

# Light in a Hollow Place

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This is a work of fiction. People and locations, even those with real names, have been fictionalized for the purposes of this story.

## Chapter One

*Paris, France:*

*Stinking smell! A knot twisted in his stomach from the pungent, rotten odor of human waste and death. Filthy Blackshirts had beat him until he'd cowered like an animal at the sound of their footsteps. He covered his ears and closed his eyes. The man's screams in the other cell curdled his blood. His own voice emitted the same sounds when they'd cut him. Desperate to hang on to a thread of sanity, he brought his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around his legs. They liked to carve him slowly, their favorite tools always razor- sharp. His stomach flipped again but nothing remained to vomit. Empty. Squeezing his eyes shut, he vowed to survive one more minute, one more day. He'd never give in to the bastards.*

Captain Richard Hart woke from the sound of his own scream. He clamped down his mouth and tried to swallow through a raw throat. Shivering, he reached for the thin wool covers and pulled them to his chin. Brittle with emotions on the inside, on the outside, his skin burned.

An eerie tingling floated throughout his body. An image formed in his mind. Hanging from the steel girders of a bridge, he planted explosives. A rope tied around his waist guaranteed his safety. He'd never made a mistake until...

*Hell.* That terrifying moment when he realized he'd caused a man's death.

His foggy brain cleared and he remembered now. He lay in a hospital bed. How long had he been here?

Neither dead nor fully alive, he survived. But the confinement left him edgy and the tremors from his nightmares were, once again, coming in full force. He'd more than once woken drenched in sweat, screaming like a mad man. They'd moved him to the end of the ward and curtained him off from the other patients. To protect them from his madness, he supposed.

Pitch blackness surrounded him. He sniffed the air and scrunched his nose from the heavy smell of antiseptics. Tilting his head he listened. He caught phrases, words, strange clanging, coughs, and gruff voices around him. No doubt the patients were talking about him. Pressing his hand against his heart, it reassured him it still beat. His chest squeezed so tight he barely could catch his breath. A soft groan escaped his chapped lips.

Doctor Gerard had assured him he'd live. He'd suffered third-degree burns to his chest, but nothing life-threatening. Being caught in a blast could tear a man apart. He'd been damn lucky to only sustain minor injuries, if the doctor spoke the truth.

His hand flew up to his bandaged eyes. Retinal burns. No guarantee he'd see again. The doctor called *this* minor? What other injuries did he sustain besides his lost sight? He felt no pain, only a dull throb of his muscles from not being able to move around.

Flexing his hands, he couldn't reach past his torso, his wrapped chest hampering his movements. He'd heard about ghost limbs, where a person was tricked into thinking he had all his body parts. His body felt intact, but what if he'd been blown into pieces and just didn't know it yet? He strained to touch his legs, but he couldn't reach his torso with such constricting bandages. Without his sight, he'd lost all sense of time and sank into his nightmares. Now they came day or night. His demons mocked him from the edge of his conscious. Waiting.

"Good morning, dear, I see you're awake. It's about time."

Richard turned his head towards the voice. Damn bandages prevented him from seeing but he recognized the smell of English Tweed cologne, and the British accent of his friend, Leslie Havens. The underlying humor in his friend's voice made him smirk despite his circumstances. His best friend and handler never failed to tell him the truth; no sugar coating in order to spare his feelings. Just what he needed, to hear it straight.

"My head's finally clearing," Richard said, relieved to hear a friendly voice. "How long have you been here?"

"Do you mean here in the hospital or in Paris? Why, I've been here a fortnight, soon as I found out what happened to you. You've been in and out of consciousness. Do you think I'd desert you in your hour of need after all we've been through together?"

A glass pressed against his lips, and he took a long sip. The cool water refreshed his dry throat. After clearing his voice, Richard bucked up his courage. "Tell it to me straight." The scrape of metal legs and the rustle of fabric let him know his friend sat.

"You've sustained minor cuts and burns on your chest...and there's your eyes."

"Do I have all my limbs?"

Damn, his heart felt ready to explode from his chest. He didn't know if he could take the truth. Claire, his darling Claire...he couldn't burden her with half a man,

could he? Clenching his jaw, he willed himself to be strong. He could take it. After all, he survived torture from the expert hands of Mussolini's Blackshirts. Claire was not afraid of scars and Richard had plenty of them. She'd never turned away from his disfigurements. But no matter the promises made between them, he couldn't saddle her with a blind husband.

