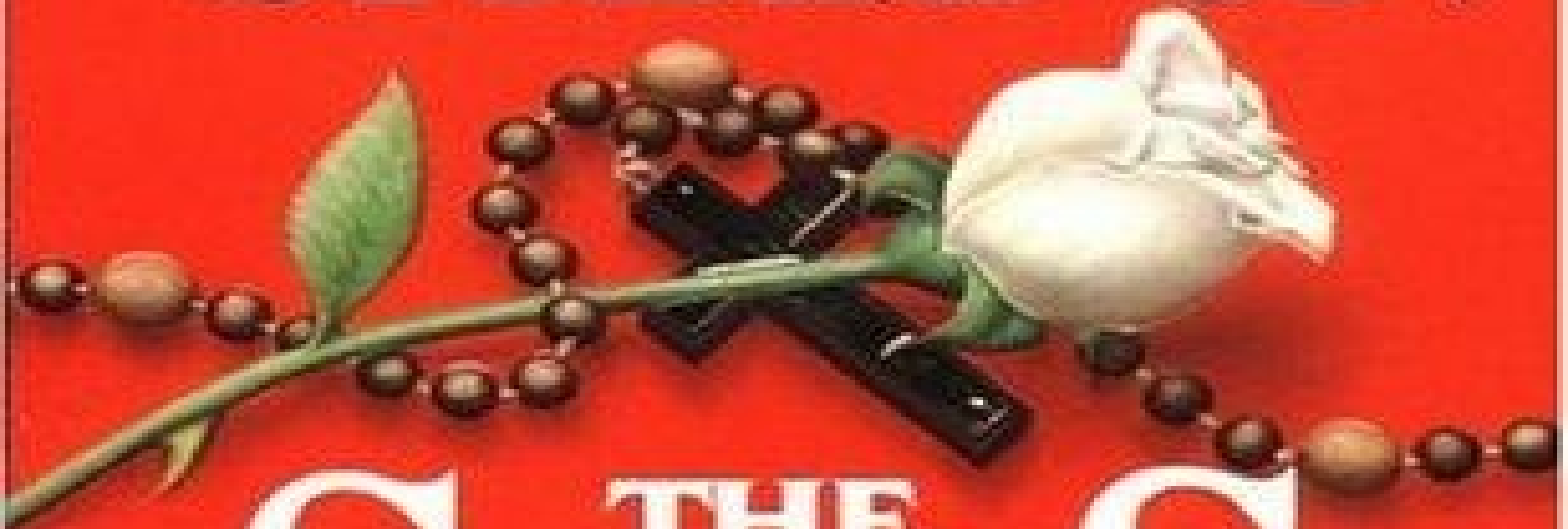


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Four nuns find themselves suddenly thrust into a hostile world they long ago abandoned for the safety of the convent. Unwittingly they become pawns in a battle between the charismatic Jaime Miro, leader of the outlawed Basque nationalists, and the ruthless Colonel Ramon Acoea of the Spanish Army. FOUR WOMEN -AND THE MEN THEY ARE FORBIDDEN TO LOVE MEGAN the orphan, who feels an overpowering attraction to Jaime Miro LUCIA the fiery Sicilian beauty on the run for murder - and Rubio Arzano, the freedom fighter who risks his life to save her TERESA whose guilty conscience finally drives her to betray her friends GRACIELA who bears a terrible secret that almost destroys her and the courageous Ricardo Mellado who loves her. The Sands of Time is an unforgettable adventure and a heartstopping romance, set against the timeless and dramatic landscape of Spain. By the same author THE NAKED FACE THE OTHER SIDE OF MIDNIGHT A STRANGER IN THE MIRROR BLOODLINE RAGE OF ANGELS MASTER OF THE GAME IF TOMORROW COMES WINDMILLS OF THE GODS MEMORIES OF MIDNIGHT THE DOOMSDAY CONSPIRACY THE STARS SHINE DOWN NOTHING LASTS FOREVER MORNING, NOON AND NIGHT THE BEST LAID PLANS SIDNEY SHELDON THE SANDS OF TIME

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HarperCoWmsPiiblishers 77-85 Fulham Palace Road, Hammersmith, London W6 8JB This paperback edition 1993 579864 Previously published in paperback by Fontana 1990 Special overseas edition 1989 Reprinted four times First published in Great Britain by Collins 1988 Copyright Sheldon Literary Trust 1988 Grateful acknowledgement is made to Marcelle Bernstein for use of material from Nuns. Grateful acknowledgement is made for use of 'Gacela of Desperate Love' by Federico Garcia Lorca, from Selected Poems of Federico Garcia Lorca, copyright 1952 by New Directions Publishing Corporation. Translated by W.S. Merwin. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation. Grateful acknowledgement is made for use of the Ernest Hemingway epigraph to the New Masses Magazine. ISBN 000 617443 4 Set in Times Printed and bound in Great Britain by Caledonian International Book Manufacturing Ltd, Glasgow All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers. This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser. To Frances Gordon, with love.

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My special thanks go to Alice Fisher, whose assistance in helping me research this novel was invaluable. 'm, Lives of great men all remind us We can make our lives sublime, And, departing, leave behind us Footprints on the Sands of Time. HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

The dead do not need to rise. They are a part of the earth now and the earth can never be conquered for the earth endures forever, it will outlive all systems of tyranny. Those who have entered it honourably, and no men entered earth more honourably than those who died in Spain, have already achieved immortality. ernest hemingway

AUTHOR'S NOTE This is a work of fiction. And yet ... The romantic land of flamenco and Don Quixote and exotic-looking senioritas with tortoise-shell combs in their hair is also the land of Torquemada, the Spanish Inquisition and one of the bloodiest civil wars in history. More than half a million people lost their lives in the battles for power between the Republicans and the rebel Nationalists in Spain. In 1936, between February and June, 269 political murders were committed, and the Nationalists executed Republicans at the rate of a thousand a month, with no mourning permitted. One hundred and sixty churches were burned to the ground, and nuns were removed forcibly from convents, 'as though,' wrote the Due de Saint-Simon, of an earlier conflict between the Spanish government and the church, 'they were whores in a bawdy house'. Newspaper offices were sacked and strikes and riots were endemic throughout the land. The Civil War ended in a victory for the Nationalists under Franco and, following his death, Spain became a monarchy. The Civil War, which lasted from 1936 to 1939, may be officially over, but the two Spains that fought it have never been reconciled. Today another war continues to rage in Spain, the guerrilla war fought by the Basques to regain the autonomy they had won under the Republic and lost under the Franco regime. The war is being fought with bombs, bank robberies to finance the bombs, assassinations and riots. When a member of ETA, a Basque guerrilla underground group, died in a Madrid hospital after being tortured by FR1;FR2;the police, the nationwide riots that followed led to the resignation of the Director General of Spain's police force, five security chiefs and two hundred senior police officers. In 1986, in Barcelona, the Basques publicly burned the Spanish flag, and in Pamplona thousands fled in fear when Basque nationalists clashed with police in a series of mutinies that eventually spread across Spain and threatened the stability of the government. The para-military police retaliated by going on a rampage, firing at random at Basques' homes and shops. The terrorism that goes on is more violent than ever. Dealing with two turbulent weeks in 1976, this is a work of fiction. And yet . . . 10

Chapter 1 Pamplona, Spain 1976 If the plan goes wrong, we will all die. He went over it again in his mind for the last time, probing, testing, searching for flaws. He could find none. The plan was daring, and it called for careful, split-second timing. If it worked, it would be a spectacular feat, worthy of the great El Cid. If it failed . . . Well, the time for worrying is past, Jaime Mir6 thought philosophically. It's time for action. Jaime Mir6 was a legend, a hero to the Basque people and anathema to the Spanish government. He was six feet tall, with a strong, intelligent face, a muscular body, and brooding dark eyes. Witnesses tended to describe him as taller than he was, darker than he was, fiercer than he was. He was a complex man, a realist who understood the enormous odds against him, a romantic ready to die for what he believed. Pamplona was a town gone mad. It was the final morning of the running of the bulls, the Fiesta de San Fermin, the annual celebration held from 7 July to the 14th. Thirty thousand visitors had swarmed into the city from all over the world. Some had come merely to watch the dangerous bull-running spectacle, others to prove their manhood by taking part in it, running in front of the charging beasts. All the hotel rooms had long since been taken, and university students from Navarra had bedded down in doorways, bank entrances, cars, the public square, and even the streets and pavements of the town. 11 me tourists packKea me cares ana noieis, watcmng me noisy, colourful parades of papier machegigantes, and listening to the music of the marching bands. Members of the parade wore violet cloaks, some with hoods of green, others garnet, and still others wearing golden hoods. Flowing through the streets, the processions looked like rivers of rainbows. Exploding firecrackers running along poles and wires of the tramways added to the noise and general confusion.

The crowd had come to attend the evening bullfights, but the most spectacular event was the Encierro - the early morning running of the bulls that would fight later in the day. Ten minutes before midnight in the darkened streets of the lower part of town, the bulls had been driven from the corrales de gas, the reception pens, to run across the river on a bridge to the corral at the bottom of Calle Santo Domingo, where they would be kept for the night. In the morning they would be turned loose to run along the narrow Calle Santo Domingo, penned in the street by wooden barricades at each corner until at the end they would run into the corrales at the Plaza de Hemingway, where they would be held until the afternoon bullfight. From midnight until 6.00 a.m., the visitors stayed awake, drinking and singing and making love, too excited to sleep. Those who would participate in the running of the bulls wore the red scarves of San Fermin around their throats. At a quarter to six in the morning, bands started circulating through the streets, playing the stirring music of Navarre. At seven o'clock sharp, a rocket flew into the air to signal that the gates of the corral had been opened. The crowd was filled with feverish anticipation. Moments later a second rocket went up to warn the town that the bulls were running. What followed was an unforgettable spectacle. First came the sound. It started as a faint, distant ripple on the wind, almost imperceptible, and then it grew louder and louder until it became an explosion of pounding hoofs, and suddenly bursting into view appeared six oxen and six enormous bulls. 12

Each weighing 1,510 pounds, they charged down the Calle Santo Domingo like deadly express trains. Inside the wooden barricades that had been placed at each intersecting street corner to keep the bulls confined to the one street, were hundreds of eager, nervous young men who intended to prove their bravery by facing the maddened animals. The bulls raced down from the far end of the street, past the Calle Estafeta and the Calle de Javier, past farmacias and clothing stores and fruit markets, towards the Plaza de Hemingway, and there were cries of '¡Ole! from the frenzied crowd. As the animals charged nearer, a mad scramble began to escape the sharp horns and lethal hoofs. The sudden reality of approaching death made some of the participants run for the safety of doorways and fire escapes. They were followed by taunts of 'cobardori - coward. A few in the path of the bulls stumbled and fell and were quickly healed to safety. A small boy and his grandfather were standing behind the barricades, both breathless with the excitement of the spectacle taking place only a few feet from them. 'Look at them!' the old man exclaimed. '¡Magnificor The little boy shuddered. 'Tengo miedo, abuelo. I'm afraid.' The old man put his arm around him. '¡Si, Manuel. It is frightening. But wonderful, too. I once ran with the bulls. There's nothing like it. You test yourself against death, and it makes you feel like a man.' As a rule, it took two minutes for the animals to gallop the 900 yards along the Calle Santo Domingo to the arena, and the moment the bulls were safely in the corral, a third rocket would be sent into the air. On this day, the third rocket did not go off, for an incident occurred that had never happened in Pamplona's 400-year history of the running of the bulls. As the animals raced down the narrow street, half a dozen men dressed in the colourful costumes of the feria shifted the wooden barricades and the bulls found themselves forced off the restricted street and turned loose into the heart of 13 the city. What had a moment before been a happy celebration instantly turned into a nightmare. The frenzied beasts charged into the stunned onlookers. The young boy and his grandfather were among the first to die, knocked down and trampled by the charging bulls. Vicious horns sliced into a baby's pram, killing an infant and sending its mother down to the ground to be crushed. Death was in the air everywhere. The animals crashed into helpless bystanders, knocking down women and children, plunging their long, deadly horns into pedestrians, food stands, statues, sweeping aside everything unlucky enough to be in their path. People were screaming in terror, desperately fighting to get out of the way of the lethal behemoths. A bright red truck suddenly appeared in the path of the bulls and they turned and charged towards it, down the Calle de Estrella, the street that led to the carcel, Pamplona's prison. The carcel is a forbidding-looking two-storey stone building with heavily barred windows. There are turrets at each of its four corners, and the red and yellow Spanish flag flies over the door. A stone gate leads to a small courtyard. The second floor of the building consists of a row of cells that holds prisoners condemned to die. Inside the prison, a heavyset guard in the uniform of the policia armada was leading a priest garbed in plain black robes along the second floor corridor. The policeman carried a sub-machine-gun. Noting the questioning look in the priest's eye at the sight of the weapon, the guard said, 'One can't be too careful here. Father. We have the scum of the earth on this floor.' The guard directed the priest to walk through a metal detector very much like those used at airports. 'I'm sorry, Father, but the rules 'Of course, my son.' As the priest passed through the security portal, a 14

sneKing siren cut through the corridor. The guard instinctively tightened his grip on his weapon. The priest turned and smiled back at the guard. 'My mistake,' he said as he removed a heavy metal cross that hung from his neck on a silver chain and handed it to the guard. This time as he passed through, the machine was silent. The guard handed the cross back to the priest and the two continued their journey deeper into the bowels of the prison. The stench in the corridor near the cells was overpowering. The guard was in a philosophical mood. 'You know, you're wasting your time here. Father. These animals have no souls to save.' 'Still, we must try, my son.' The guard shook his head. 'I tell you the gates of hell are waiting to welcome both of them.' The priest looked at the guard in surprise. 'Both of them? I was told there were three who needed confession.' The guard shrugged. 'We saved you some time. Zamora died in the infirmary this morning. Heart attack.' The men had reached the two farthest cells. 'Here we are. Father.' The guard unlocked a cell door, then stepped cautiously back as the priest entered the cell. The guard locked the door again, and stood in the corridor, alert for any sign of trouble. The priest went to the figure lying on the dirty prison cot. 'Your name, my son?' 'Ricardo Mellado.' The priest stared down at him. It was difficult to tell what the man looked like. His face was swollen and raw. His eyes were almost shut. Through thick lips, he said, 'I'm glad you were able to come. Father.' The priest replied, 'Your salvation is the church's duty, my son.' "They are going to hang me this morning?" The priest patted his shoulder gently. 'You have been sentenced to die by the garrote.' 15

Ricardo Mellado stared up at him. 'No!' 'I'm sorry. The orders were given by the Prime Minister himself.' The priest placed his hand on the prisoner's head and intoned: 'Dime tus pecados...' Ricardo Mellado said, 'I have sinned greatly in thought, word and deed, and I repent all my sins with all my heart.' Ruego a nuestro Padre celestial por la salvacion de to alma. En el nombre del Padre, del Hijo y del Espiritu Santo . . . The guard listening outside the cell thought to himself: What a stupid waste of time. God will spit in that one's eye. The priest was finished. 'Adios, my son. May God receive your soul in peace.' The priest moved to the cell door and the guard unlocked it, then stepped back, keeping his gun aimed at the prisoner. When the door was locked again, the guard moved to the adjoining cell and opened the door. 'He's all yours. Father.' The priest stepped into the second cell. The man inside had also been badly beaten. The priest looked at him a long moment. 'What is your name, my son?' 'Felix Carpio.' He was a husky, bearded man with a fresh, livid scar on his cheek that the beard failed to conceal. 'I'm not afraid to die. Father.' 'That is well, my son. In the end none of us is spared.' As the priest began to hear Carpio's confession, waves of distant sound, at first muffled, then growing louder, began to reverberate through the building. It was the thunder of pounding hoofs and the screams of the running mob. The guard listened, startled. The sounds were rapidly moving closer. 'You'd better hurry, Father. Something peculiar is happening outside.' 'I'm finished.' The guard quickly unlocked the cell door. The priest stepped out into the corridor and the guard locked the door behind him. There was the sound of a loud crash from the 16

front of the prison. The guard turned to peer out the narrow, barred window. 'What the hell was that noise?' The priest said, 'It sounded as though someone wishes an audience with us. May I borrow that?' 'Borrow what?' 'Your weapon, por favor.' 'As the priest spoke, he stepped close to the guard. He silently removed the top of the large cross that hung around his neck, revealing a long, wicked-looking stiletto. In one lightning move he plunged the knife into the guard's chest. 'You see, my son,' Jaime Miro said, as he pulled the sub-machine-gun from the dying guard's hands, 'God and I decided that you no longer have need of this weapon.' The guard slumped to the cement floor. Jaime Miro took the keys from the body and swiftly opened the two cell doors. The sounds from the street were getting louder. 'Let's move,' Jaime commanded. Ricardo Mellado picked up the machine gun. 'You make a damned good priest. You almost convinced me.' He tried to smile with his swollen mouth. 'They really worked you two over, didn't they? Don't worry. They'll pay for it.' Jaime Miro put his arms around the two men and helped them down the corridor. 'What happened to Zamora?' The guards beat him to death. We could hear his screams. They took him off to the infirmary and said he died of a heart attack.' Ahead of them was a locked iron door. 'Wait here,' Jaime Miro said. He approached the door and said to the guard on the other side, 'I'm finished here.' The guard unlocked the door. 'You'd better hurry, Father. There's some kind of disturbance going on out -' He never finished his sentence. As Jaime's knife went into him, blood welled out of the guard's mouth. Jaime motioned to the two men. 'Come on.' 17 Felix Carpio picked up the guard's gun, and they started downstairs. The scene outside was chaos. The police were running around frantically trying to see what was happening and to deal with the crowds of screaming people in the courtyard who were scrambling to escape the maddened bulls. One of the bulls had charged into the front of the building, smashing the stone entrance. Another was tearing into the body of a uniformed guard on the ground. The red truck was in the courtyard, its motor running. In the confusion, the three men went almost unnoticed. Those who did see them were too busy saving themselves to do anything about them. Without a word, Jaime and his men jumped into the back of the truck and it sped off, scattering frantic pedestrians through the crowded streets. The guardia civil, the paramilitary rural police decked out in green uniforms and black patent leather hats, were trying in vain to control the hysterical mob. The policia armada, stationed in provincial capitals, were also helpless in the face of the mad spectacle. People were struggling to flee in every direction, desperately trying to avoid the enraged bulls. The danger lay less with the bulls and more with the people themselves as they trampled one another in their eagerness to escape, and old men and women were pushed aside under the feet of the running mob. Jaime stared in dismay at the stunning spectacle. 'It wasn't planned for it to happen this way!' he exclaimed. He stared helplessly at the

carnage that was being wreaked, but there was nothing he could do to stop it. He closed his eyes to shut out the sight. The truck reached the outskirts of Pamplona and headed south, leaving behind the noise and confusion of the rioting. 'Where are we going, Jaime?' Ricardo Mellado asked. "There's a safe house outside Torre. We'll stay there until dark and then move on.' Felix Carpio was wincing with pain. 18

