

Chapter 1

France
1916

The railroad car swayed and the wheels clattered along the tracks. Eighteen-year-old Henry Braddock stared down the car filled mostly with men in uniform: French horizon blue or some form of khaki. The acrid smell of cigarette smoke drifted in the air, along with bits of conversation--some in French, some in English.

Hank retrieved a copy of *The London Times*, already folded to an article about the Great War. The article included a picture that showed a poised lieutenant holding a whistle in one hand and a stopwatch in the other. Two enlisted men, with their helmets on, stood on either side of the lieutenant. The camera caught one man kissing a picture, perhaps his sweetheart or his mother, and the other one seemed to be finishing a prayer. In the background, a ladder leaned against the parapet.

At zero hour, when the whistles sounded up and down the line, each man would dutifully climb the ladder in his sector. At the top, upon entering No Man's Land, a hail of bullets would greet him, and with it, an uncertain fate.

The dead, as much as possible, would be brought back at night. The wounded, too, would be carried back, if they had not been able to crawl back to the trench on their own. From the first-aid stations, to the clearing stations, to the hospitals, a procession of wounded flowed to the rear. It

involved medics, doctors, nurses, orderlies and ambulance drivers, some who, like Hank, were volunteer drivers in the American Field Service. So, in a sense, the lieutenant's whistle blew for all of them.

He gazed out the window at the mist-shrouded, frozen landscape. His reflection shimmered on the window glass: a boyish face showing the subtle signs of maturity, a prominent jaw inherited from his father, sandy hair that almost matched the cloth rim of his khaki hat, and soulful hazel eyes.

"Section Two is *en repos* in Bar-le-Duc," the captain who had given him his orders had said.

"What does *en repos* mean, sir?" he remembered asking.

"That means they are waiting for another assignment. It gives them time to rest up and refurbish their vehicles."

Hank wondered whether his fellow drivers would accept him. Waiting for his assignment in Paris, he'd found the majority of the drivers to be college-aged men who had graduated or had interrupted their studies to volunteer. Here he was, just a high school graduate, still in his teens.

The morning mist cleared a bit, revealing a snow-covered, rolling terrain that reminded him of Indiana. Yet the steep roofs, beige- and buff-colored stucco houses, as well as the Fiats at the crossroads, told him he was in a foreign land.

A company of French soldiers wearing horizon blue greatcoats was gathered around a field kitchen, tin plates in hand. Their foggy breath mixed with the steam rising from the stoves before dissipating into the air. Most of the men were unshaven or had some form of facial hair. That trait

had earned them the nickname *poilu*, which meant "hairy one."

Villages appeared more frequently, as did the number of tent cities, homes of the bivouacked soldiers. The engine's pistons labored to climb the steep hill, then throttled down, following the hill line to the northeast.

A town appeared below, shaped like a ship, dissected by a river. This must be it, he told himself. This must be the town of Bar-le-Duc.

With their descent into the valley, he saw the river actually split into three canals, a major one, along with two minor branches. Beautiful arched bridges spanned the ribbons of water. *Quais* ran alongside the canals, something he had become familiar with in Paris. Large, stately homes, some with red tile roofs, shadowed the canals or appeared tucked amongst the hills. Plebeian cottages and modest homes were clustered along the tracks and in the town's midsection. Yet, throughout the town, gaps appeared where ghostly, charred remnants of buildings poked up into the misty air. Casualties of the Battle of the Marne, Hank reasoned.

He scooted to the edge of his seat when a train yard appeared. Hank watched while several khaki-clad, armband-wearing ambulance drivers transferred *blessés*, French wounded, from ambulances to a Red Cross train.

This must be my unit

The brakes squealed and the depot came into view. In the crowded waiting area, women were outfitted in wide-brimmed hats and ankle-length dresses. The older gentlemen wore black or gray suits with matching hats. All the young or middle-aged men were in uniform.

One of the men in a khaki uniform and wearing a Red Cross armband stood at the back edge of the crowd, watching the windows of the train.

He's here to pick me up. A sense of relief swept over Hank, along with a surge of excitement. The adventure had begun.

The train came to an abrupt halt, and Hank quickly slipped into the tan cashmere coat he had been lucky to find in a New York City secondhand store.

