

FIVE EXECUTIONS

War-hardened and bitter, Marc Roussillon watched while Gaston and Fabien tortured and then questioned once more the first of the two men who had been accused of collaborating with the Nazis. All around him, candlelight was dispersing the dark energies of the crypt vault to which he had been summoned to participate in the interrogation and, if necessary, to witness the killings. Cavernous and austere, rooms in the distance glimmered upon his quick notice and then hurried beyond his clarified perceiving. They, too, held within granite enclosures the rotted bones of the long dead. Here, though, spools of bleak space also defined elliptically an imagery of living men who were carrying knives and handguns. That space encompassed even more clearly the well-honed muscularity of Benoît Lacombe, a young, brown-haired man whose naked and bleeding body lay bound by chains on a long table that had been purloined from the surgery of a hospital nearby.

On the long table next to him lay the equally rugged body of Raoul Lefebvre. His athletic handsomeness—usually intensified by his dark-red hair, blue eyes, aquiline nose, and full sensual lips and by the flawless proportions of his body—appeared disarranged as well as diminished by the fresh blood trickling down his chin onto his broad chest and by the purple welts and bruises that had overtaken the surfaces and contours of his form. Marc noticed how his eyes, half-shut because of the blows that had been directed at them, revealed nonetheless an incisive awareness and a defiant glare. Quickened by his presence, the eyes were studying him cautiously. They had been studying him ever since he entered the cavernous space of this vault. The mind behind those eyes was trying to interpret the reason for his being there. Had he come as friend or as executioner? Would he be the one to slit his throat or carve through his heart with a Fairbairn-Sykes knife? Was he the one who had been chosen to strangle him or to shoot him with a Browning handgun as proof that he himself was not a double agent?

Marc returned Raoul's squinting gaze with teeth-clenching detachment. He did not enjoy seeing this man who had been his friend lying there on a hospital table, naked and suffering.

The uses which the French Resistance was imposing upon the hospital tables might have, in a safe and more civilized era, appeared as incongruous and as subversive as the scenario that their

freedom fighters were activating here in the Basilica of Sacré-Coeur, at 35 Rue de Chevalier de la Barre in the district of Montmartre, within the northern part of Paris. But the summer of 1944 in Europe was neither safe nor civilized. The German Army, Navy, and Air Force were destroying everything that was safe and almost everything that was civilized.

Four months earlier, at the white stone altar that on the main floor of this building enhanced the precision and dignity of a religious ceremony occurring there, the Nazis had even killed a Jesuit priest, Father François Mercier. Fearless and honorable, this priest had preached against the Nazis and had called on the churchgoers listening to him to rescue the people of France, including its Jewish population, from the German invaders. On the same morning that they shot him, the Nazis closed the church. Their army might have made it their barracks. But the German High Command feared that, if their army used the church in that way, the allies were going to target the building and its grounds for bombing.

From time to time after that, Fabien and Gaston secretly used the crypt vaults of the church for their interrogation and torture of men and women suspected of having betrayed the French Resistance. Usually, seven or eight loyal cohorts watched the brute force and murderous impulses that the two men brought to their interrogations. Tonight, though, having summoned him away from London two days earlier, they had invited only Marc to be a witness.

He had made a risk-taking journey in a Whitley that was piloted by two comrades in the Free French Air Force. Flying at one point as low as fifteen hundred feet, the pilots enabled him to make a parachute jump over the greenery of an affluent man's vineyards in Aix-en-Provence. That drop was the nearest he could make to Paris without immediately drawing the Nazis to himself. It brought him to this risk-taking and anonymous friend of the Resistance who, besides offering temporary refuge, had secured for him the false identity and ration cards, the clothes, and the Mauser semi-automatic pistol he would need. From Aix, while wearing the uniform of a major in the German army and while driving his friend's Mercedes-Benz 540K Cabriolet B, he made a well-calculated, four-hundred-mile journey into Montmartre. Though he was stopped at several Nazi checkpoints, he still maintained a speedy passage. He was in a great hurry. He understood that danger had ensnared Raoul and Benoît and was even then sealing their fates. He was aware as well that, from the moment he had set foot on French soil, the same danger began closing in on him.

These were the thoughts that flared their blunt complications across his awareness. But only for a moment would he allow them to give him pause or to keep him from doing the thing that needed to

be done. He had come here to learn the truth about Benoît Lacombe, a man he had known for only three months. With an even greater urgency, he had come to discover whether Raoul Lefebvre, a man he had been happy to call his friend for two years now, ever since they were part of the same squadron in the Free French Air Force, was actually a traitor—a double agent working on behalf of the Nazis. That both he and Raoul had not only been flying bomber sorties across Germany, but also working as agents in French intelligence missions made their friendship seem extemporaneous and even inevitable.

Now that friendship was imperiled. The French Resistance believed that Raoul had been collaborating with the Vichy government and with the Nazis. Under his most recent code name Thibaut, he had—his accusers said—leagued himself with Benoît Lacombe (whose code name was Sylvain) to create a wireless telegraphy radio network that intercepted the messages of the allies. By means of this network, they had discovered for the Germans the troop movements of British, American, and Free French armies. Thousands of allied soldiers had died from aerial bombings as they made their way by train or on foot to battle stations in central and northern France.

This radio network had recently learned and passed forward to the Germans the names and locations of resistance fighters who had killed a Nazi commander and six other field-grade officers in Brittany. Moving quickly to avenge the killing, the Nazis pursued, captured, and shot the four men who had been responsible for the deaths of the German officers. They also killed eighty-one Frenchmen who belonged to the same guerrilla forces in Brittany, fighting there against the Nazis from the mountainous areas of northwestern France.

That Raoul and Benoît were the traitors whose radio network had led the Germans to the Free French fighters in Brittany, both Gaston and Fabien were certain. They had proof. It was they—Gaston and Fabien—who had captured and tortured the three French officers (two captains and a lieutenant) that with Raoul and Benoît had planned and then participated in the massacre of the eighty-five men. It was they—Gaston and Fabien—who, while accompanied by six other freedom fighters, had surprised these three French traitors as they were taking their pleasures in a brothel on Rue des Francs-Bourgeois in the district of The Marais, which is situated in the southern part of Paris. There, inside an impressive brick-and-stone building that wore deep slate roofs and dormer windows over arcades, they had stormed into the three bedrooms where the French officers lay with their favorite prostitutes. At the point of their enemies' .303 caliber Bren guns, the French traitors had quickly dressed and followed their captors into the darkened enclosure of a long, sleek hearse.