Jaime Miro watched mm, ms race nnea with compassion. 'We'll be there soon, my friend,' he said gently. He was unable to get the terrible scene at Pamplona out of his mind. Thirty minutes later they approached the little village of Torre, and skirted it to drive to an isolated house in the mountains above the village. Jaime Mir6 helped the two men out of the back of the red truck. 'You'll be picked up at midnight,' the driver said. 'Have them bring a doctor,' Jaime replied. 'And get rid of the truck.' The three of them entered the house. It was a farmhouse, simple and comfortable, with a fireplace in the living room and a beamed ceiling. There was a note on the table. Jaime Mir6 read it and smiled at the welcoming phrase: Mi casa es su casa. On the bar were bottles of wine. Jaime Mir6 poured drinks. Ricardo Mellado said, 'There are no words to thank you, my friend. Here's to you.' Jaime raised his glass. 'Here's to freedom.' There was the sudden chirp of a canary in a cage. Jaime Mir6 walked over to it, and he watched its wild fluttering for a moment. Then he opened the cage, gently lifted the bird out and carried it to an open window. 'Fly away, pajarito,' he said softly. 'All living creatures should be free.' 19 Chapter 2 Madrid Prime Minister Leopoldo Martinez was in a rage. He was a small, bespectacled man, and his whole body shook as he talked. 'Jaime Miro must be stopped,' he cried. His voice was high and shrill. 'Do you understand me?' He glared at the half dozen men gathered in the room. 'We're looking for one terrorist, and the whole army and police force are unable to find him.' The meeting was taking place at Moncloa Palace, where the Prime Minister lived and worked, five kilometres from the centre of Madrid, on the Carretera de Galicia, a highway with no identifying signs. The building itself was green brick, with wrought iron balconies, green window shades, and guard towers at each corner. It was a hot, dry day, and through the windows, as far as the eye could see, columns of heat waves rose like battalions of ghostly soldiers. 'Yesterday Miro turned Pamplona into a battleground.' Martinez slammed a fist down on his desk. 'He murdered two prison guards and smuggled two of his terrorists out of prison. Many innocent people were killed by the bulls he let loose.' For a moment no one said anything. When the Prime Minister had taken office, he had declared, smugly, 'My first act will be to put a stop to these separatist groups. Madrid is the great unifier. It transforms Andalusians, Basques, Catalans and Galicians into Spaniards.' 20

He had been unduly optimistic. 1 he fiercely independent Basques had other ideas, and the wave of bombings, bank robberies and demonstrations by terrorists of the ETA organization, Euzkadi ta Azkatasuna, had continued unabated. The man at Martinez's right said quietly, 'I'll find him.' The speaker was Colonel Ramon Acoca, head of the GOE, the Grupo de Operaciones Especiales, formed to pursue Basque terrorists. Acoca was a giant, in his middle sixties, with a scarred face and cold, obsidian eyes. He had been a young officer under Francisco Franco during the Civil War, and he was still fanatically devoted to Franco's philosophy, 'We are responsible only to God and to history.' Acoca was a brilliant officer, and he had been one of Franco's most trusted aides. The Colonel missed the iron-fisted discipline, the swift punishment of those who questioned or disobeyed the law. He had gone through the turmoil of the Civil War, with its Nationalist alliance of Monarchists, rebel generals, landowners, church hierarchy and the fascist Falangists on one side, and the Republican government forces, including Socialists, Communists, liberals and Basque and Catalan separatists on the other; it had been a terrible time of destruction and killing in a madness that pulled in men and war material from a dozen countries and left a horrifying death toll. And now the Basques were fighting and killing again. Colonel Acoca headed an efficient, ruthless cadre of antiterrorists. His men worked underground, wore disguises and were neither publicized nor photographed for fear of retaliation. If anyone can stop Jaime Miro, Colonel Acoca can, the Prime Minister thought. But there was a catch: Who's going to be the one to stop Colonel Acoca? Putting the Colonel in charge had not been the Prime Minister's idea. He had received a phone call in the middle of the night on his private line. He recognized the voice immediately. 21 (W a. "we are greatly disturbed by the activities of Jaime Mir6 and his terrorists. We suggest that you put Colonel Ramon Acoca in charge of the GOE. Is that clear?" Yes, sir. It will be taken care of immediately.' The line went dead. The voice belonged to a member of the OPUS MUNDO. The organization was a secret cabal that included bankers, lawyers, heads of powerful corporations and government ministers. It was rumoured to have enormous funds at its disposal, but where the money came from or how it was used or manipulated was a mystery. It was not considered healthy to ask too many questions about it. The Prime Minister had placed Colonel Acoca in charge, as he had been instructed to, but the giant had turned out to be an uncontrollable fanatic. His GOE had created a reign of terror. The Prime Minister thought of the Basque rebels Acoca's men had caught near Pamplona. They had been convicted and sentenced to hang. It was Colonel Acoca who had insisted that they be executed by the barbaric garrote vil, the iron collar fitted with a spike which gradually tightened, eventually cracked the vertebra and severed the victim's spinal cord. Jaime Miro had become an obsession with Colonel Acoca. 'I want his head,' Colonel Acoca said. 'Cut off his head and the Basque movement dies.' An exaggeration, the Prime Minister felt, although he had to admit that there was a core of truth in it. Jaime Miro was a charismatic leader, fanatical about his cause, and therefore dangerous. But in his own way, the Prime Minister thought, Colonel Acoca is just as dangerous. Primo Casado, the Director General de Seguridad, was speaking. 'Your Excellency, no one could have foreseen what happened in Pamplona. Jaime Mir6 is 'I know what he is,' the Prime Minister snapped. 'I want to know where he is.' He turned to Colonel Acoca. 'I'm on his trail,' the Colonel said. His voice chilled the

room. 'I would like to remind Your Excellency that we are not fighting just one man. We are fighting the Basque people. They give Jaime Mir6 and his terrorists food and weapons and shelter. The man is a hero to them. But do not worry. Soon he will be a hanging hero. After I give him a fair trial, of course.' Not we. I. The Prime Minister wondered whether the others had noticed. Yes, he thought nervously. Something will have to be done about the Colonel soon. The Prime Minister got to his feet. "That will be all for now, gentlemen." The men rose to leave. All except Colonel Acoca. He stayed. Leopoldo Martinez began to pace. 'Damn the Basques. Why can't they be satisfied just to be Spaniards? What more do they want?' 'They're greedy for power,' Acoca said. 'They want autonomy, their own language and their flag 'No. Not as long as I hold this office. I'm not going to permit them to tear pieces out of Spain. The government will tell them what they can have and what they can't have. They're nothing but rabble who . . . ' An aide came into the room. 'Excuse me. Your Excellency,' he said apologetically. 'Bishop Ibanez has arrived.' 'Send him in.' The Colonel's eyes narrowed. 'You can be sure the church is behind all this. It's time we taught them a lesson.' The Church is one of the great ironies of our history, Colonel Acoca thought bitterly. In the beginning of the Civil War, the Catholic Church had been on the side of the Nationalist forces. The Pope backed Generalissimo Franco, and in so doing allowed him to proclaim that he was fighting on the side of God. But when the Basque churches and monasteries and priests were attacked, the Church withdrew its support. 'You must give the Basques and the Catalans more freedom,' the Church had demanded. 'And you must stop executing Basque priests.' (Jeneralissimo Franco had been furious. How dare the Church try to dictate to the government? A war of attrition began. More churches and monasteries were attacked by Franco's forces. Nuns and priests were murdered. Bishops were placed under house arrest, and priests all over Spain were fined for giving sermons that the government considered seditious. It was only when the Church threatened Franco with excommunication that he stopped his attacks. The goddamned Church! Acoca thought. With Franco dead it was interfering again. He turned to the Prime Minister. 'It's time the bishop is told who's running Spain.' Bishop Calvo Ibanez was a thin, frail-looking man with a cloud of white hair swirling around his head. He peered at the two men through his pince-nez spectacles. 'Buenos tardes.' Colonel Acoca felt the bile rise in his throat. The very sight of clergymen made him ill. They were Judas goats leading their stupid lambs to slaughter. The bishop stood there, waiting for an invitation to sit down. It did not come. Nor was he introduced to the Colonel. It was a deliberate slight. The Prime Minister looked to Acoca for direction. Acoca said curtly, 'Some disturbing news has been brought to our attention. Basque rebels are reported to be holding meetings in Catholic monasteries. It has also been reported that the Church is allowing monasteries and convents to store arms for the rebels.' There was steel in his voice. 'When you help the enemies of Spain, you become an enemy of Spain.' Bishop Ibanez stared at him for a moment, then turned to Leopoldo Martinez. 'Your Excellency, with due respect, we are all children of Spain. The Basques are not your enemy. All they ask is the freedom to ' "They don't ask," Acoca roared. "They demand! They go around the country pillaging, robbing banks and killing policemen, and you dare to say they are not our enemies?"

I admit that mere have been inexcusable excesses. But sometimes in fighting for what one believes "They don't believe in anything but themselves. They care nothing about Spain. It is as one of our great writers said, "No one in Spain is concerned about the common good. Each group is concerned only with itself. The Church, the Basques, the Catalans. Each one says fuck the others." The bishop was aware that Colonel Acoca had misquoted Ortega y Gasset. The full quote had included the army and the government; but he wisely said nothing. He turned to the Prime Minister again, hoping for a more rational discussion. 'Your Excellency, the Catholic Church ' The Prime Minister felt that Acoca had pushed far enough. Don't misunderstand us. Bishop. In principle, of course, this government is behind the Catholic Church one hundred per cent.' Colonel Acoca spoke up again. 'But we cannot permit your churches and monasteries and convents to be used against us. If you continue to allow the Basques to store arms in them and to hold meetings, you will have to take the consequences.' 'I am sure that the reports that you have received are erroneous,' the bishop said smoothly. 'However, I shall certainly investigate at once.' The Prime Minister murmured, 'Thank you. Bishop. That will be all.' Prime Minister Martinez and Colonel Acoca watched him depart. 'What do you think?' Martinez asked. 'He knows what's going on.' The Prime Minister sighed. have enough problems right now without stirring up trouble with the Church. 'If the Church is for the Basques, then it is against us.' Colonel Acoca's voice hardened. 'I would like your permission to teach the bishop a lesson.' The Prime Minister was stopped by the look of fanaticism 111 me man's eyes. He became cautious. 'Have you really had reports that the churches are aiding the rebels?' 'Of course. Excellency.' There was no way of determining if the man was telling the truth. The Prime Minister knew how much Acoca hated the Church. But it might be good to let the Church have a taste of the whip, providing Colonel Acoca did not go too far. Prime Minister Martinez stood there thoughtfully. It was Acoca who broke the silence. 'If the churches are sheltering terrorists, then the churches must be punished.' Reluctantly, the Prime Minister nodded. 'Where will you start?' 'Jaime Miro and his men were seen in Avila yesterday. They are probably hiding at the convent there.' The Prime Minister made up his mind. 'Search it,' he said. That decision set off a chain of events that was to rock all of Spain and shock the world. 26

Chapter 3 Avila The silence was like a gentle snowfall, soft and hushed, as soothing as the whisper of a summer wind, as quiet as the passage of stars. The Cistercian Convent of the Strict Observance lay outside the walled town of Avila, the highest city in Spain, 112 kilometres north-west of Madrid. The convent had been built for silence. The rules had been adopted in 1601 and remained unchanged through the centuries: liturgy, spiritual exercise, strict enclosure, penance and silence. Always the silence. The convent was a simple, four-sided group of rough stone buildings around a cloister dominated by the church. Around the central court the open arches allowed the light to pour in on the broad flagstones of the floor where the nuns glided noiselessly by. There were forty nuns at the convent, praying in the church and living in the cloister. The convent at Avila was one of seven left in Spain, a survivor out of hundreds that had been destroyed by the Civil War in one of the periodic anti-Church movements that took place in Spain over the centuries. The Cistercian Convent of the Strict Observance was devoted solely to a life of prayer. It was a place without seasons or time and those who entered were forever removed from the outside world. The Cistercian life was contemplative and penitential; the divine office was recited daily and enclosure was complete and permanent. All the sisters dressed identically, and their clothing, like 27 everything else in the convent, was touched by the symbolism of centuries. The capucha, the cloak and hood, symbolized innocence and simplicity, the linen tunic the renouncement of the works of the world, and mortification, the scapular, the small squares of woollen cloth worn over the shoulders, the willingness to labour. A wimple, a covering of linen laid in plaits over the head and around the chin, sides of the face and neck, completed the habit. Inside the walls of the convent was a system of internal passageways and staircases linking the dining room, community room, the cells and the chapel, and everywhere there was an atmosphere of cold, clean spaciousness. Thick-paneled latticed windows overlooked a high-walled garden. Every window was covered with iron bars and was above the line of vision, so that there would be no outside distractions. The refectory, the dining hall, was long and austere, its windows shuttered and curtained. The candles in the ancient candlesticks cast evocative shadows on the ceilings and walls. In four hundred years nothing inside the walls of the convent had changed, except the faces. The sisters had no personal possessions, for they desired to be poor, emulating the poverty of Christ. The church itself was bare of ornaments, save for a priceless solid gold cross that had been a long-ago gift from a wealthy postulant. Because it was so out of keeping with the austerity of the order, it was kept hidden away in a cabinet in the refectory. A plain, wooden cross hung at the altar of the church. The women who shared their lives with the Lord lived together, worked together, ate together and prayed together, yet they never touched and never spoke. The only exception permitted was when they heard mass or when the Reverend Mother Prioress Betina addressed them in the privacy of her office. Even then, an ancient sign language was used as much as possible. 28

The Reverend Mother was a religieuse in her seventies, a bright-faced robin of a woman, cheerful and energetic, who gloried in the peace and joy of convent life, and of a life devoted to God. Fiercely protective of her nuns, she felt more pain when it was necessary to enforce discipline, than did the one being punished. The nuns walked through the cloisters and corridors with downcast eyes, hands folded in their sleeves at breast level, passing and re-passing their sisters without a word or sign of recognition. The only voice of the convent was its bells - the bells that Victor Hugo called 'the Opera of the Steeples'. The sisters came from disparate backgrounds and from many different countries. Their families were aristocrats, farmers, soldiers . . . They had come to the convent as rich and poor, educated and ignorant, miserable and exalted, but now they were one in the eyes of God, united in their desire for eternal marriage to Jesus. The living conditions in the convent were spartan. In winter the cold was knifing, and a chill, pale light filtered in through leaded windows. The nuns slept fully dressed on pallets of straw, covered with rough woollen sheets, each in her tiny cell, furnished only with a straight-backed wooden chair. There was no washstand. A small earthenware jug and basin stood in a corner on the floor. No nun was ever permitted to enter the cell of another, except for the Reverend Mother Betina. There was no recreation of any kind, only work and prayers. There were work areas for knitting, book binding, weaving and making bread. There were eight hours of prayer each day: Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers and Compline. Besides these there were other devotions: benedictions, hymns and litanies. Matins were said when half the world was asleep and the other half was absorbed in sin. Lauds, the office of daybreak, followed Matins, and the 29 . . . ,g sun was nailed as the figure of Chi triumphant and glorified. Prime was the church's morning pra asking for the blessings on the work of the day. Terce was at nine o'clock in the morning consecrated by St Augustine to the Holy Spirit. Sext was at 11.30 a.m., evoked to qnch the heat of human passions. None was silently recited at three in a afternoon, the hour of Christ's death. Vespers was the evening service of th -ch, as Lauds was her daybreak prayer. Compline was the completion of the lie Hours of the day. A form of night prayers, a preparation for death as well as sleep, ending the day on a note of f, submission: Manus tuas, domine, commendo spiritum meum Redemisti nos, domine, deus, veritates. In some of the other orders, flagellation ad been stopped, but in the cloistered Cistercian convents monasteries it survived. At least once a week, and sometigg every day the nuns punished their bodies with the Discipp 3 twelve-inch long whip of thin waxed cord with six knotted tails that brought agonizing pain, and was used to 13 e back legs and buttocks. Bernard of Clairvaux, the aic abbot of the Cistercians, had admonished: 'The body o-Qt is crushed . . . our bodies must be conformed to the yss of our Lord's wounded body.' It was a life more austere than in an, prison vet the inmates lived in an ecstasy such as they ngyg. . known in the outside world. They had renounce (owe, possessions and freedom of choice, but t giving up those things they had also renounced greed nd competition, hatred and envy, and all the pressures and temptations that the outside world imposed. Inside the co ned an all-pervading peace and the ineffable seng of joy at being one with God. There was an indescribabg serenity within the walls of the convent and in the hearts c ose who lived there. If the convent was a prison, it was pion in God's 30