With suitcase in hand, Hank stepped to the ground, ready to wade into the crowd.

The armband-wearing man emerged and looked up at him. "Henry Braddock?"

It felt great to hear his name. "That's me."

"Bruce McAllister. Welcome to Section Two."

Bruce had a slender face, a hooked nose, black hair, and looked several years older than the other American drivers. Hank guessed him to be around five-eight or five-nine. He switched his suitcase before shaking hands, noticing Bruce wore a wedding ring. "Thanks. It's good to finally get assigned."

"How long were you in Paris?"

"Three weeks."

"That's about normal." Bruce eyed Hank's suitcase and asked, sounding hopeful, "Is that it?"

"No, I checked a trunk."

Bruce shifted his focus to the baggage car, and Hank followed his gaze. Its door slid open and a man began moving trunks and parcels to the edge of the car, while two blue-clad workers bounced a cart over the stone-laid surface. "If it's all right with you, we'll come back later. It

looks like it's going to take a while."

"Sure. Fine with me."

Bruce started toward the depot and said over his shoulder, "We'll be eating lunch soon. If we wait, the chowhounds will have devoured all the good stuff."

Hank laughed. "Good idea. I'm starving."

Entering the depot through a brick-arched doorway, they threaded their way around groups of people and out the other side onto a busy street.

To their left, a queue of horse-drawn vehicles awaited their turn at the freight door. A small plaza in front of them contained limestone rocks and frozen flowers. Two- and three-story buildings faced the street. A platoon of soldiers marched by and the cadence of their footsteps echoed through the canyon of buildings.

Bruce turned to the right, and Hank got in step. "I saw some ambulances in the train yard transferring *blessés*. Were those our drivers?"

"Yeah. We're the only ones here, for the time being. Even though we're en repos doesn't mean they don't keep us busy."

"Any idea where we're headed?"

"One day's rumor has it we're heading to the Champagne area and the next day's says we're going to Verdun. Who knows?"

Exploding shells rumbled in the distance, reminding Hank of someone beating a carpet stretched over a clothesline. "How far are we from the front?"

"About forty-five miles."

They came to an ambulance parked alongside the street. Hank had visited the factory located in a Paris

suburb where the ambulances were outfitted. Large, oblong wooden boxes were attached to the frames of Model Ts donated by wealthy Americans. Hardware to accommodate three stretcher-bound patients, called *couchés*, and benches for six walking wounded, called *assis*, were bolted to the wooden frames. Although the American ambulances were smaller than the Fiats used by the French, the Model Ts were able to get into tighter places at the front, saving more lives and earning the respect that came with it.

He slung his suitcase over the tailgate. "I'll crank it."

"Fine," Bruce said, heading for the cab.

Hank waited, poised over the crank, until Bruce set the ignition and gave him a nod. He cranked hard, but the engine just sputtered. With another hard crank, the engine coughed and came to life.

As Hank climbed into the rocking cab, Bruce gave him a glance. "College man?"

"Naw. I know most of the fellas over here are college guys. A lot of Ivy League schools, I noticed."

They pulled away from the curb and Bruce made a U-turn, skirting the plaza and passing a canteen. "Right, a lot of Harvard and Yale boys, trying to outdo one another. They sing their school songs and act like they're on an extended field trip or something. So, you going to go to college later or what?"

"I dunno...maybe later. I was a reporter on my hometown newspaper and I read an article in Outlook written by President Teddy Roosevelt about you fellas over here. It got in my blood and I just had to come over, so I volunteered."

"Yeah, that's what happened to me, too...not the article, though. We had a speaker at the college, an ex-ambulance driver, there to recruit students. I was asked by my dean to introduce him."

"Your dean?"

"Right. You see, I taught at the school. Well, still do, as a matter of fact."

"So you're a professor?"

"That's right."

Suddenly, Bruce's age made sense.

"Anyway, after the talk, I couldn't get it out of my head. I kept one of the brochures that was handed out and kept looking it over. Sonja, my wife, finally said, 'Why, don't you join? Maybe the college will grant you a sabbatical.' They did and here I am."

"That was nice of your wife to do that."

"Yeah, she's not typical, that's for damn sure. So, I guess they had you transferring *blesés* from Red Cross trains to hospitals up in Paris?"

"Right. They kept us pretty busy."