From the jagged and bombed avenues of The Marais, the hearse had made its way with careful dignity to the night-time streets of Montmartre and to the secrecy of the crypt vaults within the Sacré-Coeur basilica.

It had taken a week for Gaston and Fabien to break the spirit and the self-command of the lieutenant, whose name was Lucien Chardonne. Wily and athletic, he had been the equal of the battle-scarred and still-murderous captains. Like them, he had withstood hours upon hours of grueling interrogation. Like them, he had endured days and nights of endless-seeming torture.

Hearing of this lieutenant's ability to endure days and nights of torture, Marc was impressed. His own experience had taught him more than a little about prolonged suffering and about the adamant will that refuses to be defeated by suffering's stern and proprietary laws. Years of rugged athleticism had hardened and disciplined him. That training had shaped his tolerance for pain and his capacity for meeting unforgiving challenges without flinching. But his experiences hunting sea lions in Africa and red stag in Patagonia or kayaking across the white waters of Finland or boxing a middleweight opponent in a Paris gym had been only a part of his life. Those challenges had, of course, tested his courage as well as his physicality and his stamina.

But other essential influences had also shaped him. That his parents continued to risk their lives so that France and all of Europe might be free again had intensified his own determination to conquer the Nazis. His years as a Free French Air Force pilot flying combat missions with the RAF from air bases outside London had configured in even more radical ways his tough-minded responses to danger and to pain. Those combat missions and his equally hazardous assignments as a freedom fighter working in French intelligence units had further probed and defined his understanding of who he was in the world. He had learned well the folly of self-pity, of hesitation, and of guilt and recrimination. His realistic view of things had taught him to give no quarter to his specific enemies or to the adversarial world in general.

What he had learned was valuable and came with a heavy price. No longer could he believe in his uncompromised humanness. No longer did he feel that he had a soul or that a beneficent spirit prevailed over even the so-called civilized forms of existence. No longer, without an awareness of the liabilities involved, would he choose to express the softer aspects of his nature.

He imagined that the lieutenant whom Gaston and Fabien had tortured and then murdered had lived through experiences similar to his own. Educated and scientific, he too—before the war came—must have envisioned ways that his being in the world as a creative and original presence

would influence the world for the better. As adventurous as he was well-traveled, this Lucien Chardonne probably came from a privileged background. He also may have learned how to question the idealized conceptions of the world that his elite schooling and his socially insulated background had granted him. That he felt closer to this Lucien Chardonne than to the two cretins who were reveling over their execution of him left Marc feeling uneasy and bitter.

An hour earlier, when Gaston and Fabien recounted for his benefit the seven days and nights of torture that they had inflicted upon their three prisoners, Marc found himself strangely displeased. He had never liked Gaston or Fabien. During these wretched years of war, he had met more than a few men like them. He knew their type. It was not their humble backgrounds that roused his antipathy. In peacetime, Gaston had repaired public roads and bridges. Fabien had been a lumberjack. Those were honorable trades. He could respect the two men for the hours of hard labor that they brought to their jobs. But he despised them for enjoying the war and for exulting in all the murders they committed under the guise of patriotism.

From time to time, they also murdered their own comrades in the Resistance. They would accuse them of treason and, after the grueling interrogation and torture, would kill them. Usually, they would allow a group of trusted cohorts to witness the killings. But, occasionally, they would kill in secret. That they failed to call to these secret interrogations the men and women in their unit who might speak on behalf of the accused roused his enmity and his distrust of them.

Nearly forty, Gaston was shorter than most men, though he was powerfully built. He carried his five-foot frame like a boxer. It was not only his broad shoulders, muscular arms, and large hands that made him appear sinister and threatening. His face—with its narrow squinting eyes, broken nose, and grimacing mouth—looked savage and, at times, not even human.

Fabien, not yet thirty, stood six foot, four inches. Everything about him appeared oversized. His brawny frame, hardened by years of cutting big trees from the forests in northern France, was a natural fit for physical challenge and formidable adventure. When war came, he hurried into it, though not as a Frenchman joining the Allied infantry, where despite his size he would have been rendered anonymous, merely one of the hundreds of thousands of soldiers testing their powers while in the midst of battle. Rather, he chose to join the Resistance. Working within the secrecy of a small group of freedom fighters, he could win the adulation of men whose raw courage he matched, but whose characters were far more honorable.

Marc had thought as much earlier than on this afternoon when Gaston and Fabien had recounted

their capture and torture of the three French officers who, they said, had participated in the killing of eighty-five allies. Months before that, he had witnessed the deranged glee with which Fabien and Gaston killed their enemies during several night raids that, with their underground unit (the Lyon division of Force Française d'Interier), he had made against the Nazis. Recently, a new and more furious savagery was activating the punishment that these two Frenchmen inflicted upon their Nazi enemies and sometimes upon the comrades they branded as traitors. Their brutal treatment of the three French officers they had captured did not surprise him.

As sadistic as they were methodical, Gaston and Fabien had broken the arms and legs of their three prisoners with ropes, pulleys, and mallet. On the second and third days, they held their drowning faces in toilets. On the fourth and fifth days, while the cries and groans of the prisoners anchored themselves once more to new levels of relentless pain, they lashed the bare flesh of their backs with heavy whips and razors. On the sixth day, they hung their nakedness from heavy wooden beams that spanned the width of the ceiling within the crypt vaults that cast a funereal glimmer upon the bleeding and writhing bodies. On this sixth day they hung each man from his ankles and with bared wire sticks beat his penis and his testicles with a heavy rope. The pain ripping through his groin threw him out of consciousness.

Even then, after six days of torture, the French officers did not break.

But on the seventh day, after they gouged out his left eye and threatened to cut away his right eye, as well, the lieutenant—Lucien Chardonne—told them what they wanted to hear.

