[Dedication]

For

Kara, Deb and Frédérique

and

in memory of Andrée, Augustine and Louis, and 'Josie'

[EPIGRAPH]

I was a piano teacher in Montparnasse in 1942, a second lieutenant in the Goélette and Frédéric French Resistance networks.

ACT I

Escape

Paris, 1942

Chapter One

Ruth wakes with a start, goes very still, listens. Had she heard danger or dreamt it? Light from the street lamp outside her apartment filters through the shutters, revealing the child beside her. Her daughter's face is innocent in sleep, tortured when awake with the fear of every Jewish person living in occupied Paris.

How many more times must she bite her lip as she answers the question 'Will they come for us today, Maman?' with 'I don't know, ma chère Joséphine, I don't know.' How she would love to say to her daughter, barely eleven years old, 'Of course not, ma chérie, I'll not let anyone harm you.' But she hasn't lied yet. She won't.

She jumps at the sound of the front door of the apartment below being kicked in. She wasn't dreaming then. She hears angry boots thumping on the stairs. Is that the sound of rifle butts smashing their way in? Joséphine wakes as Ruth scrambles from bed, calling out to her son in the next room.

'Léon, get up, come here.' She gathers her daughter in her arms as her son bursts in. His small, thin frame makes him seem younger than his sixteen years. The three of them stand frozen as he too is gathered into the embrace of his mother. They hear their own front door being smashed open, footsteps running down the hallway, and now two Gestapo officers, pistols pointed, rush into the room. Below them they can hear other soldiers continuing the assault on their Jewish neighbours. A gunshot rings out. Joséphine whimpers, turning away, seeking security in her mother's nightdress.

'OUT, OUT!' one of the Gestapo yells.

They step from the bedroom into the small living room.

'What do you want?' Léon asks, not leaving the circle of his mother's arms.

The two Gestapo officers size him up and laugh. One of them steps forward and points his pistol at Léon's forehead. 'You, little boy. You and your family, you will come with us now. Out!'

'Can we please at least get our coats and shoes?' Ruth asks, keeping her voice steady, despite her terror.

Before they can answer, she pushes Léon away. 'Go and dress quickly, with your coat and boots and don't forget a warm hat.'

Ruth takes Joséphine into their room, wordlessly sliding her arms into her thick winter coat and buttoning it up over her thin nightdress. Sitting her on the bed, she pulls socks onto her feet before guiding them into her boots. Standing her up to assess if she will be warm enough, Ruth grabs a scarf and hat from the nearby dresser, wrapping it around Joséphine's neck before pulling a hat over her long curly hair: there isn't time to plait it. She grabs her own coat and hat.

'Léon,' she calls out, 'Léon, get your gloves too.'

Joséphine lets her mother shove her hands into her gloves. Ruth pauses, allowing herself the memory of dressing her children when they were babies, how unhelpful they could be.

'Hurry up!' one of the Gestapo yells from the next room.

Ruth and Joséphine find Léon standing in the middle of the room, glaring at the soldiers, who are inspecting their things. Seeing nothing of value, they refocus on the small family standing before them. One of them pulls a sheet of paper from an inside pocket, goes to the smashed-in front door and confirms the apartment number. Returning to the family, he reads out the names corresponding to the number on the door.

'Ruth?'

'Yes,' Ruth replies.

‘Léon?’

‘Yes,’ Léon replies with more bravado than he really feels.

The officer looks at Joséphine and back at his list before walking over to his colleague. They whisper together for a moment before turning back to the family.

‘Who are you?’ one of them asks Joséphine.

Ruth quickly asks, ‘Who does it say she is?’

Before the one holding the paper can respond, his colleague speaks. ‘There is no one else recorded as living here. Who is she?’

‘Then she is nobody,’ Ruth responds, head held high.

‘Never mind, she’s coming too,’ he says.

‘No, she isn’t,’ Ruth insists. ‘If she is not on your list, then you can’t take her.’

‘Maman, what are you saying?’ Léon blurts out.

‘I know what I am doing, Léon. If her name is not on the list, then she doesn’t come with us.’

‘We can’t leave her alone. What are you doing?’ Léon demands.

Joséphine looks from her brother to her mother.

‘What’s happening?’ she asks.

‘Josie, listen to me. I want you to run to Mlle Levallois’ house. Go to her right now. Do you hear me? Mlle Levallois.’

‘I don’t want to. I want to stay with you and Léon.’

Kneeling to her daughter’s height, Ruth hugs her tight.

‘You’re hurting me.’

‘I love you. I love you with all my heart, but you must listen to me. You must walk out of the door and run to Mlle Levallois and tell her what has happened. You have been

brought up to obey your Maman and Papa. This, ma chère Joséphine, is the most important thing I have ever asked you to do. Now go. Don't look back. Just go.'

Pulling herself free from Joséphine, Ruth pushes the child towards the door. The soldiers look on but make no attempt to stop her: the rule is that they take the names on the list, and this young girl is not on the list.

'No, Maman, no. Don't do this to her. Josie, come back!' Léon cries out, attempting to follow his sister. His mother grabs his arm. He spins around and looks at her, shocked. How can his mother be sending Joséphine away? What has happened to her?

Ruth squeezes his arm hard. 'I know what I am doing. You must trust me.'

Since their father died two years earlier, Léon has been the one to protect his mother and sister. He is torn. Does he obey his mother or fight for his sister to stay with the family? With his back to the door, he doesn't see Joséphine stepping into the hallway and out of sight.

Shaking, Joséphine makes her way down the stairs, past the apartment below, where the door is hanging off its hinges, Gestapo are yelling inside and the young children of the family are crying. She winces at the sound of batons hitting flesh, at the sound of M. Meyer crying out as he is beaten. She stumbles down into the foyer and slips outside into the November cold. She reaches the entrance to the building next door, not a target this night. Perhaps their turn will come; she knows another Jewish family lives in this building. Hiding in the doorway, she watches the entrance to her own building.

And then she sees them: Maman and Léon, stumbling down the steps of the apartment block, pushed by the two Gestapo officers.

'Maman . . . Léon . . .' she mouths silently. A truck is waiting for them, but as her mother is hauled inside, she sees her turn and spot her daughter peering around the doorway. Ruth smiles as she crosses her arms over her heart. Joséphine watches as first her mother, then Léon are roughly pulled up into the truck. And then they are gone.

The quiet and the dark surround Joséphine as she sits alone in the doorway, too frightened to move. The cold penetrates her coat, and soon her feet and hands begin to sting. Standing, she peers out into the deserted street. The strict curfew imposed by the Germans means that the streets are deserted. It also means it's extremely dangerous to be outside. Looking across the street to the small park she runs through each day, she sees her school by the dim light of the street lamps and wonders if she should head straight there when the sun comes up. She loves school, never misses a day even when she's sick.

It is Thursday tomorrow. I have my piano lessons on Thursdays. It is this thought that drags her back to her mother's words: *Run, go to Mlle Levallois.* It's not far, and she must do what her mother says.

Leaving the sanctuary of the entranceway, Joséphine slides along the walls of the buildings. Turning the corner, now on rue Blomet, she slowly walks to number 135, careful to remain in the shadows. She knows the door will be locked, and she doesn't want to wake the Levallois family. She curls up in the corner of the entrance, shivering with cold, praying patrolling soldiers will stay away for the rest of the night.

It's still dark when the first sounds of movement on the streets of Montparnasse herald the end of curfew at 6 a.m. Joséphine hears footsteps approaching inside. Standing, she takes two steps back from the beautiful old iron and wooden doors as they swing open. She forces a smile as a face she recognizes appears. Perplexed, but recognizing her too, the man holds the door open for her to enter. It is M. Dupont, the concierge. She's heard the adults call him Maurice. This is his kingdom. He occupies a small apartment on the ground floor, and during the day is to be found at a tiny desk just inside his door. No one enters without him waving them through or checking who they are.

Joséphine steps forward smiling anxiously. 'Merci, monsieur,' she whispers, remembering her manners as she enters the foyer.

Maurice looks at the small frozen girl carefully. Joséphine is at a loss as to what to say. She is shivering, and a small tear trickles down her pale cheek.

'Mademoiselle, you're up early today. Curfew is barely over.'

Joséphine gazes up at him.

As if making a decision, Maurice takes Joséphine gently by the shoulders. 'Here for your piano lesson?' he asks, his voice kind and firm.

Joséphine nods. She looks around the familiar lobby with its faded black and white diamond tiles worn smooth by decades of footsteps. Along one wall, a row of brass mailboxes, some labelled in ink so old it has turned the colour of pencil lead, some blank. The simple chandelier hanging from the ceiling casts more shadows than light.

Maurice indicates the higher floors. 'Up you go then,' he tells her.

Joséphine ignores the elevator, a narrow cage of dark metal inserted into the stairwell's heart, barely wide enough for two people. She knows that it hums and shudders upward with a reluctance that makes the stairs seem the wiser choice no matter your age.

The iron banister is cool even through Joséphine's woollen gloves. The marble stairs guide her up. First floor. Second floor. On the last step to the third floor she stops, facing a closed door.

As Joséphine climbs the stairs, Maurice peers out into the dark street. All clear for now. No soldiers. Frowning to himself, he disappears back into his apartment. That poor child, he thinks. Where are her mother and brother?

They must have been taken.

Standing outside the third-floor apartment of Mlle Levallois, Joséphine listens for any noise inside. She does not know what time mademoiselle and her parents, M. and Mme Levallois, rise. She hears doors opening and shutting below, and realizes she can't stay in this hallway forever. She knocks lightly on the door and waits. Nothing. She knocks again.

When the door swings open, Joséphine is startled. Jumping back, she cries out in surprise and shock. She and Andrée Levallois look at one another, neither speaking. Joséphine begins to crumble. Her legs will no longer support her. Andrée leads her inside, kicking the door shut behind her, across the beautiful parquet floors that hold the memory of every footstep of every child who has come here to learn the artistry and beauty of music. The child is thin, her tiny frame reflecting the harsh rations imposed on all in the city.

'Andrée, what is it? Who is knocking on our door at this hour?' her father asks, entering the room, tying his robe, running his fingers through his morning hair. He sees his daughter guiding Joséphine, whom he knows well as one of Andrée's pupils, to the sofa. The two exchange a look. 'I'll get her a warm drink,' he says without being asked.

'Louis, what's going on?' Andrée's mother, Augustine, asks as she walks into the room, like her husband securing her robe over her nightwear, her hair tumbling around her shoulders.

Andrée gently removes Joséphine's hat, scarf, coat and gloves. Holding her hands, she feels the cold and gently rubs her fingers. Grabbing a nearby blanket, she wraps it around Joséphine and holds her tight to her chest.

'Where have you been, Joséphine? You're frozen.'

'Outside, waiting outside. Maman told me to come to you. I'm sorry. I didn't know what else to do.'

Andrée's mother sits on the other side of Joséphine and takes one of her hands, gently massaging life back into it.

'Léon?' Andrée whispers.

'He's with Maman. They were taken by soldiers. I don't know where they've gone. Maman told me to come to you.'

‘It’s all right. You’re safe here with us. We won’t let any harm come to you. Let’s get you warm and into bed. It looks like you need a good sleep. Am I right?’ Andrée looks at her parents for confirmation. She can read the fear in their eyes. What does this mean for them all – who else do they know who might take the child? It isn’t safe for her to stay here.

‘Tina,’ Louis whispers to his wife, holding out the cup of warm milk. Taking it, she holds it to Joséphine’s mouth, encouraging her to drink the warm liquid.

Louis takes two steps back without taking his eyes off Joséphine. Andrée holds the girl tight, unable to let her go, the weight of the moment settling on her. In that moment she makes a vow to herself and to Ruth: until her last breath, she will do all she can to protect this Jewish child.

The hot drink revives Joséphine a little. She sits up, and her eyes travel to the piano in the corner of the room. Each Thursday she races here after school – the hour with Mlle Levallois is her lifeline, the happiest part of her week.

‘Today is my lesson day,’ she says to Andrée. ‘But first I should go to school, shouldn’t I?’

‘No school for you today. But we’ll find time for a lesson soon.’

Louis bends down and whispers to Andrée, who nods.

‘Do you want to use the toilet?’ she asks Joséphine.

‘Yes, please.’

‘You know where it is. I’ll wait here for you.’

The three of them watch Joséphine disappear down the hallway and wait to hear the door close.

‘Well done, Louis,’ his wife says. ‘How did you know she needed the toilet?’

Andrée looks at her parents looking at each other. She sees in their eyes the love that has never diminished, and not for the first time wonders at her good fortune in having these parents.

'She was wiggling just like Andrée did at her age when she needed to go but didn't want to stop what she was doing, usually playing the piano,' Louis says, smiling, remembering.

Andrée approaches Joséphine as she reappears.

'I am so tired,' the child murmurs.

Andrée gently lifts her into her arms. 'Let's get you to bed.'

'Would you like me to carry her?' Louis asks.

'I'll take her, Papa.'

As they go to the spare bedroom, Joséphine asks again, 'What about school?'

'Not today, Joséphine.'

'Tomorrow?'

'We'll see.'

'I'll stay with her until she is asleep,' Andrée calls over her shoulder.

Chapter Two

When Andrée returns to her parents, her mother is sitting on the sofa, her father standing nearby as if frozen on the spot. They are talking in quiet, anxious voices.

'Let's have some breakfast. I have a bit of bread left over from yesterday's ration. I'll pop it in the oven for a few moments to freshen it up. It's always so stale now,' Louis says, rousing himself into action. Augustine follows him into the tiny kitchen.

Andrée sits at the dining table, listening to the familiar sound of her mother preparing a meal, spooning the ground chicory that serves as coffee under occupation, then pouring water into the coffee pot and placing it on the stovetop. She knows exactly what they're both doing without being able to see them. She hears her father put the remains of a stale baguette on a tray and into the oven, saying, 'Won't take long.' They manoeuvre around one another in the small space, a familiar dance they've performed her whole life.

Tina appears and places three plates, knives, cups and saucers on the table in their usual places, pulling a chair out for Louis. She sits down opposite Andrée, and, reaching across the table, takes one of her daughter's hands.

'Did she tell you how she got into the building?'

Andrée shakes her head. She knows what her mother is thinking. Have they been compromised? Louis takes a seat.

'I don't know. My guess is that Maurice let her in, and that he'll have recognized her as one of my pupils. I think we can trust him. But what are we to do? I honestly don't know what to think. I'm so angry I want to hit something. I'm heartbroken for that beautiful little girl. I can't imagine what she witnessed, how she is feeling – and where her mother and brother are now.'

'It's not the time to ask her for details. Right now, we must decide how best to protect her,' Tina says, her voice trembling, her eyes damp.

Louis stands and begins to pace the room. ‘I’ll not let anything happen to her as long as I have breath in my body. But is she safe here with us? Can we keep her hidden while we’re working for the liberation of France?’

Andrée considers his words carefully. ‘You’re saying that if we get caught, she gets caught, and her mother sending her to us will have been for nothing. But what is the alternative? Who else could possibly take her? At least she knows us, knows this apartment – has loved coming here for her lessons. And her mother sent her to us, trusted us to care for her.’

‘If we decide to keep her here – if we think it’s the right thing to do – we will need to have a backup plan. There might be others we know who would protect and shelter a Jewish child, but it won’t be easy to find someone.’ Louis hesitates.

‘But we’ll be putting our network and ourselves in greater danger. And the little girl also.’

The sound of the bubbling coffee pot distracts them. Louis disappears and brings it to the table along with the half-eaten baguette from the oven. He breaks it into four small pieces, placing three of them on a plate for them to share. He wraps the fourth piece in a napkin. They’re all thinking the same thing. If they keep this child, how will they feed her, without her ration book? It’s hard enough to survive on their own small rations. There’s a scraping of compote to go on the stale bread, and they serve themselves, carefully leaving a small amount for their sleeping guest. It’s not much. Louis pours the coffee. Today there is milk, and the coffee, although it which doesn’t taste of coffee, is at least hot. They are silent for a time, each contemplating the enormity of harbouring a Jewish child.

‘Do you think her mother would have sent Joséphine to us if she had any idea of our activities?’ Tina asks Andrée.

‘I’ve been thinking about that. I think she might have suspected we were connected to the Resistance. Something she said to me a couple of weeks ago that I’m just now remembering –’

Louis and Tina stop eating and focus on Andrée.

‘What did she say?’ Tina asks, a tremor in her voice. They all live in fear of denouncement or betrayal.

