JACKDAWS

KEN FOLLETT

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DUTTON

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THE FIRST DAY

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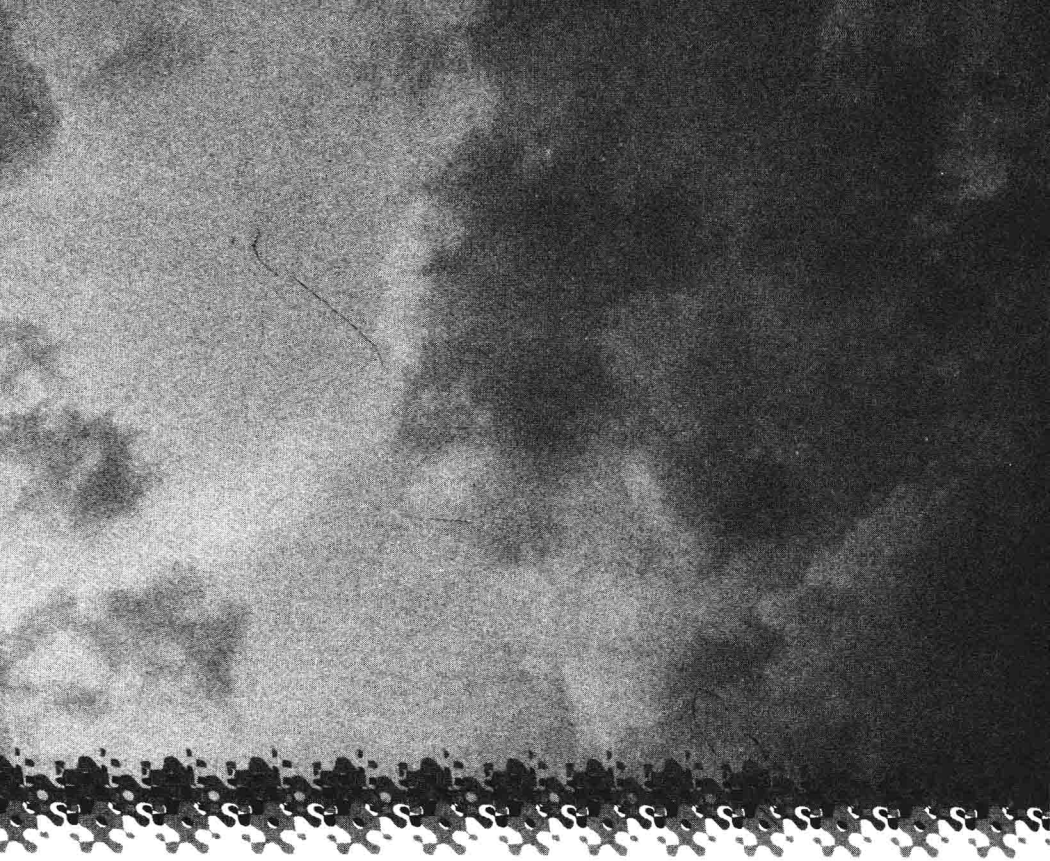

CHAPTER 1

ONE MINUTE BEFORE the explosion, the square at Sainte-Cécile was at peace. The evening was warm, and a layer of still air covered the town like a blanket. The church bell tolled a lazy beat, calling worshipers to the service with little enthusiasm. To Felicity Clairet it sounded like a countdown.

The square was dominated by the seventeenth-century château. A small version of Versailles, it had a grand projecting front entrance, and wings on both sides that turned right angles and tailed off rearwards. There was a basement and two main floors topped by a tall roof with arched dormer windows.

Felicity, who was always called Flick, loved France. She enjoyed its graceful buildings, its mild weather, its leisurely lunches, its cultured people. She liked French paintings, French literature, and stylish French clothes. Visitors often found the French people unfriendly, but Flick had been speaking the language since she was six years old, and no one could tell she was a foreigner.

It angered her that the France she loved no longer existed. There was not enough food for leisurely lunches, the paintings had all been stolen by the Nazis, and only the whores had pretty clothes. Like most women, Flick was wearing a shapeless dress whose colors had long ago been washed to dullness. Her heart's desire was that the real France would come back. It might return soon, if she and people like her did what they were supposed to.