Bruce laughed. "That's the American Field Service for you. They don't let any grass grow under our feet."

Hank thought back. "Actually, I didn't mind it. It gave me a feeling for the war, even though I wasn't assigned yet." He laughed. "You know, I came over here thinking the French were somewhat effeminate."

"Why's that?"

"Oh, I guess it was all those pictures in our textbooks showing them wearing powdered wigs and embroidered jackets with lace handkerchiefs poking out of their sleeves."

Bruce laughed. "Those eighteenth-century paintings do make them look like sissies."

"I saw a lot of wounded...trainload after trainload. But one wounded guy stuck in my brain."

"What was unusual about him?"

"Well, I don't know that he was 'unusual,' necessarily. When we got to the hospital, the *brancardiers*, stretcher-bearers, came and started to take him away. But on the way by, this wounded guy reached out, so the *brancardiers* paused for a moment. I stuck out my hand and the wounded guy squeezed it, so I squeezed back, making sure I didn't do it too hard.

"A bloody bandage covered his face, but was parted around his mouth to allow him to eat and drink. In a barely audible whisper, he said, 'Sank you. *Merci. Merci.*' Of course, I told him he was welcome, and the *brancardiers* carried him away."

Hank gulped. "I could see by the way the blanket lay over his body that his shoulder, hip and leg had been blown away." Hank cleared his throat. "Needless to say, I have a whole lot of respect for them now."

Bruce deftly skirted delivery trucks and horse-drawn wagons before stopping at a T-intersection, facing a canal. He looked both ways before finding an opening and turned left. "Everyone, to a man, is impressed by how little the *blessés* complain. It's truly amazing. So, where's home? You sound like a mid-westerner."

"I am. Calvin, Indiana is my home town."

"Really? We're practically neighbors. I'm from Ohio--Oberlin to be exact."

"Is that where you teach?"

"Right, that's my school, Oberlin College."

"Seems to me like we were told in one of my classes that Oberlin was the first co-ed school in the country. Is that right?"

"That's right. In fact, I married one of my students."

"Really?"

"Well, it's not like I robbed the cradle or anything. I had just gotten my masters degree and that was my first class. I'll never forget her eyes following me around the room. Those beautiful, expressive dark eyes that reminded me of a black-eyed Susan. I tried not to let it affect me, for the sake of the other students." Bruce laughed. "But it's like she hypnotized me."

"What do you teach?"

"English and Poetry."

"Poetry? Hey, maybe you can help me with my poems."

"You like to write?"

"Yeah, I love words--putting them together. I guess that's why I like being a reporter." Hank laughed. "Plus, I'm nosy. That probably helps, too. I've written a couple short stories and a few poems, but only have rejection slips to show for it so far."

"Maybe I can give you some pointers. I'll be glad to help."

"That'd be terrific. Do you have kids?"

"A boy, seven, and a girl, five."

"Oh, that's great."

"I wondered about leaving them, but Sonja told me to get the war thing out of my system."

They drove along the canal and came up behind a large artillery piece pulled by four horses. It was the end unit in a slow-moving convoy.

Hank leaned forward and peered up at the gun. "Man, that's a big one, isn't it?"

"Yeah, that's a 220-millimeter. We don't see many of them, mostly 75s."

At the intersection, the convoy turned right, and Bruce followed it over the bridge, just inching along.

On the other side, the convoy turned north. "They must be going to Verdun," Bruce said, heading in the opposite direction.

"I've read about Verdun in the papers. Lots of casualties up there."

"It has been a see-saw battle from the beginning."

"Didn't the French build a bunch of forts around Verdun?"

"They did after the Franco-Prussian War when the Germans punched through their lines and were able to capture Paris in a few weeks. The French vowed it would never happen again."

Bruce drove along the canal until a large compound encompassed by a tall wrought iron fence appeared on their right. He turned into it. The sign overhead read: *Caserne Exelmans*.

The guard cried, "*Entrez*," and waved them through.

Bruce drove along a parade ground surrounded by three- and-four story formidable-looking buildings. It reminded Hank somewhat of the Square back home, except that, instead of the courthouse, there was an open area for troop reviews.

In the extreme left corner of the parade grounds, Hank saw several ambulances lined up diagonally. Their radiators faced the road, ready to roll at a moment's notice.