Eden, with the knowledge of a happy eternity for those who had freely chosen to be there and to remain there. Sister Lucia was awakened by the tolling of the convent bell. She opened her eyes, startled and disoriented for an instant. The little cell she slept in was dimly black. The sound of the bell told her that it was 3.00 a.m., when the office of vigils began, while the world was still in darkness. Shit! This routine is going to kill me. Sister Lucia thought. She lay back on her tiny, uncomfortable cot, desperate for a cigarette. Reluctantly, she dragged herself out of bed. The heavy habit she wore and slept in rubbed against her sensitive skin like sandpaper. She thought of all the beautiful designer gowns hanging in her apartment in Rome and at her chalet in Gstaad. The Valentines and Armanis and Gianni. From outside her cell Sister Lucia could hear the soft, swishing movement of the nuns as they gathered in the passage. Carelessly, she made up her bed and stepped out into the long corridor, where the nuns were lining up, eyes downcast. Slowly, they all began to move towards the chapel. They look like a bunch of penguins. Sister Lucia thought. It was beyond her comprehension why these women had deliberately thrown away their lives, giving up sex, pretty clothes and gourmet food. Without those things, what reason is there to go on living? And the goddamned rules! When Sister Lucia had first entered the convent, the Reverend Mother had said to her, 'You must walk with your head bowed. Keep your hands folded under your habit. Take short steps. Walk slowly. You must never make eye contact with any of the other sisters, or even glance at them. You may not speak. Your ears are to hear only God's words.' 'Yes, Reverend Mother.' For the next month Lucia took instruction. "Those who come here come not to join others, but to dwell alone with God, solitariamente. Solitude of spirit is essential to a union with God. It is safeguarded by the rules of silence.' 'Yes, Reverend Mother.' 31 'You must always obey the silence of the eyes. Looking into the

eyes of others would distract you with useless images.' 'Yes, Reverend Mother.' 'The first lesson you will learn here will be to rectify the past, to purge out old habits and worldly inclinations, to blot out every image of the past. You will do purifying penance and mortification to strip yourself of self-will and self-love. It is not enough for us to be sorry for our past offences.'! Once we discover the infinite beauty and holiness of God, we want to make up not only for our own sins, but for every sin that has ever been committed. 'Yes, Reverend Mother.' 'You must struggle with sensuality, what John of the Cross called, "the night of the senses"!' 'Yes, Reverend Mother.' 'Each nun lives in silence and in solitude, as though she were already in heaven. In this pure, precious silence for which she hungers, she is able to listen to the infinite silence and possess God.' At the end of the first month, Lucia took her initial vows. On the day of the ceremony she had her hair shorn. It was a traumatic experience. The Reverend Mother Prioress performed the act herself. She summoned Lucia into her office and motioned for her to sit down. She stepped behind her, and before Lucia knew what was happening, she heard the snip of scissors and felt something tugging at her hair. She started to protest, but she suddenly realized that what was happening could only improve her disguise, can always let it grow back later, Lucia thought. Meanwhile, I'm going to look like a plucked chicken. When Lucia returned to the grim cubicle she had been assigned, she thought: This place is a snake pit. The floor consisted of bare boards. The pallet and the hard-backed chair took up most of the room. She was desperate to get hold of a newspaper. Fat chance, she thought. In this place

they had never heard of newspapers, let alone radio or television. There were no links to the outside world at all. But what got on Lucia's nerves most of all was the unnatural silence. The only communication was through hand signals, and learning those drove her crazy. When she needed a broom, she was taught to move her outstretched right hand from right to left, as though sweeping. When the Reverend Mother was displeased, she brought together the tips of her little fingers three times in front of her body, the other fingers pressing into her palm. When Lucia was slow in doing her work, the Reverend Mother pressed the palm of her right hand against her left shoulder. To reprimand Lucia, she scratched her own cheek near her right ear with all the fingers of her right hand in a downward motion. For Christ's sake, Lucia thought, it looks like she's scratching a flea bite. They had reached the chapel. The nuns said a silent mass, the sequence from the age-old Sanctus to the Pater Noster, but Sister Lucia's thoughts were on more important things than God. In another month or two, when the police stop looking for me, I'll be out of this madhouse. After morning prayers. Sister Lucia marched with the others to the dining room, surreptitiously breaking the rule, as she did every day, by studying their faces. It was her only entertainment. It was incredible to think that none of them knew what the other sisters looked like. She was fascinated by the faces of the nuns. Some were old, some were young, some pretty, some ugly. She could not understand why they all seemed so happy. There were three faces that Lucia found particularly interesting. One was Sister Teresa, a woman who appeared to be in her sixties. She was far from beautiful, and yet there was a spirituality about her that gave her an almost unearthly loveliness. She seemed always to be smiling

inwardly, as though she carried some wonderful secret within herself. Another nun that Lucia found fascinating was Sister Graciela. She was a stunningly beautiful woman in her early thirties. She had olive skin, exquisite features, and eyes that were luminous black pools. She could have been a film star, Lucia thought. What's her story? Why would she bury herself in a place like this? The third nun who captured Lucia's interest was Sister Megan. Blue-eyed, blonde eyebrows and lashes. She was in her late twenties and had a fresh, open faced look. What is she doing here? What are any of these women doing here? They're locked up behind these walls, given a tiny cell to sleep in, rotten food, eight hours of prayers, hard work and too little sleep. They must be pazzo - all of them. She was better off than they were, because they were stuck here for the rest of their lives, while she would be out of here in a month or two. Maybe three, Lucia thought. This is a perfect hiding place. I'd be a fool to rush away. In a few months, the police will decide that I'm dead. When I leave here and get my money out of Switzerland, maybe I'll write a book about this crazy place. A few days earlier Sister Lucia had been sent by the Reverend Mother to the office to retrieve a paper and while there she had taken the opportunity to start looking through the files. Unfortunately she had been caught in the act of snooping. 'You will do penance by using the Discipline,' the Mother Prioress Betina signalled her. Sister Lucia bowed her head meekly and signalled, 'Yes, Reverend Mother.' Lucia returned to her cell, and minutes later the nuns walking through the corridor heard the awful sound of the whip as it whistled through the air and fell again and again. 34

What they could not know was that Sister Lucia was whipping the bed. These freaks may be into S M, but not yours truly. Now they were seated in the refectory, forty nuns at two long tables. The Cistercian diet was strictly vegetarian. Because the body craved meat, it was forbidden. Long before dawn, a cup of tea or coffee and a few ounces of dry bread were served. The principal meal was taken at 11.00 a.m., and consisted of a thin soup, a few vegetables and occasionally a piece of fruit. We are not here to please our bodies, but to please God. I wouldn't feed this breakfast to my cat. Sister Lucia thought. I've been here two months, and I'll bet I've lost ten pounds. It's God's version of a health farm. When breakfast was ended, two nuns brought washing-up bowls to each end of the table and set them down. The sisters seated about the table sent their plates to the sister who had the bowl. She washed each plate, dried it on a towel and returned it to its owner. The water got darker and greasier. And they're going to live like this for the rest of their lives, Sister Lucia thought disgustedly. Oh, well. I can't complain. At least it's better than a life sentence in prison ... She would have given her immortal soul for a cigarette. Five hundred yards down the road. Colonel Ramon Acoca and two dozen carefully selected men from the GOE, the Grupo de Operaciones Especiales, were preparing to attack the convent. 35 FR1;Chapter Four Colonel Ramon Acoca had the instincts of a hunter. He loved the chase, but it was the kill that gave him a deep visceral satisfaction. He had once confided to a friend, 'I have an orgasm when I kill. It doesn't matter whether it's a deer or a rabbit or a man - there's something about taking a life that makes you feel like God.' Acoca had been in military intelligence, and he had quickly achieved a reputation for being brilliant. He was fearless, ruthless and intelligent, and the combination brought him to the attention of one of General Franco's aides. Acoca had joined Franco's staff as a lieutenant, and in less than three years he had risen to the rank of colonel, an almost unheard-of feat. He was put in charge of the Falangists, the special group used to terrorize those who opposed Franco. It was during the war that Acoca had been sent for by a member of the OPUS MUNDO, 'I want you to understand that we're speaking to you with the permission of General Franco.' 'Yes, sir.' 'We've been watching you. Colonel. We are pleased with what we see.' Thank you, sir.' 'From time to time we have certain assignments that are - shall we say - very confidential. And very dangerous.' 'I understand, sir.' 'We have many enemies. People who don't understand the importance of the work we're doing.' 'Yes, sir.'

'Sometimes they interfere with us. We can't permit that to happen.' No, sir.' 'I believe we could use a man like you. Colonel. I think we understand each other.' 'Yes, sir. I'd be honoured to be of service.' 'We would like you to remain in the army. That will be valuable to us. But from time to time, we will have you assigned to these special projects.' 'Thank you, sir.' 'You are never to speak of this.' 'No, sir.' The man behind the desk had made Acoca nervous. There was something overpoweringly frightening about him. In time. Colonel Acoca was called upon to handle half a dozen assignments for the OPUS MUNDO. As he had been told, they were all dangerous. And very confidential. On one of the missions Acoca had met a lovely young girl from a fine family. Up to then, all of his women had been whores or camp followers, and Acoca had treated them with savage contempt. Some of the women had genuinely fallen in love with him, attracted by his strength. He reserved the worst treatment for them. But Susana Cerredilla belonged to a different world. Her father was a professor at Madrid University, and Susana's mother was a lawyer. Susana was Seventeen years old, and she had the body of a woman and the angelic face of a Madonna. Ramon Acoca had never met anyone like this woman-child. Her gentle vulnerability brought out in him a tenderness he had not known he was capable of. He fell madly in love with her, and for reasons which neither her parents nor Acoca understood, she fell in love with him. On their honeymoon, it was as though Acoca had never known another woman. He had known lust, but the combination of love and passion was something he had never previously experienced. Three months after they were married, Susana informed him that she was pregnant. Acoca was wildly excited. To add to their joy, he was assigned to the beautiful little village of Castiblanca, in the Basque country. It was in the autumn of 1936 when the fighting between the Republicans and Nationalists was at its fiercest. On a peaceful Sunday morning, Ramon Acoca and his bride were having coffee in the village plaza when the square suddenly filled with Basque demonstrators. 'I want you to go home,' Acoca said. There's going to be trouble.' 'But you?' Please. I'll be all right.' The demonstrators were beginning to get out of hand. With relief, Ramon Acoca watched his bride walk away from the crowd towards a convent at the far end of the square. And as she reached it, the door to the convent suddenly swung open and armed Basques who had been hiding inside, swarmed out with blazing guns. Acoca had watched helplessly as his wife went down in a hail of bullets, and it was on that day that he had sworn vengeance on the Basques. The Church had also been responsible. And now he was in Avila, outside another convent. This time they'll die. Inside the convent, in the dark before dawn, Sister Teresa held the Discipline tightly in her right hand and whipped it hard across her body, feeling the knotted tails slashing into her as she silently recited the Miserere. She almost screamed aloud, but noise was not permitted, and she kept the screams inside her. Forgive me, Jesus, for my sins. Bear witness that I punish myself, as you were punished, and I inflict wounds upon myself, as wounds were inflicted upon you. Let me suffer, as you suffered. She was near fainting from the pain. Three more times she flagellated herself and then sank, agonized, upon her cot. She had not drawn blood. That was forbidden. Wincing 38

against the agony that each movement brought. Sister Teresa returned the whip to its black case and rested it in a corner. It was always there, a constant reminder that the slightest sin had to be paid for with pain. Sister Teresa's transgression had happened that morning as she was rounding the corner of a corridor, eyes down, and bumped into Sister Graciela. Startled, Sister Teresa had looked into Sister Graciela's face. Sister Teresa had immediately reported her infraction and the Reverend Mother Betina had frowned disapprovingly and made the sign of discipline, moving her right hand three times from shoulder to shoulder, her hand closed as though holding a whip, the tip of her thumb held against the inside of her forefinger. Lying on her cot that night, Sister Teresa had been unable to get out of her mind the extraordinarily beautiful face of the young girl she had gazed at. Sister Teresa knew that as long as she lived she would never speak to her and would never even look at her again, for the slightest sign of intimacy between nuns was severely punished. In an atmosphere of rigid moral and physical austerity, no relationships of any kind were allowed to develop. If two sisters worked side by side and seemed to enjoy each other's silent company, the Reverend Mother would immediately have them separated. Nor were the sisters permitted to sit next to the same person at table twice in a row. The church delicately called the attraction of one nun to another 'a particular friendship', and the penalty was swift and severe. Sister Teresa had served her punishment for breaking the rule. Now the tolling bell came to Sister Teresa as though from a great distance. It was the voice of God, reproving her. In the next cell, the sound of the bell rang through the corridors of Sister Graciela's dreams, and the pealing of the bell was mingled with the lubricious creak of bedsprings. The Moor was moving towards her, naked, his manhood 39 tumescent, his hands reaching out to grab her. Sister Graciela opened her eyes, instantly awake, her heart pounding frantically. She looked around, terrified, but she was alone in her tiny cell and the only sound was the reassuring tolling of the bell. Sister Graciela knelt at the side of her cot. Jesus, thank You for delivering me from the past. Thank You for the joy I have in being here in Your light. Let me glory only in the happiness of Your being. Help me, my Beloved, to be true to the call You have given me. Help me to ease the sorrow of Your sacred heart. Sister Graciela rose and carefully made her bed, then joined the procession of her sisters as they moved silently towards the chapel for Matins. She could smell the familiar scent of burning candles and feel the warm stones beneath her sandalled feet. In the beginning when Sister Graciela had first entered the convent, she had not understood it when the Mother Prioress had told her that a nun was a woman who gave up everything in order to possess everything. Sister Graciela had been fourteen years old then. Now, seventeen years later, it was clear to her. In contemplation she possessed everything, for contemplation was the mind replying to the soul, the waters of Siloh that flowed in silence. Her days were filled with a wonderful peace. Thank You for letting me forget the terrible past, Father. Thank You for standing beside me. I couldn't face my terrible past without you ... Thank You ... Thank You. ... When Matins were over, the nuns returned to their cells to sleep until Lauds, the rising of the sun. Outside, Colonel Ramon Acoca and his men moved swiftly in the darkness. When they reached the convent. Colonel Acoca said, 'Jaime Mir6 and his men will be arrested. Take no chances.' He looked at the front of the convent, and for an instant, 40

he saw that other convent with Basque partisans rushing out of it, and Susana going down in a hail of bullets. Don't bother taking Jaime Mir6 alive,' he said. Sister Megan was awakened by the silence. It was a different silence, a moving silence, a hurried rush of air, a whisper of bodies. There were sounds she had never heard in her fifteen years in the convent. She was suddenly filled with a premonition that something was terribly wrong. She rose quietly in the darkness and opened the door to her cell. Unbelievably, the long stone corridor was filled with men. A giant with a scarred face was coming out of the Reverend Mother's cell, pulling her by the arm. Megan stared in shock. I'm having a nightmare, Megan thought. These men can't be here. 'Where are you hiding him?' Colonel Acoca demanded. The Reverend Mother Betina had a look of stunned horror on her face. 'Ssh! This is God's temple. You are desecrating it.' Her voice was trembling. 'You must leave at once.' The Colonel's grip tightened on her arm and he shook her. 'I want Mir6, Sister.' The nightmare was real. Other cell doors were beginning to open, and nuns were appearing, looks of total confusion on their faces. There had never been anything in their experience to prepare them for this extraordinary happening. Colonel Acoca pushed Sister Betina away and turned to Patricia Arrieta, one of his lieutenants. 'Search the place. Top to bottom.' Acoca's men began to spread out, invading the chapel, the refectory and the cells, waking those nuns who were still asleep, and forcing them roughly to their feet through the corridors and into the chapel. The nuns obeyed wordlessly, keeping even now their vows of silence. To Megan the scene was like a film with the sound turned off. Acoca's men were filled with a sense of vengeance. They were all Falangists, and they remembered only too well how 41 --- ...>u...u agdiis! inem passed the Civil War and supported the Loyalists against their beloved leader, Generalissimo Franco. This was their chance to get their own back. The nuns' strength and silence made the men more furious than ever. As Acoca passed one of the cells, a scream echoed from it. Acoca looked in and saw one of his men ripping the habit from a nun. Acoca moved on. Sister Lucia was awakened by the sounds of men's voices yelling. She sat up in a panic. The police have found me, was her first thought. I've got to get out of here. There was no way out of the convent except through the front door. She hurriedly rose and peered out into the corridor. The sight that met her eyes was astonishing. The corridor was filled not with policemen, but with men in civilian clothes, carrying weapons, smashing lamps and tables. There was confusion everywhere as they raced around. The Reverend Mother Betina was standing in the centre of the chaos, praying silently, watching them desecrate her beloved convent. Sister Megan moved to her side, and Lucia joined them. 'What the h - what's happening? Who are they?' Lucia asked. They were the first words she had spoken aloud since entering the convent. The Reverend Mother put her right hand under her left armpit three times, the sign for hide. Lucia stared at her unbelievingly. 'You can talk now. Let's get out of here, for Christ's sake. And I mean for Christ's sake.' Patricia Arrieta, the Colonel's key aide, hurried up to Acoca. 'We've searched everywhere. Colonel. There's no sign of Jaime Miro or his men.' 'Search again,' Acoca said stubbornly. It was then that the Reverend Mother remembered the one treasure that the convent had. She hurried over to Sister Teresa and whispered, 'I have a task for you. Remove the 42

Id cross from the chapel and take it to the convent at Clendavia. You must get it away from here. Hurry!' Sister Teresa was shaking so hard that her wimple fluttered in waves. She stared at the Reverend Mother, paralyzed. Sister Teresa had spent the last thirty years of her life in the convent. The thought of leaving it was beyond imagining. She raised her hand and signed, can't. The Reverend Mother was frantic. 'The cross must not fall into the hands of these men of Satan. Now do this for Jesus.' A light came into Sister Teresa's eyes. She stood very tall. She signed, for Jesus. She turned and hurried towards the chapel. Sister Graciela approached the group, staring in wonder at the wild confusion around her. The men were getting more and more violent, smashing everything in sight. Colonel Acoca watched them, approvingly. Lucia turned to Megan and Graciela. 'I don't know about you two, but I'm getting out of here. Are you coming?' They stared at her, too dazed to respond. Sister Teresa was hurrying towards them, carrying something wrapped in a piece of canvas. Some of the men were herding more nuns into the refectory. 'Come on,' Lucia said. Sisters Teresa, Megan and Graciela hesitated for a moment, then followed Lucia towards the front door. As they turned at the end of the long corridor, they could see that the huge door had been smashed in. A man suddenly appeared in front of them. 'Going somewhere, ladies? Get back. My friends have plans for you.' Lucia said, 'We have a gift for you.' She picked up one of the heavy metal candlesticks that lined the hallway tables and smiled. The man was looking at it, puzzled. 'What can you do with that?' 'This.' Lucia swung the candelabra against his head, and he fell to the ground, unconscious. The three nuns stared in horror. 43 FR1;_ - - _ . tJUII. A moment later Lucia, Megan, Graciela and Teresa were outside in the front courtyard, hurrying through the gate into the starry night. Lucia stopped. 'I'm leaving you. They're going to be searching for you, so you'd better get away from here.' She turned and started towards the mountains that rose in the distance, high above the convent. I'll hide out up there until the search cools off and then I'll head for Switzerland. Of all the rotten luck. Those bastards blew a perfect cover. As Lucia made her way towards higher ground, she glanced down. From her vantage point she could see the three sisters. Incredibly, they were still standing in front of the convent gate, like three black-clad statues. 'For God's sake, she thought. Get going before they catch you. Move! They could not move. It was as though all their senses had been paralyzed for so long that they were unable to take in ' what was happening to them. The nuns stared down at their I feet; They were so dazed they could not think. They had ' been cloistered for so long behind the gates of God, secluded from the world, that now that they were outside the protective gates, they were filled with feelings of confusion and panic. They had no idea where to go or what to do. Inside, their lives had been organized for them. They had been fed, clothed, told what to do and when to do it. They had lived by the Rule. Suddenly there was no Rule.

What did God want from them? What was His plan? They stood huddled together, afraid to speak, afraid to look at one another. Hesitant, Sister Teresa pointed to the lights of Avila in the distance and signed, that way. Uncertainly, they began to move towards the town. Watching them from the hills above, Lucia thought: No, you idiots! That's the first place they'll look for you. Well, that's your problem. I have my own problems. She stood there for a moment, watching them walk towards their doom, going to their slaughter. Shut.