She might not live to see it—indeed, she might not survive the next few minutes. She was no fatalist; she wanted to live. There were a hundred things she planned to do after the war: finish her doctorate,

have a baby, see New York, own a sports car, drink champagne on the beach at Cannes. But if she was about to die, she was glad to be spending her last few moments in a sunlit square, looking at a beautiful old house, with the lilting sounds of the French language soft in her ears.

The château had been built as a home for the local aristocracy, but the last Comte de Sainte-Cécile had lost his head on the guillotine in 1793. The ornamental gardens had long ago been turned into vineyards, for this was wine country, the heart of the Champagne district. The building now housed an important telephone exchange, sited here because the government minister responsible had been born in Sainte-Cécile.

When the Germans came they enlarged the exchange to provide connections between the French system and the new cable route to Germany. They also sited a Gestapo regional headquarters in the building, with offices on the upper floors and cells in the basement.

Four weeks ago the château had been bombed by the Allies. Such precision bombing was new. The heavy four-engined Lancasters and Flying Fortresses that roared high over Europe every night were inaccurate—they sometimes missed an entire *city*—but the latest generation of fighter-bombers, the Lightnings and Thunderbolts, could sneak in by day and hit a small target, a bridge or a railway station. Much of the west wing of the château was now a heap of irregular seventeenth-century red bricks and square white stones.

But the air raid had failed. Repairs were made quickly, and the phone service had been disrupted only as long as it took the Germans to install replacement switchboards. All the automatic telephone equipment and the vital amplifiers for the long-distance lines were in the basement, which had escaped serious damage.

That was why Flick was here.

The château was on the north side of the square, surrounded by a high wall of stone pillars and iron railings, guarded by uniformed sentries. To the east was a small medieval church, its ancient wooden doors wide open to the summer air and the arriving congregation.

Opposite the church, on the west side of the square, was the town hall, run by an ultraconservative mayor who had few disagreements with the occupying Nazi rulers. The south side was a row of shops and a bar called Café des Sports. Flick sat outside the bar, waiting for the church bell to stop. On the table in front of her was a glass of the local white wine, thin and light. She had not drunk any.

She was a British officer with the rank of major. Officially, she belonged to the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry, the all-female service that was inevitably called the FANYs. But that was a cover story. In fact, she worked for a secret organization, the Special Operations Executive, responsible for sabotage behind enemy lines. At twenty-eight, she was one of the most senior agents. This was not the first time she had felt herself close to death. She had learned to live with the threat, and manage her fear, but all the same she felt the touch of a cold hand on her heart when she looked at the steel helmets and powerful rifles of the château guards.

Three years ago, her greatest ambition had been to become a professor of French literature in a British university, teaching students to enjoy the vigor of Hugo, the wit of Flaubert, the passion of Zola. She had been working in the War Office, translating French documents, when she had been summoned to a mysterious interview in a hotel room and asked if she was willing to do something dangerous.

She had said yes without thinking much. There was a war on, and all the boys she had been at Oxford with were risking their lives every day, so why shouldn't she do the same? Two days after Christmas 1941 she had started her SOE training.

Six months later she was a courier, carrying messages from SOE headquarters, at 64 Baker Street in London, to Resistance groups in occupied France, in the days when wireless sets were scarce and trained operators even fewer. She would parachute in, move around with her false identity papers, contact the Resistance, give them their orders, and note their replies, complaints, and requests for guns and ammunition. For the return journey she would rendezvous with a

pickup plane, usually a three-seater Westland Lysander, small enough to land on six hundred yards of grass.

From courier work she had graduated to organizing sabotage. Most SOE agents were officers, the theory being that their "men" were the local Resistance. In practice, the Resistance were not under military discipline, and an agent had to win their cooperation by being tough, knowledgeable, and authoritative.

The work was dangerous. Six men and three women had finished the training course with Flick, and she was the only one still operating two years later. Two were known to be dead: one shot by the Milice, the hated French security police, and the second killed when his parachute failed to open. The other six had been captured, interrogated, and tortured, and had then disappeared into prison camps in Germany. Flick had survived because she was ruthless, she had quick reactions, and she was careful about security to the point of paranoia.