Bruce backed into an empty slot and pointed to the ambulance on their right. "You've been assigned that one--number seventeen."

Hank's head turned sharply. He felt the thrill of having his own ambulance. He climbed slowly out of the cab and inched along the chassis like a knight inspecting his steed, examining every shrapnel and bullet hole. She had definitely been in the thick of battle. Images came to him of driving the car through a maelstrom of artillery fire and coming out unscathed.

Hank realized he had been daydreaming and looked up to see Bruce with his hand on the barracks' door handle.

"I'm coming. I'm coming," he called, grabbing his suitcase and sprinting for the door.

Inside, Bruce stopped and sniffed the air. "Hmmm, something smells good for a change. Gastroenteritis must be following the recipe for a change."

Hank laughed. Gastroenteritis had to be the cook.

"Normally, Chief Kincaid would want to meet you, but he and our liaison, Lieutenant de LaRoche, are in Chalons, at the big auto park there. They're meeting with the bigwigs, trying to get us more cars and parts. Some of our cars are in pretty bad shape."

"How many drivers are in the section?"

"Let's see. Thornton just left--you're replacing him--so eighteen. A section is supposed to have twenty-one drivers, but that's utopia." Bruce headed in a diagonal line toward the stairway. "C'mon, I'll show you our room."

On the second floor, they met a soldier dressed in a French uniform on his way down.

Bruce said, "Hey, Monk, I want you to meet our new man, Henry Braddock."

Short, with an aesthetic face accented by a goatee, Monk appeared to be in his early thirties. Extending a hand, Monk said, with a bit of an accent, "*Bienvenue*. Welcome."

Hank shook Monk's hand. "Thank you. I'm glad to be here."

"This is the guy who'll interrupt your sweet dreams and tell you they need an ambulance somewhere," Bruce said in a sardonic tone.

Monk smiled. "Only when it ees necessary, my friend."

Bruce sniffed the air again. "What's for lunch?"

Monk said over his shoulder on his way down the stairs,

"*Boeuf* stew."

"Why do they call him Monk?" Hank asked, as they continued their climb.

"He was a Trappist monk in a monastery when the war broke out. He kept thinking about it and was even located behind the German lines. That's when the Germans were forty miles outside of Paris. Monk talked it over with his abbot and decided his place was to help save his country. So he snuck through the lines and enlisted. Monk's a brave fellow."

On the third floor, they turned down the hall. Halfway to the end, Bruce stopped and opened a door. "This is home. At least for now."

The square room contained four beds, two on each side. An armoire sat between each set of beds. Light streamed through a row of windows facing the parade grounds.

Bruce closed the door behind them and pointed to the bed on their immediate right. "That's yours."

A rolled-up mattress, bedding, a gas mask, a canteen, a cartridge belt, a helmet and a first-aid pouch all sat on the iron springs. Seeing the military paraphernalia sobered Hank, making him realize he wasn't in the Boy Scouts. He would be in the middle of the conflict. It was a question of when, not if.

After placing the items of war into a pile, Hank threw his suitcase on the bed. The armoire was divided into two sections. He hung up his coat, placed his hat on the shelf and walked to the row of windows. On the parade ground, a company of soldiers went through their drills. The voice of the sergeant barking orders could barely be heard.

"Don't get too used to this. I doubt if we'll have it this good where we're going."

"Yeah, this isn't bad."

The door opened and two men walked in. The larger of the two had a round face and puffed on a pipe. The smell of Cavendish tobacco filled the room.

The other man's voice bore a slight clipped accent. "Yo! What we got here? Our new man?"

Bruce took off his hat and spun it onto his bed like a discus. "Well, Jingles, it ain't the pope."

Jingles?

Jingles pushed his hat back on his head, revealing wavy blond hair, parted down the middle. He scrutinized

Hank while speaking. "Actually, Raven, I figured it might be one of yur students."

Did he call Bruce, Raven? Hank again studied the professor's features: jet-black hair combed straight back and a hooked nose that could pass for a beak.

"Well, he likes to write. Who knows, maybe I can even recruit him to Oberlin when all this is over. Hank, this is Jingles, whose real name is Frank Kelly, by the way, and Jingles, this is Henry Braddock."