Lucia scrambled down the hill, stumbling over the loose scree, md ran after them, her cumbersome habit slowing her down. Wait a minute,' she called. 'Stop!' The sisters stopped and turned. Lucia hurried up to them, out of breath. 'You're going the wrong way. The first place they'll search for you is in town. You've got to hide out somewhere.' The three sisters stared at her in silence. Lucia said impatiently, 'The mountains. Get up to the mountains. Follow me.' She turned and started back towards the mountains. The others watched, and after a moment, they began to trail after her, one by one. From time to time Lucia looked back to make sure they were following. 'Why can't I mind my own business?' she thought. They're not my responsibility. It's more dangerous if we're all together. She kept climbing, making sure they stayed in sight. The others were having a difficult time of it, and every time they slowed down, Lucia stopped to let them catch up with her. 'I'll get rid of them in the morning. 'Let's move faster,' Lucia called. At the Abbey, the raid had come to an end. The dazed nuns, their habits wrinkled and bloodstained, were being rounded up and put into unmarked, closed trucks. 'Take them back to my headquarters in Madrid,' Colonel Acoca ordered. 'Keep them in isolation.' 'What charge?' 'Harbouring terrorists.' 'Yes, Colonel,' Patricia Arrieta said. He hesitated. 'Four of the nuns are missing.' Colonel Acoca's eyes turned cold. 'Find them.' Colonel Acoca flew back to Madrid to report to the Prime Minister. 'Jaime Miro escaped before we reached the convent.' rieme minister Martinez nodded. 'Yes, I heard.' And he wondered whether Jaime Miro had ever been in the convent to begin with. There was no doubt about it. Colonel Acoca was getting dangerously out of control. There had been angry protests about the brutal attack on the convent. The Prime Minister chose his words carefully. The newspapers have been hounding me about what happened.' The newspapers are making a hero of this terrorist.' Acoca said, stone faced. 'We must not let them pressure us.' 'He's causing the government a great deal of embarrassment, Colonel. And those four nuns - if they talk - 'Don't worry. They can't get far. I'll catch them and I'll find Miro.' The Prime Minister had already decided that he could not afford to take any more chances. 'Colonel, I want you to be sure the thirty-six nuns you are here well-treated, and I'm ordering the army to join the search for Miro and the others. You'll work with Colonel Sostelo.' There was a long, dangerous pause. 'Which one of us will be in charge of the operation?' Acoca's eyes were icy. The Prime Minister swallowed. 'You will be, of course.' Lucia and the three sisters travelled through the early dawn, moving north-east into the mountains, heading away from Avila and the convent. The nuns, used to moving in silence, made little noise. The only sounds were the rustle of their robes, the clicking of their rosaries, an occasional snapping twig, and their gasps for breath as they climbed higher and higher. They reached a plateau of the Guadarrama mountains and walked along a rutted road bordered by stone walls. They passed fields with sheep and goats. By sunrise they had covered several miles and found themselves in a wooded area outside the small village of Villacastin. I'll leave them here, Lucia decided. Their God can take care of them now. He certainly took great care of me, she thought bitterly. Switzerland is farther away than ever. 146

rive no money and no passport, and I'm dressed like an undertaker. By now those men know we've escaped. They'll keep looking until they find us. The sooner I get away by myself, the better. But at that instant, something happened that made her change her plans. Sister Teresa was moving through the trees when she stumbled and the package she had been so carefully guarding fell to the ground. It spilled out of its canvas wrapping and Lucia found herself staring at a large, exquisitely wrought gold cross glowing in the rays of the rising sun. That's real gold, Lucia thought. Someone up there is looking after me. That cross is manna. Sheer manna. It's my ticket to Switzerland. Lucia watched as Sister Teresa picked up the cross and carefully put it back in its wrapping. Lucia smiled to herself. It was going to be easy to take it. These nuns would do anything she told them. The town of Avila was in an uproar. News of the attack on the convent had spread quickly, and Father Berrendo was elected to confront Colonel Acoca. The priest was in his seventies, with an outward frailty that belied his inner strength. He was a warm and understanding shepherd to his parishioners. But at the moment he was filled with a cold fury. Colonel Acoca kept him waiting for an hour, then allowed the priest to be shown into his office. Father Berrendo said without preamble, 'You and your men attacked a convent without provocation. It was an act of madness.' 'We were simply doing our duty,' the Colonel said curtly. The Abbey was sheltering Jaime Miro and his band of murderers, so the sisters brought this on themselves. We're holding them for questioning.' 'Did you find Jaime Miro in the Abbey?' the priest demanded angrily. 47 FR1,Colonel Acoca said smoothly, 'No. He and his men escaped before we got there. But we'll find them, and justice will be done.' My justice. Colonel Acoca thought savagely.

Chapter 5 The nuns travelled slowly. Their garb was ill-designed for the rugged terrain. Their sandals were too thin to protect their feet against the stony ground, and their habits caught on everything. Sister Teresa found she could not even say her rosary. She needed both hands to keep the branches from snapping in her face. In the light of day, freedom seemed even more terrifying than before. God had cast the sisters out of Eden into a strange, frightening world, and His guidance that they had leaned on for so long was gone. They found themselves in an uncharted country with no map and no compass. The walls that had protected them from harm for so long had vanished and they felt naked and exposed. Danger was everywhere, and they no longer had a place of refuge. They were aliens. The unaccustomed sights and sounds of the country were dazzling. There were insects and bird songs and hot, blue skies assailing the senses. And there was something else that was disturbing. When they first fled the convent, Teresa, Graciela and Megan had carefully avoided looking at one another, instinctively keeping to the rules. But now, each found herself avidly studying the faces of the others. Also, after all the years of silence, they found it difficult to speak, and when they did speak, their words were halting, as though they were learning a strange new skill. Their voices sounded strange in their ears. Only Lucia seemed uninhibited and sure of herself, and the others automatically turned to her for leadership. - - -i no Y;-jii luuuuu..'c ourselves, Lucia said. 'I'm Sister Lucia.' There was an awkward pause, and Graciela said shyly, 'I'm Sister Graciela.' The dark-haired, arrestingly beautiful one. 'I'm Sister Megan.' The young blonde with the striking blue eyes. 'I'm Sister Teresa.' The eldest of the group. Fifty? Sixty? As they lay in the woods resting outside of the village, Lucia thought: They're like newborn birds fallen out of their nests. They won't last five minutes on their own. Well, too bad for them. I'll be on my way to Switzerland with the cross. Lucia walked to the edge of the clearing they were in and peered through the trees towards the little village below. A few people were walking along the street, but there was no sign of the men who had raided the convent. Now, Lucia thought. Here's my chance. She turned to the others. 'I'm going down to the village to try to get us some food. You wait here.' She nodded towards Sister Teresa. 'You come with me.' Sister Teresa was confused. For thirty years she had obeyed only the orders of Reverend Mother Betina and now suddenly this sister had taken charge. But what is happening is God's will. Sister Teresa thought. He has appointed her to help us, so she speaks with His voice. 'I must get this cross to the convent at Mendavia as soon as possible.' 'Right. When we get down there, we'll ask for directions.' The two of them started down the hill towards the town, Lucia keeping a careful lookout for trouble. There was none. This is going to be easy, Lucia thought. They reached the outskirts of the little town. A sign said, 'Villacastin'. Ahead of them was the main street. To the left was a small, deserted street. Good, Lucia thought. There would be no one to witness what was about to happen. Lucia turned into the side street. 'Let's go this way. There's less chance of being seen.'

Sister Teresa nodded and obediently followed Lucia. The question now was how to get the cross away from her. could grab it and run, Lucia thought, but she'd probably scream and attract a lot of attention. No, I'll have to make sure she stays quiet. The small limb of a tree had fallen to the ground in front of her, and Lucia paused, then stooped to pick it up. It was heavy. Perfect. She waited for Sister Teresa to catch up to her. 'Sister Teresa. . . .' The nun turned to look at her, and as Lucia started to raise the club, a male voice from out of nowhere said, 'God be with you, Sisters.' Lucia spun around, ready to run. A man was standing there, dressed in the long brown robe and cowl of a friar. He was tall and thin, with an aquiline face and the saintliest expression Lucia had ever seen. His eyes seemed to glow with a warm inner light, and his voice was soft and gentle. 'I'm Friar Miguel Carrillo.' Lucia's mind was racing. Her first plan had been interrupted. But now, suddenly, she had a better one. 'Thank God you found us,' Lucia said. This man was going to be her escape. He would know the easiest way for her to get out of Spain. 'We come from the Cistercian convent near Avila,' Lucia explained. 'Last night some men raided it. All the nuns were taken. Four of us managed to escape.' When the friar replied, his voice was filled with anger. 'I come from the monastery at Saint Genero, where I have been for the past twenty years. We were attacked the night before last.' He sighed. 'I know that God has some plan for all His children, but I must confess that at this moment I don't understand what it might be.' 'These men are searching for us,' Lucia said. 'It is important that we get out of Spain as fast as possible. Do you know how that can be done?' Friar Carrillo smiled gently. 'I think I can help you. Sister. God has brought us together. Take me to the others.' lui-iu ulugni me mar to me group. . This is Friar Carrillo,' she said. 'He's been in a monastery for the last twenty years. He's come to help us.' Their reactions to the friar were mixed. Graciela dared not look directly at him. Megan studied him with quick, interested glances, and Sister Teresa regarded him as a messenger sent by God, who would lead them to the convent at Mendavia. Friar Carrillo said, 'The men who attacked the convent will undoubtedly keep searching for you. But they will be looking for four nuns. The first thing we must do is get you a change of clothing.' Megan reminded him, 'We have no clothes to change into.' Friar Carrillo gave her a beatific smile. 'Our Lord has a very large wardrobe. Do not worry, my child. He will provide. Let us go into town.' It was two o'clock in the afternoon, siesta time, and Friar Carrillo and the four sisters walked down the main street of the village, alert for any signs of their pursuers. The shops were closed, but the restaurants and bars were open and from them they could hear strange music issuing, hard, dissonant and raucous sounding. Friar Carrillo saw the look on Sister Teresa's face. 'That's . . . rock and roll,' he said. 'Very popular with the young these days.' A pair of young women standing in front of one of the bars stared at the nuns as they passed. The nuns started back, wide-eyed, at the strange clothing the pair wore. One wore a skirt so short it barely covered her thighs, the other wore a longer skirt that was split up to the sides of her thighs. Both wore tight knitted bodices with no sleeves. They might as well be naked. Sister Teresa thought, horrified.

In the doorway stood a man who wore a turtleneck sweater, a strange-looking jacket without a collar, and a jewelled pendant. Unfamiliar odours greeted the nuns as they passed a bodega. Nicotine and whisky.

Megan was staring at something across the street. She stopped. Friar Carrillo said, 'What is it? What's the matter?' He turned to look. Megan was watching a woman carrying a baby. How many years had it been since she had seen a baby, or even a small child? Not since the orphanage, fourteen years ago. The sudden shock made Megan realize how far her life had been removed from the outside world. Sister Teresa was staring at the baby, too, but she was thinking of something else. It's Monique's baby. The baby across the street was screaming. It's screaming because I deserted it. But no, that's impossible. That was thirty years ago. Sister Teresa turned away, the baby's cries ringing in her ears. They moved on. They passed a cinema. The poster read. Three Lovers, and the photographs displayed showed skimpily-clad women embracing a bare-chested man. 'Why, they're - they're almost naked!' Sister Teresa exclaimed.

Friar Carrillo frowned. 'Yes. It's disgraceful what the cinema is permitted to show these days. That film is pure pornography. The most personal and private acts are there for everyone to see. They turn God's children into animals.' They passed a hardware store, a hairdressing salon, a flower shop, a sweet shop, all closed for the siesta, and at each shop the sisters stopped and stared at the windows, filled with once familiar, faintly remembered goods. When they came to a women's dress shop. Friar Carrillo said, 'Stop.' The blinds were pulled down over the front windows and a sign on the front door said, 'Closed'. 'Wait here for me, please.' The four women watched as he walked to the corner and turned out of sight. They looked at one another blankly. Where was he going, and what if he did not return? A few minutes later, they heard the sound of the front uiit ui me snop opening, and hriar Carrillo stood in the doorway, beaming. He motioned them inside. 'Hurry.' When they were all in the shop and the friar had locked the door, Lucia asked, 'How did you?' 'God provides a back door as well as a front door,' the friar said gravely. But there was an impish edge to his voice that made Megan smile. The sisters looked around the shop in awe. The store was a multi-coloured cornucopia of dresses and sweaters and bras and stockings, high-heeled shoes and boleros. Objects they had not seen in years. And the styles seemed so strange. There were handbags and scarves and compact and blouses. It was all too much to absorb. The women stood there, gaping. 'We must move quickly,' Friar Carrillo warned them, 'and leave before siesta is over and the shop reopens. Help yourselves. Choose whatever fits you.' Lucia thought: Thank God I can finally dress like a woman again. She walked over to a rack of dresses and began to sort through them. She found a beige skirt and tan silk blouse to go with it. It's not Balenciaga, but it will do for now. She picked out panties and a bra and a pair of soft boots. She stepped behind a clothes rack, stripped and in a matter of minutes was dressed and ready to go. The others were slowly selecting their outfits. Graciela chose a white cotton dress that set off her black hair and dark complexion, and a pair of sandals. Megan chose a patterned blue cotton dress that fell below the knees and low-heeled shoes. Sister Teresa had the most difficult time choosing something to wear. The array of choices was too dazzling. There were silks and flannels and tweeds and leather. There were cottons and twills and corduroys, and there were plaids and checks and stripes of every colour. And they all seemed skimpy, was the word that came to Sister Teresa's mind. For the past thirty years she had been decently covered by the heavy robes of her calling. And now she was being asked to shed them and put on these indecent creations. She finally 54

electd the longest skirt she could find, and a long-sleeved, jigh-collared cotton blouse. Friar Carrillo urged, 'Hurry, Sisters. Get undressed and change.' They looked at one another in embarrassment. He smiled. 'I'll wait in the office, of course.' He walked to the back of the shop and entered the office. The sisters began to undress, painfully self-conscious in front of one another. In the office, Friar Carrillo had pulled a chair up to the transom and was looking out through it, watching the sisters strip. He was thinking: Which one am I going to screw first? Miguel Carrillo had begun his career as a thief when he was only ten years old. He was born with curly blond hair and an angelic face, and they had proved to be of inestimable value in his chosen profession. He started at the bottom, snatching handbags and shoplifting, and as he got older, his career expanded and he began robbing drunks and preying on wealthy women. Because of his enormous appeal, he was very successful. He devised several original swindles, each more ingenious than the last. Unfortunately, his latest swindle had proved to be his undoing. Posing as a friar from a distant monastery, Carrillo travelled from church to church begging sanctuary for the night. It was always granted, and in the morning when the priest came to open the church doors, all the valuable artefacts would be missing, along with the good friar. Unfortunately, fate had double-crossed him and two nights earlier in Benjar, a small town near Avila, the priest had returned unexpectedly and Miguel Carrillo had been caught in the act of pilfering the church treasury. The priest was a beefy, heavyset man, and he had wrestled Carrillo to the floor and announced that he was going to turn him over to the police. A heavy silver chalice had fallen to the floor, and Carrillo had picked it up and hit the priest with it. Either the chalice 55 was too heavy, or the priest's skull was too thin, but in any case the priest lay dead on the floor. Miguel Carrillo had fled, panicky, anxious to put himself as far away from the scene of the crime as possible. He had passed through Avila and heard the story of the attack on the convent by Colonel Acoca and the secret GOE. It was fate that Carrillo had chanced upon the four escaped nuns. Now, eager with anticipation, he studied their naked bodies, and thought: There's another interesting possibility. Since Colonel Acoca and his men are looking for the sisters, there is probably a nice, fat reward on their heads. I'll lay them first, and then turn them over to Acoca. The women, except for Lucia, who was already dressed, were totally naked. Carrillo watched as they awkwardly put on the new underclothes. Then they finished dressing, clumsily buttoning unaccustomed buttons and fastening zips, hurrying to get away before they were caught. Time to get to work, Carrillo thought happily. He got down from the chair and walked out into the shop. He approached the women, studied them approvingly, and said, 'Excellent. No one in the world would ever take you for nuns. I might suggest scarves for your heads.' He selected one for each of them and watched them put them on. Miguel Carrillo had made his decision. Graciela was going to be the first. She was undoubtedly one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen. And that body! How could she have wasted it on God? I'll show her what to do with it. He said to Lucia, Teresa and Megan, 'You must all be hungry. I want you to go to the cafe we passed and wait for us there. I'll go to the church and borrow some money from the priest so we can eat.' He turned to Graciela. 'I want you to come with me. Sister, to explain to the priest what happened at the convent.' 'I-very well.' Carrillo said to the others, 'We'll be along in a little while. I would suggest you use the back door.' He watched as Lucia, Teresa and Megan left. When he heard the door close behind them, he turned to Graciela. 56 She's fantastic, he thought. Maybe I'll keep her with me, break her in to some cons. She could be a big help. Graciela was watching him. 'I'm ready.' 'Not yet.' Carrillo pretended to study her for a moment. No, I'm afraid it won't do. That dress is all wrong for you. Take it off.' 'But - why?' 'It doesn't fit properly,' Carrillo said glibly. 'People will notice, and you don't want to attract attention.' She hesitated, then moved behind a rack. 'Hurry, now. We have very little time.' Awkwardly, Graciela slipped the dress over her head. She was in her panties and brassiere when Carrillo suddenly appeared. 'Take everything off.' His voice was husky. Graciela stared at him. 'What? No!' she cried. 'I-1 can't. Please -1 -' Carrillo moved closer to her. 'I'll help you, Sister.' His hands reached out and he ripped off her brassiere and tore at her panties. 'No!' she screamed. 'You mustn't! Stop it!' Carrillo grinned. 'Carita, we're just getting started. You're going to love this.' His strong arms were around her. He forced her to the floor and lifted his robe. It was as though a curtain in Graciela's mind suddenly descended. It was the Moor trying to thrust himself inside her,

earing into the depths of her, and her mother's shrill voice was screaming, and Graciela thought, 'No, not again. No, please - not again . . . She was struggling fiercely now, fighting Carrillo off, trying to get up. 'Goddamn you,' he cried. He slammed his fist into her face, and Graciela fell back, stunned and dizzy. She found herself spinning back in time. Back . . . Back . . . 57 FR1;Las Navas del Marques, Spain 1950 She was five years old. Her earliest memories were of a procession of naked strangers climbing in and out of her mother's bed. Her mother explained, "They are your uncles. You must show them respect." The men were gross and crude and lacked affection. They stayed for a night, a week, a month, and then vanished. When they left, Dolores Pinero would immediately look for a new man. In her youth, Dolores Pinero had been a beauty, and Graciela had inherited her mother's looks. Even as a child, Graciela was stunning to look at, with high cheekbones, an olive complexion, shiny black hair and thick, long eyelashes. Her young body was noble with promise. With the passage of years, Dolores Pinero's body had turned to fat and her wonderfully boned face had become bruised with the bitter blows of time. Although Dolores Pinero was no longer beautiful, she was accessible, and she had the reputation of being a passionate bed partner. Making love was her one talent, and she employed it to try to please men into bondage, hoping to keep them by buying their love with her body. She made a meagre living as a seamstress because she was an indifferent one, and was hired only by the women of the village who could not afford the better ones.