"You're still handsome as ever, if that's what's worrying you. Amazing, but your face remains flawless."

Leslie's chuckle got under Richard's skin. He had no time to be Leslie's amusement. "My legs, do I have my legs?" he barked.

"You're completely intact, all of you."

"Even my..." Hell, he couldn't say it. The explosion happened so fast he'd blacked out. Most of the impact hit his chest, a part of him already scarred from his interrogators. But, how far below?

Another chuckle came from Leslie. "Oh, dear boy, how I'd love to check that for you."

The English accent emphasized Leslie's teasing and rolled glibly from his lips. Preferring men, Leslie didn't keep his sexual proclivities from Richard, and sensing Richard's insecurities amused him.

"Damn it," Richard growled. He lifted the covers and motioned for Leslie to come by his bed. After all, Leslie had seen him in the buff. Numerous times they met in the gym and took a sauna afterwards. This wasn't any different, yet... "Do it, but be discreet."

Richard heard the swish of curtains being closed around him. The mattress sank from the weight of his friend leaning over him. Richard jerked as Leslie's fingers raised the waistband of his pajamas, and the cool air hit his skin. He grimaced as he felt a flush of heat rise up his neck and face.

"Hmm, well, well, not one hair singed."

Exposed, but determined, Richard clawed at empty air. "The truth."

"Don't worry. You'll be shagging your brains out soon enough once Claire's here."

The slap of his waistband on his groin made him jump. *Did he say Claire?* His heart plummeted. "What are you talking about?" The tightness in his throat caused him to squawk.

"I asked her to come. Once she found out, she'd already decided anyway. Your mother and I provided the means."

"You had no right." And neither did his mother, always butting into his life.

"To pry? I disagree. You need Claire to heal, and she could care less if you're--".

"Blind..." Saying it made it real. *Damn, fuck and shit, so close in beating the odds.*

Strong hands gripped his shoulders. Leslie's jacket smelled of wet wool.

Springtime in Paris always evoked a romantic vision, but the rain must be shrouding the city in mist.

Leslie let go and the mattress sagged. "There's a good chance you'll be able to see once the bandages are removed."

"I can't have her here," he bristled, not seeing him like this, vulnerable and needy.

"And why's that?"

Leslie's sharp retort spoke volumes of his disapproval. Richard winced. But his friend didn't understand. Richard relied on his physical strength to get him through life. To be blind now paralyzed him. How could he ask Claire, an artist who relied on her vision, to be with a man who couldn't see? The burden to have to be his eyes...no. She'd insist on staying with him no matter what the consequence, but he'd refuse her pity. And there was the matter of his episodes recurring with alarming frequency.

"She doesn't deserve this." Richard crossed his arms over his bandaged chest.

"Oh, please, you sound pathetic. And you do deserve this, I suppose? Maybe Claire's right about you. You want to die after all. It must have upset you to wake up at all."

"Go to hell."

Arms circled his neck and Leslie's body pressed into him. Richard tensed. But it was a hug of friendship, nothing more. Craving the human connection, he relaxed. The hollow pit in his stomach lessened.

"I know you're scared. It doesn't make you less of a man to be frightened of the unknown," Leslie said.

Richard untangled from Leslie's hold and gently pushed him away. "What am I going to do?"

"Right now, be glad that she's on her way. Rest and relax."

"Shitty advice." Richard shoved his pillow further behind his head. Folding his hands in his lap, he tilted his head towards Leslie who remained sitting on the bed. "Tell me why you're really here? Are you on a mission?"

"I'm here to visit. I brought Aaron along for company. He says hello, and will visit later in the week."

Leslie's on again, off again boyfriend, Aaron Stein played the field, preferring to remain non-committed. Surprised Leslie agreed to such an arrangement, Richard clapped his mouth shut. It was none of his business what his friend decided.

"Am I officially discharged from your services?" Richard said, not sure if he felt relieved or anxious. What would he do if he didn't have to fight?

"Not yet. Ah, but don't worry, we're not sending you back into the fray."

The audible sigh coming from Leslie put a smile on Richard's face. "If not, then what do you have in mind?"

"There is a situation I'd like to discuss with you, but later."

"Claire won't like to hear this." The mattress groaned when Leslie stood. Settling back into his pillow, Richard rested his head. "Although she enjoyed playing spy last time." Back in New York, she almost got herself killed by her stubborn insistence she be involved. "I won't let her do that again, Leslie."