He was alone with them.

The two captains, who had not yet had their left eyes ripped out of their faces, were hanging from the wooden beams of adjoining vaults. Semi-conscious and pain-racked, they must have allowed their bodies to hang slack—momentarily freed from their tautened responses to the latest wire-floggings of their backs and chests and testicles and to the burning of their fractured arms and legs with hot candle wax.

(So Marc imagined, having been told only an hour ago the story of their capture, when he first returned to Paris from his drop-point in Aix. For four weeks before this time, as the leader of his London-based squadron, he had flown fifteen bombing missions over Munich, Berlin, Stuttgart, and Frankfurt.)

“Tell us now,” Gaston urged the young, dark-haired lieutenant whose blue left eye he had ripped away with a V-42 stiletto. “Tell us the names of the double agents who have betrayed us.”

Sinister and determined, Gaston had spewed the words between his stained teeth. The graveled timbres of his quiet voice were anchored to the rough pleasure of having at last broken Lieutenant Chardonne, this ruined handsomeness whose one blue eye studied his persecutor matter-of-factly, without tears or even a momentary expectation of mercy. The bony socket where his left eye had been was clotted with blood and watery fluid that spilled down his face and came to rest upon his left shoulder. There, the viscous remnants of the eyeball that had been ripped out of his face melded with the smashed cornea, iris and pupil.

Bound to a high-backed chair, his head leaning into its smooth cedar wood, the lieutenant waited an instant before answering. In this hour, which his unflinching realism took to be the last in his brief life, Lucien Chardonne might have appeared subtly detached to men more insightful than his captors, as though he were standing outside or apart from himself. His time had come to die. But even in death he would outwit his savage enemies.

(Upon hearing the outcome of this incident, Marc imagined that the French lieutenant had reacted to Gaston and Fabien in a stoic and cunning manner.)

“Give me some water first,” Chardonne said.

He was addressing Gaston, the man who had gouged out his left eye. In these few words, there was a modulated inflection that balanced command and negotiation.

That afternoon, Gaston chose to ignore the suggestion of a command. As the price for the information he and Fabien sought, the water seemed a fair exchange.

From a flask, Gaston poured water into a paper cup and watched while the lieutenant drank it. He drank slowly, because his parched throat and swollen lips could receive the water only if he sipped it gradually. When he was done, he stared at the cup as intently as he had observed the water. Even Gaston, whose savage nature was not given to interpreting the nuances or subtexts of other persons’ characters or circumstances, understood the Nazi’s one-eyed glance as a farewell notice of something that was finished and done with forever—the drinking of water or peering at its very image or perhaps the willingness to endure the excruciating pain of torture.

Once more now, held within a prolonged stillness, Chardonne observed his torturer. For an instant, Gaston thought that his prisoner was playing for time, reluctant even now to divulge the names of the French agents who had collaborated with the Nazis and had become catalysts in the deaths of so many allies. But he had no sooner pondered that thought, when the lieutenant began speaking rapidly the words that Gaston was waiting to hear.

“A Frenchman with the code name of Sylvain has been our most important source of information,” Chardonne began. “Because of him, we have been able to bomb your troop trains, identify and kill your secret agents, and target the resistance groups for our organized massacres.”

Gaston wanted to know more.

“Who is the man who disguises himself with this code name?” he asked. The grating sounds of his words hung upon the air even as they pushed forward their harsh command. “Who is Sylvain?”

Again, Chardonne paused. The thin line of a smile crossed his still-parched lips. He appeared (so Gaston told Marc later) to enjoy watching his torturer’s impatience.

Now, as if he were discarding information that he no longer found important and as he imparted his words in raspy understatement, he identified the first of the double agents.

“He is Benoît Lacombe.”

Again the lieutenant paused. Again Gaston pushed him forward.

“Describe him.”

Lucien Chardonne closed his one eye, possibly because he was summoning to his mind’s eye the imagery that Benoît Lacombe inhabited. When he resumed speaking, he spoke with the assurance of a man who has called forth an accurate memory.

“He’s fairly tall—maybe five-ten or five eleven. He has a wiry build, blue eyes, a perfectly straight nose, and brown hair. He is proficient in German, English, and French. He’s an aviator, too, and a superb marksman.”

Gaston pushed on, drawing from his captor the necessary answers.

“How do you know all these things?”

Sure of his way now, the lieutenant answered him quickly.

“I met Benoît twice. The first time was in Vichy, at a meeting of German operatives, spies, and officers. The second time was in Lucerne, when I was on a week’s leave with my girlfriend. Benoît was there with his girlfriend, too, and in the same hotel.”

Gaston pressed him further, his own guttural inflections binding themselves to a quickened emphasis.

“Who are these girlfriends?”

Chardonne’s one-eye observed him with muted contempt.

“The women are beyond your reach,” he said. “They are Swedes and have nothing to do with the war.”

All this while, Fabien had stood apart from the two men, as if his business there required him to stand as a sentry at the entrance to the crypt and, from that distance, to critique the thoroughness of Gaston's interrogation of their prisoner. Now he stepped forward until he was standing next to Gaston. Like him and with the same calculated menace, he hovered about the lieutenant. The frown that creased his brow indicated that he was not completely satisfied. They needed more information from Chardonne.

"Who was the other agent?" he asked with blunt intensity. "What other Frenchman was working for you Nazis?"

Chardonne began coughing suddenly, his pale face soon flushed because of the seizure and because of the feverous heat of his body. He knew that he was dying. His two captors knew it, as well. Impelled by a pragmatic awareness that their prisoner might die before he revealed the name of the second double agent, Fabien grabbed the flask of water and held it before the lieutenant. Impatient yet self-controlled, he waited until Chardonne's seizure had stopped. Then he offered the flask to him.

Chardonne sipped the water slowly. Then, having drunk his meager fill, he handed the flask to his oppressor. His blue eye was rheumy now and curious. Even in this final hour of his life, he was measuring the effect of his words upon the Frenchmen who were killing him. (So, hearing of this episode several days afterward, did Marc imagine.)