Beside her sat her husband, Michel, leader of the Resistance circuit codenamed Bollinger, which was based in the cathedral city of Reims, ten miles from here. Although about to risk his life, Michel was sitting back in his chair, his right ankle resting on his left knee, holding a tall glass of pale, watery wartime beer. His careless grin had won her heart when she was a student at the Sorbonne, writing a thesis on Molière's ethics that she had abandoned at the outbreak of war. He had been a disheveled young philosophy lecturer with a legion of adoring students.

He was still the sexiest man she had ever met. He was tall, and he dressed with careless elegance in rumpled suits and faded blue shirts. His hair was always a little too long. He had a come-to-bed voice and an intense blue-eyed gaze that made a girl feel she was the only woman in the world.

This mission had given Flick a welcome chance to spend a few days with her husband, but it had not been a happy time. They had not quarreled, exactly, but Michel's affection had seemed halfhearted, as if he were going through the motions. She had felt hurt. Her instinct told her he was interested in someone else. He was only thirty-five,

and his unkempt charm still worked on young women. It did not help that since their wedding they had been apart more than together, because of the war. And there were plenty of willing French girls, she thought sourly, in the Resistance and out of it.

She still loved him. Not in the same way: she no longer worshiped him as she had on their honeymoon, no longer yearned to devote her life to making him happy. The morning mists of romantic love had lifted, and in the clear daylight of married life she could see that he was vain, self-absorbed, and unreliable. But when he chose to focus his attention on her, he could still make her feel unique and beautiful and cherished.

His charm worked on men, too, and he was a great leader, courageous and charismatic. He and Flick had figured out the battle plan together. They would attack the château in two places, dividing the defenders, then regroup inside to form a single force that would penetrate the basement, find the main equipment room, and blow it up.

They had a floor plan of the building supplied by Antoinette Dupert, supervisor of the group of local women who cleaned the château every evening. She was also Michel's aunt. The cleaners started work at seven o'clock, the same time as vespers, and Flick could see some of them now, presenting their special passes to the guard at the wrought-iron gate. Antoinette's sketch showed the entrance to the basement but no further details, for it was a restricted area, open to Germans only, and cleaned by soldiers.

Michel's attack plan was based on reports from MI6, the British intelligence service, which said the château was guarded by a Waffen SS detachment working in three shifts, each of twelve men. The Gestapo personnel in the building were not fighting troops, and most would not even be armed. The Bollinger circuit had been able to muster fifteen fighters for the attack, and they were now deployed, either among the worshipers in the church, or posing as Sunday idlers around the square, concealing their weapons under their clothing or in satchels and duffel bags. If MI6 was right, the Resistance would outnumber the guards.

But a worry nagged at Flick's brain and made her heart heavy with apprehension. When she had told Antoinette of MI6's estimate, Antoinette had frowned and said, "It seems to me there are more." Antoinette was no fool—she had been secretary to Joseph Laperrière, the head of a champagne house, until the occupation reduced his profits and his wife became his secretary—and she might be right.

Michel had been unable to resolve the contradiction between the MI6 estimate and Antoinette's guess. He lived in Reims, and neither he nor any of his group was familiar with Sainte-Cécile. There had been no time for further reconnaissance. If the Resistance were outnumbered, Flick thought with dread, they were not likely to prevail against disciplined German troops.

She looked around the square, picking out the people she knew, apparently innocent strollers who were in fact waiting to kill or be killed. Outside the haberdashery, studying a bolt of dull green cloth in the window, stood Geneviève, a tall girl of twenty with a Sten gun under her light summer coat. The Sten was a submachine gun much favored by the Resistance because it could be broken into three parts and carried in a small bag. Geneviève might well be the girl Michel had his eye on, but all the same Flick felt a shudder of horror at the thought that she might be mowed down by gunfire in a few seconds' time. Crossing the cobbled square, heading for the church, was Bertrand, even younger at seventeen, a blond boy with an eager face and a .45 caliber Colt automatic hidden in a folded newspaper under his arm. The Allies had dropped thousands of Colts by parachute. Flick had at first forbidden Bertrand from the team because of his age, but he had pleaded to be included, and she had needed every available man, so she had given in. She hoped his youthful bravado would survive once the shooting started. Loitering on the church porch, apparently finishing his cigarette before going in, was Albert, whose wife had given birth to their first child this morning, a girl. Albert had an extra reason to stay alive today. He carried a cloth bag that looked full of potatoes, but they were No.36 Mark I Mills hand grenades.

