

Chapter One

It was spring, and the Germans were singing. They sang every evening in the tavern next to the old hotel they had commandeered as their headquarters, filling the cobblestone streets of Champs de Blé with their Nazi marching music.

To an outsider they would have seemed incongruous there, black-jacketed soldiers goose-stepping past the shrine of the Virgin Mary in the village square, or swooping into the tavern like a flock of crows, but the French villagers were used to them. Whenever the Nazis appeared, the locals vanished. Outside the tavern was a row of military motorcycles. Beyond them, the streets were empty.

On the other side of the square, in the big house which had once belonged to her father, Mireille Orlande de Jouarre knelt on the plank floor of the kitchen with a scrub brush and a bucket of water. Through the open window wafted the sweet fragrance of the flower fields.

Champs de Blé, like the nearby city of Grasse, existed by providing flowers for the perfume industry. In the days before the first spring harvest, the scent of jasmine and lavender infused the air with an almost mystical sweetness.

Mireille closed her eyes, the scrub brush poised and dripping above the wood floor. The scent brought back her childhood, when life was warm and safe and full of wonder. She remembered the dashing Legionnaire who was her father, showering her with beads from Morocco or sweets from Tunisia while telling her stories of the exotic, far-off lands he'd visited; and she remembered her mother, beautifully elegant even in her

threadbare clothes from before the war, comforting her gangling, tow-headed daughter after a merciless teasing.

“*Chou-chou*, you will be a lovely woman one day,” she said in her clear, bell-like voice. “To be tall is a gift, not a curse.”

“But the other girls make fun of me,” Mireille wailed. “I’m so tall and skinny, and my hair’s so white . . .” She hung her head. “They call me ‘Dandelion.’”

“Shhh.” She dried the child’s tear-stained face and stroked her long blonde hair. “Only a fool would listen to the opinion of a gaggle of schoolgirls. Are you a fool?”

Mireille shook her head emphatically.

“Then you are not a dandelion, either.”

She remembered her mother’s laughter. The jasmine had been in bloom then, too, that day when she was eleven years old.

That had been only five years ago, Mireille thought. Such long years. She felt the cold, dirty water from the scrub brush drip between her fingers.

So much had happened in those five years. Since the German soldiers began to sing their songs in the tavern across from the statue of the Virgin, Mireille’s life had changed irrevocably. Everything of any importance to her had vanished somewhere in the rhythm of that music.

First her mother, who had never possessed a hardy constitution, simply wasted away under the yoke of the Nazi occupation. After she died, Mireille’s father remarried quickly in order to provide a new mother for his only child. Scheduled to rejoin his regiment within a week, Capitaine de Jouarre did not have time to be overly particular about his bride-to-be, and rashly chose a shrewish, vulgar woman whose greatest skill lay

in her ability to lie convincingly. Three months after he left, the Capitaine was killed in action. Mireille's stepmother, Giselle, had taken other men to her bed almost as soon as she heard the news. Her favorite seemed to be old Valois, the tavern owner. He was by far the ugliest of her lovers, but Giselle's practical-minded ambition was not for romance. Armand Valois, to her reckoning, seemed to be the only man in Champs de Blé who knew on which side his bread was buttered.

He supplied liquor by the case to the German officers, often going to great lengths to acquire products from their native land. He also brought them women when requested and provided the use of the tavern's back room for their pleasure, from which he earned a good profit. Sometimes, when the girls were unwilling or the soldiers too demanding, the whole village could hear the screams behind the singing in the tavern, but no one spoke of them.

Valois grew rich. Giselle wasted no time after being notified of her new husband's death. She married the Nazi collaborator as soon as she had officially inherited Capitaine de Jouarre's estate, and Valois moved from his rooms above the tavern into the large old house on the town square. It was there that he began to notice Mireille.

The girl had fulfilled her mother's prophecy. Mireille grew quickly into a beauty. Her platinum hair, once her bane, now spilled over her shoulders in a glowing cascade. Her bottle-green eyes, always startling, now glowed with a soft fire against her white skin. By thirteen, her breasts had begun to bud; at fourteen, her lanky five-foot-ten-inch

stick figure had filled out with sensuous curves. Even in her prim blue school uniform, it was apparent that Mireille de Jouarre was already a woman.

She first noticed the change in the way Valois looked at her during an ordinary dinner at home. As usual, he had been drinking heavily, but this evening he was staring at her with the vacant curiosity of a beast, his mouth slack as he lazily chewed a piece of bread. Mireille lowered her eyes and tried to slink as far beneath the table as possible, but Valois only continued to stare.

“What are you gawking at?” Giselle shrieked, slapping his hand with the back of her fork.

He swatted her away like a fly. “Who are you fucking?” he blurted at Mireille. A soggy crumb spewed out of his mouth and plastered itself on his chin. “I asked you a question, girl.”

Giselle laughed nervously. Her husband rose. He didn’t bother to pull his chair away from the table, and the dishes clattered. Wine spilled onto the linen cloth.