Wily and elusive yet, Chardonne lingered within a calculated stillness that suggested a reluctance to divulge any other information. Instead, his solitary blue eye gazed, adamant and secretive, upon his captors.

His anger rising, Gaston drew closer to the depleted body of the lieutenant. Days earlier, he had noticed a silver crucifix hanging on a chain from Chardonne's neck. Neither he nor Fabien had bothered to tear it away from the young man's nakedness. Now he noticed the crucifix once more as it dangled about the upper part of the lieutenant's chest. The thought that Lucien Chardonne was a believer spurred Gaston forward to the new words that were meant to persuade his captive to reveal the identity of the second man who had been the catalyst in the deaths of so many people.

"Tell us his name," Gaston demanded. "Tell us for your own good. Before you die, make amends for all the killing you have done for your Nazis leaders. Cleanse yourself. Give us the name of the second agent."

For the next minute, made emphatic by the protracted tension, the lieutenant held himself inside

an unnatural stillness. Then, because he was weary of the war and weary of life and weary of his executioners, he spoke the name for which Gaston and Fabien were killing him and his fellow officers.

“He is Raoul Lefebvre, and he uses the code name Thibaut.”

Once again, as if they were reciting by rote the questions that would discover necessary answers, they pressed onward.

“Describe him,” Fabien said. “Prove to us that you know Raoul Lefebvre.”

In this very instant, a spasm of coughing overtook Chardonne. A long and anguished moaning was his only answer, anchored as it was to his hollow breathing and his heaving chest. Blood trickled out of his mouth, as it had many times during these days of torture. Once again, and for the tenth time on this day, the young officer drew into himself, pain-racked and dazed. He no longer knew where he was.

Gaston and Fabien waited, their furious hatred of the French traitor harnessed to the need for temperate responses that might yield the rest of the information they sought.

They did not have to wait long.

As abruptly as it had taken hold of Chardonne, the seizure of coughing stopped. His one eye, bloodshot now and rheumy-blue, stared at them quizzically. He appeared to be coming back to his awareness of them. Harbored within this new stillness, he stared ahead of him and saw them as a blur of rough imagery—a startlement of simian forms closing in on him menacingly. Then, summoning in these last minutes his ingrained discipline and his acquired tolerance for pain, he spoke the words for which they were searching.

“Lefebvre is very tall—maybe six-four. He has dark red hair, light blue eyes, the vague outline of a scar across the left side of his nose, and full lips. He is a fine athlete, a first-rate scientist, and a well-tested aviator.”

“How do you know?” Fabien asked. “How do you know what he looks like and what kind of man he is?”

“I saw him in Lucerne, on those same weekends when Benoît was there,” the lieutenant said.

He was carefully measuring the effort he would have to make if he were to say the things his captors were waiting to hear. His words came more slowly now, bound by soft timbres and jagged breathing.

“We skied together. We skated and we went tobogganing. We were there with our girlfriends. We

had a good time.”

Though they implicated Raoul and Benoît with this French traitor, these words did not altogether satisfy Gaston and Fabien. They wanted to know more. They wanted (they later told Marc) to hear the more essential words that would identify Raoul and Benoît as traitors to the French Resistance.

But Lieutenant Chardonne did not yet say those words. His one eye closed and his ragged handsomeness winced with new jolts of pain.

Now Fabien took from his vest pocket a flask of brandy. He poured a few drops into a cup, which he placed within the lieutenant’s grasp. Hate-filled and repellent, he watched him sip the liquor and then slowly revive.

In this way, Chardonne resumed his narrative about Raoul and Benoît. His voice, weakened now yet unfaltering, stayed matter-of-fact and decisive.

“When we were in Switzerland, Lefebvre and Lacombe gave me information about Allied troop movements. They were very specific about locations and times. They also gave us the names of the four men who killed one of our commanders and three officers in his unit. Within twenty-four hours, the German Air Force bombed the trains that were carrying thousands of troops to the front. On that same day, a German infantry unit hurried into Brittany and massacred more than eighty of the mountain guerrillas who had killed the German officers.”

The lieutenant paused once more. His one eye carefully observed the effect his words had upon his captors. To reaffirm the truth of those words and to give them further heft and impetus, he pushed himself to say more.

“Lefebvre and Lacombe belong to us,” he said. “They are the double agents my German contacts sent to infiltrate your group.”

Having said so, he lay back and waited for his captors to set his execution in motion. He had told them the things they wanted to hear. He had fed them half-truths and lies. Their torture of him was over. They would kill him swiftly.

(That was the way, Marc imagined, that this French lieutenant, this Lucien Chardonne, had responded in the last moments of his life.)

But Fabien did not yet take hold of his Bren light machine gun. Nor did Gaston grab with his laborer’s hands the Colt Government Model 1911 A1 revolver that stayed perched inside the holster harnessed to his left shoulder. Instead, they glanced at each other uncomfortably. They were not absolutely certain that the lieutenant had given them accurate information.

Impatient with the delay, the lieutenant spoke with steely emphasis. He might have been giving them a military order.

“Do it,” he said. “Do it right now.”

Without pausing further to plumb the truth of Lucien Chardonne, Fabien took out his Bren gun and shot him through his heart. The body sank into itself and then collapsed. But the lieutenant’s one blue eye stayed open, staring in glazed detachment upon his murderer.

Quickly thereafter, Fabien shot the two captains who were hanging from the ceiling, semi-conscious and dying. Their bodies buckled, spewing forth blood and intestines.

Then, because he wanted to claim his own part in the killings, Gaston fired his Enfield into the dead bodies of the lieutenant and the two captains.

“We did the Nazis a favor,” Gaston told Marc a week afterward.

Clearly, he relished telling about these executions. His gleaming brown eyes, yellowed teeth, and crooked smiling mouth gave him the look of an ogre that one usually meets in a nightmare or in a Gothic tale. He was a creature from whom life had expunged all the essential emblems of humanness.

Fabien, the chief perpetrator of these crimes, appeared even more monstrous. His grinning contempt of the men he had just killed and the dark shadow enfolding his hulking posture made him appear spectral and menacing. Brusque and predominant, he wanted full credit for the killings. He hurried to echo Gaston’s remark that the execution of their own officers would please the Nazis.

