher places than—"

With a look, the major cut him off. The lieutenant's eyes widened with fear again. Instead of cowering in political self-defense, the major stared down at him with aggressive contempt.

"This man will be transferred to the Twenty-first Panzer Division in El Agheila." The major waited for the lieutenant to comprehend what he was saying. "Libya," he added.

"Africa?" The lieutenant was astounded. "The Afrika Korps? But the commandant will see this as an even greater insult. General Rommel has gone out of his way to exclude the Waffen SS from... his campaigns... in..."

As the major raised one hand and pinched the lieutenant's collar, the smaller man sputtered to silence. The major studied the insignia, then raised his eyes and

let them bore into the lieutenant's faltering gaze. After a few seconds, the lieutenant looked away.

"Perhaps one day, *Herr Leutnant*," the major said quietly, "Daddy will make your dreams come true. But for now, remember that you are *not* in the Waffen SS. I will expect to see Eisenstark's transfer papers on my desk in one hour."

The major returned the lieutenant's salute and walked back toward the rest of the troops, pausing only to speak to Karl.

"Don't drown any more dogs," he said. Karl straightened to attention as he acknowledged the order. "They are more valuable than some of our junior officers," the major whispered with a wink.

On the morning after the wedding, Karl packed his duffel slowly. Anna watched him, aware that the story he had told her reflected more than just the odd luck that had graced his military career thus far. He was trying, in his own way, to justify his participation in the war by reminding her that not all German soldiers held the same political beliefs. She wondered if his growing admiration for Rommel was rooted in the spiritual and physical distance that service in the Afrika Korps would place between him and the religious atrocities occurring in Germany and along the Eastern Front. Several times, he had emphasized his own — and Rommel's — distaste for the Waffen SS, as if she might find more room for him in her heart if she could believe that he was on her side. They had been married in a civil ceremony that made no mention of church or tradition, just as she had wanted. He was her husband. Yet he knew, instinctively, that she was holding something back. Part of him wanted her to share his enthusiasm for this new assignment, for the

fresh start it gave him and for the remarkable leader he would be serving in Libya, but he understood that he would not get a hero's goodbye. Her heart was too wounded, her losses too great. She had never shared the secret of her mother's religious heritage with him, but he sensed that something deeper than ideology was fueling her bitterness toward the government.

There was more than a little energy in his step when he boarded the train that afternoon. Her complicated emotions were too much for him. He knew that he could withstand the searing terrain and the unorthodox tactics of desert warfare, but he was afraid of what lay below the surface of his new bride's polite smile. To be married to her — officially, irrevocably — was sufficient for him. To have experienced her physically was more than he had ever dreamed possible. But to linger in the shadow of her powerful heart and discover how little of it he actually owned was more than he could bear. Folding his slim hopes into one of the many bundles in his service bag, he packed himself up and shipped out. "One day," he had said to her, "this will all be over." She smiled, knowing that by "this" he did not really mean the war, but rather the dissonance in their relationship. She nodded as she kissed him goodbye and ended their first day of marriage with three little words that she knew were both merciful and untrue.

"Yes, it will."