

The Hedgerows of June

(Free Preview)

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Chapter 1

France. Late June 1944

Chris Weymouth sat in a small French café and listened to the two Nazi soldiers at the table not more than ten feet away. With soft prayer-like voices they talked about going home, eyes cast downward, hands folded in front of them. Chris thought they might be deserters or maybe they weren't Nazis at all. Maybe they were captured Russians or other unlucky Europeans forced to fight for the Germans. But they spoke the German vernacular of city schoolboys, probably Berlin. No, they were Nazis all right, definitely Germans, and no matter why they were in that café at that moment their presence gave Chris an ominous chill.

A single streak of afternoon sunlight came through the front window and landed across an empty table. The room had the overhanging scent of old wine and baked bread. Chris watched the proprietor go about his duties, arranging the half dozen tables, relocating the mismatched chairs, and gently sweeping up the wooden floor. The man wore an apron, tattered with age, but surprisingly clean. Two opened bottles of wine, their corks resting at opposing angles, sat on the countertop.

Chris worried about the time. Although he hadn't checked his watch he knew it had to be close to 2:00. The Resistance operative was due any minute. A face-to-face meeting came with incalculable danger, something no one ever did, but the two German soldiers made this encounter closer to suicide. For the fifth time that day he thought about the accuracy of his orders, but he had checked the code too many times for any of it to be a mistake, at least not on his end.

Something had to be done.

The sound of his coins hitting the table and the wave of his hand caught the proprietor's attention. "Philippe, good-bye, my friend," he said in French. The two soldiers glanced up and then looked away, avoiding eye contact.

Outside, bright sunshine reflected off the grey stone buildings. Except for the sound of a sparrow calling from the rooftops the street had a thoughtful serenity. A nun came out of the narrow passageway that separated the café from the adjacent church. She walked with a quick,

young gait, her head down. The crucifix she wore at her side swayed across her hip like a pendulum.

“Sister,” Chris said, again in French.

“Today is a day for rainbows,” she said. Her French had an American accent; he pinpointed her enunciation of “rainbows” to be Philadelphian. The sound delighted him. What she said surprised him.

He regained his composure. “Yes, but will it rain?” It was code,, silly, but necessary. Neither one looked at the other. Chris waited.

After a momentary pause she said, this time in American English “Around the corner there’s an alley. I’ll be there in five minutes. Please meet me.”

She walked away before Chris had a chance to respond. He looked inside the café. The two Nazis hadn’t moved. Obviously ignorant to what just happened out on the street.

The nun said around the corner, but which corner? He had lived in this village for the past six years. He thought he knew every passageway and every hiding place, but he couldn’t remember an alley around the corner. Without waiting to catch his balance he headed off to his left and around the other side of the church. No alley, he had to go back. Chris choked on a deep breath and looked toward heaven.

“Damn it!”

Across the street and behind the houses he found what he thought could be the alley. He moved quietly into the darkness. The fecund smell of standing water and rotting refuse made him hide his face in the crook of his elbow.

“Christopher Weymouth?” The nun’s voice came from the depth of the shadows.

“Sister?” Chris watched her face appear in a dim ray of light. It gave her smooth complexion a disturbing paleness that contrasted against the black and white of her habit. He slipped easily into his native English. “I am at an obvious disadvantage. You know my name, but I don’t know yours.”

“My name isn’t important, but if you must know, I’m Sister Mary
.”

She held out her hand, and Chris shook it the way he would shake the hand of any new acquaintance, but he tried to see if there was any indication of lies and intrigue in her face or eyes.

“Sister Mary,” Chris used her name in an effort to confirm the acquaintance. “Tell me, what could possibly be so important that we would take this kind of risk?” The wretched smell in the alley intensified. He had to breathe through the fabric of his sleeve.

“I don’t know any more than you do. I’ve been asked to contact you and tell you that you are scheduled to leave.” She turned her head toward the street and watched a couple walk into a nearby building. After they were out of sight, she faced him again. “I’m sorry about the smell. It was the only place I could think of after I saw those two in the café.”

“Maybe that was for the best,” Chris said. “But I still don’t understand. I knew I’d be leaving soon. The invasion may not come here, but there will be no reason for me to stay if the Allies can break through.”

“Indeed!” Sister Mary sounded surprised. “You know about the progress of the invasion?”