As if pulled by a magnet, the two men stepped across the room, shaking Hank's hand one after the other. "Good to have ya join us," Jingles said.

Hank noticed Jingles' teeth were slightly crooked and somewhat stained from nicotine.

"Glad to have you ova heah," the large man said in a Boston accent. "My name is Herb Behr, but they caw me Double."

"Does everyone have a nickname here?"

Jingles said, "Yeah, ever'body in our little contingent does."

Double motioned to Jingles. "He comes from Philly. Guess that's what they do down there when they're hangin' 'round the street cornah."

Jingles took out a pack of Camels and shook them so one cigarette popped up. He offered it to Hank.

"No, thanks. I don't smoke."

Jingles took the cigarette and tamped it on his thumbnail. "Where ya from?"

"Indiana."

"Play basketball?"

"That's a dumb question," Double said. "Everybody in Indianer plays basketball."

"Shut-up, Double. I'm doin' the cross examination here."

"Excuse the hell outta me."

"So?"

"Sure, sure, I played basketball. Point guard."

Jingles pulled a wooden match from his pocket. As he scraped a thumbnail across its top, the match burst into flames. After lighting up, he blew out the flame while exhaling and walked the matchstick to an ashtray. "So, ya got a girl back home?"

"Had one, but we broke up a few months ago."

Jingles nodded. Like an attorney in a courtroom, he came back to face the accused. "So what do they call ya-- Hank?" he asked, making the name sound very ordinary.

"Right."

Jingles put his hand on the other man's shoulder. "He already told ya we call him Double. Ya know why? Again, his real name is Herb Behr. That's "H-e-r-b B-e-h-r."

Hank looked Double up and down. His clothes hung on him as though he was half his former size. "Well, is it because he's lost a lot of weight?"

Jingles and Raven laughed, while Double scoffed,

"Thanks a lot."

"No, my friend," Jingles said, "Guess again."

Hank shook his head. "I dunno."

"I said his name was Herb Behr. Do ya do anagrams?"

The answer suddenly came to him, making Hank hit his forehead with the heel of his hand. "Of course, his first

and last names contain the same letters. They're just turned around. Man, I didn't get that at first."

"If it's any consolation, I didn' either. Raven came up with that one. Speaking of Raven" --he turned to him-- "why do you guess we call him that?"

Hank looked Raven over again. "Well, I guess because of his looks?"

"That's part of it. It was a dark and stormy night... Isn't that the way they start stories, Raven?"

"Sometimes..."

"The wind was howlin' 'round the corners of the barracks, the lights flickered off and on, bolts of lightnin' streaked across the sky and when they hit the ground, it sounded like close artillery rounds comin' in and this guy saunters to the window..."

Raven picked up the cue. "Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary, Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore...Quoth the Raven, nevermore."

Everyone laughed.

"That's good. That's really good," Hank said.

"So-o-o," Jingles said, and everybody suddenly zeroed in on Hank, taking him aback. "Let me continue. Let's see...he played basketball, doesn't have a girl... What's the name of yur home town?"

"Calvin."

"Calvin, Indiana. So what did ya do in Calvin? You jus' outta high school?"

The question offended Hank. "No, I was a reporter on my hometown newspaper."

"Well, excuse me," Jingles said somewhat sarcastically. "And the name of yur paper?"

"The *Webster County Bee*."

"So, ya were a busy bee." Jingles laughed.

Hank was afraid of what they might come up with, so he decided to shut up. He knew that most the time a guy didn't have much say about what his friends called him. The more he objected, the more they would call him that, whatever it was.

Raven said, "We could call him Scoop?"

"Naw, that's too easy, too ordinary," Jingles said.

Double studied Hank's hair. "We could call him Sandy."

"Naw, that's even more ordinary. It has to be somethin' different, somethin' unique."

"What about Hoosier?" Raven suggested.

"Naw. C'mon, fellas. What is a Hoosier anyway? Does anyone know for sure?"

"Naw, not for sure," Hank said.

"That's what I thought." Jingles zeroed in even more.

"Basketball, basketball... Hey, let's see...what do they call basketball? I mean another name for it." He snapped his fingers several times.

"Hoops?" Hank offered.

Jingles pointed. "That's it!" He leaned back, studying Hank. "Hoops...Hoops. What do ya think?"