Leslie touched Richard's arm. "Don't stress yourself over this. Your health comes first. I do need to tell you something you won't like to hear. Your father's in town."

Another heart stopper, and Richard pressed his fist into his chest. "Fuck. He dares to show his face."

No love lost between father and son, Eduard Roth had left Richard's mother before Richard had been born. Roth had given her enough money to get an abortion, and take an ocean liner back to the states. He never knew she had their child, not until two years ago, when Eduard met Richard's mother in New York. Married, with his own family, Roth wanted nothing to do with Richard.

Richard snarled. "This should be good. Go on, what's up?"

"The French love their art. He's consulting with Rose Valland, the curator of the Louvre."

"Wasn't she the director of the Jeu de Paume?" The Nazis had taken over the Parisian Jeu de Paume during their occupation, using it as a depository for confiscated works of art.

"Yes, and it's unbelievable, but she kept a secret diary of all the artworks coming into the de Paume. It's become the bible for the resistance and for those working to retrieve the artwork from the Germans."

"And they hired Roth? Are they nuts?" Not such an upstanding citizen, the man bought confiscated works of art from the Nazis and resold them on the black market. Now Richard was supposed to believe Roth was helping the French.

"Hmm, slippery chap. Remember, we kept his smuggling quiet on the other side of the pond," Leslie said. "He went back to Switzerland, no one the wiser. A man with nine lives like his son."

"Shut up. I'm nothing like him," Richard fumed, his skin itching from a rash of heat searing his skin. Roth's heart was encased in a block of ice. "What do you have on him?"

"Nothing. That's the problem. What worries me is he's Swiss and connected, and in Paris. Also, money and false ID papers are being funneled into Nazi hands so they can escape out of Europe. Ratlines. It's already happening."

How ironic. Richard had used an escape route over four years ago to get back to England. Now the Nazis were on the run. The U.S. policy made it clear there would be an international tribunal for crimes against humanity.

Richard sat up. "French francs are worthless but not Swiss francs. You think he's back to selling confiscated art, or stealing from the Louvre to fund one of these ratlines? Would he be that bold?"

Richard's headache stepped up a notch. What did he do to deserve this? It'd be hard enough to deal with Claire once she came, but to deal with his father..."What do you want me to do?"

"Once you get out of here, contact him."

"And if I'm blind..." Richard slammed his fist into the covers. "What am I supposed to do then?"

"Don't be an idiot. Nothing's changed about you. You'll still be the man for the job."

Was that true? Did it matter if he couldn't see? He could still think, damn it! His movements would be encumbered, but he could help by using his brain.

"Is the BCRA involved?" The French had their own military intelligence who reported to the interim French leader, Charles de Gaulle. Surely, they were aware of this problem. "Let them deal with it."

"We're in contact with them. They're very concerned, as you can imagine, and asked for our assistance. They don't want France involved with a ratline."

Richard stretched his arms over his head to ease the ache in his shoulders and back. It'd been a while since he had to deal with intelligence on this level. He preferred the direct approach of blowing up buildings, railways and bridges. And, there was another slight problem...

He turned his head towards Leslie. "My episodes are increasing." "Episodes" was a term Richard used to describe his horrendous nightmares and sweats.

"Have you discussed this with Dr. Gerard?"

"Why do you think they moved me to the end of the hall and curtained me from the rest of the guys?"

Shame kept him within his curtained cell. What kind of soldier would he represent if the men saw him broken-down by war? Before his recent accident, he'd been able to control his episodes to some degree, keeping them confined to the night. Now he had them all hours of the day.

Richard tried to scratch the itch beneath his bandaged chest. He wanted the hell out of here. To see the light, Claire's beautiful face, and breathe in the fresh air. To forget about his father and the war.

"You must have things to do." He dismissed Leslie with a wave of his hand.

"Stiff upper lip and all that, huh? Aaron and I will be back later." The curtain swooshed. "You have a strong will. It's always served you in the past. It won't fail you now."

Richard turned away from Leslie and curled up as best he could on his side. The war in Europe wound to its final conclusion. So many losses; Roosevelt dead, the Jewish holocaust revealed, and Stalin's power enforced. The ties of unity an illusion. Was the world a better place? He'd fought over eight years to free the world of a tyrant, but at what price?