“Well enough. I can get coded messages on my receiver, but I can’t transmit. The German command is too close. They’d have me” he stopped and looked at the nun standing in front him. Her youthful face, beautiful in the dim light, her accent, comforting and safe, could be a deception and he had fallen into the trap of complacency.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to be impolite,” she said. “I’ve been told who you are and why you’re the right person for this mission. You must prepare to leave. Go back to your apartment and destroy everything. Don’t leave a trace.”

“I know how to”

“Hush, please. I must tell you this without any mistakes. Do you know the small farm house just outside of town?” She moved in closer. “I’m talking about the one with that the old front porch.” Her chin rose toward his.

“You mean the one made of wood not stone?”

She looked directly into his eyes. “Yes, it isn’t made of stone.”

“I know the place. The wood holding that porch up is rotting from neglect. I’m surprised it’s still standing. It’s about two kilometers east of here on the main road leaving town and heading into the bocage. An old farmer owns it. I can’t think of his name. We’ve never met.”

“His name is Jean-Claire. His son was a French hero. He will be missed.” She touched her crucifix without saying anything. “Be there tomorrow morning, but first make sure you go back and destroy

everything. You can't leave a trace. The Germans might be desperate and are likely to do anything."

Chris remembered an incident, about three years ago, involving a French hero, something he did not want to remember. He tried to convince himself her reference to a hero was only a coincidence. "Sister," he said, shaking off the memory, "this could have been sent to me through code. I don't understand."

"I don't either. I'm just doing as I've been told."

"Where will you be? You're an American, aren't you?"

"I'm Catholic. I've got no other allegiance but to God and justice. Please go and may His love be with you." Once she made it to the street a ray of sun reflected off the stark white sections of her habit.

She walked back to the confines of the church. The bright sunshine made her squint. Its powerful rays scorched her face. Her habit lay heavy on her sweltering body. But what she thought about was his eyes. Christopher Weymouth had the most remarkable eyes. Dark, closer to black, surrounded by a milky white so unnatural, so exciting, she felt her breath skip every time she inhaled.

Like the Devil incarnate, she mused.

She reached for the church door, tried to laugh, to shrug off the vision, but her breath caught in her throat once again. Her eyes squeezed out a single tear. She dabbed it away with the back of her wrist.

Inside the church the air was motionless, but cooler. A faint echo persisted even after the slam of the door disappeared. Mary dipped the tips of her fingers in the holy water, knelt, made the sign of the cross, then walked down the aisle and sat in the middle of the second pew. She took one look toward the stained glass window and the light splintering into shards of orange and red before she lowered her head to think about the man she'd just met. She knew she shouldn't be thinking like this, about him, about the excited feeling she couldn't control raging inside of her. The crucifix at her side guided her. A candle flickered in the shadows.

Sliding to her knees she blessed herself again. With her eyes closed she brought her hands together. She began to pray.

"Ave Maria gratia plena"

She couldn't keep Christopher's image out of her mind. The memory of those remarkable eyes thrilled her even while she prayed.

"Benedicta tu in mulieribus"

She had to get the sound of his voice out of her mind.

“Sancta Maria, Mater Dei”

How long must she keep up this masquerade? How much longer could she pretend to be this nun, to be Sister Mary?

“Ora pro nobis peccatoribus, nunc, et in hora mortis nostrae. Amen.”

She blessed herself once more and opened her eyes. A woman sat alone in a pew near the altar. Too far away to hear, but close enough to cause concern. Along the wall to her left were the dark curtains of the confessionals. Mary thought about the sins absolved in the darkness.

The door sent its echo through the church.

Father Augustine sat down, two pews in front of her, but a little closer to the aisle. The man she had trusted more than any other person in the world had grown old. His body had become frail, but his mind and courage had endured the horrors of war.

He rested his hands on his knees. His long, pale fingers contrasted against the crisp fabric of his black pants.

“You met him then.”

Father Augustine’s voice startled her. She fidgeted, tried to find a comfortable position for her aching knees.

“Yes.”

“What did you think of my friend?”

“He’s handsome.” She quickly added, “I think he’s trustworthy.”

“Yes, he is.”

Mary knew Father Augustine didn’t approve of her meeting with Christopher. She resisted the urge to explain. He wouldn’t expect an explanation. The pain in her knees got worse.

“I had to see him,” she said.

Father Augustine dried his palms on his pants. “I had an unexpected visitor today. Someone I can’t tell you about because, well, you understand.”

“Yes. What happened?”

The woman sitting near the altar stood and walked up the aisle toward the door. Mary pretended to be involved in prayer. Father Augustine remained quiet until the echo of the door had faded.

“He had some bad news.”