‘Two weeks ago, Joséphine asked if she could extend her lesson. Because it was getting dark, I walked her home. She ran into her apartment. Ruth was there and told me that, a few weeks earlier, Joséphine had said to her after a lesson that she overheard you and Papa saying that a cat was coming to stay with us. She heard you telling Maman that “the cat will be here shortly”.’

They all know what this means. Cat is the alias of one of the Resistance operatives working with them.

‘Oh my God, what did you say?’ Louis asks.

‘I smiled and said, no, we weren’t getting a cat. Joséphine must have heard wrong.’

‘And?’ Tina prompts.

‘I was just about to walk away when she asked me if I knew anything about what was likely to happen to Jewish families, whether the Germans were going to move them out of Paris. There was something about the way she asked that told me she thought I might know something others didn’t.’

‘What did you say?’ Louis asks again, now very concerned.

‘I told her that if I heard anything I would tell her. She smiled and said she would make sure Joséphine understood there would be no cat at our home. Nothing was said again.’

‘Joséphine has been here before when we’ve had visitors, including Cat. You don’t think she will have told anyone else?’ Louis persists.

‘No. We’re not compromised, Papa; Ruth knew, but not Joséphine. I think Ruth has entrusted her most precious possession to our care because of who we are and what we do.’

‘And we will take care of her,’ Tina says, smiling at her husband and daughter, suddenly certain. They look at each other and instinctively join hands across the table. They will fight to keep this child safe.

‘Are we all agreed?’ Louis asks. ‘This is dangerous, and it won’t be easy.’

The women grip his hands tighter.

‘We’ll need that backup plan,’ Tina says firmly. ‘And we’ll have to discuss it with our comrades.’ She stands and starts clearing the table. ‘For now, we must make this a normal Thursday. Go about our usual tasks. Joséphine will sleep for hours, though I might wake her after lunch to feed her so she will sleep tonight. Louis, you go and open the shop, put up a sign saying only open until twelve noon. You have somewhere else to be later this afternoon. Andrée, you have your lessons at home today, not at the school. I’ll stay here, but I’ll pop down at some point and say hello to Maurice, just to see how he seems.

‘There’s one small problem,’ Tina adds. ‘She has the nightdress and coat she was wearing and no other clothes. And we can’t afford to buy her any.’

Andrée is purposeful now. Having a task at hand makes the whole undertaking feel possible.

‘I’ll go to their apartment and gather her things. Hopefully no one has been there yet and ransacked the place.’

‘Are you sure it’s safe?’ Tina asks. The last thing they need is unwanted attention.

Andrée is resolute. ‘I’ll walk past the place and see what’s going on. Don’t worry, Maman – if I see any Gestapo I’ll steer clear.’

* * *

Several neighbours are gathered around the entrance to Joséphine's apartment building at rue Théophraste Renaudot. Andrée walks slowly towards them, studying their faces. Will she be seen as a French intruder, somehow in league with the invaders who violated this building and those who lived here?

What she sees is fear and resignation.

She recognizes one of the women being consoled by another and gently approaches.

'Mme Benoît, are you all right? What has happened?'

Mme Benoît dries her eyes, recognizing Andrée. 'Mlle Levallois, good morning,' she says, struggling for words.

'Two families were taken from at number twenty-two last night, or should I say very early today. We heard the noise from our block next door –'

'They've all been taken?' Andrée asks, checking.

'Yes, all of them gone. It's probably our turn tonight,' wails Mme Benoît, immediately comforted by her friend.

'There's no one inside?'

The neighbour supporting her also lives in the next-door building. Andrée recognizes her. She has a child in the school Joséphine attends, and where Andrée teaches music part-time.

'Where is Frédéric?' Andrée inquires of Mme Benoît's ten-year-old son, another of her pupils.

'We sent him to school. He should go to school for as long as he can.'

'I agree,' Andrée says, turning to Mme Benoît's friend. 'Can you take her to your apartment?'

The woman nods. Mme Benoît places her hand on Andrée's sleeve.

‘It’s all right, Mlle Levallois, we know this is not your doing. If I don’t get a chance: thank you for your patience teaching Frédéric. He loves his lessons with you. I hope he can continue to learn music in some form . . .’ Mme Benoît says, her voice trailing away.

One of the men in the small gathering speaks up. ‘Why don’t we all go home and pack what we can? I watched from the window as our friends and neighbours were taken. Some were prepared and had suitcases with them. Others, just the clothes on their backs.’

As the men and women slowly walk into the building next door, Andrée reaches out to Mme Benoît, who allows herself to be drawn into a long, tight hug before following the others.

Andrée glances around the square; it is deserted so she heads up the steps to Joséphine’s building and waits for the concierge to let her in. A small woman with a scarf tied over her hair, she eyes Andrée sympathetically.

‘Madame, bonjour,’ Andrée says. ‘Do you think it would be acceptable for me to enter the apartment of the family of my pupil Joséphine, who were taken last night? Only if the door is open, of course. They have several of my music books that another child might appreciate.’

The concierge looks at her carefully. Andrée can see her deciding – a familiar scenario in occupied Paris: can I trust this person standing before me?

With a shrug, the woman disappears into her apartment, making it clear that she doesn’t want to know anything about what Andrée is about to do.

Andrée quickly mounts the stairs and locates Joséphine’s apartment: the second one on the right. The door is open. The lock broken, the handle still intact. She can see where the wood splintered when the boots of the Gestapo kicked the door in.

Stepping inside the apartment, Andrée gasps as she gazes around the home so lovingly tended by Ruth and her children. The sideboard is covered in family photos. She

looks at them, not recognizing Ruth's late husband, who she never met. She selects two to take with her. For Joséphine. One is a formal setting, the other a candid photo, slightly out of focus, but Andrée can see why Ruth has chosen to give it pride of place. In it, none of the family are looking at the camera. They are laughing and looking at each other, arms and legs entangled, sitting on a rug in what she recognizes as the park across the street in the middle of the square.

Andrée looks at the candlesticks on the table, placed in the centre, ready for Shabbat, which she remembers is tomorrow. The family should be gathered around their sabbath table, lighting the stumps of candles, saying their prayers, giving blessings.

Andrée lightly runs her fingers across the candlesticks. Their silver sparkles with love and care, a symbol of the Jewish faith. She wonders if she could take them with her for Joséphine. But if she is stopped on their way home and searched, these candlesticks would be impossible to explain. Reluctantly, she leaves them where they are.

She moves around the apartment, looking for Joséphine's room, but finds Léon's first. His school smock is laid out neatly on a chair, along with trousers and a neatly pressed shirt. He should be wearing that right now, sitting in the classroom at the Lycée Buffon in boulevard Pasteur, with his friends. Instead, he's . . . where . . . ?

The second room is clearly shared by Ruth and Joséphine. Andrée can't bring herself to look too closely at Ruth's meagre belongings, and tears spring to her eyes. Wiping them angrily away with the sleeve of her coat, she concentrates on looking for a bag, something to put whatever she can find of Joséphine's. Her heart is racing – she's aware of the broken door to the apartment, the risk of a neighbour guessing what she's doing, the Gestapo coming back to look for the missing child. She must act quickly.

At the back of a small wardrobe she finds a suitcase and pulls it out into the room. Flipping open the lid, she gasps, a hand rising to her mouth. Inside are men's shirts, trousers, underclothes, a pair of shoes. She feels her heart clenching.

Time stands still as she looks at the clothes: all that remains of Joséphine's father. Is she also looking at the remains of her mother, in the few dresses hanging in the wardrobe? With a heavy heart, she reverently removes the clothes from the suitcase and places them on the rumpled bed Ruth and Joséphine had fled from only a few hours earlier.

With the suitcase empty, Andrée focuses on gathering a small girl's clothes. Her pale pink school smock is resting on a nearby chair, ready to be worn. She gently folds and places it in the suitcase. Small cardigans and blouses are taken from hangers, folded and joined with the uniform. In a chest, she finds underwear. Then two pairs of shoes. They all fit easily into the suitcase.

Only then does she allow herself to look for something personal to Joséphine. She sees a pile of books. Flicking through, she guesses they are the right age for her. Kneeling on the threadbare rug over the wooden floor to shut the case, she sees something pink and soft on the floor, half under the bed. Pulling it free, she holds a crocheted toy, a well-loved bear. She locates the piano books and stuffs them inside also.

Not allowing herself to think, fighting back both fear and terrible sadness, she places the bear in the case, closes it, and, without looking back, leaves the apartment, pulling the door closed behind her. She makes her way quickly back down the stairs. The door to the concierge's apartment is firmly closed. She doesn't want to see Andrée leaving – Andrée understands that this is a sign that she is safe for now.

Chapter Three

Outside the building, Andrée scans the street. Is anyone watching her leave? Will a curious neighbour see the small suitcase and think her a thief? Informants are everywhere. She hasn't quite thought through what she'll say if she's stopped. She'll mention the piano books, but what if the Gestapo ask to see inside the case – how can she explain the clothes of a small girl? The suitcase itself is enough to draw the sly attention of the Gestapo.

Moving towards home, Andrée pauses to take in the park at the centre of the Square Saint-Lambert, through which Joséphine must walk to her school, the Lycée Camille Sée. Andrée teaches piano two mornings a week to girls at the school who don't receive private lessons at her home, as Joséphine has done for the past couple of years. In the centre of the park, the flower beds have been transformed into vegetable patches by those living on the square. As the rationing grows ever more severe, and hunger bites, the citizens of Paris have begun to grow food anywhere they can. Today the patches are largely bare, as winter approaches. The scrubby tops of turnips and swede are visible – traditionally food for horses, but now they supplement the meagre diets of hungry Parisians.

On the other side of the square is her parents' bookshop, where her father will be working. Perhaps she should go there first. She pauses. One thing she knows is that hesitation is always risky. How many times has she heard of operatives being stopped because they drew attention to themselves through indecisive behaviour? The act is a huge part of the game of staying safe, of hiding in plain sight. She draws her shoulders back. She's retrieved her piano books. Now she might drop them at her father's shop. That's the story.

She makes herself walk slowly and confidently across the street and down a few steps into the newly created neighbourhood park that sits below street level. Inside the park, she hesitates again, berates herself again. But it is empty, save for a woman pushing a baby carriage and an elderly man sitting on one of the benches. She recognizes neither of them.

She can hear the echo of girls' voices from inside the school – it must be break time. She sets off towards her parents' shop.

As she walks, she takes in the trees sheltering the park from the streets above. Not for the first time, she reflects what a wonderful vision the designer had for this space, sinking it below street level, creating a park that in time will give shade to all inside. Not yet ten years old, the carefully chosen trees and shrubs have some growing to do. The paths that dissect and surround the square invite people to meander through. Today, Andrée will not meander. Not only is she in a hurry to get to the other side, but the early arrival of winter has stripped the trees and bushes of their leaves – and cover. Only the hardiest of blooms struggle to bring a little colour to an otherwise bleak world.

Andrée walks briskly through the park and exits. Without looking left or right, she crosses the street to the building that houses her parents' bookshop.

Louis looks up from his newspaper at the sound of the shop bell. It takes a moment for him to register it is his daughter. She has her hat pulled low, and he is not expecting her. As Andrée pushes her hat up to reveal her eyes, he hears the bump of the suitcase hitting the floor.

He moves quickly to the glass door and glances out onto the street. Has she been followed? He flicks the open sign to closed and turns to his daughter.

'Ma petite, is everything all right? Your mother? Joséphine?'

'No, no, they're fine, Papa,' Andrée reassures him. 'I collected Joséphine's things from the apartment. It was sad in there. I felt like a thief creeping around.'

Her father reaches out and pats her cheek. They both understand how she feels. But even in the relative safety of the shop, neither of them dares show emotion. Someone could enter at any moment, despite the closed sign.

Andrée picks up the suitcase and takes it to the small counter. She clicks it open, while Louis looks out onto the street again.

'I think I got everything she needs, and I grabbed two photos from the sideboard. But I was worried about walking home with the suitcase.'

Louis picks up the bear and sighs. The enormity of what they are doing threatens to overwhelm him again.

'If she needs anything else, we'll get it for her. She'll not go without. Let's divide up the contents,' Louis says. 'You take what you can in this satchel now and I'll bring the rest later in the suitcase.'

He does a quick calculation: which items are more incriminating? Andrée can easily explain away the books and the bear, also the smock. She's a piano teacher; she teaches at the school. The photos and the rest of the child's clothes he'll bring later. He wants to bear the greater risk, but he also knows that if one of them is caught, they're all caught. He packs the satchel and passes it to his daughter. The rest he puts back into the suitcase.

'I think you mean whatever we can get our hands on for her in these terrible times,' Andrée says with a half-smile. 'Help me make sense of what is happening, Papa. What happened to Joséphine's mother and brother? What did they do that was so wrong they had to be taken away?'

'Ma fille, you know I can't answer that. There's no sense behind what's happening right now to any of us, but especially to our Jewish friends and neighbours. We just have to be strong, do what we can, and wait for the day France is free again.'

Andrée feels the tears come again and swipes at her cheeks with the sleeve of her coat.

Louis chuckles. 'Some things don't change. We couldn't stop you using your sleeve to wipe away tears, dirt, food when you were little. It gives me comfort to see you still do it.'

Fastening the satchel, he hands it to Andrée. ‘Your mother will be worrying. You’d better head home. Tell her I won’t be far behind you. We have our busy Thursday afternoon ahead of us.’

Andrée smiles and feels a surge of fear, as always. Thursday afternoons are when she gives piano lessons at home. It is also the day when they receive ‘visitors’, other operatives, under the cover of the lessons. Also under the watchful eye of the concierge. Maurice Dupont sees all, but so far chooses not to engage with what all this activity might mean.

As Andrée leaves the shop, she flips the sign back again. Without looking around at her father, she heads out into the street. Again, a calculation. Should she retrace her steps with a different bag? She decides to follow her instincts. Always the best way.

This time her walk through the park is slower as she takes in what she had ignored only a few moments ago: the beauty of mother nature in winter. Stripped of colour and foliage, each tree, each plant, rests, nurturing itself in preparation for a new life in a few months. Stepping off the path, Andrée reaches out and strokes a nearby tree.

She peers closer, smiling at a carving made by an unknown boy or girl. A roughly shaped heart surrounds four initials. With a gloved finger, she traces the letters and offers up a silent prayer.

I hope whoever you are and wherever you are, you are together and safe.

Looking up at the bare branches, she pleads, Help me to learn from you, have your strength to survive the weeks and months ahead. Teach me how to nurture my inner self so I can protect those I love and present a life reborn when this war is over.

The wind rattles the branches, and Andrée takes this as a sign. The tree will survive the winter ahead to be here for her whenever needed.

Chapter Four

The knock on the door. The scream from within. One follows the other in the blink of an eye.

It's just after lunch. Louis has returned safely from the bookshop, bringing with him the rest of Joséphine's belongings. The little girl woke briefly mid-morning, Tina tells them, and ate the tiny crust of baguette and drank some milk, before going back to sleep. The three of them have eaten a hasty meal of watery soup and a small hunk of *Camembert de Normandie*, washed down with the remaining chicory coffee. Now they're ready for their guests. It must be business as usual. Their fellow operatives will have to be informed of this new development – that they're now harbouring a Jewish child. What they'll tell Joséphine they haven't quite decided. But that's not urgent – she's used to being in the apartment for her lesson while other 'visitors' are there.

Louis runs to the front door as Andrée hurries to the spare bedroom, where she had checked on Joséphine only a few minutes earlier.

Andrée finds the girl sitting on the edge of the bed, crying. Gathering her in her arms, she holds her, rocking her gently until her sobs subside.

'They're back. Don't let them take me. I promised Maman not to let them take me,' she hiccups.

'You're safe, little one. You're with me. I won't let anyone take you.'

'I heard them banging on the door. They're here.'

'No, no, ma petite. It's just someone coming to visit us. A friend.'

Meanwhile Louis opens the door to a man standing in the doorway, not taking a step inside. Hearing Joséphine's anguish, he looks alarmed. What if one of the neighbours steps out to see what's going on? Should he leave now, while he still can?

'Please, Félix, come inside. I'll explain. There, she's stopped. Andrée is with her,' Louis tells him.'

Félix steps inside, ducking his head slightly as he enters – a young man not yet thirty, with the eager, slightly unfinished look of someone still growing into himself. The son of a wealthy family, he has the good clothes and easy manners of his background, but there is something restless beneath his surface, a hunger for something more consequential than the art-history textbooks piled on his desk at the Sorbonne, where he is completing a doctoral thesis.

Shortly afterwards, another brief knock at the door heralds the arrival of Dancer.