raciela's mother despised her daughter, for she was nstant reminder of the one man whom Dolores a q had ever loved. Graciela's father was a hand-me young mechanic who had proposed to the beautiful s0 g Dolores, and she had eagerly let him seduce her. When she had broken the news that she was pregnant, he had disappeared, leaving Dolores with the curse of his seed. Dolores Pinero had a vicious temper, and she took her vengeance out on the child. Any time Graciela did something to displease her, her mother would hit her and scream, 'You're as stupid as your father!' There was no way for the child to escape the rain of blows or the constant screaming. Graciela would wake up every morning and pray; 'Please, God, don't let Mama beat me today. 'Please, God, make Mama happy today. 'Please, God, let Mama say she loves me today.' When she was not attacking Graciela, her mother ignored her. Graciela prepared her own meals and took care of her clothes. She made her lunch to take to school, and she would say to her teacher, 'My mother made me empanadas today. She knows how much I like empanadas.' Or: 'I tore my dress, but my mother sewed it up for me. She loves doing things for me.' Or: 'My mother and I are going to the pictures tomorrow.' And it would break her teacher's heart. Las Navas del Marques is a small village an hour from Avila, and like all villages everywhere, everyone knew everyone else's business. The lifestyle of Dolores Pinero was a disgrace, and it reflected on Graciela. Mothers refused to let their children play with the little girl, lest their morals be contaminated. Graciela went to the school on Plazaleta del Cristo, but she had no friends and no playmates. She was one of the brightest students in the school, but her exam results were poor. It was difficult for her to concentrate, for she was always tired. Her teacher would admonish her, 'You must get to bed earner, uraciela, so that you are rested enough to do youi work properly.' But her exhaustion had nothing to do with getting to bed late. Graciela and her mother shared a small, two-room casa The girl slept on a couch in the tiny room, with only a thin worn curtain separating it from the bedroom. How could Graciela tell her teacher about the obscene sounds in the night that awakened her and kept her awake, as she listened to her mother making love to whichever stranger happened to be in her bed? When Graciela brought home her report card, her mother would scream, "These are the cursed marks I expected you to get, and do you know why you got these terrible marks? Because you're stupid. Stupid!" And Graciela would believe it and try hard not to cry. In the afternoons when school was over, Graciela would wander around by herself, walking through the narrow, winding streets lined with acacia and sycamore trees, past the whitewashed stone houses, where loving fathers lived with their families. Graciela had many playmates, but they were all in her mind. There were beautiful girls and handsome boys, and they invited her to all their parties, where they served wonderful cakes and ice cream. Her imaginary friends were kind and loving, and they all thought she was very smart. When her mother was not around, Graciela would carry on long conversations with them. Would you help me with my homework, Graciela? I dori know how to do sums, and you're so good at them. 'What shall we do tonight, Graciela?' We could go to tft pictures, or walk into town and have a lemonade. Will your mother let you come to dinner tonight, Graciela We're having paela, g No, I'm afraid not. Mother gets lonely if I'm not with Aer.J I'm all she has, you know. On Sundays, Graciela rose early and dressed quietly, careful not to awaken her mother and whichever uncle was

her bed, and walked to the San Juan Bautista Church, "here Father Perez talked of the joys of life after death, a w-ytale life with Jesus; and Graciela could not wait to die and meet Jesus. Father Perez was an attractive priest in his early forties. He had ministered to the rich and the poor, and the sick and the vital, since he had come to Las Navas del Marques several years earlier, and there were no secrets in the little village to which he was not privy. Father Perez knew Graciela as a regular church-goer, and he, too, was aware of the stories of the constant stream of strangers who shared Dolores Pinero's bed. It was not a fit home for a young girl, but there was nothing anyone could do about it. It amazed the priest that Graciela had turned out as well as she had. She was kind and gentle and never complained or talked about her home life. Graciela would appear at church every Sunday morning wearing a clean, neat outfit that he was sure she had washed herself. Father Perez knew she was shunned by the other children in town, and his heart went out to her. He made it a point to spend a few moments with her after mass each Sunday, and when he had time, he would take her to a little cafe for a treat of helado. In the winter Graciela's life was a dreary landscape, monotonous and gloomy. Las Navas del Marques was in a valley surrounded by the Cruz Verde mountains and, because of that, the winters were six months long. The summers were easier to bear, for then the tourists arrived and filled the town with laughter and dancing and the streets came alive. The tourists would gather at the Plaza de Manuel Delgado Barredo, with its little bandstand built on stone, and listen to the orchestra and watch the natives dance the Sardana, the centuries-old traditional folk dance, barefoot, their hands linked, as they moved gracefully around in a colourful circle. Graciela watched the visitors as they sat at the pavement cafes drinking aperitives or shopping at the pescaderia - the fish market, or thefarmacia. At one o'clock in the afternoon the bodega was always filled with tourists drinking chateo and picking at tapas, seafood and olives and chips. The most exciting thing for Graciela was to watch the paseo each evening. Boys and girls would walk up and down the Plaza Mayor in segregated groups, the boys eyeing the girls, while parents and grandparents and friends watched, hawk-eyed, from sidewalk cafes. It was the traditional mating ritual, observed for centuries. Graciela longed to join in it, but her mother forbade her. 'Do you want to be aputaT she would scream at Graciela. 'Stay away from boys. They want only one thing from you. I know from experience,' she added bitterly. If the days were bearable, the nights were an agony. Through the thin curtain that separated their beds, Graciela could hear the sounds of savage moaning and writhings and heavy breathing, and always the obscenities. 'Faster . . . harder!' 'JCogemeF Mdmame la verga!' '¡Metela en eculo!' Before she was ten years old, Graciela had heard every obscene word in the Spanish vocabulary. They were whispered and shouted and shuddered and moaned. The cries of passion repelled Graciela, and at the same time awakened strange longings in her. When Graciela was fourteen years old, the Moor moved in. He was the biggest man Graciela had ever seen. His skin was shiny black, and his head was shaved. He had enormous shoulders, a barrel chest and huge arms. The Moor had arrived in the middle of the night when Graciela was asleep, and she got her first sight of him in the morning when he pushed the curtain aside and walked stark naked past Graciela's bed to go outside to the outhouse in the yard.

Graciela looked at him and almost gasped aloud. He was enormous, in every part. That will kill my mother, Graciela thought. The Moor was staring at her. 'Well, well. And who do we have here?' Dolores Pinero hurried out of her bed and moved to his side. 'My daughter,' she said curly A wave of embarrassment swept over Graciela, as she saw her mother's naked body next to the man. The Moor smiled, showing beautiful white, even teeth. 'What's your name, guapaY Graciela was too shamed by his nakedness to speak. 'Her name's Graciela. She's retarded.' 'She's beautiful. I'll bet you looked like that when you were young.' 'I'm still young,' Dolores Pinero snapped. She turned to her daughter. 'Get dressed. You'll be late for school.' 'Yes, Mama.' The Moor stood there, eyeing her. The older woman took his arm and said cajolingly, 'Come back to bed, querido. We're not finished yet.' 'Later,' the Moor said. He was still looking at Graciela. The Moor stayed. Every day when Graciela came home from school she prayed that he would be gone. For reasons she did not understand, he terrified her. He was always polite to her and never made any advances, yet the mere thought of him sent shivers through her body. His treatment of her mother was something different. The Moor stayed in the small house most of the day, drinking heavily. He took whatever money Dolores Pinero earned. Sometimes at night in the middle of lovemaking, Graciela would hear him beating her mother, and in the morning Dolores Pinero would appear with a blackened eye or split lip. 'Mama, why do you put up with him?' Graciela asked. 'You wouldn't understand,' she said sullenly. 'He's a real man, noi a midget like the others. He knows how to satisfy ? a woman.' She ran her hand through her hair coquettishly 'I Besides, he's madly in love with me.' Graciela did not believe it. She knew that the Moor was using her mother, but she did not dare protest again. She was too terrified of her mother's temper, for when Dolores Pinero was really angry, a kind of insanity took possession of her. She had once chased Graciela with a kitchen knife because she had dared make a pot of tea for one of the 'uncles'. Early one Sunday morning Graciela rose to get ready for church. Her mother had left early to deliver some dresses. As Graciela pulled off her nightgown, the curtain was pushed aside and the Moor appeared. He was naked. 'Where's your mother, guapaT 'Mama went out early. She had some errands to do.' The Moor was studying Graciela's nude body. 'You really are a beauty,' he said softly. Graciela felt her face flush. She knew what she should do. She should cover her nakedness, put on her skirt and blouse and leave. Instead, she stood there, unable to move. She watched his manhood begin to swell and grow before her eyes. She could hear the voices ringing in her ears: 'Faster . . . Harder!' I She felt faint. A The Moor said huskily, 'You're a child. Get your clothes on and get out of here.' And Graciela found herself moving. Moving towards him. She reached up and slid her arms around his waist and felt his male hardness against her body. 'No,' she moaned. 'I'm not a child.' The pain that followed was like nothing Graciela had ever known. It was excruciating, unbearable. It was wonderful, exhilarating, beautiful. She held the Moor tightly in her arms, screaming with ecstasy. He brought her to orgasm after orgasm, and Graciela thought: So this is what the mystery is all about. And it was so wonderful to finally know

the secret of all creation, to be a part of life at last, to know what joy was for now and for ever. What the fuck are you doing? ' It was Dolores Pinero's voice screaming, and for an instant everything stopped, frozen in time. Dolores Pinero was standing at the side of the bed, staring down at her daughter and the Moor. Graciela looked up at her mother, too terrified to speak. Dolores Pinero's eyes were filled with an insane rage. 'You bitch!' she yelled. 'You rotten bitch.' 'Mama - please -' Dolores Pinero picked up a heavy iron astray at the bedside and slammed it against her daughter's head. That was the last thing Graciela remembered. She awoke in a large, white hospital ward with two dozen beds in it, all of them occupied. Huddled nurses scurried back and forth, trying to attend to the heeds of the patients. Graciela's head was racked with excruciating pain. Each time she moved, rivers of fire flowed through her. She lay there, listening to the cries and moans of the other patients. Late in the afternoon, a young doctor stopped by the side of her bed. He was in his early thirties, but he looked old and tired. 'Well,' he said. 'You're finally awake.' 'Where am I?' It hurt her to speak. 'You're in the charity ward of the Hospital Provincial in Avila. You were brought in yesterday. You were in terrible shape. We had to stitch up your forehead.' The doctor went on: 'Our chief surgeon decided to sew you up himself. He said you were too beautiful to have scars.' He's wrong, Graciela thought. I'll be scarred for the rest of my life. On the second day Father Perez came to see Graciela. A nurse moved a chair to the bedside. The priest looked at the . -_....., u. Jung gin lying mere and his heart melted. The terrible thing that had happened to her was the scandal of Las Navas del Marques, but there was nothing anyone could do about it. Dolores Pinero had told the policia that her daughter had injured her head in a fall. Now, Father Perez asked, 'Are you feeling better, child?' Graciela nodded, and the movement made her head pound. The policia have been asking questions. Is there anything you would like me to tell them?' ' I There was a long silence. Finally she said, 'It was an accident.' He could not bear the look in her eyes. 'I see.' What he had to say was painful beyond words. 'Graciela, I spoke with your mother. . . ' And Graciela knew. 'I - I can't go home again, can I?' 'No, I'm afraid not. We'll talk about it.' Father Perez took Graciela's hand. 'I'll come back to see you tomorrow.' 'Thank you, Father.' When he left, Graciela lay there, and she prayed: Dear God, please let me die. I don't want to live. She had nowhere to go and no one to go to. Never again would she see her home. She would never see her school again, or the familiar faces of her teachers. There was nothing in the world left for her. A nurse stopped at her bedside. 'You need anything?' Graciela looked up at her in despair. What was there to say? The following day the doctor appeared again. 'I have good news,' he said awkwardly. 'You're well enough to leave now.' That was a lie, but the rest of his speech was true. 'We need the bed.' She was free to go - but go where? When Father Perez arrived an hour later, he was accompanied by another priest. 66

This is Father Berrendo, an old friend of mine. Graciela glanced up at the frail-looking priest. 'Father.' He was right. Father Berrendo thought. She is beautiful. Father Perez had told him the story of what had happened to Graciela. The priest had expected to see some visible signs of the kind of environment the child had lived in, a hardness, a defiance, or self-pity. There were none of those things in the young girl's face. 'I'm sorry you've had such a bad time,' Father Berrendo told her. The sentence carried a deeper meaning. Father Perez said, 'Graciela, I must return to Las Navas del Marques. I am leaving you in Father Berrendo's hands.' Graciela was filled with a sudden sense of panic. She felt as though her last link with home was being cut. 'Don't go,' she pleaded. Father Perez took her hand in his. 'I know you feel alone,' he said warmly, 'but you're not. Believe me, child, you're not.' A nurse approached the bed carrying a bundle. She handed it to Graciela. 'Here are your clothes. I'm afraid you're going to have to leave now.' An even greater panic seized her. 'Now?' The two priests exchanged a look. 'Why don't you get dressed and come with me?' Father Berrendo suggested. 'We can talk.' Fifteen minutes later Father Berrendo was helping Graciela out of the hospital door into the warm sunlight. There was a garden in front of the hospital with brightly coloured flowers, but Graciela was too dazed even to notice them. When they were seated in his office. Father Berrendo said, 'Father Perez told me that you have no place to go.' Graciela nodded. 'No relatives?' 'Only -' It was difficult to say it. 'Only - my mother.' Father Perez said that you were a regular churchgoer in your village. FR1.- --> ace again. TCS. Graciela thought of those Sunday mornings, and the beauty of the church services and how she had longed to be with Jesus and escape from the pain of the life she lived. 'Graciela, have you ever thought of entering a convent?' 'No.' She was startled by the idea. 'There is a convent here in Avila - the Cistercian convent. They would take care of you there.' 'I - I don't know.' The idea was frightening. 'It is not for everyone.' Father Berrendo told her. 'And I must warn you, it is the strictest order of them all. Once you walk through the gates and take the vows, you have made a promise to God never to leave.' Graciela sat there, her mind filled with conflicting thoughts, staring out the window. The idea of shutting herself away from the world was terrifying. would be like going to prison. But on the other hand, what did the world have to offer her? Pain and despair beyond bearing. She had often thought of suicide. This might offer a way out of her misery. Father Berrendo said, 'It's up to you, my child. If you like, I will take you to meet the Reverend Mother Priorsso.' Graciela nodded. 'All right.' The Reverend Mother studied the face of the young girl before her. Last night for the first time in many, many years she had heard the voice. A young child will come to you. Protect her. 'How old are you, my dear?' 'Fourteen.' She's old enough. In the fourth century the Pope decreed that girls could be permitted to become nuns at the age of twelve. 'I'm afraid,' Graciela said to the Reverend Mother Betina. 'I'm afraid. The words rang in Betina's mind: 'I'm afraid . . . That had been so many long years ago. She was speaking

to her priest. 'I don't know if I have a calling for this. Father. I'm afraid.' 'Betina, the first contact with God can be very disturbing, and the decision to dedicate your life to Him is a difficult one.' How did I find my calling? Betina had wondered. She had never been even faintly interested in religion. As a young girl she had avoided church and Sunday school. In her teens she was more interested in parties and clothes and boys. If her friends in Madrid had been asked to select possible candidates to become a nun, Betina would have been at the bottom of the list. More accurately, she would not even have been on their list. But when she was nineteen, events started to happen that changed her life. She was in her bed, asleep, when a voice said, 'Betina, get up and go outside.' She opened her eyes and sat up, frightened. She turned on the bedside lamp. She was alone. What a strange dream. But the voice had been so real. She lay down again, but it was impossible to go back to sleep. Betina, get up and go outside. It's my subconscious, she thought. Why would I want to go outside in the middle of the night? She turned out the light and a moment later turned it on again. This is crazy. But she put on a dressing-gown and slippers and went downstairs. The household was asleep. She opened the kitchen door, and as she did a wave of fear swept over her, because somehow she knew that she was supposed to go out the back into the yard. She looked around in the darkness, and her eye caught a glint of moonlight shining on an old refrigerator that had been abandoned and was used to store tools. Betina suddenly knew why she was there. She walked over to the refrigerator as though hypnotized, and opened it. Her three-year-old brother was inside, unconscious. That was the first incident. In time, Betina rationalized it as a perfectly normal experience. must have heard my iinnii. ! yi n wiu suu uti inw me yara, ana I knew the refrigerator was there, and I was worried about him so I went outside to check. The next experience was not so easy to explain. It happened a month later. In her sleep, Betina heard a voice say, 'You can't put out the fire.' She sat up, wide awake, her pulse racing. Again, it was impossible to go back to sleep. She put on a dressing-gown and slippers and went into the landing. No smoke. No fire. She opened her parents' bedroom door. Everything was normal there. There was no fire in her brother's bedroom. She went downstairs and looked through every room. There was no sign of a fire. 'I'm an idiot, Betina thought. It was only a dream. She went back to bed, just as the house was rocked by an explosion. She and her family escaped, and the firemen managed to put out the fire. 'It started in the basement,' a fireman explained. 'And a boiler exploded.' The next incident happened three weeks later. This time it was no dream. Betina was on the patio, reading, when she saw a stranger walking across the yard. He looked at her and in that instant she felt a malevolence coming from him that was almost palpable. He turned away and was gone. Betina was unable to get him out of her mind. Three days later, she was in an office building, waiting for the lift. The lift door opened,

She was about to step into the lift when she looked at the lift operator. It was the man she had seen in her garden. Betina backed away, frightened. The lift door closed and the lift went up. Moments later, it crashed, killing everyone in it. The following Sunday, Betina went to church. Dear Lord, I don't know what's happening to me, and I'm scared. Please guide me and tell me what you want me to do. The answer came that night as Betina slept. The voice said one word. Devotion.