“They’ll be as pleased as hell,” he said. “Those three guys were Jewish.”

“How do you know?” Marc asked him coldly.

“We have our ways of finding out things,” he said. “They were Jews all right—the three of them.”

“I thought we were fighting this war to help the Jews,” Marc said.

“That’s not why I’m in the war,” Fabien said. “It’s not why Gaston’s in it.”

He eyed Marc suspiciously.

Formidable and self-assured, Marc responded with his own penetrating gaze of him.

For a moment, it appeared that they would clash—with their fists perhaps or with the guns they were carrying.

Aware of the tension between them, Gaston intervened.

“You’re in occupied territory now,” Gaston said. “It’s not safe to let people know you’re a Jew-

lover.”

“I’ll take my chances,” Marc said.

These two disgusted him.

From the moment he heard the story, the grim imagery of the three French officers whom Gaston and Fabien had tortured and maimed a week earlier stayed with him. Even now, an hour after hearing it, that imagery coiled about the scene unfolding itself before him. The Spartan imagery of the three French officers whom Gaston and Fabien had executed rose before his seeing as if those lost, captive men were apparitions meant to meld with the here-and-now reality of the two other Frenchmen who were accused of betraying the Resistance.

But he knew these two Frenchmen. Raoul and Benoît had fought bravely on behalf of a free France. For two years, they had put their lives on the line for their country and for their comrades. They were not those unhappy French officers who may have been executed not because they had remained friendly with some Germans, but because they had discovered the identities of the real traitors in their midst. Raoul and Benoît were war-hardened Frenchmen who had won the trust of their commanders and of all the other freedom fighters who belonged to their combat units. Their loyalty to the cause of freedom was a proven thing. The charges that Gaston and Fabien had brought against the two men required an altogether different language for interpreting them. The charge of having transmitted radio messages to the Nazis did warrant both torture and execution. Yet the clues or codes that might validate this new perception of Raoul and Benoît seemed forced and insufficient. Thus far, to his mind at least, the evidence against them anchored itself to coincidence and, probably, to fabrication.

Other men and some women in the Resistance also received and transmitted radio messages involving the allies. They intercepted German military information, as well. Sometimes, they used the same radio transmitters and the same temporary identity codes that Raoul and Benoît had used. They used the names of Thibaut and Sylvain during those weeks when Raoul and Benoît were away, flying combat missions from their air base outside London. Any one of those persons could be the double agent who had told the Nazis about the allies’ planned troop movements in central and northern France. Anyone from that same group of resistance fighters might have revealed the names of the four Frenchmen who had killed seven German officers in Brittany.

He pointed out as much within the first hour that he arrived within the shadowy confines of these crypt vaults. He said at that time that he could vouch for Raoul’s loyalty and his integrity. In combat

missions over Germany and in espionage assignments here in France, they had often risked their lives together. There was nothing about Raoul that could rouse his suspicion or alter his trust of him. Nor would he accuse Benoît of betraying the Resistance. He did not know enough about him. What he knew was all in Benoît's favor. That conviction (derived from Benoît's unflinching courage in combat and his crafty work in French intelligence, which had save the lives of thousands of freedom fighters as well as French Jews), he also pointed out to Gaston and Fabien.

Now he reminded these two sadists of the unsafe path they were treading.

"You're going too far with this," he said, while he peered at the naked and bleeding bodies of Raoul and Benoît, chained as they were on the long hospital table that was being used as a vehicle for their torture.

He paused deliberately, taking once more the measure of Gaston and Fabien—these two rancid Frenchmen who liked to torture and kill men, even if they were innocent. He stared at them directly, grim-faced yet self-controlled.

"You're treating them as if they were Nazis," he said. "These men are not Nazis or even Nazi-lovers. They have risked their lives again and again for France and for our allies."

With hulking stance and angry words, Fabien defended his and Gaston's ongoing torture of the two prisoners.

"The bastards are traitors," he said. "They deserve to die."

Still Marc stayed in control. His voice was level and matter-of-fact.

"You don't have enough proof," he told them. "A double agent *has* infiltrated our group. But he could be any one in our network who has been assigned to our radio communications."

Gaston stepped forward now, his bantam-weight muscularity a blunt threat before the formidable six-foot-two, dark-haired younger man who was observing him with his own wily awareness.

"You're either with us or against us in this thing," Gaston said.

Marc noticed how carefully this belligerent man's big right hand stayed near the Colt revolver that was perched within a shoulder holster.

His own rugged hand was already in contact with the Mauser handgun that kept its place in the pocket of his raincoat.

"I thought we were all in this together," he said.

Then, as if he meant it as a coda to their brief exchange of words or as well-reasoned counsel or as an understated condemnation of their torturing these two men, he spoke other words, as firm and

as reliable as all the words (few though they were) that he had thus far directed to Fabien and Gaston.

“It is not a good thing to kill our own men unless we have sufficient evidence.”

His voice both contemptuous and impatient, Fabien rejected this too-careful regard of men suspected of being traitors.

“We have more than enough evidence,” he said. “We have the confession of Lieutenant Chardonne.”

“You have the words of a man who was willing to say anything, as long as you stopped torturing him,” Marc said. “You have the words of a man who may have met Raoul and Benoit before the war or who may have been told about them by the double agent that you are looking for.”

“A dying man doesn’t lie,” Gaston mumbled. “I’ll take the words of a dying man as truth any day, even if he is a Jew.”

To this remark, which he regarded as obtuse and offensive, Marc gave no reply. Instead, he compelled these two sadists once more to confront their unjust actions.

“You’re not giving these men a fair interrogation,” he said. “Where are the others who could tell you that these men are innocent? Where are Antoine, Didier, and Julien? Where are Yves, Henri, and Emile? Where are all the other men in my squadron?”

“They are busy with more important assignments,” Fabien mumbled. “Anyway, their being here isn’t necessary. We don’t need them to find excuses for saving their friends.”