The scene in the square looked normal but for one element. Beside the church was parked an enormous, powerful sports car. It was a French-built Hispano-Suiza type 68-*bis,* with a V12 aeroengine, one of the fastest cars in the world. It had a tall, arrogant-looking silver radiator topped by the flying-stork mascot, and it was painted sky blue.

It had arrived half an hour ago. The driver, a handsome man of about forty, was wearing an elegant civilian suit, but he had to be a German officer—no one else would have the nerve to flaunt such a car. His companion, a tall, striking redhead in a green silk dress and high-heeled suede shoes, was too perfectly chic to be anything but French. The man had set up a camera on a tripod and was taking photographs of the château. The woman wore a defiant look, as if she knew that the shabby townspeople who stared at her on their way to church were calling her *whore* in their minds.

A few minutes ago, the man had scared Flick by asking her to take a picture of him and his lady friend against the background of the château. He had spoken courteously, with an engaging smile, and only the trace of a German accent. The distraction at a crucial moment was absolutely maddening, but Flick had felt it might have caused trouble to refuse, especially as she was pretending to be a local resident who had nothing better to do than lounge around at a pavement café. So she had responded as most French people would have in the circumstances: she had put on an expression of cold indifference and complied with the German's request.

It had been a farcically frightening moment: the British secret agent standing behind the camera; the German officer and his tart smiling at her, and the church bell tolling the seconds until the explosion. Then the officer had thanked her and offered to buy her a drink. She had refused very firmly: no French girl could drink with a German unless she was prepared to be called a whore. He had nodded understandingly, and she had returned to her husband.

The officer was obviously off-duty and did not appear to be armed, so he presented no danger, but all the same he bothered Flick. She puzzled over this feeling in the last few seconds of calm and finally

realized that she did not really believe he was a tourist. There was a watchful alertness in his manner that was not appropriate for soaking up the beauty of old architecture. His woman might be exactly what she seemed, but he was something else.

Before Flick could figure out what, the bell ceased to toll.

Michel drained his glass, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

Flick and Michel stood up. Trying to look casual, they strolled to the café entrance and stood in the doorway, inconspicuously taking cover.

CHAPTER 2

DIETER FRANCK had noticed the girl at the café table the moment he drove into the square. He always noticed beautiful women. This one struck him as a tiny bundle of sex appeal. She was a pale blonde with light green eyes, and she probably had German blood—it was not unusual here in the northeast of France, so close to the border. Her small, slim body was wrapped in a dress like a sack, but she had added a bright yellow scarf of cheap cotton, with a flair for style that he thought enchantingly French. When he spoke to her, he had observed the initial flash of fear usual in a French person on being approached by one of the German occupiers; but then, immediately afterwards, he had seen on her pretty face a look of ill-concealed defiance that had piqued his interest.

She was with an attractive man who was not very interested in her—probably her husband. Dieter had asked her to take a photo only because he wanted to talk to her. He had a wife and two pretty children in Cologne, and he shared his Paris apartment with Stéphanie, but that would not stop him making a play for another girl. Beautiful women were like the gorgeous French impressionist paintings he collected: having one did not stop you wanting another.

French women were the most beautiful in the world. But everything French was beautiful: their bridges, their boulevards, their furniture, even their china tableware. Dieter loved Paris nightclubs, champagne, foie gras, and warm baguettes. He enjoyed buying shirts and ties at Charvet, the legendary *chemisier* opposite the Ritz hotel. He could happily have lived in Paris forever.

He did not know where he had acquired such tastes. His father was

a professor of music—the one art form of which the Germans, not the French, were the undisputed masters. But to Dieter, the dry academic life his father led seemed unbearably dull, and he had horrified his parents by becoming a policeman, one of the first university graduates in Germany so to do. By 1939, he was head of the criminal intelligence department of the Cologne police. In May 1940, when General Heinz Guderian's panzer tanks crossed the river Meuse at Sedan and swept triumphantly through France to the English Channel in a week, Dieter impulsively applied for a commission in the army. Because of his police experience, he was given an intelligence posting immediately. He spoke fluent French and adequate English, so he was put to work interrogating captured prisoners. He had a talent for the work, and it gave him profound satisfaction to extract information that could help his side win battles. In North Africa his results had been noticed by Rommel himself.