Dancer moves through the doorway the way she moves through every room – with the unhurried, weightless precision of someone whose body was trained from childhood to be watched and admired. Dancer is in her early thirties, dark-eyed and quietly luminous, the poise of the Folies Bergère still etched in her movements. Marriage and motherhood have settled in her without diminishing her grace. She takes in the room in a single glance and finds her place in it immediately, the way a dancer always finds their mark.

Behind her, Agent – in his sixties, a lecturer at the Sorbonne, with wire-rimmed glasses and the slightly distracted air of a man whose mind is always three steps ahead of the conversation. He is cautious in the way that precise, intelligent people are cautious – not from timidity but from the habit of calculating consequences. He nods at Louis, takes a careful look at the room and sits where he can see the door.

And then Cat.

He comes in last, as though the timing is entirely his own choosing – which, with Cat, it probably is. Early thirties, tall, with the particular ease of a man raised to believe that rooms arrange themselves around him, as generally they do. He comes from old money, aristocratic stock, the kind of family that left for England when the Germans came. Cat did not leave. Whether that was courage or stubbornness or something else entirely, no one has yet determined. He may not know the reason himself. He looks around the room with calm,

unhurried interest, as though assessing it for entertainment value, and allows himself a small smile at nothing in particular.

Tina closes the door behind them.

'Dancer, Agent, Félix, Cat – please, sit down.'

The four settle into the living room, each making an assessment of trust and risk. These are not their real names. They work under aliases, a necessary fiction that keeps them safer than they would otherwise be. They know that Louis and Tina take an extra risk simply by opening this door, by letting these meetings happen within these walls. The Levallois family offers them something that cannot be easily found elsewhere.

A safe place. For now.

In a room down the hall, the little girl is sobbing. 'Mlle Levallois, where are Maman and Léon?'

Oh, we really must do something about you calling me Mlle Levallois, Andrée thinks, but all she says is, 'You're safe here. Can I call you Josie like your mother does?'

The child nods.

'Good. Josie, you're safe with me, with my Maman and Papa. Nothing bad is going to happen to you.' Andrée keeps her voice calm and reassuring. She wishes she was sure this was true. 'Can I get you something? Water, something to eat?'

'I'm very thirsty.'

'Of course. Get back into bed. I'll fetch you some water, and then I think you should try to sleep some more.'

Walking through the living room to the kitchen, Andrée nods at the guests.

'I'm just going to get the child some water. Then she'll go back to sleep and we can explain everything,' she tells them.

Josie drinks the water before snuggling beneath her blankets and rolling over to face the wall. She is asleep again within minutes. Andrée stays with her until her breathing softens, removing her hair from her face, pulling the blankets up around her chin, experiencing something she's not felt before. She looks at Josie and her heart skips a beat. The weight of responsibility of caring for this little girl stirs something in her – a mixture of fear but also a fierce determination she's never felt before. This child will survive. She will do everything in her power to make it so.

When Andrée returns to the living room, Dancer looks up. Her job is vital to the cause: she's a wireless operator. Their communication link to London. The poise and agility with which she once graced the stage is now performed with her hands.

'Louis and Tina have told us about Joséphine. I am so sorry this has happened to her family.'

Sitting with the others, Andrée fills in the details, telling them how she went to Josie's apartment earlier to get some of her things, about the devastation she found.

'How did she escape?' Agent asks.

'From what I can understand, it seems her mother stood up to the Gestapo when they didn't have Joséphine's name on their list and refused to let them take her. While they were standing around debating what to do, Josie did as her mother had instructed and came to us.'

'What does this mean for you – and what does it mean for us?' Cat asks. He's right to ask. Andrée, Louis and Tina exchange glances. They have to protect this child. But they've sworn allegiance to the movement to drive the Germans from France.

Andrée speaks first: 'She will live here with us until her mother and brother return.'

Louis looks around the group. 'The question is how you feel about us having a Jewish girl living here, whether you think she is a threat to our safety and our work,' he says carefully, looking from one to the other.

‘I don’t have a problem with her being here. I don’t feel our work is particularly compromised by her presence. It’s you who run the real risk in harbouring her,’ Agent says.

The others nod in agreement.

‘Tell me her name again?’ he asks.

‘Joséphine . . . Josie,’ says Tina. The tenderness in her voice is obvious to all.

‘How . . . how can this be happening in our city?’ Cat gets up and paces the room.

‘We all feel the same way. Don’t ever put a gun in my hands, for I will surely use it,’ Tina says heatedly.

Louis smiles. ‘Ma femme, I believe you. You others, make sure my wife is never in possession of a gun, or any weapon for that matter.’

‘How old is the child?’ Dancer asks.

‘Eleven,’ Andrée tells them.

Louis walks over to stand behind the chair Tina sits on, his hands gently on her shoulders as he addresses the group.

‘Thank you for your support and acceptance of the situation we find ourselves in. We will explain to Josie that we have friends who visit to talk about politics and the war. She is a very clever little girl. She will understand.’

He isn’t as confident as he makes himself sound. But what else can they do?

‘It won’t be easy, Andrée,’ says Cat, ‘but I’m sure Doctor René will provide an identity card and ration card for her.’

‘We’ve all become adept at stretching what food we have. I’m sure, Dancer, you can feed many mouths with a single egg just as I do,’ Tina says with a smile.

‘We will leave it up to you to inform René and the others. Josie will never be mentioned or discussed outside this apartment. Agreed?’ Agent is brisk.

‘Shall we get down to business then? I have post for each of you,’ Louis tells them.

He opens a kitchen drawer, removes the false bottom and retrieves the folder he received from Colonel Pallas. He takes several envelopes from the folder. They have all been opened already and he has written a code name on each.

'Dancer, this is from Colonel Pallas for you and Andrée.'

Looking at Agent, Louis hands him a large envelope. 'Agent, can you these to your contact at the Sorbonne? He will know what to do with them.'

'Am I allowed to look at the contents?' Agent asks.

'Yes, you should know what it is you're being asked to handle. We all know the rules. If you feel you are being asked to do something you're uncomfortable with, you say no. That won't change. Ever. When you've got a response, I'll forward it on. Just let me know next time we meet.'

Louis hands a smaller envelope to Cat. 'We have another lead on the matter you've been following up. Details in here,' he says. He looks around the small group. 'Please take your time reading what I've given you.'

Once they have finished reading their correspondence, they leave, one by one. Louis burns their letters in the kitchen stove.

For a moment they stand in silence.

'That went well,' Tina says eventually. 'What would we have done if they'd said she couldn't stay here?'

'We're all fighting the same enemy, and none of us is more threatened by them than Josie,' Louis says, reaching for Tina's hand.

Andrée looks at her parents. 'I'll wake her now. There's no one else we're expecting today. The sooner we explain to her the new living arrangements, the sooner she can begin the process of adjusting. It's not going to be easy for her. Slow and steady, I'm thinking.'

'When are you meeting Doctor René?' Louis asks.

‘It was meant to be tomorrow, but I don’t want to leave Josie so soon. Maman, when you go to queue for rations, could you pop in and arrange another time for next week? Don’t tell him anything about Josie – I’ll do that when I see him.’

* * *

It is early evening. Andrée sits with Josie while she eats some bread, observing how she breaks off small pieces, chewing slowly. She imagines this is something Ruth has taught her, as the significantly smaller rations allotted to the Jews of Paris made feeding a family of three increasingly difficult. The girl’s thick dark hair tumbles around her face. Andrée and Tina are unsure how it is to be tamed when the time comes for her to leave the apartment – neither of them has hair like her thick curls, but they’ve agreed that Tina will help her to undertake the chore.

‘Thank you again,’ Josie mumbles, a crumb escaping onto the plate and quickly picked up and consumed.

‘Josie, this will be your home until your mother and brother return. Anything you need, you just have to ask and we will do what we can. I’ve shown you what I got from your apartment. Is there anything I missed that you would like me to go back for?’

‘Maman and Léon,’ Josie says with a watery smile. It’s the first time Andrée has seen her smile.

‘You know I would if I could. Anything else?’

‘No, thank you, mademoiselle. I have my clothes, my books and the photos you brought me.’

‘And your bear.’

‘And my bear.’

When the child has wiped every crumb from her plate and drunk her warm milk, Tina opens her arms for Josie to join her on the sofa. Andrée takes the spare chair alongside her father, facing the sofa.

'When can I play the piano?' Josie asks, leaning into Tina.

'We'll talk first, and then I'll give you your lesson. A bit later today than usual, but it won't be long,' Andrée assures her.

'Josie – can we call you Josie, or do you prefer Joséphine?' Louis asks.

'Josie, please. Everyone who loves me calls me Josie. Only my teachers and some of the grumpy people in our apartment building ever call me Joséphine.'

'Now we've agreed what we will call you, we would like to talk to you about what you should call us.'

Josie pulls herself from Tina's embrace, looking from her to Andrée, not quite understanding.

'Josie, we are living in bad times, dangerous times for all of us, but more so for you. We don't want anyone in this building or outside wondering too much about who you are. We need to be your family – just for now. Do you understand what I'm saying?' Tina asks.

'I think so. You want to pretend to be my family?'

'Yes, Josie, for all our safety.' Andrée leans forward. 'We would like you to think about me being your aunt. You can call me Tata Andrée.'

Josie looks at Andrée. With the back of her hand she wipes away tears that have not yet fallen. 'Really? I can call you Tata Andrée?' Her voice quavers.

'Yes. Yes, I would like that very much,' Andrée says.

Josie nods in agreement before turning to Tina and Louis.

'If you are to call our daughter Tata, then that would make me your grandmother. How do you feel about calling me Grand-Mère?' Tina says.

Josie looks at Louis. His turn.

'And I must be your grandfather, your Grand-Père. What do you think?' Louis says, leaning close to Josie, his eyes kind.

'Grand-Père,' Josie whispers, smiling back at him. Turning to Tina, 'Grand-Mère?'

'Then it's settled,' says Andrée. She pauses. 'Josie, there is one more thing I need to say. We do not want to replace your family. You will only have one Maman, one brother. We are just doing what we need to do to keep you safe until we can reunite you with your family. This is something we very much want to do.'

'I know. Thank you,' Joséphine says with genuine warmth. She turns to Andrée, 'Can we have my lesson now?'

'Not quite. There is one more thing we want to talk to you about,' Louis says. 'We don't think you should go to school just yet. But Tata Andrée will speak to your headmistress tomorrow, when she goes to give her lessons there. It may be possible to enrol you at the school under our surname. As she teaches there, she'll be able to keep an eye on you – and she knows the headmistress well. We hear that she is allowing other little girls like you to stay on.' He pauses. 'Would you like that?'

Josie looks from Andrée, to Tina, to Louis, perplexed by what she has just heard.

'If you would accept, just temporarily until your Maman and brother return, being called Joséphine Levallois, we would be honoured to give you our name.'

'So you're saying my name would be Josie Levallois?'

'Yes, Josie. We think it would be the safest thing to do, but you must agree to it, and we will understand if you don't,' Andrée tells her.

'You would really let me use your name?'

'Absolutely, without hesitation,' Louis tells her.

‘Yes. Thank you is all I can say. Thank you. I promise I will not let you down. I would be very proud to be called Joséphine Levallois,’ Josie says, now wiping her cheeks with her sleeve.

‘Is there anything more we can do for you?’ Louis asks.

‘Can I play the piano now?’

Chapter Five

The next morning, Andrée leaves the apartment and crosses the square once more, this time heading towards Josie's school, to give her piano lessons. The school is barely ten years old, named after Camille Sée, the politician who in 1880 introduced sweeping reforms to girls' education in France. Its art deco façade is elegant and assured – a building that knows its own purpose. The school is girls-only, run with quiet authority by its founding headmistress, the formidable Marie-Thérèse Évrard.

Andrée and Mlle Évrard know one another well. Through the network, Andrée has heard that other Jewish girls are being sheltered at the school, with the headmistress's full knowledge and blessing. She tells herself that even if Mlle Évrard refuses, she is unlikely to denounce them for harbouring a Jewish child. But telling herself this and believing it are different things.

Still, what choice do they have? Josie needs to be at school.

Andrée enters the building, making her way through the throng of girls, each in her school smock and clutching a satchel. She finds her way to the headmistress's office and knocks carefully. Marie-Thérèse Évrard opens her door.

'Andrée, so lovely to see you. Does this visit mean you will finally accept one of my many requests to become a permanent teacher here?'

Andrée's face is grave. 'Marie-Thérèse, hello. I love my work here, but no, that's not what I want to talk to you about.'

The headmistress's expression changes as she takes in the look on Andrée's face. This isn't a courtesy call.

'Come in,' she says, closing the door behind them.

'I've come about Joséphine, one of my piano pupils, in her first year with you,' Andrée tells her.

‘Ah yes, I’ve heard,’ says Marie-Thérèse carefully, sitting at her desk and inviting Andrée to take the seat opposite her. The two women watch one another warily.

‘What have you heard?’ Andrée asks finally.

‘That Joséphine and her family were taken in the early hours of Thursday morning.’

‘Her mother and brother were taken. Not Joséphine.’

Marie-Thérèse doesn’t say a word. She shifts in her chair, looking anywhere but at Andrée. Then she rubs at her temples and briefly closes her eyes. Andrée is about to say more but Marie-Thérèse raises her hand to stop her.

From her top drawer she takes out a piece of paper. Pushing it and a pen towards Andrée, she asks. ‘Are you telling me that you wish to enrol a new child at the school?’

Andrée is puzzled for a moment, then understands.

Adopting a professional tone, she begins.

‘Mlle Évrard, I would like to enrol my niece, Joséphine Levallois, in your school, and it is my hope you will be able to have her start immediately,’ she says, staring hard at Marie-Thérèse.

‘Understood. What I now need from you is to complete this enrolment form. I’ll have her original papers changed to state that her first day is 9 November 1942.’

‘Thank you,’ Andrée says, her voice breaking with emotion.

‘Please, don’t thank me. I can assure you that I and all the staff will do our best to ensure that your niece receives the education she deserves – the same education and respect afforded to every girl in the school. As long as I’m here, she will be safe. And you will be able to keep a close eye on her.’

Andrée stands, walks around the desk as Marie-Thérèse moves towards her, and the two women embrace.

‘I fear you and your parents will have the tougher time,’ Marie-Thérèse whispers in her ear. ‘I am available to you any time, day or night, to help with Josie.’

* * *

The following Monday, Josie descends the staircase to the foyer of the apartment block for the first time since the night her family was taken from her. She grips Andrée’s hand tightly. Maurice Dupont can be seen his little desk just inside his apartment. He looks up and takes in the sight of Andrée and her pupil, the girl he’d found frozen on the doorstep a few nights earlier, now clutching a school satchel. Everyone in the neighbourhood has heard about the Jewish families being taken in the night.

Andrée hesitates, shifts, then remembers the game: this is her niece. She’s taking her to school.

As if reading her mind, Maurice greets the duo formally.

‘Mlle Levallois, good morning. And this is your . . . pupil?’

‘That’s right,’ Andrée says firmly, the tiniest hint of a challenge in her voice. ‘My niece in fact. Her mother isn’t well, so we’re taking care of her for the time being.’

They hadn’t thought about what to say to the concierge, although they know he let Josie in.

Maurice looks at Josie. ‘Off to school across the square,’ he says. ‘Have a good day, little one.’

Josie manages a faint smile, grasping Andrée’s hand even tighter as they hurry down the stairs and out onto the street.

They remain holding hands, neither acknowledging their need for comfort as, in step, they begin the short walk to Josie’s school. Tina has helped Josie to plait her hair, and she is wearing her school smock underneath her thick wool coat.

As they enter the building, Josie’s friend Monique runs up to them.

‘Bonjour, Josie. Are you OK? You haven’t been at school.’

‘Yes, I’ve been sick,’ Josie replies, not letting go of Andrée’s hand.

‘Well, come. Let’s go to class. We have Mlle Beaufoy this morning. I’m going to be a writer like her. Good morning, Mlle Levallois.’

‘Good morning, Monique. So, you want to be a writer, not a pianist,’ Andrée says, smiling.

‘Oh, I like the piano too, but I prefer writing. I hope you don’t mind.’

‘Not at all, but you will keep up your piano lessons?’

‘Yes, I do enjoy them – not as much as Josie does though. Are you coming, Josie?’

‘Josie and I must see Mlle Évrard. She’ll be along soon,’ Andrée tells her.

‘Oh – of course! I’ll see you later, Josie.’

‘Is she your best friend?’ Andrée asks Josie, as Monique runs off.

‘She’s, um, she’s my best friend who is not . . .’

‘Jewish. She’s not of your faith.’

‘I still like her though, and she likes me, so it shouldn’t matter, should it?’