She thought about it all night, and in the morning she went to talk to the priest. He listened intently to what she had to say. Ah. You are one of the fortunate ones. You have been chosen. Chosen for what? Are you willing to devote your life to God, my child? I - I don't know. I'm afraid. But in the end, she had joined the convent. chose the right path, the Reverend Mother Betina thought, because I have neverknown so much happiness . . . And now there was this battered child saying, 'I'm afraid.' The Reverend Mother took Graciela's hand. 'Take your time, Graciela. God won't go away. Think about it and come back and we can discuss it.' But what was there to think about? I've got nowhere else in the world to go, Graciela thought. And the silence would be welcome. have heard too many terrible sounds. She looked at the Reverend Mother and said, 'I will welcome the silence.' That had been seventeen years earlier, and in that time Graciela had found peace for the first time in her life. Her life was dedicated to God. The past no longer belonged to her. She was forgiven the horrors she had grown up with. She was Christ's bride, and at the end of her life, she would join Him. As the years passed in deep silence, despite the occasional nightmares, the terrible sounds in her mind gradually faded away. Sister Graciela was assigned to work in the garden, tending the tiny rainbows of God's miracle, never tiring of their splendour. The walls of the convent rose high above her on . . . , .> .i iii, i Munc mountiam, out Uraclacia never felt that they were shutting her in; they were shutting the terrible world out, a world she never wanted to see again. Life in the convent was serene and peaceful. But now suddenly her terrible nightmares had turned into a reality Her world had been invaded by barbarians. They had forced her out of her sanctuary, into the world she had renounced for ever. And her sins came flooding back, filling her with horror. The Moor had returned. She could feel his hot breath on her face. As she fought him, Graciela opened her eyes, and it was the friar on top of her trying to penetrate her. He was saying, 'Stop fighting me. Sister. You're going to enjoy this!' 'Mama,' Graciela cried aloud. 'Mama! Help me!' 72

Chapter 7 Lucia Carmine felt wonderful as she walked down the street with Megan and Teresa. It was marvellous to wear feminine clothes again and hear the whisper of silk against her skin. She glanced at the others. They were walking nervously, unaccustomed to their new clothes, looking self-conscious and embarrassed in their skirts and stockings. They look as though they've been dropped from another planet. They certainly don't belong on this one, Lucia thought. They might as well be wearing signs that say 'Catch Me.' Sister Teresa was the most uncomfortable of the women. Thirty years in the convent had deeply ingrained a sense of modesty in her, and it was being violated by the events that had been thrust upon her. This world to which she had once belonged now seemed unreal. It was the convent that was real, and she longed to hurry back to the sanctuary of its protective walls. Megan was aware that men were eyeing her as she walked down the street, and she blushed. She had lived in a world of women for so long that she had forgotten what it was like to see a man, let alone have one smile at her. It was embarrassing, indecent . . . exciting. The men aroused feelings in Megan that had been long since buried. For the first time in years, she was conscious of her femaleness. They were passing the bar they had gone by before and the music was blowing out into the street. What had Friar Carrillo called it? Rock and roll. Very popular with the young. Something bothered her. And suddenly Megan realized what it was. When they had passed the cinema, the friar had said: 73 . . . > .wi mnui inr iincoma is permitted to show these days. That film is pure pornography. The most personal and' private acts are there for everyone to see. Megan's heart began to beat faster. If Friar Carrillo had been locked up in a monastery for the past twenty years, how could he possibly have known about rock music or what was in the film? Something was terribly wrong. She turned to Lucia and Teresa and said urgently, 'We've got to return to the shop.' They watched as Megan turned and ran back, and they quickly began to follow her. Graciela was on the floor, desperately fighting to get free, scratching and clawing at Carrillo. 'God damn you! Hold still!' He was getting winded. He heard a sound and glanced up. He saw the heel of a shoe swinging towards his head, and that was the last thing he remembered. Megan picked up the trembling Graciela and held her in her arms. 'Shh. It's all right. He won't bother you any more.' It was several minutes before Graciela could speak. 'He he - it wasn't my fault this time,' she said pleadingly. Lucia and Teresa had come into the shop. Lucia sized up the situation at a glance. The bastard! She looked down at the unconscious, half-naked figure on the floor. As the others watched, Lucia grabbed some belts from a counter and tied Miguel Carrillo's hands tightly behind his back. Tie his feet,' she told Megan. Megan went to work. Finally, Lucia stood up, satisfied. 'There. When they open up the shop this afternoon, he can explain to them what he was doing here.' She looked at Graciela closely. 'Are you all right?' 'I - I - yes.' She tried to smile. 'We'd better get out of here,' Megan said. 'Get dressed. Quickly.'

when they were ready to leave, Lucia said, 'Wait a minute.' She went over to the cash register and pressed a key. There were a few hundred peseta notes inside. She scooped them up, picked up a purse from a counter and put the money inside. She saw the disapproving expression on Teresa's face. Lucia said, 'Look at it this way, Sister. If God didn't want us to have this money. He wouldn't have put it there for us.' They were seated in the cafe, having a conference. Sister Teresa was speaking. 'We must get the cross to the convent at Mendavia as quickly as possible. There will be safety there for all of us.' Not for me, Lucia thought. My safety is that Swiss bank. But first things first. I've got to get hold of that cross. The convent at Mendavia is north of here, isn't it? 'Yes.' The men will be looking for us in every town. So we'll sleep in the hills tonight.' Nobody will hear her even if she does scream. A waitress brought menus to the table and handed them out. The sisters examined them, their expressions confused. Suddenly Lucia understood. It had been so many years since they had been given choices of any kind. At the convent they had automatically eaten the simple food placed before them. Now they were confronted with a cornucopia of unfamiliar delicacies. Sister Teresa was the first to speak. 'I - I will have some coffee and bread, please.' Sister Graciela said, 'I, too.' Megan said, 'We have a long, hard journey ahead of us. I suggest that we order something more nourishing, like eggs.' Lucia looked at her with new eyes. She's the one to keep an eye on, Lucia thought. Aloud she said, 'Sister Megan is right. Let me order for you. Sisters.' f- mimim-, uami hot rolls, jam and coffee. 'We're in a hurry,' she told the waitress. ; Siesta ended at 4.30, and the town would be waking up. She wanted to be out of there before that happened, before they discovered Miguel Carrillo in the dress shop. ; When the food arrived, the sisters sat there staring at it. 'Help yourselves,' Lucia urged them. I They began to eat, hesitatingly at first, and then with gusto, overcoming their feelings of guilt. Sister Teresa was the only one having a problem. She took one bite of food and said, 'I - I can't. It's-It's surrendering.' Megan said, 'Sister, you want to get to the convent, don't you? Then you must eat to keep up your strength.' Sister Teresa said primly, 'Very well. I'll eat. But I promise you, I won't enjoy it.' It was all Lucia could do to keep a straight face. 'Good, Sister. Eat.' When they had finished, Lucia paid the bill with some of the money she had taken from the cash register and they walked out into the hot sunshine. The streets were beginning to come alive, and the shops were starting to open. By now they had probably caught Miguel Carrillo, Lucia thought. Lucia and Teresa were impatient to get out of town, but Graciela and Megan were walking slowly, fascinated by the sights and sounds and the smells of the town. Not until they had reached the outskirts and headed towards the mountains did Lucia begin to relax. They moved steadily north, climbing upwards, making slow progress in the hilly terrain. Lucia was tempted to ask Sister Teresa if she would like her to carry the package, but she did not want to say anything that might make the older woman suspicious. When they reached a small glade in the highland, surrounded by trees, Lucia said, 'We can spend the night here. In the morning we'll head for the convent at Mendavia.' The others nodded, believing her.

I nc -iin inoveu -sicwiy across me olue sxy, ana the glade was silent, except for the soothing sounds of summer. Finally, night fell. One by one the women stretched out on the green grass. Lucia lay there, breathing lightly, listening for a deeper silence, waiting for them to fall asleep so that she could make her move. Sister Teresa was finding it difficult to sleep. It was a strange experience sleeping out under the stars, surrounded by her sisters. They had names now, and faces and voices, and she was afraid that God was going to punish her for this forbidden knowledge. She felt terribly lost. Sister Megan, too, was having difficulty getting to sleep. She was filled with the excitement of the day's events. How did I know that the friar was a fraud? she wondered. And where did I get the courage to save Sister Graciela? She smiled, unable to keep from being a tiny bit pleased with herself, even though she knew such a feeling was a sin. Graciela was asleep, emotionally drained by what she had gone through. She tossed and turned in her sleep, haunted by dreams of being chased down dark, long, endless corridors. Lucia Carmine lay still, waiting. She lay there for almost two hours and then quietly sat up and moved through the darkness towards Sister Teresa. She would take the package and disappear. As she neared Sister Teresa, Lucia saw that the nun was awake on her knees, praying. Damn! Lucia hurriedly retreated. Lucia lay down again, forcing herself to be patient. Sister Teresa could not pray all night. She had to get some sleep. Lucia planned. The money taken from the cash register would be enough for her to take a bus or a train to Madrid. Once there, it would be simple to find a pawnbroker. She saw herself walking in and handing him the golden cross. The pawnbroker would suspect that it was stolen, but that would not matter. He would have plenty of customers eager to buy it. n;7 give you one hundred thousand pesetas for it. She would pick it up from the counter, would rather sell my body first. One hundred and fifty thousand pesetas. I would prefer to melt it down and let the gold run in the gutter. Two hundred thousand pesetas. That is my last offer. You are robbing me blind, but I will accept it. The pawnbroker would eagerly reach for it. On one condition. A condition? Yes. I misplaced my passport. Do you know someone who can arrange a passport for me? Her hands would still be on the golden cross. He would hesitate, then say, happen to have a friend who does things like that. And the deal would be done. She would be on her way to Switzerland and freedom. She remembered her father's words: There is more money there than you could spend in ten lifetimes. Her eyes began to close. It had been a long day. In her half-sleep, Lucia heard the sound of a church bell from the distant village. It sent memories flooding through her, of another place, another time. . . 78

Chapter 8 Taormina, Sicily 1968 She was awakened every morning by the distant sound of the bells of the Church of San Domenico, high in the Peloritani mountains surrounding Taormina. She eyed waking up slowly, languorously stretching like a cat. She kept her eyes closed, knowing that there was something wonderful to remember. What was it? The question teased at her mind, and she pushed it back, not wanting to know just yet, wanting to savour the surprise. And suddenly her mind was joyously flooded with it. She was Lucia Maria Carmine, the daughter of Angelo Carmine, and that was enough to make anyone in the world happy. They lived in a large, storybook villa filled with more servants than the fifteen-year-old Lucia could count. A bodyguard drove her to school each morning in an armoured limousine. She grew up with the prettiest dresses and the most expensive toys in all of Sicily, and was the envy of her schoolmates. But it was her father around whom Lucia's life centred. In her eyes, he was the most handsome man in the world. He was short and heavyset, with a strong face and stormy brown eyes that radiated power. He had two sons, Arnaldo and Victor, but it was his daughter whom Angelo Carmine adored. And Lucia worshipped him. In church when the priest spoke of God, Lucia always thought of her father. He would come to her bedside in the morning and say, 'Time to get up for school, faccia del angelo.' Angel face. 79 n was not true, or course. Lucia knew she was not really beautiful. I'm attractive, she thought, studying herself objectively in the mirror. Yes. Striking, rather than beautiful. Her reflection showed a young girl with an oval face, creamy skin, even, white teeth, a strong chin - too strong? - voluptuous, full lips - too full? - and dark, knowing eyes. But if her face fell just short of being beautiful, her body more than made up for it. At fifteen, Lucia had the body of a woman, with round, firm breasts, a narrow waist and hips that moved with sensuous promise. 'We're going to have to marry you off early,' her father would tease her. 'Soon you will drive the young men pazzi, my little virgin.' 'I want to marry someone like you. Papa, but there is no one like you.' He laughed. 'Never mind. We'll find you a prince. You were born under a lucky star, and one day you will know what it is like to have a man hold you in his arms and make love to you.' Lucia blushed. 'Yes, Papa.' It was true that no one had made love to her - not for the past twelve hours. Benito Patas, one of her bodyguards, always came to her bed when her father was out of town. Having Benito make love to her in her house added to the thrill because Lucia knew that her father would kill them both if he ever discovered what was going on. Benito was in his thirties, and it nattered him that the beautiful young virgin daughter of the great Angelo Carmine had chosen him to deflower her. 'Was it as you expected?' he asked the first time he bedded her. 'Oh, yes,' Lucia breathed. 'Better.' She thought: While he's not as good as Mario, Tony or Enrico, he's certainly better than Roberta and Leo. She could not remember the names of all the others. At thirteen, Lucia had felt that she had been a virgin long

enough. She had looked around and decided that the lucky boy would be Paolo Costello, the son of Angelo Carmine's doctor. Paolo was seventeen, tall and husky, and the star soccer player at his school. Lucia had fallen madly in love with Paolo the first time she had seen him. She managed to run into him as often as possible. It never occurred to Paolo that their constant meetings had been carefully contrived. He regarded the attractive young daughter of Angelo Carmine as a child. But on a hot summer day in August, Lucia decided she could wait no longer. She telephoned Paolo. 'Paolo - this is Lucia Carmine. My father has something he would like to discuss with you, and he wondered whether you could meet him this afternoon at our pool house?' Paolo was both surprised and flattered. He was in awe of Angelo Carmine, but he had not known that the powerful Mafioso was even aware of his existence. 'I would be delighted,' Paolo said. 'What time would he like me to be there?' 'Three o'clock.' Siesta time, when the world would be asleep. The pool house was isolated, at the far end of their widespread property, and her father was out of town. There would be no chance of their being interrupted. Paolo arrived promptly at the appointed hour. The gate leading to the garden was open, and he walked directly to the pool house. He stopped at the closed door and knocked. 'Signore Carmine? Pronto . . . ?' There was no response. Paolo checked his watch. Cautiously, he opened the door and stepped inside. The room was dark. 'Signore Carmine?' A figure moved towards him. 'Paolo . . .' He recognized Lucia's voice. 'Lucia, I'm looking for your father. Is he here?' She was closer to him now, close enough for Paolo to see that she was stark naked. 'My God!' Paolo gasped. 'What?' 'I want you to make love to me.'

you're pazza'. You're only a child. I'm getting out of here.' He started towards the door. 'Go ahead. I'll tell my father you raped me.' 'No, you wouldn't.' 'Leave, and you'll find out.' He stopped. If Lucia carried out her threat, there was not the slightest doubt in Paolo's mind as to what his fate would be. Castration would be only the beginning. He walked back to Lucia to reason with her. 'Lucia, dear.' 'I like it when you call me dear.' 'No - listen to me, Lucia. This is very serious. Your father will kill me if you tell him I raped you.' 'I know.' He made another stab at it. 'My father would be disgraced. My whole family would be disgraced.' 'I know.' It was hopeless. 'What do you want from me?' 'I want you to do it to me.' 'No. It is impossible. If your father found out, he would kill me.' 'And if you leave here, he will kill you. You haven't got much choice, have you?' He stared at her, panicky. 'Why me, Lucia?' 'Because I'm in love with you, Paolo!' She took his hands and pressed them gently between her legs. 'I'm a woman. Make me feel like one.' In the dim light Paolo could see the twin mounds of her breasts, her hard nipples, and the soft, dark hair between her legs. Jesus, Paolo thought. What can a man do? She was leading him to a couch, helping him out of his trousers and his shorts. She knelt and put his male hardness in her mouth, sucking it gently, and Paolo thought: She's done this before. And when he was on top of her, plunging deep inside her, and she had her hands tightly wrapped around his backside, her hips thrusting hungrily against his, Paolo thought: My God, she's marvellous.

Lucii was in heaven. n was as inougn sne naa oeen oorm for this. Instinctively she knew exactly what to do to please him a'd to please herself. Her whole body was on fire. She felt herself building to a climax, higher and higher, and when it finally happened, she screamed aloud in sheer joy. They both lay there, spent, breathing hard. Lucia finally spoke. She said, 'Same time tomorrow.' When Lucia was sixteen, Angelo Carmine decided that it was time for his daughter to see something of the world. With an elderly Aunt Rosa as chaperone, Lucia spent her school holidays in Capri and Ischia, Venice and Rome, and a dozen other places. You must be cultured - not a peasant, like your Papa. Travel will round out your education. In Capri Aunt Rosa will take you to see the Carthusian Monastery of St James and the Chapel of San Michele and the Palazzo a Mare . . . 'Yes, Papa.' 'In Venice there is St Mark's Basilica, the Doges' Palace, the church of San Gregorio, and the Accademia Museum.' 'Yes, Papa.' Rome is the treasure house of the world. There you must visit the Citta Vaticano, and the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, and the Galleria Borghese, of course.' 'Of course.' 'And Milano! You must go to the Conservatorio for a concert recital. I will arrange tickets for La Scala for you and Aunt Rosa. You will see the Municipal Museum of Art, and there are dozens of churches and museums.' 'Yes, Papa.' With very careful planning, Lucia managed to see none of those places. Aunt Rosa insisted on taking a siesta every afternoon and retiring early each evening. 'You must get your rest too, child.' 'Certainly, Aunt Rosa.' And so while Aunt Rosa slept, Lucia danced at the Quisisana in Capri, rode in a carrozza with a beplumed and im-iiaaicu iuisuc puing n, joinea a group of college boys at the Marina Piccola, went on picnics at Bagni di Tiberio, and took the Funicolare up to Anacapri, where she joined group of French students for drinks at the Piazza Umertol In Venice a handsome gondolier took her to a disco, and a fisherman took her fishing at Chioggia. And Aunt Rosa slept In Rome Lucia drank wine from Apulia and discovered all the off-beat fun restaurants like Marte and Ranieri e Giggi' Fazi. Wherever she went, Lucia found hidden little bars and nightclubs and romantic, good-looking men, and she thought: Dear Papa was so right. Travel has rounded out my education. In bed, she learned to speak several different languages, and she thought: This is so much more fun than my language classes at school.