"Right," Double said. "Hoops. That fits."

"What about just Hoop?" Raven offered. "Drop the s. It should be singular."

Jingles said, "Yes--Hoop! I think we've got it. He looks like a Hoop."

Hank did not object to the name. In fact, he liked it and knew it could be a lot worse, but didn't say anything for fear they'd change their minds.

Jingles absent-mindedly put his hand in his pocket, jingling his pocket change, still considering how well the name fit.

Hoop pointed. "Ah-ha!"

"What?" Jingles said.

"Your nickname. " Hoop paused, and the jingling of the coins took center stage. "That's it, isn't it?"

Jingles smiled sheepishly, while Raven patted him on the back. "You got it, kid. Now that our business has been conducted, why don't we go to chow?"

Jingles crushed out his cigarette. "Good idea, Raven. Let's go."

"Wait a sec," Double said, tapping the bowl of his pipe on the ashtray to empty the burned tobacco. "All set." He stuck his pipe into his shirt pocket.

Out in the hall, Jingles put his hand on Hoop's shoulder. "Ever play poker?"

"Yeah, a little."

"You're not snookering, me now, are ya, Hoop? You wouldn't do that to yur buddy, now, would ya?"

"No, no, really. I've only played a little. And that was when I was real young. My friend's dad drank a lot and was an ex-prizefighter. He taught me how to box and how to play poker."

"Well, then how about a little poker after lunch?"

Hoop didn't want to lose any of this money, but didn't want to admit it. "Okay."

* * * *

"Oh-oh, here's trouble," Jingles said, looking up.

Monk stood in the doorway of the mess hall, and everyone stared at him. "I hate to tell you this, gentlemen, but zee Red Cross train ees not full yet."

A voice rose. "Aw, Monk, you know how to spoil a good lunch."

Another voice piped up, "Yeah, we had a bridge game slated."

"Sorry, gentlemen." Monk looked around the room 'til he spotted the person he was searching for. "Preston, please take your squad to number twenty-seven, zee former Academy for Boys. They have twenty-nine *blessés* for zee train."

"Fine," Preston said.

Monk shifted his gaze. "And Raven, take your squad and pick up twenty-one *blessés* at Jeanne d'Arc."

"Will do," Raven said.

Monk left. The men hurriedly finished their meals.

On the way to the car, walking several paces ahead of Jingles and Double, Raven said quietly to Hoop, "We'll probably have our part wrapped up in a couple of hours. We can go pick up your trunk after that."

"Sounds good to me."

"And there's a canteen across from the depot."

"Yeah, I saw it."

"They have great doughnuts there."

"Man, that's even better."

* * * *

Loud chatter and clouds of smoke met them at the door. Raven and Hoop joined a ribbon of men working their way through the line and came out the other end, each

carrying a cup of coffee and a plate bearing a chocolate frosted doughnut.

Going slowly up the center aisle, Hoop and Raven checked the rows of crowded picnic tables. Only one bench in the last row had any available space, but it had room for only one of them--and that would have been a tight squeeze.

Two nurses sat across from that lonely space. Hoop knew they were called VADs, an acronym that stood for Voluntary Aid Detachment. He looked at them out of the corner of his eye to avoid staring. They wore light gray uniforms with starched white cuffs and bibs. Attached to a stiff brim bearing a Red Cross, a gray cloth matching their uniform covered their hair. Only their hairlines showed. One of them was especially pretty.

The pretty one raised her head, spotting the two men. After checking the empty space, she pointed and said in a Scottish brogue, "Ye can sit there if ye like."

The second nurse looked up at her companion in surprise.

Hoop could hardly believe their luck. He and Raven headed to the spot, but hesitated.

Seeing the problem, the Scottish nurse gazed down the line of men. "*Pourriez vous serrer vers le haut, s'il vous plait, et faites un peu d'espace.*"

The line of men stared at her much as they would a goddess. Obediently, they squeezed together and the empty space gradually expanded until there was enough space for both of them.

"*Merci,*" both Hoop and Raven said to the soldiers as they set their dishes down and stepped over the bench.

"And th-thank you so very much," Hoop said as he sat, embarrassed to have stuttered. His heart beat faster and faster. Violet-colored eyes, jet-black hair, a triangular-shaped face, lips small but full, features that made her one of the prettiest women he had ever seen in his life. The only mar, if you wanted to call it that, was a mole that appeared under her left cheekbone. "This is so very, very thoughtful of you. I wasn't sure we'd be able to find a place to sit."

