

God's Warriors

By

James LePore

Megan Nolan emerged from the bowels of Montmartre's Abbesses Metro station into a cold and raw late afternoon in January of 2001. Rower and colder, it seemed to her, than when she had entered the Metro near her apartment in the Latin Quarter only twenty minutes earlier. To catch her breath, she lit a Gauloise and stood near the station's covered entrance. A passing businessman slowed to stare at her as she stood and smoked. Her strawberry blonde hair flowed down to the shoulders of her dark green, *au courant* wool overcoat, which itself flowed down to the tops of her knee-high Prada boots. Under the coat, she had on faded jeans and an ivory-colored cashmere turtleneck sweater. She did not wear jewelry in Montmartre as she had heard stories of the sudden knock down and necklace-, or worse, earring-grab by marauding boys. Her hair and her gold-flecked green eyes were her best accessories anyway. She did love jewelry though, to wear and to sell, which is why she was going to see her friend Annabella Jeritza, the widowed gypsy fortuneteller whose shop was only a few blocks away near the obscure little Volney Park.

Skirting the Square Jehan-Rictus with its ridiculous *Je T'aime* wall—a mass of blue tiles with stylized *I Love You's* in various languages written on them—Megan headed east on Rue Yvonne le Tac, whose name always made her smile because she had stolen Yvonne Taccopina's boyfriend in high school and then broken his heart like it was a dry twig. And Yvonne's too, into the bargain. In her shoulder bag was a white gold, heart-shaped pendant in its original Raumet

velvet box, given to her for Christmas by her current boyfriend, Alain, whose father owned the Raunet chain. This Annabella would find a buyer for and receive a ten percent commission. At Harry Winston yesterday Megan had located a similar pendant priced at \$7,800. She expected to net \$2,000, which she would add to her account with Pictet & Cie, her private Swiss banker on Avenue des Champs-Elysees.

Alain would no doubt eventually ask her why she hadn't worn the pendant, which would give her an opportunity to tell him that *she* decided what she wore and when, not him. *She could sell it if she wished, couldn't she? Or was it a gift with strings?* Alain, who was lithely and sensuously beautiful, and whose unconscious sense of superiority exuded from his every pore, was, when all was said and done, a twenty-four-year old child who could—and would—easily be brought to heel. Only three years older, Megan felt ancient compared to her new lover, too worldly wise for her own good. Not a good feeling, but there it was, and there was all of Alain's unearned money, his very real sexual charms, and of course his father's jewelry.

As Megan strolled along Rue Durantin, she was stared at by the lost boys, whores, pimps, drug dealers and pickpockets—the cream of Paris's low life—who hung out in and around the bars and greasy spoons that lined the avenue. Clutching tightly to her bag, her naturally proud and erect bearing making her look taller than her five-foot seven inches, she tossed her hair in defiance, and moved with apparent casualness through the carnival that was Montmartre, especially on market day, when the tourists showed up in busloads to be victimized. At the corner of Rue Caulaincourt, she ran into two prostitutes whose garish makeup and fantastic dress she had used in a story about

slut chic that the editors at *Cosmopolitan* had bought thinking they were on to something new in the world of fashion. The mother-and-daughter team named Marie and Michelle had been agog with pride when Megan photographed them and gave them \$50 each for their "personal story and image rights."

Megan stopped to chat, noticing as she did, the girls' pimp, a large and muscular mulatto named Sky, watching them through the plate glass window of the pizzeria on the corner. It was Sky who had actually taken the girls' hundred dollars and signed their names to the releases that Megan carried in her bag at all times. Sky had hit on her, and Megan's smile in response had not been one of complete dismissal. Afterward, she made it a point to stop by the pizzeria—Sky's office—to chat him up. A graceful and attractive man of about thirty-five, with close-cropped hair and incredible light blue eyes, Megan was not going to sleep with him, although in another lifetime she might have. Her instincts however—the instincts of a woman alone whose only protection was her wits and her cunning—told her that such a man would be worth knowing, if only to have a friend in the wilds of Montmartre.