He saw that, even without sufficient proof of wrongdoing, these torturers were going to declare Raoul and Benoît guilty. He doubted that Lieutenant Chardonne had mentioned Raoul and Benoît in his confession. Now he understood why Gaston and Fabien had summoned him to this scene. They wanted to implicate him in the execution of Raoul and of Benoît. His countrymen would regard his being here as a form of consent to the murders. To many, his being here would be tantamount to an active participation in the killings. But, should he protest the killings, Fabien and Gaston were ready (he was convinced) to treat him as an enemy. His being a Roussillon did not intimidate them. Even national heroes might stumble. Even tough-minded combat pilots might involve themselves with players from the wrong side. Perhaps, if he were to protest the deaths of his friends too vehemently or attempt to rescue them, Gaston and Fabien would kill him and lay the blame on the Nazis or even on Raoul and Benoît.

That he was Jewish as well as French may have been the strongest reason why they had drawn

him to this place of execution. They had killed the lieutenant and the two captains not because they were traitors, but because they were Jewish. Cynical and savage, they might be planning to kill him, too, here in this burial place of old, rotted bones and of the stinking flesh of the recent dead.

No, he did not like Gaston or Fabien. But he would let them play out their version of this scene. He would give them enough rope to hang themselves. He would play out his own scene, as well. He had questions to ask Raoul and Benoît. He had answers to seek that could overturn the charges against them. He had strategies to devise to keep Fabien and Gaston from killing them before he could discover the clues that would save his two comrades.

His instinct told him to rescue his friends immediately. But Gaston had taken his Colt revolver out, ready to kill him if he made the wrong move or if any intruder hurried into the crypt vaults. So he waited, accepting the moment with bitter patience and with a belief that the rigorous punishment about to be inflicted upon Raoul and Benoît would dispel, after all, whatever doubts his realistic sense of things was compelling him to consider.

Pensive and conflicted, he drew nearer to the long hospital tables that held the bruised body of Raoul, his friend of long standing, and the more damaged body of his new friend Benoît. Their captors had not yet broken their arms and their legs. Nor had they held their drowning faces in toilets or lashed the bare flesh of their backs with heavy whips and razors.

But, before he arrived inside the crypt vaults, when the first hours of the interrogation did not yield the necessary words that Gaston and Fabien wanted to hear, they stripped Raoul and Benoît naked and hung them from the heavy wooden beams that spanned the width of the ceiling. They hung each of their captives from his wrists, with heavy weights tied to his legs. Not even the firm shoulders and strong biceps of these athletic men could subdue the agonizing pain that made each of them imagine that his arms were being pulled from their sockets.

Their bodies writhed with the pain that rode in jagged waves through their arms, necks and chests and through their groins and legs. Their quickened breaths heaved upon the air long spates of nearly-suppressed moaning and guttural cries. And, all this while, Fabien and Gaston went on questioning them, encircling their trussed-up athletic bodies as if they belonged to hardened traitors locked in a medieval dungeon.

“Tell us the truth,” Gaston said every time that he hurled his accusations at Raoul or at Benoît. In those moments, the snarling energy of his clipped, low-pitched words struck with billowing intensities the bleak, candle-lit atmosphere of this crypt vault. “Tell us that the two of you led the

Nazis to our people in Brittany.”

Trapped as they were in this first cycle of torture, both Raoul and Benoît continued to protest their innocence. So Fabien and Gaston had explained to Marc, as they drew him into their interrogation of the two suspects.

Now they were going to begin the second and more intense cycle of torture.

They had bound in thick chains the naked bodies of the two men on the long hospital tables. Once they began this new method of torture, they were going to press the chains deep into the flesh of each man as though they were making a tourniquet. Perhaps the jagged cuts or the purple welts that strew their trceries across their young bodies or the red blood spurting out of their arms and chests and legs would break the spirit of their prisoners. Perhaps the welts and bruises and the searing pain and the spurting blood would hurry the two men into an anguished confession of their guilt.

There was no way that Marc could reach for his handgun. Grim-faced and tight-lipped, he watched Gaston begin pressing the chains into Raoul’s arms and legs. He watched, too, while Fabien held his Bren gun steady and, as though he were prepared to confront an enemy, pointed it toward him, from the shadowy surround of the entrance where he now stood.

The pressings of the chains within Raoul’s naked flesh did their work swiftly. Welts and bruises (purple, green, and blue) were already making inroads upon his arms, legs, and groin. Blood, deep-red and profuse, kept spurting in small fountains from his rugged body. The grueling punishment tore from his throat a low moaning and then a wild, jagged howling.

With no show of emotion, Marc watched the pain-twisted face of his friend and listened to his anguished howling cries fall away to a thin and tattered groan.

Now, methodical and abrupt, Gaston brought this latest round of torture to a stop. He was ready to heave upon his prisoner a rat-a-tat momentum of snarling questions.

But Marc interrupted him.

“I’ll question him,” he said as he moved closer to the table on which Raoul lay. “I know him well. If he does not tell me the truth, I’ll know that, too.”

To this assertion of his own leadership here in this gruesome place, both Fabien and Gaston frowned their displeasure. Once again, Gaston’s right hand moved toward the holstered gun held upon his left shoulder. In the same instant, Fabien moved forward with his Bren gun raised ambiguously. Their beady eyes, dark-gray and belligerent, targeted him for more incisive inquiry. Then, pausing inside each other’s glance, they held themselves still. Cautiously, they watched as he

approached his wounded friend.

With matter-of-fact inflections and an unsmiling manner, he began questioning Raoul. He had chosen to maintain a military manner. Yet the language of his steadfast gaze signaled his friend that he would be on his side if he were innocent of the crimes of which Fabien and Gaston were accusing him.

“Did you know Lucien Chardonne?” he asked.

Raoul’s answer surprised him. So, also, did his friend’s uneasy glance, anchored as it was to uncertainty and sorrow.

“Yes, I knew him,” he said. “We went to school together in Paris and in Heidelberg. Before the war, we were the best of friends.”

“What about after the war? Were you still friends?”

“We were,” Raoul explained. His deep voice seemed far away and gravelly, and his words sounded pensive. “Our friendship had nothing to do with politics. How many friendships do?”

“Did you meet Lucien Chardonne in Lucerne?”

