



ESCAPE FROM PARIS

by Carolyn Hart

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Linda handed her papers to the sergeant. Her hands shook a little but he didn't seem to notice. Perhaps he was used to shaking hands.

He read the passes which permitted her to drive, to purchase 10 gallons of gasoline a week and to visit hospitals in a 75-mile radius of Paris on behalf of the Foyer du Soldat.

Linda was ready to explain why it was she and not her sister Eleanor making the visit today, but he didn't ask. He merely nodded, handed the papers back and said, in his heavily accented French, "You may proceed, Mademoiselle."

The sentry pacing back and forth between the hospital gate posts stood aside for the little car to enter.

Linda slowly drove around the side of the hospital, trying, if she would admit it, to put off for another few minutes her entry into the hospital. She had not wanted to come. It was Eleanor who visited hospitals daily, taking Red Cross packages to wounded soldiers and airmen. Eleanor kept hoping, of course, that she would find some trace of her husband, Andre, who had been missing since Dunkirk.

Today's visit to Douellens had been set up for a week or more so. When Eleanor was up all night with a tooth ache, Linda volunteered to go in her place. Linda hated sickness – and wounds – and hospitals – and she was dreadfully afraid of the Germans.

She drove slowly around the west wing to park in the shadow of a huge oak, just opposite a row of bins that marked the kitchen hospital. Linda reluctantly got out of the car. Opening the trunk, she lifted out the picnic hamper which was filled with small boxes, fifty or more, and then she walked slowly toward the front of the hospital and up the broad stone steps, into a dirty entry foyer, the marble streaked with grit. The smell in the foyer struck her like a physical blow. She paused for just an instant, then, her mouth tight, turned to her left.

"The Commandant's office is just back of the entry foyer," Eleanor had told her. "You must check in there first and show your papers."

A French sergeant perfunctorily looked at her papers.

"Do I just go up and down the halls?" Linda asked uncertainly.

He shrugged, his face weary and bitter. "Do whatever you like, Mademoiselle."

She hesitated for a moment in the main hallway then stepped into the first ward. She stopped just inside, appalled. Eleanor had told her the hospitals were overcrowded and understaffed but she hadn't expected anything like this.

Every inch of space was used, the beds jammed so close together there was scarcely room to step between them. The smell of blood, infection and carbolic acid hung thickly in the steamy air. Linda didn't see a single nurse, just row after row of beds with men lying quietly.

When they saw her, greetings and questions in French spread over the long room like wildfire. "A girl. Look, there's a girl. It must be the Red Cross. Mademoiselle, have you come from Paris?"

She edged her way up and down the rows, answering as well as she could in her far from perfect French, and trying hard not to gasp at the dreadfully maimed. She passed a huge Senegalese soldier, encased in soiled bandages, who writhed in pain, muttering in a language no one could understand. Burns, a nearby patient told Linda when she looked, full of pity. She saw a soldier without a nose, another whose entire face was shrouded in gauze, and so many who were blind.

She walked through two wards, passing out her little packets of cheese, bread, chocolate and cigarettes. What a useless journey, she thought miserably. Little packets of food for men who needed medicine and clean bandages and good meals. It was worse than useless. It was a mockery of aid. Yet, this hospital was a paradise compared to where most of the men would be sent when well. As soon as they were well enough, they would be transferred to military prisons.