On the next block, Megan turned into an alley that led to a weed and rubble-strewn courtyard that serviced several of the six-story apartment buildings on Rue Durantin and the street behind it, including Annabella's. In the good weather, she would sometimes find Annabella in the courtyard hanging clothes or sitting drinking tea with her gypsy women friends, some of whom were young mothers watching their children playing. Megan, beginning around the age of sixteen, was acutely aware of the envy and jealousy she aroused in other females. Their eyes were

paint brushes dipped in fear and hate. Annabella's friends—gypsies to the bone—painted her with the hottest of colors. Though she was allowed to pass unhindered because of her friendship with the old fortuneteller, she was hoping not to have to deal with any gypsies on her way to the back entrance to Annabella's shop. At the end of the alley, she slowed and stood behind a rusted dumpster to survey the scene ahead. Relieved to see the courtyard empty, she was about to step from behind the dumpster when she saw Annabella hurtling across the ramshackle wooden porch at the back of her building and down its three steps to land sprawling and twisted in the weeds under a naked clothes line.

Before Megan could react, Annabella's son, a swarthy and arrogant little man whom Megan had seen once or twice about the fortuneteller's shop—reeking of alcohol each time—emerged from the back door, through which he had obviously thrown his mother. When he reached Annabella she was trying to rise and he helped her by grabbing her by her brassy orange hair and lifting and turning her to face him before slapping her twice across the face with a fully arcing forehand and backhand, the backhand jarring her loose from his grip and knocking her back to the ground. There Annabella lay, inert, her rouged cheek resting on an old magazine—it looked like *Paris Match* to Megan—while her son leaned over her to say something before spitting on her and turning to go back into the building.

Megan took a step toward Annabella and then stopped as her friend lifted herself on one elbow and began in halting strokes to smooth her long cotton skirt down her legs, which, stick-like and clad in stockings rolled to just below the knee, had been exposed almost to the waist when

she first hit the ground. In the old gypsy's profile, Megan could clearly see the welted hand mark on her right cheek, its reddish hue deepening by the second so that it looked like it had been painted on, part of a costume or ritual. Megan remembered—she would for a long time—the cloud of rouge that had risen from Annabella's wrinkled face as each downward blow from her son's right hand landed with a sharp snap like the lash of a whip. Megan remained in place, only her eyes visible over the top edge of the dumpster, and watched as Annabella slowly pulled herself to her feet. Searching the ground, trying to steady herself, the old palm reader spotted something and then stooped to retrieve the multi-colored kerchief she wore at all times on her head. Carrying it in her hand—the bobby pins must have gone flying—she walked unsteadily but not without dignity into the building.

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Eight months later, near the end of a hot day in early September, Megan stood at the filigreed wrought iron fence that bordered the grassy playing field of L'Ermitage International School in the leafy suburb of Maison-Lafitte, west of Paris. Through the fence's sturdy bars, she could see a group of middle school girls, eleven- and twelve-year olds, playing soccer amid the elongated shadows cast by the chimneys of the nearby seventeenth century castle that had given the town its name. The girls all wore the same black shorts and Nike sneakers, the teams differentiated by the colors of their *L'Ermitage*-embossed T-shirts. The girl she was interested in, Jeanne, had just scored for the green team. Megan did not know the score as she had arrived mid-game and there was no scoreboard, but she knew the goal was important by the way Jeanne's teammates surrounded her in

brief exultation before setting up for the ensuing kick-off.

An older girl, a freckled American-looking blonde around sixteen or so in a chic blue skirt, striped top and the ubiquitous Nikes, was doing double duty as referee and scorekeeper. When she blew her whistle to end the game, Megan leaned in as Jeanne passed, fifty feet or so from the fence, as she made her way through the post-game handshake line. With her raven-black hair and dusky coloring, Jeanne looked nothing like the rest of the girls, but her flushed face and the sparkle in her dark, piercing eyes—her team had apparently won—spoke of a happy child, her place in her small world secure. Megan knew this had not always been so.

The girls gathered their gear along the sidelines and headed in groups of two and three to the school. Megan watched Jeanne until the last possible moment. No one had noticed her watching the game. No one knew that she had contracted to fund Jeanne's tuition at L'Ermitge, a seven-day, twelve-month boarding school, through the end of her twelfth year, a sum that would eventually exceed \$90,000. Most of this money she had already extracted from the by now desperately-in-love Alain Tillinac, and given it with special instructions to Pictet & Cie.