When Lucia returned home to Taormina, she confided to her closest girl-friends: 'Lucia was naked in Naples, stoned in Salerno, felt up in Florence, and laid in Lucca.' Sicily itself was a wonder to explore, an island of Grecian temples, Roman Byzantine amphitheatres, chapels, Arab baths and Swabian castles. Lucia found Palermo raucous and lively, and she enjoyed wandering around the Kalsa, the old Arab quarter, and visiting the Opera dei Pupi, the puppet theatre. But Taormina, where she was born, was her favourite. It was a picture postcard of a city on the Ionian Sea on a mountain overlooking the world. It was a city of dress shops and jewellery stores, bars and beautiful old squares, trattorie and colourful hotels like the Excelsior Palace and the San Domenico. The winding road leading up from the seaport of Naxos is steep and narrow and dangerous, and when Lucia Carmine was given a car on her fifteenth birthday, she broke every 84 traits 'liw' - the book but was never once stopped by the Carabinieri. After all, she was the daughter of Angelo Carmine. To those who were brave enough or stupid enough to inquire, Angelo Carmine was in the property business. And it was naturally true, for the Carmine family owned the villa at Taormina, a house on Lake Como at Cernobbio, a lodge at Gstaad, an apartment in Rome, and a large farm outside Rome. But it happened that Angelo Carmine was also in more colourful businesses. He owned a dozen warehouses, two gambling casinos, six ships that brought in cocaine from his plantations in Colombia, and an assortment of other very lucrative enterprises, including loan sharking. Angelo Carmine was the Capo of the Sicilian Mafiosi, so it was only appropriate that he lived well. His life was an inspiration to others, heartwarming proof that a poor Sicilian peasant who was ambitious and worked hard could become rich and successful. Angelo Carmine had started out as an errand boy for the Mafiosi when he was twelve. By fifteen he had become an enforcer for the loan sharks, and at sixteen he had killed his first man and made his bones. Shortly after that, he married Lucia's mother, Anna. In the years that followed, Angelo Carmine had climbed the treacherous corporate ladder to the top, leaving a string of dead enemies behind him. He had grown, but Anna had remained the simple peasant girl he married. She bore him three fine children, but after that her contribution to Angelo's life came to a halt. As though knowing she no longer had a place in her family's life, she obligingly died and was considerate enough to manage it with a minimum of fuss. Arnaldo and Victor were in business with their father, and from the time Lucia was a small girl, she eavesdropped on the exciting conversations between her father and her brothers, and listened to the tales of how they had outwitted or overpowered their enemies. To Lucia, her father was a 85 knight in shining armour. She saw nothing wrong in what her father and brothers were doing. On the contrary, they were helping people. If people wanted to gamble, why let stupid laws stand in their way? If men took pleasure in buying sex, why not assist them? And how generous of her father and brothers to loan money to people who were turned away by the hard-hearted bankers. To Lucia, her father and brothers were model citizens. The proof of it lay in her father's friends; Once a week Angelo Carmine gave an enormous dinner party at the villa, and oh, the people who would be seated at the Carmine table! The mayor would be there, and a few aldermen, and judges, and seated next to them were film stars and opera singers and often the chief of police and a Monsignor. Several times a year the governor himself would appear. Lucia lived an idyllic life, filled with parties and beautiful clothes and jewels, cars and servants, and powerful friends. And then one February, on her twenty-third birthday, it all came to an abrupt end. It began innocuously enough. Two men came to the villa to see her father. One of the men was their friend, the chief of police, and the other was his lieutenant. 'Forgive me, Padrone,' the police chief apologized, 'but this is a stupid formality which the Commissioner is forcing me to go through with. A thousand pardons, Padrone, but if you will be kind enough to accompany me to the police station, I will see to it that you are home in time to enjoy your daughter's birthday party.' 'No problem,' Angelo Carmine said genially. 'A man must do his duty.' He grinned. 'This new Commissioner who's been appointed by the President is - in the American phrase - "an eager beaver", eh?' 'I'm afraid that is so,' the police chief sighed. 'But don't worry. You and I have seen these pains-in-the-asses come and go very quickly, eh, Padrone?' They laughed and left. 1

Angelo Carmine was not home for the party that day, nor the next. In fact, he never saw any of his homes again. The State entered a one-hundred-count indictment against him that included murder, drug trafficking, prostitution, arson, and scores of other crimes. Bail was denied. A police dragnet went out that swept up Carmine's crime organization. He had counted on his powerful connections in Sicily to have the charges against him dismissed, but instead he was taken to Rome in the middle of the night and held at the Regina Coeli, the notorious Queen of Heaven prison. He was put in a small cell that contained barred windows, a radiator, a narrow bed and a toilet with no seat. It was outrageous! It was an indignity beyond imagining. In the beginning Angelo Carmine was sure that Tommaso Contorno, his lawyer, would have him released immediately. When Contorno came to the visiting room of the prison, Carmine stormed at him. 'They've closed down my warehouses and drug operation and they know everything about my money laundering operation. Somebody is talking. Find out who it is and bring me his tongue.' 'Do not worry, Padrone,' Contorno assured him. 'We will find him.' His optimism turned out to be unfounded. In order to protect their witnesses, the State adamantly refused to reveal their names until the trial began. Two days before the trial, Angelo Carmine and the other members of the Mafia were transferred to Rebibbia Prigione, a top-security prison twelve miles outside of Rome. A nearby courtroom had been fortified like a bunker. A hundred and sixty accused Mafia members were brought in through an underground tunnel wearing handcuffs and chains and put in thirty cages made of steel and bullet-proof glass. Armed guards surrounded the inside and outside of the courtroom and spectators were searched before they were allowed to enter. When Angelo Carmine was marched into the courtroom, his heart leaped for joy, for the judge on the bench was Giovanni Buscetta, a man who had been on the Carmine payroll for the last fifteen years and who was a frequent guest of the aniline nose. Angelo Carmine knew at last that justice was going to be served. The trial began. Angelo Carmine looked to Omerta, the Sicilian code of silence, to protect him. But to his astonishment, the chief witness for the State turned out to be none other than Benito Patas, the bodyguard. Benito Patas had been with the Carmine family so long and had been so trusted that he had been allowed to be in the room at meetings where confidential matters of business were discussed, and since that business consisted of every illegal activity on the police statutes, Patas was privy to a great deal of information. When the police had apprehended Patas minutes after he had cold-bloodedly murdered and mutilated the new boyfriend of his mistress, they had threatened him with life imprisonment, and Patas had reluctantly agreed to help the police build their case against Carmine in exchange for a lighter sentence. Now, to Angelo Carmine's horrified disbelief, he sat in the courtroom and listened to Patas reveal the innermost secrets of the Carmine fiefdom. Lucia was also in the courtroom every day listening to the man who had been her lover destroying her father and her brothers. Benito Patas' testimony opened the floodgates. Once the Commissioner's investigation began, dozens of victims came forward to tell their stories of what Angelo Carmine and his hoodlums had done to them. The Mafia had muscled into their businesses, blackmailed them, forced them into prostitution, murdered or crippled their loved ones, sold drugs to their children. The list of horrors was endless. Even more damaging was the testimony of the Pentiti, the repentant members of the Mafia who decided to talk. Lucia was allowed to visit her father in prison. He greeted her cheerfully. He hugged her and whispered, 88

Do not worry, faccia del angelo. Judge Giovanni Buscetta is my secret ace in the hole. He knows all the tricks of the law. He will use them to see that your brothers and I are acquitted.' Angelo Carmine proved to be a poor prophet. The public had been outraged by the excesses of the Mafia, and when the trial finally ended. Judge Giovanni Buscetta, an astute political animal, sentenced the Mafia members to long prison terms and sentenced Angelo Carmine and his two sons to the maximum permitted by Italian law, life imprisonment, a mandatory sentence of twenty-eight years. For Angelo Carmine it was a death sentence. All of Italy cheered. Justice had finally triumphed. But to Lucia, it was a nightmare beyond imagining. The three men she loved most in the world were being sent to hell. Once again, Lucia was allowed to visit her father in his cell. The overnight change in him was heartbreaking. In the space of a few days, he had become an old man. His figure had shrunk and his healthy, ruddy complexion had turned sallow. 'They have betrayed me,' he moaned. 'They have all betrayed me.' Judge Giovanni Buscetta -1 owned him, Lucia! I made him a wealthy man, and he did this terrible thing to me. And Patas. I was like a father to him. What has the world come to? Whatever happened to honour? They are Sicilians, like me.' Lucia took her father's hand in hers and said in a low voice, 'I am Sicilian, too. Papa. You shall have your vengeance. I swear it to you, on my life.' 'My life is over,' her father told her. 'But yours is still ahead of you. I have a numbered account in Zurich. The Bank Leu. There is more money there than that you could spend in ten lifetimes.' He whispered a number in her ear. 'Leave cursed Italy. Take the money and enjoy yourself.' Lucia held him close. 'Papa! I will ever need a inena, you can trust Dominic Durell. We are like brothers. He has a home in France at Beziers near the Spanish border: 'I'll remember.' 'Promise me you'll leave Italy.' 'Yes, Papa. But there is something I have to do first.' Having a burning desire for revenge was one thing. Figuring out a way to get it was another. She was alone, and it was not going to be easy. Lucia thought of the Italian expression, 'Rubare il mestiere.' 'You steal their profession. I must think the way they do. A few weeks after her father and brothers had started serving their prison sentences, Lucia Carmine appeared at the home of Judge Giovanni Buscetta. The judge himself opened the door. He stared at Lucia in surprise. He had seen her often when he was a guest at the Carmine home, but they had never had much to say to each other. 'Lucia Carmine? What are you doing here? You shouldn't have.' 'I have come to thank you. Your Honour.' He studied her suspiciously. Thank me for what? Lucia looked deep into his eyes. 'For exposing my father and brothers for what they were. I was an innocent, living in that house of horrors. I had no idea what monsters -' She broke down and began to sob. The judge stood there uncertainly, then patted her shoulder. There, there. Come in and have some tea.' 'Th - thank you.' When they were seated in the living room. Judge Buscetta said, 'I had no idea that you felt that way about your father. I had the impression that you were very close.' 'Only because I had no idea what he and my brothers were really like. When I found out -' She shuddered. 'You don't

know what it was like,' Lucia said. 'I wanted to get away, but there was no escape for me.' 'I didn't understand.' He patted her hand. 'I'm afraid I misjudged you, my dear.' 'I was terrified of him.' Her voice was filled with passion. Judge Buscetta noticed, not for the first time, what a beautiful young girl Lucia was. She was wearing a simple black dress that revealed the outlines of her lush body. He looked at her rounded breasts and could not help observing how grown up she had become. would be amusing, Buscetta thought, to sleep with the daughter of Angela Carmine. He's powerless to hurt me now. The old bastard thought he owned me, but I was too smart for him. Lucia is probably a virgin. I could teach her a few things in bed. An elderly housekeeper brought in a tray of tea and a plate of biscuits. She put them on a table. 'Shall I pour?' 'Let me,' Lucia said. Her voice was warm and filled with promise. Judge Buscetta smiled at Lucia. 'You can go,' he told the housekeeper. 'Yes, sir.' The judge watched as Lucia walked over to the small table where the tray had been set down and carefully poured out tea for the judge and herself. 'I have a feeling you and I could become very good friends, Lucia,' Giovanni Buscetta said, probing. Lucia gave him a seductive smile. 'I would like that very much. Your Honour.' 'Please - Giovanni.' 'Giovanni.' Lucia handed him his cup. She raised her cup in a toast. To the death of villains.' Smiling, Buscetta lifted his cup. To the death of villains.' He took a swallow and grimaced. The tea tasted bitter. 'Is it too?' 'No, no. It is fine, my dear.' Lucia raised her cup again. To our friendship.' She took another sip, and he joined her. Buscetta never finished his toast. He was seized by a sudden spasm, and he felt a red-hot poker stabbing at his heart. He grabbed his chest. 'Oh, my God! Call a doctor. . . .' Lucia sat there, calmly sipping her tea, watching him stumble to his feet and fall to the floor. He lay there, his body twitching, and then he was still. That's one. Papa, Lucia said. Benito Patas was in his cell playing solitaire when the jailer announced, 'You have a conjugal visitor.' Benito beamed. He had been given special status as an informer, with many privileges, and conjugal visits was one of them. Patas had half a dozen girl-friends, and they alternated their visits. He wondered which one had come today. He studied himself in the little mirror hanging on the wall of his cell, put some pomade on his hair, slicked it back, then followed the guard through the prison corridor to the section where there were private rooms. The guard motioned him inside. Patas strutted into the room, filled with anticipation. He stopped and stared in surprise. 'Lucia! My God, what the hell are you doing here? How did you get in?' Lucia said softly, 'I told them we were engaged, Benito.' She was wearing a stunning red, low-cut silk dress that clung to the curves of her body. Benito Patas backed away from her. 'Get out.' 'If you wish. But there is something you should hear first. When I saw you get up on the stand and testify against my father and brothers, I hated you. I wanted to kill you.' She moved closer to him. 'But then I realized that what you were doing was an act of bravery. You dared to stand up and tell the truth. My father and my brothers were not evil men, but they did evil things, and you were the only one strong enough to stand up against them.' 'Believe me, Lucia,' he said, 'the police forced me to.'

You don't have to explain, she said slyly. 'Not to me. Remember the first time we made love? I knew then that I was in love with you and that I always would be.' 'Lucia, I would never have done what I -' 'Caro, I want us to forget what happened. It's done. What's important now is you and me.' She was close to him now, and he could smell her heady perfume. His mind was in a state of confusion. 'Do - do you mean that?' 'More than I've ever meant anything in my life. That's why I came here today, to prove it to you. To show you that I'm yours. And not with just words.' Her fingers went to her shoulder straps, and an instant later her dress shimmered to the floor. She was naked. 'Do you believe me now?' By God, she was beautiful. 'Yes, I believe you.' His voice was husky. Lucia moved close to him, and her body brushed against his. 'Get undressed,' she whispered. 'Hurry!' She watched Patas as he undressed. When he was naked, he took her hand and led her to the little bed in the corner of the room. He did not bother with foreplay. In a moment he was on top of her, spreading her legs, plunging deep inside her, an arrogant smile on his face. 'It's like old times,' he said smugly. 'You couldn't forget me, could you?' 'No,' Lucia whispered in his ear. 'And do you know why I couldn't forget you?' 'No, mi amore. Tell me.' 'Because I'm Sicilian, like my father.' She reached behind her head and removed the long, ornate pin that held her hair in place. Benito Patas felt something stab him under his rib cage, and the sudden pain made him open his mouth to scream, but Lucia's mouth was on his, kissing him, and as Benito's body bucked and writhed on top of her, Lucia had an orgasm. A few minutes later she was clothed again, and the pin had been replaced in her hair. Benito was under the blanket, . . . >>-ia mhj<-m; ai me cell aoor and smiled at the guard who opened it to let her out. 'He's asleep,' she whispered. The guard looked at the beautiful young woman and smiled. 'You probably wore him out.' 'I hope so,' Lucia said. A the sheer daring of the two murders took Italy by storm. The beautiful young daughter of a Mafioso had avenged her father and brothers, and the excitable Italian public cheered her, rooting for her to escape. The police, quite naturally, took a rather different point of view. Lucia Carmine had murdered a respected judge and had then committed a second murder within the very walls of a prison. In their eyes, equal to her crimes was the fact that she had made fools of them. The newspapers were having a wonderful time at their expense. 'I want her neck,' the police commissioner roared to the deputy commissioner. 'And I want it today.' The manhunt intensified. The object of all this attention was hiding in the home of Salvatore Giuseppe, one of her father's men who had managed to escape the firestorm. In the beginning, Lucia's only thought had been to avenge the honour of her father and brothers. She had fully expected to be caught and was prepared to sacrifice herself. When she had managed to walk out of the prison and make her escape, however, her thoughts changed from vengeance to survival. Now that she had accomplished what she had set out to do, life suddenly became precious again. I'm not going to let them capture me, she vowed to herself. Never. Salvatore Giuseppe and his wife had done what they could to disguise Lucia. They had lightened her hair, stained her teeth, and bought her glasses and some ill-fitting clothes. Salvatore examined their handiwork critically. 'It is not bad,' he said. 'But it is not enough. We must get

you out of Italy. You have to go somewhere where your picture is not on the front page of every newspaper. Somewhere you can hide out for a few months.' And Lucia remembered: you ever need a friend, you can trust Dominic Durell. We are like brothers. He has a home in France at Beziers, near the Spanish border. 'I know where I can go,' Lucia said. 'I'll need a passport.' 'I will arrange it.' Twenty-four hours later Lucia was looking at a passport in the name of Lucia Roma, with a photograph taken in her new persona. 'Where will you go?' 'My father has a friend in France who will help me.' Salvatore said, 'If you wish me to accompany you to the border?' Both of them knew how dangerous that could be. 'No, Salvatore,' Lucia said. 'You have done enough for me. I must do this alone.' The following morning Salvatore Giuseppe rented a Flat in the name of Lucia Roma and handed her the keys. 'Be careful,' he pleaded. 'Don't worry. I was born under a lucky star.' Had not her father told her so? At the Italian-French border the cars waiting to get into France were advancing slowly in a long line. As Lucia moved closer to the immigration booth, she became more and more nervous. They would be looking for her at all exit points. If they caught her, she knew she would be sentenced to prison for life. I'll kill myself first, Lucia thought. She had reached the immigration officer. 'Passport, signorina.' Lucia handed him her black passport through the car window. As the officer took it, he glanced at Lucia, and she saw a puzzled look come into his eyes. He looked from the passport to her face and back again, this time more carefully. Lucia felt her body tense. 'You're Lucia Carmine,' he said.