‘No, Josie, it definitely shouldn’t matter.’

Mlle Évrard is waiting for them outside her office.

‘Joséphine Levallois, welcome to the Lycée Camille Sée. I hope you will be very happy here. We are committed to providing young girls like you with the best education possible. While you are on these grounds, you will be under my care, my responsibility, and I will do everything within my means to keep you safe. My fellow teachers understand the situation and will do the same.’

Josie looks puzzled for a moment but soon understands what she is being told. She nods. Andrée nudges Josie to shake hands with her headmistress.

‘Thank you,’ Josie says. ‘Can I go to class now?’

Andrée and Marie-Thérèse exchange a smile. ‘Can you find the way?’ Marie-Thérèse asks.

‘I think so,’ says Josie with a small smile. She quickly kisses Andrée on the cheeks before running off down the corridor to her class.

‘What about her friends, like the little girl Monique?’ Andrée asks Marie-Thérèse.

‘Her mother is a good woman,’ the headmistress tells her. ‘Leave what happens here at school with me. I’ll make sure she’s safe.’

Andrée nods, and the two women part. Andrée feels a tiny bit lighter. At least the child can be at school.

I’ll fight for her to never miss a day of school, she tells herself.

* * *

Having dropped Josie at school, Andrée makes her way to rue Lagrange in the 5th arrondissement. Louis and Tina are at the bookshop and will collect Josie after school and take her back to the apartment. Having a child in their care makes this work seem even more perilous. Andrée’s instinct now is to stay close to Josie all the time. But she knows she cannot give up on the tasks she has pledged to perform for her network.

Exiting the metro at Saint-Michel station, she walks past Notre-Dame, avoiding looking up at the imposing structure. It is surrounded by German soldiers. The main police station, which they are using as their HQ, is right next to the church. Hurrying on, she turns down the quiet street where her meeting will take place.

Now alert, she watches everyone on the street – those walking, standing, talking – looking for any tell-tale sign she or the building she is heading to are being watched. Satisfied that she’s safe, she stops for a moment at the inconspicuous building nestled among other similar buildings. .

Scanning the names on the panel beside the door, her finger hovers over the doorbell of the man their network knows as Doctor René before pressing the button: three slow buzzes, three fast – their signal. The building has no concierge, which is one of its attractions. She waits, willing herself to look calm, as the seconds stretch. Finally, she hears footsteps approaching. The door opens. Without making eye contact, she slips in behind René and follows him upstairs.

'So, Andrée, what have you got for me today? Come on in,' René says as he opens the door to his apartment.

They sit at the dining table. Andrée takes a folder from her handbag and places it on the table. René reaches out to take it, but Andrée holds it firm.

'There's something I need to tell you before we go on. Something has happened at home, and everyone connected to us needs to know. And once I tell you, you will have to decide whether you still want to be involved with my family.'

Withdrawing his hand from the folder, René nods. 'Go on.'

Andrée quickly recaps the events of the last few days. René doesn't say a word until she is finished. He's a man of medicine; his whole life has been devoted to the care of others. He never had a family of his own, but his patients were his family. Having reached retirement age, he has found a new way to care for others, not only through the practice of medicine but in supplying false medical certificates that save lives as surely as any surgeries he has performed.

'Hearing this only reaffirms my resolve to work with you. But do I need to tell you of the risk you are taking by having a Jewish girl live with you?'

'You do not. But what choice do we have? Where else could she go?'

René reaches out and pats her hand. 'Let me get you a ration card for her. It's the least I can I do.'

‘Thank you. I wasn’t sure how to ask you.’

René gives a thin smile. ‘Oh, Andrée. Is there anything else you need?’

‘We’re still adjusting to how this is going to work for all of us. The fact that she is still at the same school gives her life some structure but adds risk. As for the rest, well, we’ll deal with any problems as they come along.’ Andrée is aware that she sounds more certain than she feels.

René nods. ‘Leave the ration card to me,’ he says.

He takes the folder. Removing the pages inside, he places them on the table: the details of seven young men. A small photo is taped in the right-hand corner of each sheet, handwritten information beneath. He reads each file, studying the picture attached.

‘All verified, all safe from compromise or collaboration?’ he asks.

Andrée nods.

‘Only this one –’ he holds up a file – ‘has anything like a legitimate illness: heart irregularity noted when he was a child. I’ll have no trouble writing him up. The others, well, I’ll have to be a little more inventive.’

‘And, as always, you will. What are you thinking?’ Andrée holds up one of the files. The photo shows a man aged twenty-five, fit, well built, clearly healthy. He had even played rugby at club level. ‘He isn’t going to be easy.’

‘Oh, I don’t know. What do they say? The bigger they are, the harder they fall. I think a recent, severe injury might have led to a case of depression and a need for continued rest and quiet.’

‘I’ll leave these with you. Are the ones I gave you last week ready?’

‘All done. I’ll just get them from the safe.’

It doesn’t take long for René to hand a similar folder to Andrée. ‘Do you want to take a look?’ he asks.

She flicks through the documents, reading the medical summaries detailing conditions that will prevent the young men from being deported to the forced labour camps in Greater Germany.

‘Remind them always to carry this piece of paper with them. It is a copy. The original has been filed at the German centre for forced labour. They must tell this fact to anyone who detains them.’

‘Thanks, Doctor René. I’ll take them to my drop on the way home. Don’t want to get caught with them. I have more to lose now that Josie is living with us.’

‘It is an incredibly brave thing you, Louis and Tina are doing. Tell me, how are your parents?’

‘Really well. It’s strange, but I think the risks they’ve been taking this year have given them a new lease of life. I know they are roughly the same age as you, but the three of you seem in some way invigorated.’

René stands up and ushers Andrée to the door. ‘Like you and your parents, I have so much to live for. I need to see this war end, and my country liberated and free. Yes, we take risks, but it is worth it to contribute just a little in resisting the Germans.’

It is later than Andrée intended when she climbs the stairs to her apartment. Approaching the door, she hears a piano, the sound of music: Josie playing her favourite piece, ‘Clair de Lune’. Leaning against the wall, Andrée closes her eyes and, as Debussy intended, lets the music wash over her, calm her fears. Smiling, she pictures Josie sitting at her piano, and hopes the music is having the same effect on the little girl.

Chapter Six

The next morning, Andrée ferries Josie to school after a meagre breakfast of a thin slice of dry bread and chicory coffee. Josie needs the food more than they do, so she gets the last piece of hard cheese with her bread. They must have another ration card – soon.

It is a relief – a huge one – to know that Josie will receive a small meal at lunchtime, along with the vitamin bars the school distributes to all its pupils, something the Germans have not yet thought to ban.

After saying goodbye to Josie, Andrée sets off on another errand. She wants to see Dancer at her apartment on rue Péclet. The building, like Doctor René's, is also without a concierge. Their own concierge, Maurice Dupont, seems trustworthy enough – accepting the story of their 'niece' Joséphine without question – and never remarks on the steady stream of visitors, but the Germans are known to use concierges as spies, finding ways to pressure them into betraying residents they suspect of working for the Resistance.

Andrée makes her way up the stairs, ducking in after someone entering the building. At Dancer's door she gives the recognized signal – three short rings, three slow. She waits, sensing a presence behind the door. She places her face in front of the small glass spyhole, and the door immediately opens. A hand grabs her arm and pulls her inside.

'Andrée, hello. I wasn't expecting you,' Dancer says, looking down the corridor to see if anyone is around. Satisfied, she shuts the door and locks it.

'I'm sorry. I should have sent a message. If now isn't a good time, I can come back, but I need to talk to you,' Andrée says.

'No, it's fine. Philippe is at school. I was just . . .' Dancer looks around her small living room, her eyes resting on the rug in the middle of the room. One end is flicked back. Andrée follows her gaze.

Dancer's expression is trusting, but wary. It's highly unusual for operatives to visit one another.

'I have to be more careful,' Dancer says, walking over to the rug and flicking the rug straight with her foot. 'No doubt you've guessed that I keep my wireless under the floorboards. I was transmitting when you knocked: I can only do it while Philippe is asleep or at school. Andrée, is everything all right? Has something happened to the child?'

'No, she's fine. I just want to talk. I came straight from dropping Josie at her school. I've re-enrolled her under our name.'

Andrée has come to see Dancer partly out of concern and partly because she needs her help. Dancer's husband is Jewish. He was taken by the authorities back in 1940, two years ago, right at the start of the occupation of Paris, leaving her alone with Philippe, who was only four years old at the time. Since then she has burned with rage, throwing herself into the work with a fierce, almost reckless, determination. Louis has confided to Andrée that he fears she will be caught, which would leave Philippe without either parent to care for him. And the boy is half-Jewish, which makes him vulnerable in ways that are difficult to think about.

'I know we're not the only network you're involved with, Dancer. And that your other network is linked with General de Gaulle in London. If you've got too much to do, please tell me and we can cut back on what we ask of you.'

Dancer doesn't answer this question. She looks around at the clutter.

'I can't believe how messy this room is. As a dancer, my life was all about discipline and everything being neat and tidy. Now look at me,' she says, sweeping her arms around the room.

'Can I help you tidy up a little? I've got time,' Andrée asks.

'Thank you, but no. I will get on top of it. Everything will be sorted and put away by the time I need to go and pick up Philippe.'

‘Do you miss it?’ Andrée asks as she sits in a chair Dancer has just cleared of clean folded clothes.

‘What? The dancing?’

‘Yes. I saw you several times at Folies Bergère. You were absolutely spellbinding .’

‘Thank you. That was an exciting time in my life. I loved not only the dancing but the people: the other dancers, the audience. It was an otherworldly experience every night.’

‘Are you teaching Philippe to dance?’

‘I’m teaching him about the joy of listening to music and moving in time with it. You’d understand that, as a musician.’

‘Oh, yes, I do. Not that there’s much movement possible playing the piano.’

‘But there is!’ says Dancer. ‘When I wasn’t on the stage, I often watched the pianist, and his whole body swayed in time with the music.’

‘You’re right. You could say our hands dance across the keys. I’ve never thought of it that way before.’

She looks across at the photographs displayed on the sideboard. ‘Did you meet your husband while dancing?’

‘Yes. He was one of the financial backers of the Folies. I became aware of him when I saw him night after night sitting at the same table, and he seemed to be watching only me. One night the manager said there was someone, a key supporter of the company, who wanted to meet me. We met, had dinner, and I fell madly in love with him on our first date.’

‘A proper coup de foudre.’

Dancer laughs. ‘I’m living proof it can happen.’

She stops laughing abruptly and goes over to pick up one of the photographs.

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bring up sad memories.’.

‘You didn’t.’ Dancer puts the photograph back down on the sideboard and turns back to Andrée.

‘They are wonderful memories, beautiful memories, and now just that: memories.’

‘I know he was Jewish. Did you convert?’

‘No. He wasn’t orthodox and said it wasn’t necessary.’

‘That’s what I want to talk to you about,’ Andrée says.

‘Saul being Jewish?’

‘Yes. I’m hoping you can share some of the customs or rituals so that I might help Josie feel more at home while she’s living with us. I’m embarrassed to say how little we know.’

‘It’s wonderful that you want to do that for her. Although I didn’t convert, I was happy to be a part of Saul’s observance, and we wanted always Philippe to know about his father’s faith.’

‘Thank you, Dancer. Anything you can tell us to do, or not do, would be so useful. We don’t even know what day Hanukkah falls this year or what we should do to mark it.’

‘Hanukkah is early this year – a few weeks before Christmas. The first night is on 3 December and the last is on the tenth. I have an idea. Why don’t you all come here for dinner and we can light the first candle together? We’ll have Josie light it.’

‘Really? That’s too kind. We can’t expect you to feed us. I’ll agree if you let us bring as much food as we can get hold of. Is there anything special you need?’

‘One of the most important things for Hanukkah are foods fried in oil. To celebrate light in times of darkness and the miracle of one day’s worth of oil lasting the eight days it took for them to get more. There are potato pancakes called latkes. I can make some. Saul’s mother also taught me how to make the braided Shabbat bread called challah. I haven’t made it since he was taken. It will be good for me and for Philippe to do this.’

‘Thank you. I won’t say anything to Josie yet in case something comes up. Now, if you don’t need me, I should be getting back.’

‘Thank you,’ says Dancer. She puts her hand on Andrée’s arm. There are tears in her eyes. ‘I can’t tell you how much talking about Saul and Hanukkah means to me. It’s so easy to forget what must not be forgotten.’

* * *

Walking through the park, Andrée looks at the school, secure in the knowledge that Josie is safe inside, at least for the moment. Exiting onto the street, she crosses the road and heads to her parents’ bookshop. Her mother is with a customer and acknowledges her daughter with a short nod of her head before turning her attention back to her work. Andrée tugs off her gloves and flicks through a newspaper her mother had been reading, but her attention is drawn to the exchange between Tina and the woman she is serving.

‘So which novel is it exactly that you need for your son, Mme Charbonnier?’ Tina asks.

Andrée registers the tension in her mother’s voice.

‘Like I was saying, given that there’s just about no Jews left in Montparnasse, it means that we’ll see less of the Germans and their local lackeys. Don’t get me wrong, I’m sorry that they have disappeared. I imagine it’s just to work in Germany. Anyway, things should settle down now and we can go about our business without being asked for our papers all the time.’

Tina ignores the invitation to celebrate the evacuation of Jews from Paris and asks her instead, ‘And the book you are looking for your son: do you know what it’s called?’

‘It’s just that we were talking . . .’

‘Who is we?’ Tina asks, her voice now tinged with anger.

Andrée wonders if she should interrupt. It's hard for her parents to make a living from the shop; they can't afford to offend customers. And people are denounced for the smallest of things – a casual remark about the German occupiers made to the wrong person can lead to arrest.

'Well, other mothers. Anyway, what I was getting at is it must be hard on you and your husband losing so many customers now the Jewish families are gone. That's all.'

'We're doing just fine, thank you. Now, remind me of the name of the novel you're after. You said your son needs it for his literature class.'

'I was hoping you would tell me. He's thirteen, third year at the Lycée Buffon, so whatever the other boys are reading.'

'It could be one of three. How about you take all three? That way, when he moves on to whatever his next book is, you will already have it and won't have to come back here,' Tina says, her anger replaced with sarcasm.

Andrée stifles a giggle.

'Well, if you think that's best. Of course, I'll take what he needs to see the academic year out. Oh, and I will check with my daughter to see what her reading needs are. Céline is in her second year at Lycée Camille Sée, where so many Jewish girls used to go.'

Tina doesn't react to the mention of Josie's school.

'I have your books here, madame.'

Andrée moves aside as Tina quickly wraps the three books.

'Is there a discount for buying all three at the same time?' Mme Charbonnier asks.

'No. No, full price, I'm afraid,' Tina says briskly.

After taking her money and handing over the package, Tina curtly wishes Mme Charbonnier a lovely day.

Andrée waits until the door is closed, watching the woman pass by the window before turning back to her mother. Tina raises an eyebrow and Andrée laughs.

'You handled her beautifully, Maman, although for a moment there, I thought I might have to rescue you.'

'Don't you mean rescue her?'

'At least she can't tell the other women, whoever they are, that you refused to serve her. She might have something to say about you not agreeing with her outrageous statements, but well done, Maman.'

'Thank you, ma chérie. I can be diplomatic when it's needed, but that wasn't easy. She's one to keep an eye on, especially as her daughter is at the school. At least she's older. How was your visit with Dancer, by the way?'

'I admire her so much. She was, probably still is, a beautiful dancer, and now she's raising her son alone with no idea where her husband is. I don't know how many networks she is connected to but judging by her general air of anxiety and exhaustion, I'm thinking more than the two we know about.'

'Do you think she's coping?' asks Tina. 'Should we be worried about giving her assignments?'

'She's coping as well as the rest of us, and, no, I don't think we should hold back. She's very capable, and we need her. It's one thing to be a wireless operator, but she has to collect the intelligence she needs to send, and pass on the instructions she receives from London. And she moves around the city almost invisibly.' Andrée speaks with admiration.

'We all do what little we can, Andrée, and Dancer is an asset, no doubt about it. Was she able to help you with Josie?'

'Oh, Maman. She was so moved by our conversation. It seemed to be just what she needed. She told me how she and Saul met, how his mother taught her how to make Jewish

bread, and you should have seen her face when she talked about Saul. She's committed to teaching Philippe these customs, and she's invited us to join them on the first night of Hanukkah and have Josie light the first candle.'

'What did you say?'

'That we would only come if we could bring what food we could.'

'When is Hanukkah?'

'This year it starts on the third of December and it lasts eight days.'