Yes, thank you," Raven said.

"Ye're welcome. Ye both looked stranded oot there."

"Where did you learn to speak French so well?" Hoop asked.

"I'm half-French. My father is French. The line goes way back, although he never lived in France."

"Huguenot?" Hank guessed.

A surprised look came over her face. "How did ye know?"

"We studied it in school--how the Huguenots were, well, persecuted, I guess you'd call it--Protestants in a land of Catholics. They left France centuries ago and, by and large, I believe most of them became Presbyterians, which is the way I was brought up. In fact, my father is a pastor."

"He is? The three sons of my pastor were rowdy."

The other VAD said, "So were ours. E'en his daughter."

Hoop couldn't help but laugh. "Well, I wouldn't say I was rowdy exactly. Maybe a little mischievous, but nothing real bad."

The Scottish nurse glanced at his armband. "Ye're an ambulance driver?"

He nodded.

"From America?"

Hoop nodded again.

"And what made ye come over here?"

Hoop leaned forward and his voice took on an enthusiastic cadence. "I read an article last summer about the Americans over here, darting helter-skelter in their ambulances, saving lives. It reminded me of the Knights of King Arthur that I read as a kid. It just said something to me. And when the notice came in over the wire at the newspaper where I worked, I had to volunteer."

"Ah-h, King Arthur! So ye dreamed of becomin' a knight of the roon' table, did ye?"

"Most definitely!"

She smiled reminiscently. "All of us wee lassies pretended we were Lady Guinevere."

They looked deeply in each other's eyes. It seemed as though time had stopped.

Finally, Hoop shook himself free and studied her uniform again. "So, are you in England's Red Cross?"

She shook her head, looked at her friend and back at Hoop. "No, we're both in the French Red Cross. Connie, here, cuz her fiancé is a French soldier, and me... Well, I guess I wanted to get back to my French roots. I just wanted to help and I was ready to leave home."

"I guess I was ready to leave home as well and see what this war is really like. Say, my name is Henry Braddock." He half-stood and reached across the table. He felt her warm hand slip into his.

"I'm Kyla Laurens."

Hoop reached for the second nurse's hand.

"I'm Constance Rawlings, but please call me Connie," she said in an English accent.

Raven half-stood and introduced himself. "Bruce McAllister. Nice to meet you both," he said, first shaking Kyla's hand, then Connie's.

As both of the drivers sat, Kyla asked, "McAllister? Might ye be Scottish?"

Bruce's voice took on a Scottish brogue. "Ach, aye, lassie. I come from a long line o' sturdy Scots, I do. E'en me long johns are plaid."

Everyone laughed, and Hoop said, "By the way, his nickname is Raven."

Kyla looked him over, studying his black hair. "And why do they call ye Raven? Is it cuz ye look like a blackbird?"

"That might be part of it now, but it might also be due to the fact I once recited "The Raven" by Edgar Allen Poe. The lads have been callin' me that e'er since, they have."

"And who might this Poe bodie be?"

"He's one of our American poets, and a fine one he is...or was, seeing he's no longer with us."

"I must say I've never heard o' him. I favor Robbie Burns myself."

"My loove for ye is like a red, red rose."

Kyla wilted and put her hand over her heart. "Aye, that and many more."

Raven motioned to Hank, dropping his brogue. "And we nicknamed him Hoop."

Kyla stared at Henry. "Hoop?"

Hoop thought it was cute the way she said it. It sounded as though it had come from an owl. "It's from a game we play back home called basketball."

"Basket-baa?"

"You play it with a big round ball and there're hoops at both ends of the court, about ten feet off the ground. The object is to put the ball through the hoop and that's why they call me that. I was a point guard on my high school team."

"Were ye a star?"

Hoop couldn't help but blush. "Well, I wouldn't go that far. I was the one who usually brought the ball up the court and either passed it to someone or took a shot myself. We went to the state finals."

"Did ye now? Did ye win?"

"We won three games, but lost the final match."

"Did ye try with all yer heart to win?"

"Sure! The whole team fought like crazy."

"The only shame would be that ye didn't try."