“Yes,” he quickly answered. “We did meet, but only by chance. We were there with our girlfriends. We skied and skated and went tobogganing. We ate the best food and danced at a nightclub. We had a good time and forgot all about the war.”

Now Marc asked the most important question of all.

“Is what your accusers are saying true?” he asked. “Did you ever pass information about the war to Lucien Chardonne?”

“Never,” Raoul answered without a pause. “Nor would Lucien have any reason to confess that I did so.”

Raoul grew excited now. He was angry that anyone would believe that Lucien had lied about him.

Marc probed further.

“You can tell me, you know. Tell me if you made a mistake,” he said. “Tell me if you did anything wrong.”

Raoul returned his friend’s steady gaze. He was exhausted and pain-racked from the cycles of torture he had thus far endured. His wrists (Marc noticed) were swollen and may have been broken, wrenched when he was hanging from the ceiling with heavy weights tied to his legs. His senses were still disarranged and reeling from the punishments inflicted upon him. It took him a minute or two

before he found the words that might ease Marc's doubts.

"I am innocent of all their accusations," he whispered. "I have done no wrong. And neither has Benoît."

"Do you know who has done wrong?" Marc asked.

Raoul fell silent. His eyes turned from Marc to observe Gaston hulking nearby and, in the distance, Fabien with his Bren gun pointed in the direction where Marc stood by him.

Hesitant still and non-committal before the menacing presence of his torturers, he chose his words carefully.

"I can't say," he said. "I need to find more clues before I can say for certain."

Marc guessed that his friend did know or suspect at least the identity of the traitor in their Resistance unit. But, in the presence of Fabien and Gaston, he did not want to say the name. They were his torturers. He had rightly guessed that they were in league with the traitor.

Suddenly Fabien and Gaston were surrounding him.

"Your friend Raoul needs the chains again," Gaston said. "Your questions won't accomplish anything."

Wily and determined, Marc quickly devised the scenario he must follow, if he was to save his two friends and save himself.

"You're right," he answered Gaston. "Torture is the only way we'll get the truth out of these two."

Gaston eyed him cautiously. He was pleased that he had convinced him of the guilt that the two prisoners were concealing.

"You are thinking smart," he told him.

An ugly grin took hold of his face momentarily. He was (Marc could see) enjoying the prospect of torturing his prisoner once again, before he killed him. The grin told Marc that Gaston was already contemplating the moment when he and Fabien would turn upon him. The traitor for whom they were working must have ordered them to murder him as well as Raoul and Benoît. Not only was he a Jew. He was also the friend of the two prisoners who would go in search of the traitor and find the reason why he had ordered the murders. Raoul and Benoît must have uncovered a trail that would eventually lead them to the double agent infiltrating their Resistance unit.

Without giving any sign of his hatred and contempt of Gaston and Fabien or his awareness that they were his enemies, Marc willed himself to enter these next moments with an efficient and

convincing show of collaboration.

He addressed his new conciliatory words to Gaston first of all.

“You can go on with your torture of Raoul,” he said. “You should be able to break him within the next hour.”

Gaston grinned again, accepting as a compliment the words that suggested he knew how to play the game of torture. With swift and well-practiced aptitudes, he turned his attention away from Marc and resumed his twisting of the chains that bound Raoul.

Now Marc approached Fabien, who was standing at the entrance to the crypt, having once again returned to his post as a sentry.

“Show me how to work the chains,” he said. “I’ll handle the torture of Benoît, and you can go back to your post.”

To this suggestion, entwined as it was within a militant assertion, Fabien did not at first respond. He stood, adamant and proprietary, by his post. All the while, he was studying him carefully. Then, accepting as authentic this gesture of collaboration that would prove Marc was on their side, he hurried to the table where Benoît was bound in chains. Already, upon the adjoining table, the body of Raoul was writhing with new gradations of torture. His shattered breathing and anguished groans broke away from his body, only to strike feebly against this eerie labyrinth of the dead.

As they approached the table, Benoît stared at both Marc and Fabien. A rigid stillness overtook his young and rugged body. A questioning frown distorted slightly his sandy-blond handsomeness. Though his blue, penetrating eyes held at first both men within his quickened assessment of the scene, his inquiring gaze came to rest upon the ambivalent sight of Marc. Surprised and despairing at the same time, he turned his gaze away from both men. Enchained and apparently betrayed and abandoned by his new comrade, he prepared himself for the torture that was going to kill him.

Marc could feel Benoît’s despair. But there was nothing that he could at this time do to allay it.

Instead, he waited for Fabien to give him directions about the proper way to invoke this torture with chains. To demonstrate how to work the chains that cut into the arms and legs and chests of the prisoner, Fabien would have to place his Bren gun on a nearby medieval stone bench that had been built so that mourners could take a seat there and pray when they visited the crypts inside which their dead were enclosed.

At first, Fabien did not separate himself from the machine gun. He simply led Marc to the bound form of Benoît and described the specific twisting configurations that would bring the most pain to

the prisoner.

“You need to make a tourniquet of the chains,” he said. “Press them deep into the flesh. That should get him talking.”

Marc played dumb. Leaning over Benoît, he fumbled with the chains without creating the tight pressure that would bruise and wrench the flesh of Benoît’s body.

“No, no,” Fabien protested. “You’re not doing it right.”

Then, placing his machine gun on the mourners’ bench, he proceeded to demonstrate the hold upon the chains that would turn them into a cutting weapon.

In an instant, Marc had his pistol in his hand and was pointing it at these two savages who were so eager to torture and kill the innocent.

Startled, both Fabien and Gaston stopped in their tracks.

“Move and I’ll shoot you,” he said.

Fabien as well as Gaston stood motionless at the hospital tables, on which their prisoners lay within the stillness of their own surprise. The torturers waited for Marc to make the next move.

Now Marc became the interrogator.

“For whom are you working?” he asked. “How much did he pay you to kill these men?”

Gaston was the first to protest.

“You’re talking crazy,” he said. “Nobody paid us anything.”

Fabien joined in, blunt and resentful.

“We’re doing what we’ve been trained to do.”

Marc hurried forward with new accusatory questions.

“When did you decide to work for a traitor?” he asked. “What specific day convinced you that the Germans were the winning team that you needed to join?”