'So it will be over before Christmas.'

'Yes.' Andrée's face lights up as she has an idea. 'Perhaps we should do a little more this year to show Josie how we used to celebrate Christmas. What do you think?'

'I think that's a wonderful plan. I'll send your father into the cellar to find some of the decorations we haven't put up in years. I know they're down there.'

'Speaking of Papa, do you have any idea when he'll be back? I have a feeling he's returning with something special from Colonel Pallas.'

'Why do you say that?' asks Tina, suddenly alert.

'When was the last time the Colonel asked Papa to visit him? He normally waits for him to go at his scheduled time each week.'

'We will find out when he returns.'

'I think I'll go home and wait for him. What time are you going to close, Maman?'

'Soon. I think I've had all the customers I'm going to get today, and, quite frankly, I'm not in the mood for any more.'

'Tell me, Maman – do you worry when Papa goes to see Colonel Pallas and is late coming home?'

Tina looks away, gathering herself before facing her daughter. ‘Yes. He’s his most risky contact. Colonel Pallas is head of the network; his capture would be a coup for the Germans. So yes, I fear your father getting caught up in his arrest.’

Andrée kisses her mother on the cheek. ‘You know Papa. He’s careful and he’s not going to stop. What we’re doing is too important to have doubts now.’

‘Go on home. Maybe he’s there already, even though he said he would come back to the shop.’ Tina smiles. ‘Maybe he just forgot.’

Knowing her father never forgets anything, Andrée hugs her mother.

‘Don’t be long. I’ll get lunch ready.’

Chapter Seven

‘Papa, are you home? Papa?’ Andrée calls out as she closes the door behind her.

Silence.

Hanging up her coat, hat and gloves, she looks at the other hooks. All empty.

She is alone in the apartment.

Looking around the room, she’s drawn to the piano. She sits on the stool and begins to play. The slow, melodic notes of ‘Clair de Lune’ fill the apartment as a sense of calm washes over her, transporting her to another place and time: the coast of Normandy where she and her parents shared so many wonderful family holidays together. She doesn’t hear the front door open and her father enter.

As the last note fades, Andrée becomes aware of a presence behind her. Turning, she sees her father standing in the middle of the room, in his coat and hat.

‘Still my favourite piece to hear you play. From the day we brought that piano home, you must have been four or five, you couldn’t wait to learn that one piece. Your poor tutor. You drove him crazy not wanting to practise arpeggios, or simpler pieces. No, you had to get to “Clair de Lune” straight away.’

‘And now it’s Josie’s favourite,’ Andrée says, removing her father’s hat and slipping the coat from his shoulders.

‘Yes, and now it’s Josie’s favourite, and your mother and I get to hear it being played by a beginner all over again. Do you have any idea how happy I am to be reminded of such a wonderful time?’

Louis opens his satchel and removes documents which he will hide in the secret drawer in the kitchen.

‘Did you forget you were meant to go to the shop after you left the Colonel?’ Andrée asks.

Louis stops what he is doing. ‘Oh dear! Yes, I forgot. I should go there now,’ he says, moving back towards his coat.

‘No, no, Papa. I stopped by after I’d seen Dancer. Maman is closing up about now; she’ll be home soon.’

‘Are you sure? I don’t want her to be angry with me.’

‘Maman is never cross with you – well, hardly ever.’ Andrée smiles. ‘No, she just worries about you, especially when you’re with the Colonel.’

She pauses.

‘Why did he ask to see you today?’

‘How about I wait until your mother’s home? That way I won’t have to say it twice.’

‘Did I hear someone mention my name?’ Tina says, coming into the apartment.

Louis stands and kisses his wife lightly on the lips, helping her out of her coat and then pulling out a chair for her to sit.

‘I’ll get our lunch things, but you can start talking, Papa,’ Andrée tells them.

Louis takes his time shuffling the files in front of him. ‘Tina, you’ll be pleased to know there is a table booked for us at Le Fleuron tomorrow for lunch.’

Tina and Andrée exchange glances. ‘Lunch at Le Fleuron, tomorrow,’ Tina repeats.

‘Yes. Table for two. Sorry, ma chère. Next time,’ he tells Andrée.

Sighing, Andrée brings their modest lunch to the table: stale bread which she’s warmed in the oven, a tiny piece of cheese for them to share, and three steaming cups of chicory coffee. ‘You have a meeting with Gypsy?’

‘Yes.’ Louis brings the hot liquid to his lips and sips.

‘You have to somehow smuggle one of those folders to her under the noses of the Germans who’ll be sitting all around you,’ Andrée states.

‘No.’ Louis has a little chuckle, taking another sip. ‘She has to smuggle a document to me under the noses of the Germans, who'll no doubt be sitting right beside us.’

‘Well, then I’d better drag out my finest dress and coat, and get my bigger handbag ready,’ Tina says.

‘Good idea,’ Louis says, with a wink to his wife.

‘What’s in them?’ Andrée asks, indicating the files on the table.

‘There’s one here for you, Andrée. The rest we will give to whoever we think appropriate for the mission. We’ll go through them in a minute and decide.’ Louis picks up the tiny piece of cheese and examines it.

‘Let’s hope Doctor René is able to provide us with a ration card soon,’ says Tina.

They both know what she means. They’re hungry; even hungrier now they’re sharing their paltry rations with a growing child. And they’re giving her the biggest portions – they can’t bear the thought of Josie suffering in their care, given what she has already endured.

‘What is it he wants me to do, Papa?’

‘I’m not sure about it, to be honest. You’d have to spend a night away, and I’m worried it’s too soon for you to leave Josie, even briefly. We don’t want to unsettle her.’

‘What do you think, Maman?’ Andrée asks Tina.

‘How soon would she need to go?’ Tina asks.

‘In two days. We can go over the details later,’ Louis tells them.

‘I’ll talk to Josie tonight, see how she feels about it,’ Andrée says.

Louis hands a file to Tina and one to Andrée, opening the third himself. ‘We’ll look at yours last, Andrée.’

Silently, they each read the files in front of them.

‘Did you discuss these with Colonel Pallas?’ Andrée asks, when she’s finished.

‘Yes. That’s why I was so long.’

‘Did he indicate who he thought we should give them to?’

‘He made suggestions, as usual, but he’ll leave it up to us in the end. We know the members of our cell. He’s only ever met me and René. What are you thinking?’

‘Cat. The mission is risky, but he can handle it.’

‘There’s no such thing as too risky where that one’s concerned,’ Tina says. ‘I know he gets results, but I still worry he thinks he’s immune to danger.’

‘As you say, he gets results. If Pallas is right, this will put Cat into the lion’s den – a château that houses the communication network for all of Europe,’ Louis says. ‘It’s a key target.’

‘Is there a contact at the château, or is he going in blind?’ Tina asks.

‘It looks like there is a contact, but he hasn’t been thoroughly vetted, so Cat will have to approach him with caution,’ Andrée tells her.

‘What details have you got for him?’

‘He’ll have copies of the original internal layout, but as it was designed over a hundred years ago, who knows what changes have been made since then?’ Andrée flicks through the pages of architectural drawings; they’re faded, torn in places.

‘What’s his cover story going to be?’ Tina asks.

‘Well, he comes from a family of socialites and intellectuals, so he’ll say he’s visiting the home of a relative, a place he visited often in his youth. He’ll find a family link and will carry it off with his usual panache, just he always does,’ Louis says.

Tina and Andrée smile at this. They know little about Cat, but he’s always played the role of the aristocrat.

‘Is it worth Félix going with him? They can pass as brothers, they have the same background, they’re good friends and he’s altogether more level-headed. Plus, they can get in and out faster if they cover half the building each,’ Andrée suggests.

‘No. He goes alone. We can’t risk two operatives being caught,’ Louis says, ending the conversation.

‘True. There’s no rush though. We can give him the file when he comes to the meeting next Thursday,’ Andrée says, closing the folder.

‘What have you got, mon amour?’ Louis asks Tina.

‘This goes to Agent. Being a teacher at the Sorbonne, he is perfectly placed to deal with it,’ she tells them.

‘What is it?’ Andrée asks.

‘It appears there is a small group of students at the university who are being less than discreet, openly petitioning for other students to join their Resistance network. Only the problem is, they don’t belong to any network. In fact, several of them have been seen meeting with members of the Gestapo. Pallas is concerned they are collaborating for money, handing over students who even express a mild interest in joining them.’

‘That makes my blood boil,’ Andrée says. ‘Students by their very nature are idealistic, and will want to be patriotic. We’ve got to stop them.’

‘Félix can identify them and report back to me. I’ll take the details to Colonel Pallas. He will have them dealt with,’ Louis tells them.

Neither Tina nor Andrée need to ask what it meant by this ominous statement.

Louis picks up the folder he’d set aside for Andrée. ‘Let’s take a better look at this.’

‘Why don’t you summarise it for us? Then we can study it after we know the facts,’ Tina says.

‘Right. There’s a drop coming in on Thursday night from London. A female agent is bringing two new wireless sets – faster than the ones we have. You will meet her and bring her here initially, then we will move her to a safe house as quickly as possible. She is not

only delivering the sets but will need to train our operators to use them. The Colonel is handling that end.' He pauses. 'One of the sets goes to Dancer.'

There is a moment's silence. This is a very dangerous mission. But Andrée is determined to succeed.

'Where is she landing?' Andrée asks.

'In the fields behind the Forêt de Sénart. You need to get yourself to Draveil: you'll be met there and taken to wait in the forest. After the pick-up, you'll both be accommodated overnight, then travel back here on Friday morning.'

Andrée's frown is brief but telling. 'I'd better give Josie her lesson today or tomorrow then. She won't want to miss out this week.'

The presence of Josie settles over them like a weight. It is not just their own lives they are risking now: they're also risking hers. But there's too much at stake for them to stop now.

'Do you know the name of the operative I'm meeting?' Andrée asks.

'Suzanne,' Louis says. 'All the information is in the file, including details of who will meet you in Draveil and how you are to identify yourself. Your cover is that you're visiting your sister and her family to help with the arrival of a new baby.'

Andrée nods, tucks the file under her arm and heads to her room. 'I'll read up on it all tonight, but now it's time to go and pick up Josie.'

Tina and Louis look at her and nod. No one knows what to say. For a moment each feels overwhelmed at the enormity of the tasks they are being asked to perform for the liberation of France, alongside the responsibility of keeping a little girl alive.

Chapter Eight

Louis adjusts his tie in the mirror by the front door. It has been months since he has worn his best shirt and suit. Now the collar gapes at his throat, his belt pulled in several notches. They are all losing weight. Beside him, Tina smooths her best dress, the grey one she wore to their anniversary dinner three years ago, before the war, before everything changed. It hangs loosely on her too.

They have been tightening their belts even further to save enough to feed Josie. Five more days until she goes back to see Doctor René. Hopefully he'll be able to produce the promised ration card. Only the food Josie receives at school is saving them all from starvation.

'You look beautiful,' he tells her.

'I look old and tired,' she says, but she's smiling. 'And this dress has seen better days.'

'To me, you're as lovely as the day we met.'

She turns to him, cups his cheek. 'Flatterer. Do you have the handbag?'

Louis holds up the large leather bag they'd discussed. Empty now, but not for long.

'Ready.'

'Then let's go to lunch with the enemy.'

Le Fleuron sits in the heart of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, its cream-coloured façade elegant even under occupation. Once, this was where Paris's aristocracy gathered. Now, German officers fill the tables, their grey uniforms a reminder of who controls the city. The French who still come here are either collaborators or very, very careful.

Louis and Tina approach the entrance. A doorman, his face carefully neutral, opens the door. Inside, the restaurant is warm, opulent, obscene in its plenty when the rest of Paris starves. White tablecloths. Crystal glasses. The smell of meat cooking.

The maître d' approaches. 'Monsieur?'

'Levallois. Table for two. Twelve thirty.'

The man consults his book. 'Ah, yes. This way, please.'

They're led through the dining room. Louis counts six tables of German officers. At one, a colonel laughs at something his companion says. At another, two younger officers lean close in conversation, their voices low. None of them pay Louis and Tina any attention. Why would they? An elderly couple, well-dressed, respectable. Invisible.

Their table is near the back, tucked beside a pillar. Not the best table, but perfect for their purposes. Partially hidden. Easy to leave quickly if needed.

'Your waiter will be with you shortly.' The maître d' gives them each a menu and disappears.

Tina places her handbag on the empty chair beside her. Louis is opposite her, his back to the room, able to see the entrance, the kitchen door, the exits. Always know the exits. That's the first rule.

A waiter appears. Young, nervous. 'May I bring you something to drink?'

'Water for now,' Louis says. 'We're waiting for someone.'

The waiter nods and retreats. Minutes pass. Louis studies the menu without seeing it. Beside him, Tina's hands are folded in her lap, perfectly calm. But he knows her. Knows the tension in her shoulders, the slight tightness around her eyes. She's as nervous as he is.

At twelve forty, the door opens and Gypsy enters.

Gypsy. Even her code name suits her: flamboyant, impossible to ignore. She wears a crimson dress that turns heads, her dark hair swept up, lipstick bright. She moves through the room like she owns it, nodding to the German officers as if they're old friends. One calls out to her in German, and she laughs, responds in perfect German, touches his shoulder as she passes. When the owners, her friends, fled to England, they entrusted her to manage Le

Fleuron, do what was necessary to keep it open, its history and prestige intact. They chose well.

Louis feels his jaw tighten. He knows it's an act. Knows she's gathering intelligence, playing a role. But watching her charm the occupiers turns his stomach.

She reaches their table, and her expression shifts. Warmer. Real. 'Louis. Tina. How wonderful to see you. It's been far too long.'

Louis stands, kisses her on both cheeks. 'Gypsy. You're looking well.'

'One does one's best in difficult times.' She sits, arranges her skirts. The waiter reappears immediately. Of course he does. For Gypsy, service is instant.

'Champagne,' she tells him. 'The '34 if we have it.'

'Of course, madame.'

As soon as he's gone, Gypsy leans forward. Her voice drops. 'Three bottles. That's what I serve them every night. Three bottles of champagne to four German officers. They talk. They boast. They forget I'm listening.'

She smiles, but there's steel in it. 'Fools.'

'Is it safe, being so visible?' Tina asks quietly.

'Safer than hiding. They think I'm a collaborator. They think I'm charmed by their uniforms, their promises. Let them think it. Meanwhile, I find out exactly where they're sending troops, which units are moving, when the next round-ups are planned.'

She picks up her menu.

'If you don't mind, I am going to dine with you – just three old friends catching up. Shall we order? What our chef has done with the pork we received yesterday is magnificent.'

Pasting a smile on her face Gypsy looks around the room before turning back to Louis and Tina.

‘If it weren’t for the pigs dining with us, we would have no pork. No meat at all,’ she whispers.

Louis and Tina suppress giggles. Tina squeezes Louis’s leg under the table.

They order. The champagne arrives. Gypsy pours, and they toast to nothing in particular, just three old friends having lunch. Around them, the restaurant hums with conversations held in German and French, the sound of occupation made mundane.

‘I hear you have a new addition to your household,’ Gypsy says, cutting her pork into small pieces, to savour.

‘We do.’ Louis keeps his face neutral. How does she know? ‘Our grand-niece. Staying with us while her mother recovers from an illness.’

‘Of course. How kind of you to take her in.’ Gypsy’s eyes are sympathetic. She knows. Everyone in the network knows by now.

‘These are difficult times for children.’

‘Very difficult,’ Tina agrees.

They eat. They talk about inconsequential things: the weather, the shortages, how Paris has changed. Anyone listening would hear nothing suspicious. Just three friends, making the best of bad times. With each swallow of their food, both Louis and Tina think of Andrée and Josie and how this is one meal they won’t be sharing.

Halfway through lunch, Gypsy reaches for her handbag. It’s large, expensive, the kind wealthy women carry. She opens it, pulls out a compact, checks her lipstick. Sets the compact on the table. Reaches back into the bag, removes a small leather folder.

‘I brought those photographs I promised you, Tina. From before the war. I thought you might enjoy them.’

She hands the folder across the table. Tina takes it, opens it. Inside are photographs, real ones, from years ago. Gypsy and her late husband at a party. Tina and Louis at the same party. Innocent. Ordinary.

But beneath the photographs Louis can see the edge of something else. Papers. Folded thin. Documents.

'How lovely,' Tina says, closing the folder carefully. 'May I keep these? I'd like to show Andrée.'

'Of course. They're yours.'

Tina slips the folder into her handbag. The one Louis brought. Large enough. Deep enough. The exchange is complete.