The matter-of-fact tone in Kyla's voice made Connie and Raven nod in agreement.

Hoop turned to Connie. "And where are you from?"

"Leeds. Leeds, England. In the northern part of the country."

Hoop glanced at the campaign ribbon on Connie's uniform. "How did you get that?"

"I served six months in the English Red Cross. My fiancé and I met in Bristol where our family was on holiday. Arnaud was 'ead chef at a restaurant and 'e came to the pier to buy some fish." Connie laughed and blushed.

"Our family was 'avin' an ice cream treat and as I was

comin' out of the shop, I bumped into 'im and a scoop of ice cream fell off the cone and 'it 'im in the chest."

Everyone laughed.

"I guess it was my flipperty-flop day, but 'e 'ad 'is apron on, so it wasn't too bad. 'e apologized and insisted on buyin' me anotha ice cream cone. 'e were right grand about it and asked if 'e could look me up. My brother was there, so I said aye. And, well, things went well.

"Arnaud came up to Leeds to visit whenever 'e could and even my father liked 'im. After we were engaged, Arnaud said 'e'd been thinkin' about something for a long time and felt that 'e 'ad to fight for 'is country. So I decided my place should be near 'im and 'ere I am."

All eyes turned to Kyla. A tense look came over her face. "I have no beau, if that's what all of ye want to know."

Hoop sighed with relief. "Are you two ladies stationed at one of the hospitals here?"

"No, we're on our way to Verdun," Kyla answered.

"Our train barely made it up the last hill. They're repairin' it right now."

Hoop focused on the manila envelopes in the middle of the table. "Wow! We're lucky to have caught you then."

Kyla looked at her watch hanging on her uniform and then turned to Connie. "They've been at it about two hours now."

"So where did the two of you meet?" Hoop asked.

Connie smiled. "We jus' met on the train and found we were goin' to the same place."

A shout came from the doorway, making everyone turn. The conductor called, "*Les passagers a destination de Verdun, en voiture, s'il vous plait!*"

A stir in the crowd resulted.

"That's us," Kyla said. She and Connie each grabbed her manila envelope and stood.

Hoop and Raven stood, too.

With suitcases in hand, just as the nurses headed for the door, Hoop asked Kyla, "Say, could you answer a quick question?"

Kyla checked the doorway and the line of people filing out. "It has to be quick."

"Do you know how our Grand Canyon was built?"

Puzzled, Kyla shook her head.

"A Scotsman dropped a penny down a gopher hole." Kyla broke into a big smile, accompanied by a shriek of laughter. Her eyes danced in merriment, while Connie giggled. "It's a good thing it wasn't a golf ball or he'd still be diggin'."

Everyone laughed even harder.

"En voiture! Verdun! En voiture," the conductor cried again.

"We've got to go," Kyla said.

Hoop and Raven stood motionless, watching as the nurses merged into the crowd and disappeared out the door.

"Now, that is one of the loveliest lassies I've ever seen in my life," Raven said.

"Isn't she, though?" Hoop said in a dreamy tone. "How many hospitals are there in Verdun, do you think?"

"We used to have to go up there from Pont-A-Mousson. There are plenty of them."

"Man, I don't want her to get away. Maybe I should find out what hospital she's going to?"

"I would."

Hoop raced through the canteen and across the street. He flew through the depot as if going down court. Kyla was just mounting the steps of the car.

"Kyla! Kyla!"

She stopped mid-flight and spun around, a surprised look on her face.

He ran up to her. "What hospital are you assigned to? If you don't mind my asking?"

Kyla turned to Connie standing on the vestibule.

"I can't remember." Connie fumbled inside her manila envelope. "ere it is! Petit Monthairon."

Kyla turned back. "Aye. Petit Monthairon."

Hoop swallowed hard. "Do you mind if I look you up. If I get up there?"

Kyla paused. The passengers waiting to board became restless. She looked down on him. "No, I doon't mind."

Relief swept over him. Grinning broadly, he tipped his hat. "Hope to see you, then."

She was gone. Hoop looked in the windows, but they were fogged. He mumbled aloud, in a daze, "Monthairon. Monthairon."

He wandered back through the depot. *I wonder if I'll ever see her again. I've got to. Somehow, someway, I've got to get up there.*