To these questions, neither Fabien nor Gaston offered any answers.

Marc had not expected that his questions would yield honest answers or, in fact, any answers at all. If there had been time and if the five or six freedom fighters who had earned his trust had accompanied him here to the crypt vaults, they would have tortured Fabien and Gaston until the two savages revealed the identity of the double agent who had infiltrated their group. But there was no time, and he had come here alone. Besides, Gaston and Fabien were too dangerous to hand over to an organization that might protect them.

He would have to kill them quickly. He was surprised that the thought of killing two unarmed

men in cold blood gave him pause.

Just at that moment, Gaston made things easier for him.

From his place at the table where he had been torturing Raoul, he made a wild move to draw his Colt handgun from his holster. No sooner had he taken hold of it, than Marc fired a bullet into his chest.

The impact from the bullet threw Gaston back against the table. He grimaced and watched his blood spattering across his soiled vest.

“Bastard,” he cried out in a voice suddenly gone thin and tattered. “Lousy bastard. You’ll get your bullet from the Germans. They’ll bury you and your kind.”

Marc fired his handgun again. This time the bullet entered Gaston’s forehead. Blood and tissue and hair exploded out of the back of his head and out of his mouth. His left eyeball popped out of its socket and his nose collapsed, as more blood spattered his vest and shot out of his ears. The body crumpled into itself. For an instant, it leaned back into the long hospital table and then dropped, as if it were sinking in slow motion, upon the stone floor that was already soiled by the blood of all the men he had brought to this place for execution.

In this same moment, Fabien rushed to the bench in which he had placed his machine gun. With a swift, lunging movement, he took hold of the gun and, facing his adversary, fired. The bullet flew past Marc, missing him by a wide margin.

Fabien did not have a chance to fire again.

With split-second accuracy, Marc shot him once and then again and again. The first bullet ripped through his face, scattering the tissue and flesh and bone of his cheeks and nose in a swirl of blood. The second bullet entered his left eye and tore through the back of his head. The third bullet smashed into his heart.

For a fleet second, Fabien’s body was lifted after the impact of each bullet. Then it reeled and buckled and fell backward onto the mourners’ bench.

With military precision, Marc now hurried into the actions that would bring Raoul, Benoît, and him away from this place of execution. As swift as he was adept, he freed them from their chains and helped them to dress in the laborers’ clothes that had served as part of their disguise when they entered Montmartre. Battered by the hours of torture, they had difficulty lifting their arms to receive the sleeves of their shirts and jackets. It was even more difficult for them to place their legs within their trousers.

Marc encouraged them.

“We’re almost finished with this thing,” he said. “But we have to move fast. We have to get away from here as soon as we can.”

His friends looked at him without at first speaking. Their awareness of the scene that was unfolding around them (they were to tell him later) seemed disarranged. Their faculties for quick-witted perceiving were as battered as their bodies. Yet they kept resisting the pain roused by their struggling gait and by Benoît’s broken arm. That he had rescued them so unexpectedly and only an hour before their torturers were going to kill them was both astonishing and mind-boggling.

“Don’t worry about us,” Raoul said, tough-willed and self-pitiless. “We’ll keep up with you.”

In silence thereafter, while Marc assisted his wounded friends, the three of them stumbled away from the crypt vaults and away from the dead bodies of Fabien and Gaston. Raoul and Benoît were prepared to fight their way into an escape. They had armed themselves with Fabien’s Bren gun and with Gaston’s Colt revolver. Only when they were making their slow and painful way to the long, narrow passage that would bring them to the secluded alley from which Marc had entered the basilica did Benoît permit himself to speak.

“If any Nazis stop us,” he said in a jagged, whispering voice furling into itself, “I’m ready to shoot them.”

“So am I,” said Raoul, in a voice no less halting and pain-racked. “It will be a pleasure.”

Marc had a different plan.

“We won’t shoot unless we have to,” he said. “We’re better off if we don’t leave any traces of where we are headed.”

His two friends nodded in agreement. Clearly, in this matter of their escape from the crypt vaults and their securing safe passage out of Montmartre, they regarded Marc as their leader. Their journey to a farmhouse in Sancerre, a hilltop town in central France, would be fraught with new dangers.

They knew the plan that Marc wanted them to follow. Each of them was carrying false identity papers and ration cards. Beneath his raincoat, Marc was still wearing the uniform of a German major. That he spoke fluent German, had traveled widely in Germany before the war, and was carrying a German handgun validated the persona that on this journey he would inhabit. Benoît and Raoul wore the clothes of Belgian laborers. Born and raised in the French section of Belgium, they spoke with conviction the specific inflections of that region.

Under cover of a rain-swept August night, they made their way in the Mercedes-Benz. Dark

scattering streets, looking haunted because they were empty, rose up to meet the flare of their headlights. In the proximate distance, the booms and volleys and roused flashes of night bombing were overtaking Paris. But never did the allies' bomber aircraft fly above the streets of Montmartre or above the long, rural roads on which they were traveling.

Their luck also stayed with them through every checkpoint where German officers or patrolmen stopped them. That Marc was disguised as a major exempted him from the curfew imposed upon civilians. Each time the three of them were stopped, he explained that, on a week's leave from the war, he was driving his two friends to their homes in Belgium. They were recovering from injuries they had received when British aircraft strafed a Paris hospital in which they were repairing the master furnace.

The three of them were not going to Belgium, though. They were headed for a farmhouse in Sancerre. That town had become a regional command center for the French Resistance. Within the expansive vineyards of the area, a woman who was Raoul's and Benoît's friend was hiding from the men who wanted to kill her. Among those men were more of the double agent's henchmen, who went in search of her right after he had devised the arrest of Raoul and Benoît.

Marc was eager to arrive at the farmhouse in Sancerre. There, Raoul, Benoît, and he would be out of harm's way temporarily. Within that tenuous safety, they would conceal themselves until the night that their squadron sent a Lockheed Hudson or a British Beaufighter to bring them back to London. In Sancerre, he might dispel his lingering uncertainty about Raoul and Benoît. He might also discover from them or from a woman who was their trusted friend the clues that could lead him to the double agent.