At the next table, a German officer calls for more wine. The waiter hurries over. No one is watching Louis and Tina and Gypsy. Why would they? Three French citizens, having lunch, sharing memories. Nothing suspicious. Nothing worth noting.

'Coffee?' Gypsy asks.

'Please,' Louis says.

The coffee arrives. Real coffee, rich and dark. Louis savours it, knowing it might be months, years even, before he tastes it again. Across from him, Gypsy is telling a story about one of the German colonels, how he got drunk and tried to sing French opera, badly. She's laughing, bright and carefree.

But her eyes aren't laughing. Her eyes are hard.

'I should go,' she says finally. 'I have an appointment this afternoon. A new supplier for the restaurant. One must keep the Germans well-fed after all.' The bitterness in her voice is barely concealed.

'Of course. Thank you for lunch,' Tina says.

‘My pleasure. We should do this more often. It’s good to remember we’re still human, still French, still ourselves despite everything. This is on me, my friends.’

She stands. Louis and Tina stand. They embrace. Gypsy picks up her handbag, lighter now without the folder, and sweeps from the restaurant. The German officers watch her go. One raises his glass to her. She blows him a kiss.

Louis and Tina sit back down.

‘Brave woman,’ Tina says quietly.

‘Foolish woman. She takes too many risks.’

‘Perhaps. But we need her. We need what she can learn.’

They stand, gather their things. Tina’s handbag, heavy now with the folder, with secrets, with intelligence that could save lives or end them.

They walk through the restaurant. Past the German officers. Past the collaborators. Past the waiters and the maître d’. Out into the November cold.

Only when they’re three streets away does Tina speak. ‘I need to sit down. My hands are shaking.’

Louis guides her to a bench. They sit. Around them, Paris endures. People hurry past, heads down, focused on survival. No one notices an elderly couple resting on a bench.

‘Every time,’ Tina says. ‘Every single time, I think they’ll see through us and arrest us right there.’

‘But they don’t. We’re too old, too ordinary. They don’t see us as threats.’

‘That’s our advantage.’

‘That’s our only advantage.’ Louis looks at the handbag. ‘What do you think’s in there?’

‘Troop movements, probably. Patrol schedules. Names of collaborators. The usual.’

Tina's hands have stopped trembling. She takes a breath. 'We should get home. Josie will be back from school soon. And Andrée needs to see this before she leaves.'

They stand. Begin the walk home. Just two elderly people, out for lunch, enjoying what's left of the afternoon. The handbag swings between them, heavy with secrets, with danger, with the small victories that might, eventually, add up to freedom.

Behind them, Le Fleuron gleams in the winter sun, feeding the occupiers, sheltering traitors, and hiding in plain sight the Resistance that will, one day, help bring liberty back to France.

Chapter Nine

Josie's fingers stumble over the keys, the notes of 'Clair de Lune' colliding rather than flowing. She stops, places her hands in her lap, stares at the sheet music.

'I can't do it. I'll never play it like Maman would want to hear it,' she says, her voice quivering.

Andrée slides onto the bench beside her. 'Your Maman heard you play this piece dozens of times, Josie. Every time you sat at the piano, she heard you. And do you know what she heard?'

Josie shakes her head.

'She heard you getting better. She heard you trying. She heard how much you loved it. That's what music is, Josie. It's not about being perfect. It's about feeling something and sharing it. Not everyone has this gift, but you do.'

Josie's fingers return to the keys, tentative. She plays the opening again, slower this time. The notes find each other, one following the next as the composer intended.

'Better,' Andrée says softly. 'Much better. Now, there's something I need to talk to you about.'

Since collecting Josie from school an hour ago, Andrée has been wondering when to tell her she will be away for a night. She hadn't planned to raise it during the lesson, but somehow, sitting here together at the piano, the moment feels right.

Josie's hands freeze on the keys. She turns to look at Andrée, her eyes suddenly wide. 'What is it? What's wrong?'

'Nothing is wrong, ma petite. Nothing at all.' Andrée smiles. 'But before I tell you what I need to say, I want to tell you something else first. I peeked into your classroom this morning, before my first lesson.'

Josie stares at her. 'I didn't see you.'

‘I know you didn’t.’

‘Why?’

‘Well, I stood at the window and watched your teacher call the register.’ Andrée pauses, her eyes warm. ‘She called Joséphine Levallois – and you just sat there, completely absorbed in whatever you were thinking, not a flicker of recognition.’

Josie’s hand flies to her mouth. ‘Oh no! I forgot.’

‘You forgot entirely. And then Monique, she was sitting next to you, gave you a firm nudge with her elbow and I could see her lips moving: *That’s you, Josie. Remember – you’re Joséphine Levallois now.* And up shot your hand.’ Andrée laughs softly at the memory. ‘And you said, “That’s me, that’s me, I’m here.”’

Josie drops her face into her hands. ‘I’m so sorry.’

‘Don’t be sorry. Not for a moment.’

Andrée reaches over and gently pulls Josie’s hands from her face.

‘It was one of the sweetest things I’ve seen in a long time. Do you know what it told me? It told me how strong your friendship with Monique is. She is watching over you, that girl. I’m so glad you have her as a friend.’

Josie is quiet for a moment. Then, softly: ‘And someone to remind me of my name.’

Andrée squeezes her hand. ‘And someone to remind you who you are being for now.’

The smile fades from Josie’s face as quickly as it came. ‘What else did you want to tell me?’

Andrée takes a breath. ‘Only that I must go away tomorrow. Just for one night. I’ll be back Friday morning, I promise.’

The silence stretches. Josie stares at the piano keys.

‘Where?’ she finally asks.

‘I need to help someone, and it means being away overnight. I wouldn’t go if it wasn’t important.’

Josie nods slowly. ‘Is it to do with the meetings? The people who come on Thursdays.’

‘Yes.’

‘And you can’t tell me about it.’

‘No, I can’t. Not because I don’t trust you, but because it’s safer for you not to know. Do you understand?’

Josie picks at the edge of the sheet music, folding the corner over and back, over and back.

‘When Maman sent me here, she told me to do whatever you told me. She said you would keep me safe and that I should trust you completely.’

‘Your Maman was right.’

‘Will you come back? Promise you’ll come back.’

Andrée wraps her arms around Josie, pulls her close. The child’s body is rigid at first, then slowly softens, melting into the embrace.

‘I promise. I will always come back to you. Always.’

‘What if something happens? What if the Germans –’

‘Nothing will happen. I’m very careful. We all are. And Grand-Mère and Grand-Père will be here with you the whole time. You won’t be alone. I’ll also be bringing someone home with me, but just for a few days.’

Josie draws away, wipes her eyes with the back of her sleeve. ‘Can we have a lesson tomorrow too? Before you go?’

‘What a good idea. We can one in the morning, before school.’

A small smile. ‘So two lessons?’

‘Two lessons. And when I come home on Friday, I’ll listen to you play this all the way through, no stopping, no matter how many mistakes.’

‘Even if I play it terribly?’

‘Even then. Because that’s what family does. We listen to each other, even when we’re not perfect. I know we’re not your family, Josie, and we would never try to replace them, but for now, we’re your pretend family.’

‘I do you call Tata.’

‘Yes, you do, and I will be your Tata for as long as you want me to be.’

Josie turns back to the piano. Her fingers find the keys again, and this time the opening notes of ‘Clair de Lune’ fill the apartment with a confidence born of love.

* * *

Thursday morning arrives grey and cold. Andrée wakes to find Josie already at the piano, still in her nightdress, playing scales. Not ‘Clair de Lune’, not anything difficult. Just scales, up and down, methodical and precise.

‘You’re up early,’ Andrée says from the doorway.

‘Couldn’t sleep. Wanted to practise.’

‘Come and have breakfast first. The piano will still be here after we’ve eaten.’

At the dining table, Tina has laid out what little they have. The ever-present crust of bread, a scraping of the jam she had stored away for special occasions. She queued outside the bakery for over two hours to buy the bread, which the authorities have deemed can only be sold when it is two days old, to make it less likely that people will eat it quickly. Tina does her best to hide the exhaustion she is feeling. Louis reads his newspaper, his daily dose of propaganda, but Andrée catches him watching Josie over the top of the pages.

‘So, Josie,’ Louis says, folding the paper, ‘your Tata Andrée tells us you’re having a piano lesson after breakfast today. Lucky girl.’

Josie scrapes a tiny amount of jam carefully on her bread, spreading it to each of the four corners. ‘She’s leaving today,’ she mumbles. A tear falls onto the stale baguette.

‘It’s just for one night. She’ll be back tomorrow,’ Tina says brightly. ‘And we’ll have a lovely evening. I thought we might play cards. Do you know any card games?’

‘Léon and I used to play.’

‘Perfect. Then you can teach Grand-Père and me. Andrée was always terrible at cards. We’ll have more fun without her.’

This earns Tina a small smile. Andrée feels the tightness in her chest loosen slightly.

After breakfast, Josie returns to the piano. Andrée sits in the chair beside it, watching her work through the exercises. The child’s concentration is fierce, her jaw set, her whole body focused on getting it right. When she stumbles, she doesn’t lose heart. She backs up, finds where she lost the thread, begins again.

‘You’re doing wonderfully,’ Andrée tells her when she looks up. ‘Really, Josie. You’ve improved so much in just these few days.’

‘Days,’ Josie repeats. ‘Has it only been days? It feels like . . .’ She trails off, staring at her hands on the keys.

‘Like what?’

‘Like longer.’ She looks up at Andrée. ‘Is that bad? That I don’t think about them every single minute any more?’

Andrée kneels beside the piano bench, takes Josie’s hands in hers. ‘Listen to me. You think about them every time you sit at this piano. Every time you play a note. This is how you remember them, Josie. This is how you keep them close. Not by being sad every minute, but by living. By learning. By doing the things they would want you to do.’

Josie’s eyes shine, but she blinks back the tears. ‘Maman would want me to keep playing.’

‘Yes. And Léon would want you to keep going to school and having fun with your friends.’

‘And they’d want me to be safe here. With you.’

‘That’s exactly what they’d want.’

Josie turns back to the keyboard. This time she plays with less tension in her hands, her shoulders relax, her breathing steadies. When she finishes ‘Clair de Lune’, still imperfect, still with stumbles, but complete, Andrée applauds.

‘Beautiful. Truly beautiful, Josie.’

‘You’re just saying that because you’re leaving.’

‘I’m saying it because it’s true. Now come here.’

Josie slides off the bench and Andrée holds her tight, breathing in the scent of her dark, glossy hair, feeling the beat of her heart.

Josie’s arms tighten around her waist.

They stand like that for a long moment, the morning light slanting through the windows, the piano silent behind them, the world outside continuing its dangerous tune.

Then Andrée pulls back, smooths Josie’s hair. ‘Be good for Grand-Mère and Grand-Père. I’ll see you tomorrow. Promise.’

‘Promise,’ Josie echoes.

Louis holds out his hand to Josie. ‘Come on, Josie, I’ll take you to school today.’

After Josie has left, Andrée packs a small bag. A change of underwear. Identity papers. She has memorized her instructions from Colonel Pallas and destroyed the documents. Now she rehearses her cover story one more time. Sister. Baby. Visit. Simple. Believable.

She has done this before. But not a child waiting at home, and not with her parents so deeply compromised.

The thought she has been pushing aside surfaces again: was the decision to keep Josie really hers to make? If they are denounced – if Josie is discovered – what follows for her parents will be arrest, and after arrest, torture. She would do anything for that little girl; she knows that without question. But is it right that her parents are the ones risking everything? Did they ever truly have a choice, or did she make it for them?

She closes the bag. There is no useful answer to that question. There never is.

At the door, bag in hand, Andrée looks back. In her mind's eye she sees Josie at the piano, her hands resting on the keys. Louis stands behind her, placing his hands on her shoulders. Tina emerges from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron, focused on Josie.

A family. They've become a family. She answers her own question: this was Tina and Louis's decision as much as it was hers. They're all in this together, for better or worse.

Andrée raises her hand in farewell, and then she's gone, down the stairs, out into the cold November day, into whatever waits in the fields behind Forêt de Sénart.

****

The train to Draveil is nearly empty. Andrée chooses a compartment with two other passengers, an elderly woman clutching a basket and a man in a worn suit reading a newspaper. Neither looks up when she enters. Good. Invisible is good.

She sits by the window, her bag on the seat beside her, and watches Paris slide away. The journey is only twenty kilometres, but it feels like crossing into another country. In the city, the streets are crowded with German soldiers. In the countryside, they'll be fewer, more spread out. More room to move around unseen, so long as she can blend in with the locals.

The train lurches, stops, starts again. A checkpoint. Andrée's heart beats faster but she keeps her face blank, bored, just another woman visiting family: remembering yet again the rule of being lost in the 'role' she is playing. Off to see family, duty rather than enjoyment the purpose of her visit. Two German soldiers board, moving through the carriages checking

papers. The elderly woman fumbles with her documents, drops them. One of the soldiers picks them up, hands them back without a word. Moves on.

When they reach Andrée, she has her papers ready. The photograph, taken two years ago, shows her with shorter hair, a different expression. The soldier glances at it, at her, back at the photograph.

'Purpose of travel?' he asks in heavily accented French.

'Visiting my sister. She's just had a baby.'

'Name of your sister?'

'Marguerite Dubois.'

'Address?'

She recites it. A real address, a real family, carefully chosen by Colonel Pallas. If they check, it will hold. Marguerite is real. The baby is real. Only Andrée's connection to them is fiction.

The soldier hands back her papers. Moves on. The compartment door slides shut. Andrée counts to one hundred before allowing herself to breathe normally again.

At Draveil, she steps onto the platform. It is mid-afternoon, the pale winter light already fading. She walks through the small station building, past the ticket counter, out into the street. There should be someone to meet her. Code name: Visitor.

A woman stands beside a bicycle, adjusting the basket. Dark hair, practical clothes, the look of someone who belongs here. Andrée approaches, stops a careful distance away.

'Excuse me, I'm looking for the Dubois residence. Rue de la République?'

The woman looks up. Studies Andrée for a long moment.

'Back that way, third street on the left. The house with the blue shutters.'

'The blue shutters. Thank you.'

'Are you visiting long?'

‘Only until tomorrow. My sister just had a baby.’

The woman smiles. ‘How lovely. A new life in such times. Follow me. I’m going that way myself.’

They walk in silence, the woman pushing her bicycle, Andrée matching her pace. Two women, unremarkable, going about their business. At a corner, the woman stops.

‘I’m Visitor,’ she says quietly.

‘Andrée.’

‘No code name?’

‘My family decided we have nothing to hide.’

Visitor raises an eyebrow but says nothing. ‘This way. We have perhaps three hours before the drop. You’ll stay at my house tonight. Both of you.’

‘Is it safe?’

‘As safe as anywhere. My husband is away: he was sent east by the Germans. My neighbours think I take in boarders to make ends meet. You’re a cousin from Paris. Suzanne will be a friend of a friend, passing through. Simple stories. The best kind.’

The house is small, neat, tucked at the end of a narrow street. Visitor wheels her bicycle around to the back, motions for Andrée to follow. Inside, it’s cold but clean. A kitchen, a small sitting room, one bedroom upstairs.

Visitor sets out a simple supper on the table: fresh bread and a good hunk of cheese. It’s a little more than Andrée has in a single meal in quite some time, but especially since Josie arrived, and she stifles a feeling of guilt. But she needs to eat: they’ve got a long night ahead of them.

‘You’ve done this before?’ Visitor asks.

‘A rendezvous? Yes, a few times. Never a parachute drop though.’

‘It’s not complicated. We wait in the trees. Listen for the plane. Watch for the drop. Collect quickly and leave. The Germans patrol but not often at night. Too cold, too dark.’

‘And if something goes wrong?’

‘We scatter. You know the protocol. Don’t come back here. Make your own way to Paris. I’ll do the same.’

Andrée nods. She knows the protocol. Everyone for themselves if it goes bad. It’s the only way to protect the network, the safe houses, the others.

‘Tell me about your husband,’ Andrée says, changing the subject.

Visitor’s face softens. ‘Michel. Captured. It’s been a little over a year now. ‘This work I do: it’s for him. For all of them. The ones who can’t fight any more.’

‘I understand.’

‘Do you? Have someone?’

‘A child. Not mine by birth, but I’m responsible for her now. Jewish. We’re hiding her.’

Visitor sets down her cup. ‘How old?’

‘Eleven.’

‘Brave girl.’

‘She is. Braver than she should have to be.’

They sit in silence, two women bound by different losses, different loves, the same war.