Mireille’s fingers gripped the table edge until they turned white. She felt her breath coming in short, hissing bursts. Inside her uniform, her new breasts trembled and her legs began to twitch in fear.

“Don’t put on your haughty airs with me,” Valois roared.

“Armand, please,” Giselle pleaded. “She’s only a child.”

He ignored her, shouting directly at Mireille. “It’s that gypsy that hangs around here, isn’t it?”

“Don’t be silly,” Giselle piped. “Stefan helps with the errands. He’s been working here for years.”

Valois' head swiveled to face his wife in accusation.

"Besides," Giselle went on, her voice beginning to crack, "he's a cripple."

"I'm talking to her, not you!" Valois shouted. He hoisted the wine bottle to his lips and drained its contents. "A cripple," he muttered. "I'll bet he's not a cripple where it counts."

"Armand—"

"Shut up, slut!" He swung the bottle at her.

Giselle gave a little gasp of indignation and ran upstairs. Valois followed her, staggering and cursing. There were shouts, a hard crack or two, a few loud sobs, and then the rhythmic creaking of bedsprings and Giselle's moans of pleasure from behind the open bedroom door.

Mireille sighed with relief. Valois had been distracted, and he would forget the incident by tomorrow. But how long would it take for him to look at his stepdaughter that way again, dim and glassy-eyed, like an animal smelling sex?

Apparently Giselle shared her worry. The next day when Mireille returned from school, her stepmother was waiting for her with a pair of scissors.

"Sit down," she ordered.

Before Mireille could protest, Giselle was hacking off her hair near the roots.

"Giselle," she squealed. "Please . . ."

"I'll not have you flaunting yourself in front of my husband!" She yanked at the blonde tresses, attacking them with the scissors. "Things are going to be different from now on."

When she was done, she handed the girl a broom. "Here. Your parents may have turned you into a spoiled, lazy girl, but I'll put you right." She came down a few minutes later with Mireille's old party dresses draped over her arm. "It's no wonder men look at you," she grumbled. "Clothes like a duchess. Take that off." Mireille looked down at her school uniform. "Now." Giselle wiggled her fingers impatiently.

"But what will I wear to school?" Mireille asked.

"You won't be going to school anymore. Girls don't need it. I never went a day in my life, myself," she said proudly as she pulled a shapeless black rag from a hook behind the kitchen door. "Put this on."

Then she stepped outside with Mireille's lace and silk dresses, her blouses of hand-stitched linen, the flowing robes her father had brought her from the corners of the world, and set fire to them in the back yard.

When she came back, clapping the soot off her hands, she stopped in the doorway to look the girl over. The old black dress hung on Mireille's shoulders like a shroud, and smelled of someone else's sweat.

"That's better," Giselle snapped and turned away. "By the way, you won't be having dinner with us anymore, either."

Stefan, the gypsy errand boy, was dismissed, and seemed to disappear entirely from Champs de Blé. After two years, he still hadn't returned.

In those two years, nothing had changed much. Mireille's hair had grown in. She wore it pulled back like a widow's. She was thinner than she had been. And the black dress was two years older.

The Nazis' singing in the tavern across the way grew louder. "Stop it!" she shouted, dropping the scrub brush. She clapped her hands over her ears. Dirty water ran down her face.

But she could still hear the music.

Scrambling to her feet, she slammed the window closed with a crash. As she did, her hand brushed against a water glass filled with lavender on the sill. It went flying above the sink, exploded on the thin porcelain edge, and fell in a shower of glass at her feet.

"Oh, *merde*," she groaned, slapping the edge of the sink.

She felt the pain a moment later, when she saw the gush of blood. A triangular wedge of glass more than two inches wide was sticking out of her palm.

She removed the glass and ran her hand under the sink pump, flooding the basin with blood. The towel she used to staunch the flow soaked through within seconds. Mireille was no stranger to household injuries and knew the cut was not serious, but she needed more than a towel for the bleeding.

Fortunately, Valois was well stocked with German military field bandages, huge antiseptic pads the size and shape of chalkboard erasers. Clutching the blood-soaked towel, Mireille ran to the bathroom up the stairs and tied on one of the bandages. She was pulling the knot taut with her teeth when she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror.

She stared at her reflection for a moment, as if she'd forgotten what her own face looked like. Dirt ran in streaks down her cheeks. The hollows beneath her eyes were deep and purple-tinged. Greasy strands of white hair spilled out from under the rag she wore on her head.

“What have they done to me?” she whispered. Her vision blurred with tears.

She was sixteen years old.

After she stopped the bleeding in her palm, she headed back to the kitchen to clean up the broken glass. On the way, she stopped in her bedroom for a glove that might protect her injured hand while she finished her chores.

She didn't remember where she'd put them, the thin cotton gloves that she'd worn to church back when Giselle had permitted Mireille to attend. Now, of course, it wouldn't do for the girl to be seen in her threadbare black dress, her one garment.