On the short train ride back to Paris, Megan watched the small towns and countryside roll by for a while and then, images of a happy and healthy Jeanne fresh in her mind, allowed herself to recall her first, and last, meeting with the child, who was at the time chained to a filthy bed in the rear of an apartment in a housing project in the Paris suburb of Florentin.

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"We have your man," Sky had said over the phone, giving her the address. "Do not delay." In thirty minutes, she was there. Boiko Jeritza was there as well, sitting in a stuffed chair in a dark living room, his mouth duct-taped shut, his hands tied behind his back. Boiko's wild eyes followed them as Sky led her into the grimy kitchen where he showed her the photographs, sixteen in all: of children—boys and girls—naked or half-naked, some forlornly posing, some having sex with men. One of the men was Boiko. In the same folder that had held the photographs was a list of customers, some highlighted in yellow, some with amounts in euros next to their names and addresses. Before Megan could speak, they heard a noise from a back room and there they found Jeanne.

The plan was to frighten Boiko into submission, but Megan now believed he was dead. Was, in fact, sure he was dead. She had been to visit Annabella a half-dozen times since, and not seen Boiko once. Two weeks earlier, she summoned the courage to ask the old gypsy about her son. They were drinking tea laced with whiskey late one night in Annabella's back room. The old gypsy's face had healed but occasionally Megan would see her lightly brushing the back of her fingers across one cheek or the other. Annabella had put down her cup on the oilcloth covered table between them, and said, "He is in hell."

"In hell?" Megan had asked.

"With Satan, where he belongs, and can do no more harm"

"He's dead?"

Annabella smiled before answering, looking Megan in the eye for a second or two. A long second or two.

"Yes, but you know that he is," she said finally.

It was Megan's turn to be silent. *Missing, gone away*, did not mean dead. Was she fishing? Tying to confirm her suspicions? Or did she, as Megan more and more was coming to believe, have the second sight that gypsies spoke of quietly and revered?

"How did he die?" she asked, at length, returning her friend's stare with equanimity. She had not survived the last nine years on her own in Europe and Africa by giving any cards away.

"He was slain by St. Michael, the archangel."

"At your request?"

"Using his instruments on earth."

"Annabella, you're scaring me."

"God's warriors do not always appear to be so."

Megan sat back in her chair and shook her head slightly. Sky had disappeared for a while as well, but he had soon returned to his office at the pizzeria, keeping his beautiful eyes on his whores and their customers. He had asked for another two thousand euros, for expenses, but he seemed unchanged, his usual breezy and menacing self.

"Who are they?" she asked.

"I don't know, but once they are chosen, they are apart. They have one foot in another world."

Megan picked up her cup and took a sip, feeling the fire in her throat as she swallowed Annabella's concoction, hot and soothing, like the gypsy herself. Her hand was steady as she replaced the cup on the table, her heartbeat normal.

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Megan was still in her reverie as her train neared the Gare de Montparnasse. *Once they are chosen*, Annabella had said, *they are apart*. It would be one thing to have a

conscience, bad enough, but to be chosen? To be apart? She shuddered at this thought. Sky had been chosen, not her. She did not mind not liking herself. What was there to like? It was liking herself, or rather attempting to behave in such a way as to create this feeling, that troubled her. That would mean an end to her life as she knew it. There was Jeanne of course, but that was a special case. A child so abused, a young girl with no family, had to be helped. She did not even know her last name and did to want to know. Sky, and her bankers, had made all the arrangements. She had made the trip to Maison-Lafitte out of curiosity, a natural curiosity under the circumstances, but would never see the girl again.

On her recent visits with Annabella, the old woman had taken to holding Megan's hand, occasionally turning it over and rubbing her thumb across the palm as if to erase the future she saw there. *Yes, but you know that he is*, her friend had said, and Megan had not denied it. Perhaps retribution was in store for the part she had played in Boiko's demise. How ironic that she should be punished for so just an act.

Megan smiled to herself at this thought. Cause and effect and moralizing were not her cup of tea. Tomorrow she would spend the day with Alain at the Ritz; it was his birthday. She would tolerate Alain for a while longer. He was very handsome and quite energetic. Why not? The train's low hissing as it came to its full stop seemed to emphasize this thought. Why not? Nothing need change, nor will it.