At seven o’clock they dress in dark clothes, layer on coats and scarves. Visitor hands Andrée a flashlight. ‘Don’t use it unless necessary. Our eyes will adjust.’

They walk through the village, keeping to the shadows. Beyond the last houses, fields stretch dark and empty. The forest rises ahead, a black wall against the slightly paler sky.

Among the trees it's darker still. Andrée follows Visitor's silhouette, trusting her to know the path.

They stop in a small clearing. Visitor checks her watch. 'Any time now. The window is twenty minutes.'

Andrée scans the sky. Just clouds, the quarter-moon or odd star occasionally breaking through. Then a sound. Distant. Growing closer. The low drone of an aircraft.

'There,' Visitor whispers.

The plane passes overhead, invisible but unmistakable. The engine sound changes. Something falls, a darker shape against the dark sky. A parachute blooms above.

They run. The parachute is drifting, will land in the next field. Andrée's heart hammers.

Exposed. Visible. Anyone watching could see them now. But there's no choice. The agent will land, will need help gathering the parachute, hiding it, moving quickly away.

The figure lands hard, rolls, comes up tangled in silk. Andrée and Visitor reach her together. A woman, young, dark-haired, already struggling out of her harness.

'Suzanne?' Andrée asks.

'Yes. The cases – there.' She points. Two suitcases, attached to their own smaller parachutes, lie twenty metres away.

Visitor is already gathering the parachute, rolling it into a bundle.

'Get them. Quickly.'

Andrée runs. The cases are heavy, awkward. She grabs one, Suzanne the other. Together they run back to the trees while Visitor finishes bundling the parachutes.

'We'll leave them here,' Visitor says. 'My friends are coming later to bury them later. Let's move.'

They half run, half walk back through the forest, the suitcases banging against their legs. Suzanne stumbles once but catches herself. No one speaks. Behind them, the forest is silent. No shouting. No searchlights. No indication they were seen.

At Visitor's house, they tumble inside. Andrée and Suzanne drop the cases, exhausted. Visitor bolts the door, pulls the blackout curtains. Only then does she light a lamp.

In the lamplight, Suzanne looks young. Twenty-five at most. Her face is pale, her hands shaking slightly. 'Sorry,' she says. 'First time jumping. Rather more frightening than they said it would be.'

'You did well,' Andrée tells her. 'Very well. I'm Andrée.'

'Pleased to meet you. And thank you. Both of you.' She looks at the two suitcases. 'The wireless sets. They're the newest model. Faster, harder to detect. I'm to train your operators to use them.'

'Tomorrow,' Visitor says. 'Tonight, we eat, we rest. The danger is over for now.'

They share more bread and cheese, a bottle of wine that Visitor produces from somewhere. Unheard of bounty. Andrée enjoys the wine, the cheese and even the stale bread, again pushing back the feelings of guilt for the three she left in Paris, who will have eked out what scraps remain in the larder.

Suzanne tells them about London, about the training, about the flight over France. 'I could see Paris. The lights are dimmed but it's still there. Still Paris, my home.' She looks at Andrée. 'Is it very bad?'

'Yes,' Andrée says simply. 'But we endure. We resist. We wait for liberation.'

'It's coming, I promise you. London's getting ready. It won't be much longer.'

Andrée wants to believe her. Wants to think that Josie won't spend years hiding, that the occupation will end, that Ruth and Léon might somehow still return. But she's learned not to hope too hard. Hope is dangerous and it can make you careless.

It occurs to her she might know more about the progress of the Germans than Suzanne does. She may be living in an unoccupied country, but how much of what is going on in Europe, in Africa, does she really know? Andrée has seen classified, stolen documents. She's not convinced this war is going to end any time soon. But she knows the rules: follow instructions, speak only of that which is connected to the mission in hand. Speculation, gossip, rumours are dangerous and do nothing to help the cause.

They sleep three to a bed, fully clothed, ready to run if needed. Andrée lies between Visitor and Suzanne in the chilly room, listening to their breathing, to the house settling around them, to the silence of the village outside. She thinks of Josie, safe in Paris with Louis and Tina. Playing cards. Laughing, perhaps. Forgetting, for a moment, to be afraid.

'Sleep,' Visitor whispers. 'Tomorrow comes early.'

Andrée closes her eyes.

* * *

Friday morning is grey and bitter. Frost covers everything, turning the world silver and sharp. They eat quickly, the remains of the bread from their supper, washed down with chicory coffee. Then they prepare to leave.

Visitor accompanies them towards the station. At the edge of the village, she stops. 'From here, you're on your own. Safer that way. Good luck.'

'Thank you,' Andrée says. 'For everything.'

'Thank your Colonel Pallas. He chose well, sending you.' Visitor turns to Suzanne. 'Welcome back to France. May your work here be successful.'

They part. Andrée and Suzanne walk to the station, each carrying a battered suitcase. To anyone watching, they're just two women travelling. Perhaps friends. Perhaps sisters. Nothing suspicious. Nothing worth noting. They try to make the suitcases appear less cumbersome, less heavy. Andrée focuses on the imagined contents of the case: some light

dresses and shoes. Not a wireless set. This part of the trip is far more dangerous because of their precious cargo.

On the platform, they don't speak. Don't stand too close – side by side but apart, gazing forward, waiting. When the train arrives, they board separately, meet in a compartment only after the train is moving. Even then, they keep conversation light, impersonal.

'Visiting Paris?' Suzanne asks, as if they've just met.

'Returning home. You?'

'Visiting family. A few weeks, perhaps.'

'I hope you enjoy your stay.'

'I'm sure I will.'

The charade is exhausting but necessary. Anyone could be listening. Anyone could be watching. Trust no one. Assume everyone is a collaborator until proven otherwise. These are the rules that keep them alive.

The train ride home is much slower. The train stops on the tracks several times. At the checkpoint, the same questions. Papers. Purpose of travel. How long staying. The German soldier looks at Suzanne's documents longer than Andrée's. French, but issued in Lyon. Less common. He asks her something in his broken French. She responds in fluent French, easy and natural. He nods, hands back her papers, moves on.

When he's gone, Suzanne catches Andrée's eye. The smallest smile. They've passed. Almost home.

Finally Paris appears through the window. Buildings, streets, people. The city under occupation but still Paris, still breathing, still alive. The train slows, pulls into the Gare d'Austerlitz. They transfer to the metro and make the short trip to their metro station, Vaugirard.

They disembark. On the platform, Andrée turns to Suzanne. ‘This way. Stay close but not too close. You know what to do.’

They navigate the station, the streets beyond. Andrée leads the way. She knows every turn, every shortcut on the short trip home; which streets have more patrols, which are safer.

When her building is in sight, she stops. Checks the street. Empty. ‘Inside. Quickly.’

As they enter, M. Dupont looks up from his desk just inside his apartment door. His eyes flick to the suitcases, to Suzanne, then back to Andrée. She knows what the concierge is thinking – if she’s here to stay, that apartment is becoming crowded. There is a long pause as he seems to consider what he is seeing. Andrée’s heart starts to pound.

But eventually he nods once. Asks nothing. For now, he simply returns to his newspaper.

Upstairs, Andrée’s hands shake slightly as she fits the key in the lock. Then the door opens and there’s Josie, running, throwing herself into her arms.

‘Tata Andrée! You came back! You came back.’

‘I promised, didn’t I?’ Andrée buries her face in Josie’s thick curls, feels the relief wash through her. She’s home. Her mission is complete. For now, she’s safe.

Behind Josie, Louis and Tina appear. They take in Suzanne, the suitcases, understand immediately.

‘Welcome,’ Louis says, extending his hand. ‘You must be Suzanne. Come in, come in. You’re safe here.’

Suzanne steps inside, and Louis closes the door behind her. Another agent arrived. Another piece in place. Another small victory in a war that must, surely, eventually end.

Andrée keeps her arms around Josie, feels the child’s heartbeat against her own. Whatever happens next, whatever dangers lie ahead, this moment is enough. The wireless sets are here. The work continues.

‘Come,’ Tina says.

They move to the dining table, Josie still holding Andrée’s hand, unwilling to let go. Through the window, Paris stretches out grey and cold, occupied but undefeated. Somewhere in the city, the Resistance continues its work. Somewhere, others are risking everything for freedom.

And here, in this small apartment, a family gathers around a table, welcomes a stranger, eats what passes for supper these days, and dares to believe that tomorrow might be better than today.

Chapter Ten

It is the 3 December , 1942, and Andrée, lost in memories of winters past, doesn't hear Josie approach as she stands staring out of the window to the street below, which is empty, silent: curfew has ended but people remain indoors, sheltering as best they can. Fuel shortages are making it harder for the citizens of Paris to warm their homes as the cold begins to bite. The shielded street lamps shine dimly. It is past sunrise, but heavy dark clouds extend the night. She feels the touch of a small hand as Josie's fingers close around hers; the young girl leans into Andrée's side.

'Good morning, Josie. You're up early.'

'I know. Somehow, I felt you were out here alone, and I wanted to be with you.'

Andrée hears the words 'I wanted to be with you' and bites her lip. How can this child have made such a momentous impact on her in such a short period of time? Four weeks. She can't look at her for fear of breaking down. They both look out the window.

'Is it snowing?'

'It's threatening to. Can you see the small snowflakes dancing past the street lamps as they float down? They're too fine to settle just yet though,' Andrée says.

'That's a pity. I'd like it to snow today – it's such a big day for us.'

Two days ago, Andrée and her parents told Josie of the invitation to celebrate Hanukkah with Dancer and Philippe. It was obvious the conversation triggered memories, painful and happy. Josie was silent, staring down at her hands in her lap.

Finally, Louis broke the silence.

'Can you tell us what Hanukkah means to you, Josie?'

Barely above a whisper they heard the word 'Papa'.

'Do you want to tell us what it is about your Papa and Hanukkah you remember?'

Josie remained silent for several moments, tears streaming down her face. ‘Last year Maman wouldn’t let us light the candles because it was our first year without Papa and he always lit the shamash, the candle used to kindle the others, and as he wasn’t there to light it, we didn’t light any. I really miss him. And I miss lighting the candles too.’

Now Andrée turns to the girl standing next to her.

‘It is a big day for all of us. For Grand-Père Grand-Mère and I, it will be our first Hanukkah celebration. I can’t wait for this evening to come, to watch you light the first candle. You know we are relying on you to tell us what to do.’

‘I think I can remember, but Philippe and his Maman might need to remind me, and then I will show you.’

‘It’s still early. What do you want to do between now and school?’ Andrée asks, knowing full well what the answer will be.

She follows Josie’s eyes as they turn to the piano.

‘Can you love something that isn’t a person or even an animal? Josie asks.

‘Of course you can. You can love anything, not just anyone.’

‘I know it’s yours, but I love your piano.’

‘What are you two doing up when your bed is the warmest place to be right now?’ Louis enters the room and comes to stand with them, noting the fine flakes drifting past the window. ‘Could get our first snow soon.’

‘It’s only threatening, Grand-Père, see? They’re melting as soon as they reach the ground.’

Louis shivers. ‘Cold enough to snow, that’s all I know. Is the coffee on?’ he asks Andrée.

‘Not yet, Papa. Josie and I were just talking about Hanukkah later today – she’s going to show us what to do.’

‘Are you excited, Josie?’

‘Oh yes. I might get a little sad because I will be remembering Papa and Maman and Léon, but I want to do this for them.’

Louis pats her on the shoulder. ‘Good girl. We’ll be there with you.’

* * *

The afternoon light is fading when they set out. The streets are still deserted, but all three of the adults are alert for the possibility of soldiers. If stopped, their story is ready: they have their niece, Joséphine Levallois, with them, and they’re off to see another family member, Louis’s brother Jean-Paul, who lives nearby, as he hasn’t been well. Andrée carries a basket with what little they’ve managed to save: half a baguette, some cheese, a small jar of preserved fruit that Tina has been hoarding since summer. Not much, but something. Doctor René’s ration card for Josie has helped significantly. Louis has a bottle of wine tucked under his arm, one of the last from before the war. Tina holds Josie’s hand, and together they navigate the darkening streets.

Josie is quiet. Not the silence of fear, but something else. Anticipation, perhaps. Or memory. Andrée watches her, sees the way she holds herself a little straighter than usual, the way her free hand keeps reaching up to touch the collar of her coat, a nervous gesture.

‘Are you all right, Josie?’ Andrée asks.

‘Yes. I’m just thinking about last year. And the year before that. All the Hanukkahs with Papa and Maman and Léon.’ She looks up at Andrée. ‘Is it wrong to be happy about tonight when they’re not here?’

‘No, Josie, it’s not wrong. Your Papa would want you to celebrate. Your Maman sent you to us so you could be safe, keep being Jewish. This is part of that.’

‘I know. It just feels strange.’

‘Strange is all right. Strange is normal right now.’

Andrea rings the bell on the street, three long bursts, three short. Dancer comes down to let them in, and before speaking or greeting one another they climb the three flights of stairs, their footsteps echoing in the stairwell.

Dancer ushers them into her apartment. Her face is flushed from cooking, her hair tied back, an apron over her dress. Around her, the room glows warm with lamplight.

'Come in, come in! You must be freezing. Philippe, our guests are here,' she calls out.

They enter, and the warmth envelops them. The apartment is immaculate – Dancer has tidied up for them. Every surface shines. The smell of cooking oil fills the air. A small boy appears, dark-haired like his mother.

'This is Philippe,' Dancer says, her hand on his shoulder. 'Philippe, say hello to our friends.'

'Hello,' the boy says shyly. His eyes find Josie. 'Are you Joséphine? Maman told me you were coming and that you know how to light the candles.'

Josie nods. 'I do. My Papa taught me. Did your Papa teach you?'

Philippe's face falls slightly. 'A little bit. Not very much. He's been gone a long time.'

'My Papa too,' Josie says quietly. 'And then my Maman and my brother.'

The two children look at each other, recognition passing between them. They're the same, these two. Both living with loss. Philippe reaches out and takes Josie's hand.

'Come on. I'll show you the menorah. Maman cleaned it specially.'

They disappear into the other room, and Dancer watches them go, her eyes shining.

'I didn't expect that,' she says quietly. 'I thought he'd forgotten Saul. He was only four when they took him, days after occupation. They caught him protesting along with his friends. I begged him not to go.'

‘Children remember more than we think,’ Tina says, touching Dancer’s arm. ‘Now, what can we do to help?’

Dancer wipes her eyes quickly, forces a spark back into her voice. ‘Everything’s nearly ready. The latkes are keeping warm; the brisket is done. I visited Gypsy and told her you were coming tonight and asked if there was any way she could get me a small piece of brisket and she did. I even managed to make *sufganiyot*: jam doughnuts. Don’t ask me where I found the ingredients, but I did.’

She laughs. ‘Let’s think of this celebration as an act of resistance. Saul always said Hanukkah without *sufganiyot* isn’t Hanukkah at all.’

The table is beautifully laid: a white cloth, mismatched plates that somehow work together, candles waiting to be lit. In the centre, a menorah. Silver, tarnished in places, but polished until it gleams. Eight branches waiting for candles, plus the one for the shamash, the candle used to light all the others, taller in the middle.

Josie and Philippe are already there, Josie explaining the menorah to him in a serious voice. ‘See, tonight we only light one candle. Tomorrow night, two. And it keeps going until all eight are lit. The shamash lights the others–that’s its job. Papa always said the shamash was taking care of the other candles, making sure they could shine.’

Philippe nods solemnly. ‘That’s nice. The shamash is brave.’

‘Very brave,’ Josie agrees.

Dancer approaches. ‘It’s time,’ she says softly. ‘We light the menorah before we eat.’

From a drawer she takes out a box of white candles. She places one candle in the shamash holder, one in the furthest-right branch. Then she steps back.

‘Josie,’ she says, ‘would you do us the honour?’

Josie stands. In the dim light she looks even smaller than usual, a child playing at adult rituals. But her face is serious, composed. She approaches the menorah, and Dancer hands her a match.

'Do you remember the blessing?' she asks gently.

'I think so. Papa always said it in Hebrew first, then told us what it meant.'

'Then say it however you remember it.'

Josie strikes the match. The flame catches, bright in the darkness. She touches it to the wick of the shamash, and the candle blooms with light.

Then, holding the candle carefully, she begins to speak. Her voice is clear, surprisingly strong. The Hebrew words come haltingly at first, then more confidently, as if her father is whispering them to her across time and distance.

'*Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha'olam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Hanukkah*.' With the final words, she uses the shamash to light the other candle. The flame wavers, then steadies. Two small lights in the darkness.

She pauses, translates. 'Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to kindle the Hanukkah light.'