She looked everywhere for the gloves without success but found, at the back of the bottom bureau drawer, a small silver-framed photograph of herself as a baby with her parents. Her father was in uniform, her mother dressed in rustling stiff taffeta and wearing the set of glittering diamonds that had been passed down through her family for three hundred years.

Giselle wears those diamonds now, she thought. Only they don't look like diamonds anymore.

Mireille had kept the picture hidden from Giselle and Valois. It was the last shred of herself she had left. She traced the outlines of the two beloved faces with her finger, as if the contact could somehow pass through time and death and bring them back.

Pressing the photograph to her chest, Mireille crawled to her narrow bed and wept for the lost years until she slept.

Footsteps woke her. It was full dark outside, starless and moonless. The singing from the tavern had stopped.

Mireille sat up abruptly in bed. The silver-framed photograph of her parents clattered onto the floor.

Armand Valois picked it up and studied it.

He was drunk. He weaved unsteadily in the doorway, his rank breath filling the room. "Kitchen's a bloody mess."

Mireille straightened her dress hurriedly and stood up. "I'll tend to it."

Without looking at her, he shoved her back onto the bed. "You're not going anywhere."

"Giselle?" She had meant to cry for help, but her voice came out no louder than a squeak.

Valois looked at her then and smiled, a gap-toothed grin that made her shiver. "She's out." He dropped the photograph. His heel broke the glass as he stepped on it on his way toward Mireille.

"Get away . . . Get away from me," she said, feeling the heat rising in her cheeks.

“Don’t be afraid, princess.” Spittle sprayed from between the brown stubs of his teeth. “I won’t make you do anything you haven’t done plenty of times before.”

“Please . . .” She heard the fear in her own voice. “Let me get you some dinner.”

“I’ve been watching you grow up, princess.”

“Some coffee . . .”

“Giselle likes to keep you ugly. But you’re not ugly, are you, blondie?” He reached for the tattered scarf around her head and pulled it off. She could smell his odor. “Not with your clothes off.” He cupped his hand over her breast.

Panicking, she elbowed him on the side of his head and slid off the bed. Valois bellowed and came lurching after her, but he was too drunk to maintain his balance. He thudded in a heap on the far side of the room.

Mireille ran for the doorway and flew down the stairs to the front door. *God, get me out of here*, she prayed fervently as she pulled at the old-fashioned press handle.

It wouldn’t give. She tried again, propping her foot against the door frame, until she heard Valois’ laughter from the top of the stairs.

A big iron key dangled from his thumb. “Ready for Daddy?” he asked, grinning.

She sprinted for the back door. Behind her, Valois was thundering down the stairs three at a time.

Please fall, she begged silently as she threw herself into the now darkened kitchen and felt the first stab of pain on her bare feet.

She had forgotten about the broken glass. Now, with a shriek, she fell backward on top of it with the full force of her body. She heard it crack against the muscles of her

back, felt the sharp slivers pierce her arms and legs. Then the light came on in a blinding flash and Valois stood over her, panting with the exertion of the chase.

“I’m hurt,” she said, trying to get upright.

Valois bent down, extending both arms toward her. But when she reached for them, he clasped his hands tight around her wrists and forced her down again onto the broken glass. She screamed.

She kept screaming as he pulled up her dress roughly, then unbuttoned his own filthy trousers. She screamed until Valois drew back his fleshy hand and slapped her across her mouth, again and again, until she could taste her own blood.

“Snotty bitch!” he grunted. “I’ll show you what I think of you and your high-handed ways.” Using the hand he’d struck her with, he spread her legs.

In that same moment, seized with fear, Mireille spotted a large triangular wedge of glass twinkling on the edge of the sink above her. It was the same piece that she had cut her hand on earlier. Dried blood still darkened the tip.

Quickly, as Valois tried to lower himself onto her, she thrust her arm upward. The big military bandage on her hand was bulky, and she had to take care not to knock the glimmering shard off its narrow perch, but Mireille somehow managed to snatch the glass wedge with her fingertips and anchor the broad side into the thick bandage.

Now, she told herself. Don’t think about it. Do it now.

While Valois struggled to enter her, she lowered the shard to the level of his jaw, then jammed it up into his throat.

His eyes popped open in surprise. A hiss escaped from his neck, while his tongue seemed to grow inside his mouth. His big hands raised up into the air and hesitated,

trembling, for a moment above Mireille. He still had the strength, she knew, to kill her. And he would.

Mireille squeezed her eyes shut and, with a sob, forced the glass across the width of Valois' throat. He convulsed. A spray of red shot into her face.

Choking, tasting his salty, warm blood mixed with her own, she rolled his lifeless body off her, then stood up slowly, shaking with cold terror.

She backed up through the scattered broken glass to the door and opened it. Outside, the lavender fields were soughing in the darkness. Their scent was thick and sweet.

Dreamily, feeling as if she were walking through molasses, Mireille noticed that she was still clutching the piece of broken glass she had used to kill her stepfather. With an effort she opened her hand and it tumbled to the floor.

“God help me,” she whispered, and went out.