He was always willing to use torture when necessary, but he liked to persuade people by subtler means. That was how he had got Stéphanie. Poised, sensual, and shrewd, she had been the owner of a Paris store selling ladies' hats that were devastatingly chic and obscenely expensive. But she had a Jewish grandmother. She had lost the store and spent six months in a French prison, and she had been on her way to a camp in Germany when Dieter rescued her.

He could have raped her. She had certainly expected that. No one would have raised a protest, let alone punished him. But instead, he had fed her, given her new clothes, installed her in the spare bedroom in his apartment, and treated her with gentle affection until one evening, after a dinner of *foie de veau* and a bottle of La Tache, he had seduced her deliciously on the couch in front of a blazing coal fire.

Today, though, she was part of his camouflage. He was working with Rommel again. Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, the "Desert Fox," was now Commander of Army Group B, defending northern France. German intelligence expected an Allied invasion this summer. Rommel did not have enough men to guard the hundreds of miles of vulnerable coastline, so he had adopted a daring strategy of flexible response: his

battalions were miles inland, ready to be swiftly deployed wherever needed.

The British knew this—they had intelligence, too. Their counterplan was to slow Rommel's response by disrupting his communications. Night and day, British and American bombers pounded roads and railways, bridges and tunnels, stations and marshaling yards. And the Resistance blew up power stations and factories, derailed trains, cut telephone lines, and sent teenage girls to pour grit into the oil reservoirs of trucks and tanks.

Dieter's brief was to identify key communications targets and assess the ability of the Resistance to attack them. In the last few months, from his base in Paris, he had ranged all over northern France, barking at sleepy sentries and putting the fear of God into lazy captains, tightening up security at railway signal boxes, train sheds, vehicle parks, and airfield control towers. Today he was paying a surprise visit to a telephone exchange of enormous strategic importance. Through this building passed all telephone traffic from the High Command in Berlin to German forces in northern France. That included teleprinter messages, the means by which most orders were sent nowadays. If the exchange was destroyed, German communications would be crippled.

The Allies obviously knew that and had tried to bomb the place, with limited success. It was the perfect candidate for a Resistance attack. Yet security was infuriatingly lax, by Dieter's standards. That was probably due to the influence of the Gestapo, who had a post in the same building. The *Geheime Staatspolizei* was the state security service, and men were often promoted by reason of loyalty to Hitler and enthusiasm for Fascism rather than because of their brains or ability. Dieter had been here for half an hour, taking photographs, his anger mounting as the men responsible for guarding the place continued to ignore him.

However, as the church bell stopped ringing, a Gestapo officer in major's uniform came strutting through the tall iron gates of the château and headed straight for Dieter. In bad French he shouted, "Give me that camera!"

Dieter turned away, pretending not to hear.

"It is forbidden to take photographs of the château, imbecile!" the man yelled. "Can't you see this is a military installation?"

Dieter turned to him and replied quietly in German, "You took a damn long time to notice me."

The man was taken aback. People in civilian clothing were usually frightened of the Gestapo. "What are you talking about?" he said less aggressively.

Dieter checked his watch. "I've been here for thirty-two minutes. I could have taken a dozen photographs and driven away long ago. Are you in charge of security?"

"Who are you?"

"Major Dieter Franck, from Field Marshal Rommel's personal staff."

"Franck!" said the man. "I remember you."

Dieter looked harder at him. "My God," he said as recognition dawned. "Willi Weber."

"*Sturmbannführer* Weber, at your service." Like most senior Gestapo men, Weber held an SS rank, which he felt was more prestigious than his ordinary police rank.

"Well, I'm damned," Dieter said. No wonder security was slack.

Weber and Dieter had been young policemen together in Cologne in the twenties. Dieter had been a high flyer, Weber a failure. Weber resented Dieter's success and attributed it to his privileged background. (Dieter's background was not extraordinarily privileged, but it seemed so to Weber, the son of a stevedore.)

In the end, Weber had been fired. The details began to come back to Dieter: there had been a road accident, a crowd had gathered, Weber had panicked and fired his weapon, and a rubbernecking bystander had been killed.

Dieter had not seen the man for fifteen years, but he could guess the course of Weber's career: he had joined the Nazi party, become a volunteer organizer, applied for a job with the Gestapo citing his police