Mary became alert. “What?”

“He told me the Germans, specifically Mueller, know about our little one, Henri.”

“What do they know? Mueller won’t come here, will he?”

“He never has before, but I don’t know. This is different.” Father Augustine folded his hands and rested them in his lap.

Mary waited. The church’s faint echo continued.

“With the invasion and his orders to leave,” Father Augustine said, “I don’t know what Mueller will do. I don’t know if he’ll come here or not. I hope not.”

“Does he know about the other children?”

“I don’t know. I pray for the twins. I pray for Joseph.”

“Yes, I know, Father.”

Closing her eyes and tightening her hands together, she whispered a quick prayer. She fought the constricting knot in her stomach, found her strength and controlled her shame. She knew she had to be Sister Mary until Henri and the others were safe. She opened her eyes.

“There’s no reason for him to come here,” she said, more to convince herself than Father Augustine. “We’ve been very careful. There would be no reason for him to put it together that these kids are the kids he’s trying to find.” She closed her eyes again. A vision of the confessionals made her open them. “I’ll leave tomorrow with the children as planned. They will appear to be just another set of orphans. More victims of this war.”

“Good.” Father Augustine rubbed his brow with the back of his left hand, a gesture she knew too well. His voice lacked conviction. “But I’m not sure our ruse will work forever. I hope the Germans leave before you do. That way you don’t have to confront them.”

“Yes, and I hope Christopher meets me at Jean-Claire’s.”

The pain in Mary’s knees had become excruciating.

“I have not heard your confession,” Father Augustine said.

“No. Before I leave.” Mary didn’t argue; she knew he’d insist. “Where are the children?”

“In the rectory.” Father Augustine’s mood had turned cheerful with the mention of the children. “They’re tired, but they’ve been asking for you. They’ll be so happy to see you.”

Mary closed her eyes. “I’ll meet you there, then.” She heard him pull himself to his feet and walk away. She made the sign of the cross.

“Pater Noster, qui es in caelis”

Chris watched her disappear into the church. He thought about the insanity of their meeting. Nothing had happened that couldn’t have been

done through a coded message, a transmission of unintelligible words that he could've deciphered without taking this risk. Unless, of course, she wanted to meet him, or had to meet him, face-to-face. But why?

When he thought he had waited long enough, he walked back into the light of day and away from the disgusting smell in the alley. The bitter taste that stench had caused in back of his mouth disappeared. The sun warmed his face. Pigeons cooed and fluttered into flight all around him and although the fresh air smelled sweet, he found his thoughts possessed by this nun he had not noticed until that day.

The paleness of her complexion made him think she probably didn't leave the comfort of the cloister very often. It felt wrong she would've been asked to do such a dangerous task. Yet she mentioned a mission. Could she be part of a mission? If so, what could possibly be so important?

Deep in thought, at times perplexed, he spent most of the afternoon walking through the French village where he had lived since the beginning of the war. Shadows had covered the streets by the time he got home to the small cabaret owned by his very dear friend, Amélie. A crowd had formed in the street. A German truck had been parked near the building's entrance.

"Pardon, what's going on?" he asked.

The woman next to him held a tense hand over her mouth. "Amélie," she said, her French soft with tears, "they say she is a spy."

"Mueller," Chris said under his breath like he had muttered an obscenity. He watched Colonel Mueller and two of his thugs drag Amélie into the street. Her tangled hair fell across her face and into her deep blue eyes. She lifted her defiant chin as she studied the crowd and the faces of those who stood with nothing to say and without the power to help.

"Who owns the radio?" Mueller spoke with a rough slur, so very different from the soft tones of the soldiers back in the café. His thin, muscular body threw an elongated shadow into the crowd. A layer of sweat covered his handsome, clean-shaven face.

Chris knew Colonel Mueller well. He had spent the past four years gaining this man's confidence. He had fed him information just true enough to make him believe it and just false enough to produce bad decisions at the highest level of German command. Chris never mentioned how he got the information and Mueller never asked.

Most of the time Chris received information from operatives who came to the cabaret. They'd play a tedious and dangerous game of verbal codes and gestures. He rarely used the radio and he never discussed it with anyone. Mueller always acted pleased to get the information and thankful for the special favors and rewards it brought from the German High Command. Chris had never imagined Amélie would ever take responsibility for any of it. He should have thrown the radio out a long time ago.

Chris was about to step forward, but he felt a soft hand on his shoulder. He turned, for just a moment, and saw a man with a slight quiver in his full red lips. The man shook his head briefly, silently. Chris knew to stand back.