Chapter 9 Lucia Carmine. 'No!' Lucia cried. The blood drained from her face. She looked around for a way to escape. There was none. And suddenly, to her disbelief, the guard was smiling. He leaned towards her and whispered, 'Your father was good to my family, signorina. You may pass through. Good luck.' Lucia felt dizzy with relief. 'Grazie.' She stepped on the accelerator and drove the twenty-five yards towards the French border. The French immigration officer prided himself on being a connoisseur of beautiful women, and the woman who pulled up before him was certainly no beauty. She hadousy hair, thick glasses, stained teeth and was dowdily dressed. Why can't Italian women look as beautiful as French women? he thought disgustedly. He stamped Lucia's passport and waved her through. She arrived in Beziers many hours later. The phone was answered on the first ring, and a smooth male voice said, 'Hello.' 'Dominic Durell, please.' 'This is Dominic Durell. Who is this speaking?' 'Lucia Carmine. My father told me -' 'Lucia!' His voice was warm with welcome. 'I was hoping to hear from you.' 'I need help.' 97 i ui i-iii cuum on me. Lucia's heart lightened. It was the first good news she had heard in a long time. She suddenly realized how drained she was. 'I need a place where I can hide out from the police.' 'No problem. My wife and I have a perfect place for you to use for as long as you like.' It was almost too good to be true. Thank you,' i 'Where are you, Lucia?' 'I'm 'At that moment the blare of a police shortwave radio crackled over the phone. It was instantly shut off. 'Lucia -' i-w N

Lucia - where are you? I'll come and get you.' Why would he have a police radio in his house? And he had answered the telephone on the first ring. Almost as though he had been expecting her call. 'Lucia - can you hear me?' She knew, with an absolute certainty, that the man on the other end of the line was a policeman. So the dragnet was out for her. This call was being traced. 'Lucia' She replaced the receiver and walked quickly away from the telephone booth. I've got to get out of France, she thought. She returned to her car and took a map from the glove compartment. The Spanish border was only a short distance away. She replaced the map and started off. She turned a corner and headed south towards San Sebastian. It was at the Spanish border that things started to go wrong. 'Passport, please.' Lucia handed the Spanish immigration officer her passport. He gave it a cursory glance and started to hand it back.

but something made him hesitate. He took a closer look at Lucia, and his expression changed. 'Just a moment, please. I will have to have this stamped inside.' He recognized her, Lucia thought desperately. She watched him walk into the little office kiosk and show the passport to another officer. The two of them were talking excitedly. She had to escape. She opened the door on the driver's side and stepped out. A group of German tourists who had just cleared customs was noisily boarding an excursion coach next to Lucia's car. The sign on the front of the coach read 'Madrid'. Achtung! Their guide was calling out. 'Schnell!' Lucia glanced towards the hut. The guard who had taken her passport was yelling into the telephone. 'All aboard, bitte.' Without a second thought, Lucia moved towards the laughing, chattering tour group and stepped on to the coach, averting her face from the guide. She took a seat in the rear of the coach, keeping her head down. Move! She prayed. Now. Through the window Lucia saw that another guard had joined the first two and the three of them were examining her passport. As though in answer to Lucia's prayer, the coach door closed and the engine sprang into life. A short time later the coach was rolling out of San Sebastian towards Madrid. What would happen when the border guards found that she had left her car? Their first thought would be that she had gone to the ladies' room. They would wait and finally send someone in to get her. Their next step would be to search the area to see if she had hidden somewhere. By then dozens of cars and buses would have passed through. The police would have no idea where she had gone, nor in which direction she was travelling. The tour group on the coach was obviously having a happy holiday. Why not? Lucia thought bitterly. They haven't got the police snapping at their heels. Was it worth risking the rest of my life? Lucia thought, reliving the scenes with Judge Buscetta and Benito in her mind. I have a feeling you and I could become very good friends Lucia. ... To the death of villains. And then Benito Palas: It's like old times. You couldn't forget me, could you? And she had made the two traitors pay for their sins against her family. Was it worth it? They were dead, but her father and brothers would suffer for the rest of their lives. Oh, yes, Lucia thought, was worth it. Someone on the coach started a German song, and the others joined in: 7n Munchen ist ein Hofbrau Haus, ein, zwei, drei . . . 'I'll be safe with this group for a while, Lucia thought. I'll decide what to do next when I get to Madrid. She never reached Madrid. At the walled city of Avila, the tour coach made a scheduled stop for refreshments and what the guide delicately referred to as a 'comfort station'. 'Alle raus aus dem Bus,' he called. Lucia stayed in her seat, watching the passengers rise and scramble for the front door of the coach. I'll be safer if I stay here. But the guide noticed her. 'Out, Fraulein,' he said. 'We have only fifteen minutes.' Lucia hesitated, then reluctantly rose and moved towards the door. As she passed the guide, he said, 'Warten Sie, bitte! You are not of this tour.' Lucia gave him a warm smile. 'No,' she said. 'You see, my car broke down in San Sebastian and it is very important that I get to Madrid, so I - 'Nein!' the guide bellowed. 'This is not possible. This is a private tour.' 'I know,' Lucia told him, 'but you see, I need ' 'You must arrange this with the company headquarters in Munich.'

i can i m in a terrible hurry and 'Nein, nein. You will get me in trouble. Go away or I will call the police.' But 'Nothing she said could sway him. Twenty minutes later Lucia watched the coach pull away and roar down the highway towards Madrid. She was stranded with no passport and almost no money, and by now the police of half a dozen countries would be looking for her to arrest her for murder. She turned to examine her surroundings. The coach had stopped in front of a circular building with a sign in front that read 'Estacion de Autobuses'. I can get another bus here, Lucia thought. She walked into the station. It was a large building with marble walls, and scattered around the room were a dozen ticket windows with a sign over each one: Segovia . . . Munogalindo . . . Valladolid . . . Salamanca . . . Madrid. Stairs and an escalator led to the downstairs level where the buses departed. There was a pasteleria where they sold doughnuts and sweets and sandwiches wrapped in wax paper, and Lucia suddenly realized that she was starved. I'd better not buy anything, she thought, until I find out how much a bus ticket costs. As she started towards the window marked Madrid, two uniformed policemen hurried into the station. One of them was carrying a photograph. They moved from window to window showing the picture to the clerks. They're looking for me. That damned bus driver reported me. A family of newly arrived passengers was coming up the escalator. As they moved towards the door, Lucia stepped up beside them, mingling with them, and went outside. She walked down the cobblestoned streets of Avila, trying not to rush, afraid of drawing attention to herself. She turned into the Calle de la Madre Soledad, with its granite buildings and black wrought-iron balconies, and when she reached the plaza she sat down on a park bench to try to figure out her next move. A hundred yards away, several women and some couples were seated in the park, enjoying the afternoon sunshine. As Lucia sat there, a police car appeared. It pulled up at the far end of the square and two policemen got out. They moved over to one of the women seated alone and began questioning her. Lucia's heart began to beat faster. . . She forced herself to get to her feet slowly, her heart pounding, and turned away from the policemen and kept walking. The next street was called, unbelievably, 'The Street of Life and Death'. wonder if it's an omen. There were realistic-looking stone lions in the plaza, their tongues out, and in Lucia's fevered imagination, they seemed to be snapping at her. Ahead of her was a large cathedral, and on its facade was a carved medallion of a young girl and a grinning skull. The very air seemed to be filled with death. Lucia heard the sound of a church bell and looked up through the open city gate. In the distance, high on a hill, rose the walls of an abbey. She stood there, staring at it. 'I never want to leave,' Lucia assured her. Not for the next few months, anyway. The Reverend Mother rose. 'It is an important decision. I suggest that you go and think about it carefully before you make up your mind.' Lucia felt the situation slipping away from her and she began to panic. She had nowhere to go. Her only hope was to stay behind these walls. 'I have thought about it,' Lucia said quickly. 'Believe me, Reverend Mother, I've thought about nothing else. I want to renounce the world.' She looked the Mother Prioress in the eye. 'I want to be here more than I want to be anywhere else in the world.' Lucia's voice rang with truth. The Reverend Mother was puzzled. There was something unsettled and frantic about this woman that was disturbing. And yet what better reason for anyone to come to this place where their spirit would be calmed by meditation and prayer? 'Are you Catholic?' 'Yes.' The Reverend Mother picked up an old-fashioned quill pen. 'Tell me your name, child.' 'My name is Lucia Car - Roma.' 'Are your parents alive?' 'My father is.' 'What does he do?' 'He was a businessman. He's retired.' She thought of how pale and wasted he looked the last time she had seen him, and a pang went through her. 'Do you have any brothers or sisters?' 'Two brothers.' 'And what do they do?' Lucia decided she needed all the help she could get. 'They're priests.' 'Lovely.' The catechism went on for three hours. At the end of that time, the Reverend Mother Betina said, 'I will find you a bed for the night. In the morning you will begin instructions and when they are finished, if you still feel the same, you may join the order. But I warn you, it is a very difficult path you have chosen.' 'Believe me,' Lucia said earnestly. 'I have no choice.' The night wind was soft and warm, whispering its way across the wooded glade, and Lucia slept. She was at a party in a beautiful villa, and her father and brothers were there, and everyone was having a wonderful time, and a stranger walked into the room and said, 'Who the hell are these people?' And the lights went out and a bright flashlight shone in her face and she came awake and sat up, the light blinding her. There were half a dozen men surrounding the nuns in the clearing. With the light in her eyes, Lucia could only dimly make out their shapes. 'Who are you?' the man demanded again. His voice was deep and rough. Lucia was instantly awake, her mind alert. She was trapped. But if these men were from the police, they would have known who the nuns were. And what were they doing in the woods at night? Lucia took a chance. 'We are sisters from the convent at Avila,' she said. 'Some government men came and ' 'We heard about it,' the man interrupted. The other sisters were all sitting up now, awake and terrified. 'Who - who are you?' Megan asked. 'My name is Jaime Miro.' There were six of them, dressed in rough trousers, leather jackets, turtle-neck sweaters and canvas rope-soled shoes, and the traditional Basque berets. They were heavily armed, and in the dim moonlight they had a demonic look. Two of the men looked as though they had been badly beaten. The man who called himself Jaime Miro was tall and lean, with fierce black eyes. 'They could have been followed here.' 104

He turned to one of the members of his band. 'Have a look around.' 'sr Lucia realized that it was a woman who answered. Lucia watched her move silently into the trees. 'What are we going to do with them?' Ricardo Mellado asked. Jaime Miro said, 'Nada. We leave them and move on.' One of the men protested, 'Jaime - these are little sisters of Jesus.' 'Then let Jesus take care of them,' Jaime Miro said curtly. 'We have work to do.' The nuns were all standing now, waiting. The men were gathered around Jaime, arguing with him. 'We can't let them get caught. Acoca and his men are searching for them.' 'They're searching for us, too, amigo.' 'The sisters will never make it without our help.' Jaime Miro said firmly. 'No. We're not risking our lives for them. We have problems of our own.' Felix Carpio, one of his lieutenants, said, 'We could escort them part of the way, Jaime. Just until they get away from here.' He turned to the nuns. 'Where are you sisters headed?' Teresa spoke up, the light of God in her eyes. 'I have a holy mission. There is a convent at Mendavia that will shelter us.' 'Felix Carpio said to Jaime Miro, 'We could escort them there. Mendavia's on our way to San Sebastian.' Jaime Miro turned on him, furious. 'You damned fool! Why don't you put up a signpost telling everyone where we're going?' 'I only meant - ' Mierda! His voice was filled with disgust. 'Now we have no choice. We'll have to take them with us. If Acoca finds them, he'll make them talk. They're going to slow us down and make it that much easier for Acoca and his butchers to track us.' Lucia was only half listening. The gold cross lay within 105 FR1:- . . . u urc musy timing. God, and a weird sense of humour. 'All right,' Jaime Miro was saying. 'We'll have to make the best of it. We'll take them as far as the convent and drop them, but we can't all travel together like some bloody circus.' He turned to the nuns. He could not keep the anger out of his voice. 'Do any of you even know where Mendavia is?' The sisters looked at one another. Graciela said, 'Not exactly.' 'Then how the hell did you ever expect to get there?' 'God will lead us,' Sister Teresa said firmly. Another one of the men, Rubio Arzano, grinned. 'You're in luck.' He nodded towards Jaime. 'He came down to guide you in person, sister.' Jaime silenced him with a look. 'We'll split up. We'll take three different routes.' He pulled a map out of a backpack and the men squatted down on the ground, shining flashlights on the map. 'The convent at Mendavia is here, south-east of Logrono. I'll head north through Valladolid, then up to Burgos.' He ran his fingers along the map and turned to Rubio, a tall, pleasant-looking man. 'You take the route to Olmedo up to Penafiel and Aranda de Duero.' 'I'Right, amigo.' Jaime Miro was concentrating on the map again. He looked up at Ricardo Mellado, one of the men whose face was bruised. 'Ricardo, head for Segovia, then take the mountain route to Cerezo de Abajo, then to Soria. We'll all meet at Logrono.' He put the map away. 'Logrono is two hundred and ten kilometres from here.' He calculated silently. 'We'll meet there in seven days. Keep away from the main roads.' Felix asked, 'Where in Logrono shall we meet?' Ricardo said, 'The Cirque Japon will be playing in Logrono next week.' 'Good. We'll meet there. The matinee performance.' Felix Carpio, the bearded one, spoke up. 'Who are the nuns going to travel with?' 106

>, I .->!!! III III Up. It was time to put a stop to this, Lucia decided. 'If the soldiers are searching for you, signore, then we'd be safer travelling on our own.' 'But we wouldn't be. Sister,' Jaime said. 'You know too much about our plans now.' 'Besides,' the man called Rubio added, 'you wouldn't have a chance. We know the country. We're Basques, and the people up north are our friends. They'll help us and hide us from the nationalist soldiers. You'd never get to Mendavia by yourselves.' 'don't want to get to Mendavia, you idiot. Jaime Miro was saying, grudgingly, 'All right, then, let's get moving. I want us far away from here by dawn.' Sister Megan stood quietly listening to the man who was giving orders. He was rude and arrogant, but somehow he seemed to radiate a reassuring sense of power. Jaime Miro looked over at Teresa and pointed to Tomas Sanjuro and Rubio Arzano. 'They will be responsible for you.' 'Sister Teresa said, 'God is responsible for me.' 'Sure,' Jaime replied drily. 'I suppose that's how you got here in the first place.' Rubio walked over to Teresa. 'Rubio Arzano at your service. Sister. How are you called?' 'I am Sister Teresa.' Lucia spoke up quickly. 'I will travel with Sister Teresa.' There was no way she was going to let them separate her from the gold cross. Jaime Miro nodded. 'All right.' He pointed to Graciela. 'Ricardo, you'll take this one.' Ricardo Mellado nodded. 'Bueno.' The woman, whom Jaime had sent to reconnoitre, had returned to the group. 'It's all clear,' she said. 'Good.' Jaime Miro looked at Megan. 'You come with us, Sister.' Megan nodded. Jaime Miro fascinated her. And there was something intriguing about the woman. She was dark and 107 .n.c-iwis-iiis, wiin me nawk-ii-ke reatures of a predator Her mouth was a red wound. There was something intensely sexual about her sight. y The woman walked up to Megan. 'Im Amparo Jiron Keep your mouth shut, Sister, and there will be no trouble.' Jaime said to the others. 'Let's get moving. We'll meet in Logrono in seven days. Don't let the sisters out of your sight.' Sister Teresa and the man called Rubio Arzano had already started to move down the path. Lucia hurried after them. She had seen the map that Rubio Arzano had put in his backpack. I'll take it, Lucia decided, when he's asleep. Their flight across Spain began. wia! you arc is me wori liar ive ever heard.' She walked over to the robes that the nuns had discarded. 'What are those?' 'Ah. Those, yes. The two young men were wearing them as disguises, you see, And ' There are four outfits here. You said there were two men.' 'Right. The other two joined them later, and ' She walked over to the phone. 'What are you doing?' 'Calling the police.' 'That's not necessary, I assure you. As soon as you release me, I'm going right to the police station to make a full report.' The woman looked down at him. 'Your robe is open. Friar.'; The police were even less sympathetic than the woman had been. Carrillo was being questioned by four members of the guardia civil. Their green uniforms and eighteenth-century black patent leather hats were enough to inspire fear throughout Spain, and they certainly worked their magic on Carrillo. 'Are you aware that you answer to the exact description of a man who murdered a priest up north?' Carrillo sighed. 'I am not surprised. I have a twin brother, may heaven punish him. It is because of him that I joined the monastery. Our poor mother ' 'Spare us.' A giant with a scarred face walked into the room. 'Good afternoon. Colonel Acoca.' 'Is this the man?' 'Yes, Colonel. Because of the nuns' robes that we found with him in the shop, we thought you might be interested in questioning him yourself.' Colonel Ramon Acoca walked up to the hapless Carrillo. 'Yes. I'm very interested.'

imio gave me L-oionei nis most ingratiating smile. 'I'm glad you're here, -Colonel. I'm on a mission for my church, and it's very important that I get to Barcelona as quickly as possible. As I tried to explain to these nice gentlemen, I am a victim of circumstances simply because I tried to be a good samaritan.' Colonel Acoca nodded pleasantly. 'Since you are in a hurry, I will try not to waste your time.' Carrillo beamed at him. 'Thank you, Colonel.' 'I'm going to ask you a few simple questions. If you answer truthfully, everything will be fine. If you lie to me, it will be very painful for you.' He slipped something into his hand. Carrillo said righteously, 'Then of God do not lie.' 'I'm very happy to hear that. Tell me about the four nuns.' 'I don't know anything about four nuns. Col.' The fist that hit him in the mouth had brass knuckles on it, and blood spurted across the room. 'My God! What are you doing?' Carrillo gasped. Colonel Acoca repeated his question. 'Tell me about the four nuns.' 'I don't.' The fist slammed into Carrillo's mouth again, breaking teeth. Carrillo was choking on his blood. 'Don't, I.' 'Tell me about the four nuns.' Acoca's voice was soft and reasonable. 'I - He saw the fist being raised. 'Yes! I - I' The words came tumbling out. 'They were in Villacastin, running away from their convent. Please don't hit me again.' 'Go on.' 'I - I told them I would help them. They needed to change clothes.' 'So you broke into the shop . . . 'No. I - yes. I - they stole some clothes and then they knocked me out and left me.' 'Did they say where they were headed?' A peculiar sense of dignity suddenly took possession of Carrillo. 'No.' His not mentioning Mendavia had nothing to FR1;FR2:uu wim pmcii;jiig me nuns. -.arnno aita not give a damn about them. It was because the Colonel had ruined his face. It was going to be very difficult to make a living after he was released from prison. Colonel Acoca turned to the members of the guardia civil. 'See what a little friendly persuasion can do? Send him to Madrid and hold him for murder.' Lucia, Sister Teresa, Rubio Arzano and Tomas Sanjuro walked north-east, heading towards Olmeda, staying away from the main roads and walking through fields of grain. They passed flocks of sheep and goats, and the innocence of the pastoral countryside was in ironic contrast to the grave danger they were all in. They walked through the night, and at dawn they headed for a secluded spot in the hills. Rubio Arzano said. The town of Olmeda is just ahead. We'll stop here until nightfall. You both look as though you could do with some sleep.' Sister Teresa was physically exhausted. But something was happening to her emotionally that was far more disturbing. She felt she was losing touch with reality. It had begun with the disappearance of her precious rosary. Had she lost it or had someone stolen it? She was not sure. It had been her solace for more years than she could remember. How many thousands of Hail Marys and how many Our Fathers and how many Hail, Holy Queens? It had become a part of her, her security, and now it was missing. Had she lost it in the convent during the attack? And had there really been an attack? It seemed so unreal now. She was no longer sure what was real and what was imaginary. The baby she had seen. Was it Monique's baby? Or was God playing tricks on her? It was all so confusing. When she was young, everything had been so simple. When she was young . . .

Chapter 11 Eze, France 1924 When she was only eight years old, most of the happiness in Teresa DeFosse's life came from the church. It was like a sacred flame drawing her to its warmth. She visited the Chapelle des Penitents Blancs, and prayed at the cathedral in Monaco and Notre Dame Bon Voyage in Cannes, but most frequently she attended services at the church in Eze. Teresa lived in a chateau on a mountain above the medieval village of Eze, near Monte Carlo, overlooking the Cote d'Azur. The village was perched high on a rock and it seemed to Teresa that she could look down upon the whole world. There was a monastery at the top, with rows of houses cascading down the side of the mountain to the blue Mediterranean below. Monique, a year younger than Teresa, was the beauty in the family. Even when she was a child, one could see that she would grow up to be an exquisite woman. She had fine-boned features, sparkling blue eyes, and an easy self-assurance that suited her looks. Teresa was the ugly duckling. The truth was that the DeFosses were embarrassed by their elder daughter. If Teresa had been conventionally ugly, they might have sent her to a plastic surgeon and had her nose shortened, or her chin brought forward, or her eyes fixed. But the problem was that all Teresa's features were just slightly askew. Everything seemed out of place, as though she were a comedienne who had donned her face for laughter. du i uruo naa cneaiea ner in me matter of looks. He had compensated for it by blessing her with a remarkable gift. Teresa had the voice of an angel. It had been