“Who owns this radio?” Colonel Mueller repeated.

The afternoon had started to fade. Only a sliver of the sun's rays hit the tops of the buildings. The air felt cold, foreshadowing something dreadful, deadly. Chris couldn't just watch Amélie die. He needed to take action.

Mueller had always said he owed Chris a favor. Chris knew the risk, but he had no alternative. Now was the time to ask. Chris stepped forward and pointed a finger at the colonel.

“Amélie, give this man what he wants.” His finger still pointed at Mueller, but he looked at her.

“I'm sorry,” she said in French, “but I can't. I don't know anything.”

“Landric, how do you think this is going to end?” Chris used his best German. “Do you really think you will gain anything by torturing this woman?”

Mueller took a step toward him, “Ah, my friend, do you really think you're going to save anybody today?” He took the gun from his holster and held his finger on the trigger, the barrel aimed into the sky.

“Do you really think you're going to win the war today?” Chris's sudden outburst caused a quick murmur through the crowd.

Women turned their backs to the action. They held onto the arms of their men standing next to them. The men looked at Chris with unspoken pity. They patted their women's hands and gently shook their heads. Chris wanted to reach out to them, but he couldn't tell if they feared for his life or their own. They stood in their ragged, dirty clothes and accepted what they had lived with for much too long.

“You are an idealist,” Mueller shrugged his shoulders. “You still think human life has value.” He pointed at faces in the crowd. “What you fail to understand is that it has value only as long as it serves the Reich.” Mueller looked at Amélie. Her torn, red cotton dress fluttered in the cold summer breeze. He turned his head back toward Chris. “You’ve served me well these past few years.”

“Then return the favor.” Chris lowered his voice. “I’m not as idealistic as you might think, but I do know a bad idea when I see it.”

Colonel Mueller leveled the gun at Chris’s face. His uniform had been torn open; the jacket blew back exposing his strong chest and abdomen. “Do you see anyone suffering in this town? That place you like to go to for wine has never experienced an empty wine cellar under German occupation. You’ve been able to play your piano in this cabaret without anyone stopping you. Now you stand there and tell me I’m guilty of a bad idea?”

“Landric, I’m sorry. I wanted to”

“You wanted to what?”

Mueller turned and aimed the gun at Amélie’s head.

“Chris,” Amélie said, her French trembling. “I know you are a good man.”

“Landric! She’s not important.”

Mueller lowered his weapon. He didn’t look at Chris when he spoke. “Yes, she is. Someone has been sending information to the enemy. They know too much. I received orders to find the culprit and to bring swift and immediate justice.” Mueller looked at Chris. “Who else could it be? You, perhaps? I don’t think so. Like I said, you’ve served me well.”

Chris took a step in Amélie’s direction. He raised his hands. Tears formed in his eyes. “Amélie, I’m sorry, please forgive me. I never meant to hurt you.”

Mueller turned the gun back toward Chris. “You? I thought you were just some deserter, playing a piano at some forgotten dump.” Mueller held the gun with both hands, aimed directly at Chris’s head. “But then again”

He turned back toward Amélie, took a wide stance and aimed. The gun went off, the gunshot echoed down the corridor of the street. Amélie fell backward, her dress rising up across her knees. She lay dead; her eyes open in astonishment.

“Be careful,” Mueller said to Chris who stood staring at the corpse. “I have nothing to lose if I kill you. Be happy I owed you this one. Next time I won’t hesitate.”

And neither will I, Chris thought, neither will I. Chris stood in the street and looked at the woman he had called his friend, worked with for the past six years, not just as a piano player, but in their struggle against the Fascists. He could never allow himself to love her, especially when he knew some day he’d have to leave her behind, but for the first time since his father had died, he had to fight to hold back his tears.

Colonel Landric Mueller ordered his men to load the body and Chris’s radio on the truck. He walked away holding his gun to his side, his German boots kicking up a soft powder of dust in the afternoon shade.

The crowd silently dispersed, but Chris couldn’t move. He looked around for the man with the full red lips. He heard, again, the gunshot that killed Amélie and he clenched his fists, but he swallowed the anger and hatred he had for Landric Mueller. He wanted to feel his fingers dig into that Nazi’s throat. He wanted to watch the life slowly bleed out of him like air escaping from a punctured inner tube.

After the crowd disappeared he found the strength to grimly walk to his second-floor room above the cabaret. The day would come when Amélie’s death would be avenged.

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