She hesitates, then recites two other prayers, for the miracle of light, for life and for her family's survival, with each word her voice gaining in confidence and volume.

Josie sets the shamash back in its place. She stands there, staring at the two flames: the helper and the helped. Her lips move silently. Andrée realizes she's praying or talking to someone who isn't there. To her father, perhaps. Or her mother. Or both.

Then the tears come. Silent at first, just streaming down her face. Then her shoulders shake, and a sob breaks free.

Andrée is there instantly, kneeling beside her, pulling her close. 'I know, Josie. I know.'

‘Papa’s supposed to do it,’ she chokes out. ‘Papa always did it. He wore his good jacket, and he smiled a lot, and he made it special. And now he’s gone and Maman’s gone and Léon’s gone and I’m doing it without them.’

‘I know it’s not right,’ Andrée says fiercely. ‘None of this is right. But your Papa would be so proud of you right now. So proud. You remembered the blessing. You lit the candle. You’re keeping the tradition alive. That’s what he would want.’

Dancer is crying too now, and Tina, and even Louis must look away, his fists clenched. Philippe stands uncertain, then moves to stand beside Josie, slips his small hand into hers.

‘My Papa would be proud too,’ he says. ‘Maman says he’s watching from wherever he is. Maybe your Papa is watching too. Perhaps they’re together, watching us.’

Josie looks down at him, wipes her eyes. ‘Perhaps they are.’

They stand together, all of them, watching the candles burn. Two small flames against the darkness of occupation, of loss, of war. But flames, nonetheless. Light that refuses to be extinguished.

‘There’s a song,’ Josie says after a while, her voice still thick with tears. ‘“Ma’oz Tzur” – Papa used to sing it.. It’s about being strong, about God protecting us. I don’t remember all the words, but I remember the tune.’

She begins to hum, tentative at first. Dancer recognizes it and joins in, her voice blending with Josie’s. The melody is ancient, mournful and hopeful at the same time. Philippe hums along, off-key but earnest.

Andrée doesn’t know the song, but she hums anyway, finding harmonies where she can. Beside her, Louis and Tina do the same. Six voices in a small Paris apartment, singing an old Jewish song while the Nazis patrol the streets below. It’s defiance. It’s remembrance. It’s love.

After the song, it is time to eat. Dancer serves the food with pride: a small amount of tender brisket that falls apart on the tongue, roasted vegetables that taste like days gone by. Louis pours wine for the adults, water for the children. They talk quietly, carefully avoiding dangerous topics. No talk of arrests, of deportations, of resistance. Tonight is for light, for memory, for defiance of a different kind.

When the meal is finished, when the plates are cleared away, Dancer serves the *sufganiyot*, dusted with sugar, oozing jam. They eat them slowly, reverently, tasting sweetness in a world gone bitter.

'My Papa always said Hanukkah is about miracles,' Josie says, licking sugar from her fingers. 'About how sometimes, when everything seems darkest, a little bit of light can last much longer than it should. Back in the time of the Temple, the oil that should have burned for one day, burned for eight.'

'And what do you think?' Dancer asks. 'Do you believe in miracles?'

Josie considers this. Looks around the room at Andrée, at Louis and Tina, at Dancer and Philippe, at the candles still burning bright.

'I think I do,' she says quietly. 'I think maybe miracles are just people being kind when they don't have to be. People being brave when it's easier to hide. People sharing what little they have. People lighting candles when it's dark.'

Andrée's throat tightens. This child. This wise, brave, beautiful child.

'Then we're surrounded by miracles,' Louis says gruffly.

They stay until the candles burn low, until Philippe starts yawning, until the night deepens outside and curfew looms. They mustn't take any risks. They bundle into their coats, embrace Dancer and Philippe, promise to see each other again soon.

At the door, Dancer pulls Josie aside. 'Thank you,' she says. 'For tonight. For helping Philippe remember. For helping me remember.'

‘Thank you for making the *sufganiyot*,’ Josie says seriously. ‘Papa would have said they were perfect.’

‘Next year,’ Dancer says, ‘we’ll make them together. You and me and Philippe. We’ll make enough for everyone.’

‘Next year,’ Josie echoes. As if next year is certain. As if they’ll all still be here, still be safe, still be free to light candles and eat jam doughnuts and sing old songs.

On the walk home, Josie is quiet again, but a different kind of quiet. Not sad, but thoughtful. She holds Andrée’s hand on one side, Tina’s on the other, and Louis walks ahead, watching the streets, keeping them safe.

‘Tata Andrée?’ Josie says as they near their building.

‘Yes, Josie?’

‘Do you think Papa saw me? Do you think he knows I lit the candles?’

Andrée stops, crouches so they’re eye to eye.

‘I think your Papa knows everything you do. Every note you play on the piano. Every lesson you learn at school. Every moment you’re brave. He knows, Josie. And he’s proud. So proud.’

Josie nods, satisfied with this answer. ‘Good. I wanted him to know I didn’t forget. I’ll never forget.’

‘Never,’ Andrée agrees.

They climb the stairs to their apartment. Inside, it’s cold and dark. Louis lights the lamps while Tina stokes the stove, adding two precious pieces of coke to the dying embers. Josie goes straight to the piano, doesn’t ask permission, just sits and begins to play.

Not ‘Clair de Lune’ this time. Something else. Something Andrée doesn’t recognize at first. Then she realizes: it’s the tune from tonight., ‘Ma’oz Tzur’. Josie is picking it out on the keys, finding the notes, making the melody her own.

Andrée stands in the doorway, watching. This child who has lost everything but refuses to be broken. This child who lights candles in the darkness and plays songs of hope on a piano that doesn't belong to her but somehow does.

Louis appears beside her. 'She's remarkable,' he says quietly.

'Yes,' Andrée says. 'Yes, she is.'

'We're going to keep her safe, you know. Whatever it takes. However long this war lasts. She's ours for now.'

'I know, Papa. I know.'

The piano music continues, filling the apartment with an old Jewish melody, with memory, with defiance, with love. Outside, the night is cold and dark and dangerous. But inside, there is light. There is music. There is family.

And that, Andrée thinks, is its own kind of miracle.

ACT II

Resistance

1943–1944

Chapter Eleven

The year 1943 arrives with no fanfare or celebration. No words of hope for the coming year or what lies ahead for the Levallois family residing at 135 rue Blomet, Montparnasse.

Mid-January brings news that spreads through the Resistance network like poison through blood. Colonel Pallas calls an emergency meeting. Not a Thursday this time and not at the Levallois's apartment, but in their bookshop. *Now. Today. Come immediately*, says the note brought up by Maurice before the day has even begun.

Louis and Tina leave while Josie is still gathering her books for school. Andrée grows impatient.

'Come on, Josie, it's time to go.'

Josie appears at last – why has she chosen today of all days to drag her feet? She seems to take a lifetime to put on her coat, hat and gloves.

Josie is forced to walk quickly to keep up as they cross the park, the street on the other side and enter the school grounds. Mothers and daughters hug and kiss goodbye. Andrée takes Josie's face in her hands, smiles, and kisses her lovingly on each cheek.

'Andrée. Hello. How are you?'

Andrée turns to see Monique's mother quickly kiss her daughter goodbye and head towards her. She doesn't have time to chat today. She takes a breath. Puts on a warm smile.

'Stéphanie, hello. I'm fine, thank you. And you?'

Stéphanie comes closer to Andrée, too close.

'I'm surviving, like all of us. Josie seems settled and doing well. She's all Monique talks about when she comes home each day.'

'Stéphanie, I can't tell you how much Monique's friendship means to Josie, and to me and my parents. You're both making a very difficult situation easier to bear.'

Other mothers call out greetings to Stéphanie, some to Andrée. The girls are heading inside, to class, to get out of the cold. Stéphanie stays standing in the playground, forcing Andrée to stay with her. It becomes clear she has something else to say.

'What you and your parents have done – giving Josie a home, a safe place to see out this terrible war – is so admirable.'

'Thank you. It's the least we can do.'

'I'd like to think that if the situation arose, I'd do the same,' Stéphanie says, not requiring a response. 'You can trust me, Andrée.'

Andrée reaches out and touches Stéphanie's arm. 'Thank you. You have no idea how much that means to me.'

Andrée arrives at the bookshop a few moments later to find the sign turned to closed. Louis stands at the window, watching the street. Tina sits at the desk, her hands folded, her face pale.

'What's happened?' Andrée asks.

'We don't know yet. Colonel Pallas sent word through René. All network leaders, immediately.' Louis's jaw is tight. 'Whatever it is, it's bad.'

They know what he means: for them to be called together in broad daylight is unprecedented. There must be urgent information to impart.

Louis indicates the door to the tiny back room behind the counter. It is closed. Andrée understands. The courier bringing the news is already waiting for them all to arrive.

The others arrive within the hour. Cat, casual as always but with tension in his shoulders. He enters the shop and browses the bookshelves, nodding coolly at the Levallois family, who stand behind the counter. Agent follows quickly behind, his face grave. Félix, for once not smiling. Dancer slips in last, breathless; her coat dusted with snow. Gypsy is the

only one not in attendance, it is too close to the lunch hour, her absence at Le Fleuron would be conspicuous. Louis will get a message to her once he hears the news.

Louis locks the door, pulls the blinds. They gather in the back room, between the high shelves, immersed in the familiar and comforting smell of old paper and dusty book jackets. Colonel Pallas's courier, a thin woman Andrée doesn't recognize, speaks in a low, urgent voice.

'The Germans have authorized the formation of a French paramilitary force, the French Militia.'

The words hang in the air. Andrée feels them settle, heavy and cold.

'French,' Cat echoes flatly. 'They're forming a *French* force to hunt us.'

'That is correct. Joseph Darnand, a decorated war veteran, a fascist, and loyal to Vichy and the Germans, will lead it. The Militia will have full police powers. They can arrest, interrogate, execute. They'll be hunting Resistance fighters, Jews, anyone who opposes the regime.'

'How many?' Louis asks.

'Thousands, eventually. They're recruiting now. Offering good pay, better rations, authority. They'll get volunteers, there's no doubt about it. Frenchmen who believe in the collaboration. Frenchmen who want power. Frenchmen who are simply desperate and hungry.'

Félix swears under his breath. 'The French hunting the French. It's obscene.'

'It's worse than obscene,' Dancer says, her voice sharp. 'It's effective. The Germans don't speak French like we do. They don't know Paris like we do. They can't tell who's lying, who's hiding something. But this Militia? They're French. They know the language, the neighbourhoods, the people. They'll know when someone's story doesn't add up. They'll know where to look.'

Andrée's stomach turns. She thinks of Josie and of the neighbours who watch, who wonder, who might report the recent appearance of a young girl in the Levallois household. She thinks of Mme Charbonnier, who was so rude in the bookshop, and whom Andrée imagines watching her and Josie come and go from the school. Of Maurice Dupont the concierge, who asks no questions, but who has witnessed not only their growing household, but also the weekly comings and goings of their 'guests'.

'There's more,' the courier adds. 'The Militia will work closely with the Gestapo. They'll have access to German intelligence, German resources. And they'll be motivated. Many of them are ideologues. They truly believe in fascism, in collaboration. They won't be bribed. They won't look the other way.'

'When do they start operations?' Agent asks.

'They already have. In the south, in Vichy territory. They're establishing themselves there first, then they'll spread north. By spring, they'll be operating in Paris.'

Silence. Each of them calculating, thinking through the implications, adjusting their understanding of the danger they face.

'How will we identify them?' Cat asks. 'Do they wear uniforms?'

'Yes. Dark blue uniforms. Berets. Insignia. They want to be visible, to intimidate. But not all of them will be in uniform all the time. Some will work in plain clothes, infiltrating Resistance networks, posing as sympathizers.'

'Infiltrators,' Tina says quietly. 'We'll have to suspect everyone.'

'We already suspect everyone,' Louis says. 'Now we'll have to be even more careful. No new members without extensive vetting. No meetings in public places. No exceptions to security protocols.'

The courier nods. ‘Colonel Pallas is implementing new procedures across all networks. Compartmentalization. Cell structure. Limited contact between groups. If one cell is compromised, it can’t bring down any others.’

‘What about people we’re hiding?’ Andrée hears herself ask. ‘Jews. Children. Will the Militia hunt them too?’

The courier’s face is sympathetic. ‘I’m afraid so. The Militia is virulently antisemitic. They’ll be zealous in hunting Jews, perhaps more so than the Germans. They see it as cleansing France.’

Andrée’s hands ball into fists. Josie. They’re talking about hunting Josie. Hunting thousands like her.

‘We will protect them,’ Louis says firmly. ‘Whatever it takes. The Militia doesn’t change that. It just means we must be smarter, more careful.’

‘There’s one more thing,’ the courier says. ‘The Militia uses torture. Extensively. They’ve set up interrogation centres. If they catch any of you, they won’t just arrest you. They’ll torture you for information. Names, addresses, meeting places. Everything.’

The room is silent. Everyone knows what this means. If caught, they won’t just die. They’ll suffer. And they might break. Might give up others.

The courier shakes her head. ‘Continue to rely on what you’ve always relied on: silence, courage and luck.’

She stands. ‘Colonel Pallas wanted you to know immediately. The Militia is the gravest threat we’ve faced yet. Not because they’re more brutal than the Germans, but because they’re French. They know us. They are us, but corrupted. Be careful. Trust no one you haven’t known for years. And remember: if you’re caught, hold out as long as you can. Even if you crack in the end, every hour you stay silent gives others an extra hour to escape.’

She leaves first, disappearing into the grey, foreboding afternoon.

For a long moment, no one speaks. Félix breaks the silence.

'French hunting French. God help us all.'

'God isn't helping,' Dancer says bitterly. 'We're on our own. We've always been on our own.'

'No,' Tina says, her voice stronger than Andrée has heard it in weeks. 'We have each other. That's something. That's everything.'

They begin to discuss practicalities. New meeting protocols. Perhaps they should change the time of their meeting each week. Afternoon one week, morning the next. This is rejected. Thursday afternoons provide the flimsy cover of Andrée's piano lessons, as people come and go from the apartment. They are dependent on Maurice continuing to turn a blind eye to the number of visitors arriving at the flat. It is worth the risk. Emergency escape routes. How to recognize infiltrators, extra precautions. It's all necessary, all rational, of course, but Andrée feels an undercurrent of fear, feels it spreading throughout Paris and beyond. The Germans were the enemy. They were foreign. Other. Easy to hate. But the Militia? They're countrymen. They're neighbours, family, friends. The enemy isn't just at the gates any more. The enemy is inside the walls.

The meeting breaks up. Cat leaves first, then Agent, then Félix. Dancer lingers, pulls Andrée aside. She speaks quietly.

'Josie – you need to prepare her. If the Militia come, if there's a raid, she needs to know what to do.'

'She's eleven years old.'

'She still needs to know where to hide, how to stay silent. Think, Andrée, what will she say if she's caught?' Dancer's eyes are hard. 'We know what these people can do. Better she's prepared than innocent. I'm only thinking of Josie and what I intend to say to Philippe.'

Andrée nods, her throat tight. 'You're right. I'll talk to her.'

‘Good.’ Dancer touches her arm. ‘We’re all at greater risk now. Take care of yourself. Take care of her. And if it comes to it, if you are forced to choose between saving her and saving yourself –’

‘I’ll save her, of course.’

‘I know you will. Just making sure you know it too.’ Dancer pulls her coat tighter. ‘The war just got harder. Stay sharp.’

When everyone is gone, Andrée turns the sign to open. Almost immediately, the bell above the door tinkles. Mme Charbonnier steps inside.

‘So, you are open. I walked past a little while ago and the closed sign was up, the blinds down. But then I saw people leaving.’

A smirk, a hint of menace.

‘Is there something I can help you with, madame?’ Andrée asks, forcing a polite smile.

‘No, not really. I was just passing and surprised to see you shut at this hour. I was worried that something had happened to you or your parents, or to that dear little girl living with you.’

Fearing the two women in his life might not be able to contain the anger welling inside them, Louis steps forward and addresses Mme Charbonnier, hoping she can’t sense his rage.

‘As you can see, we are all fine. Thank you for your concern.’

‘Oh, well, if there is nothing to worry about, I’ll be on my way.’

‘Let me get the door for you.’ Louis beats her to it, holding it open just enough for her to squeeze through. ‘Good day, madame.’

They set about their tasks in silence. For a long time no one speaks, until Louis tries to say something reassuring.

‘We’ve survived the Germans for over two years. We’ll survive the Militia too.’

‘Will we?’ Tina asks. ‘The Germans are occupiers. They’re brutal, but they’re following orders, doing their job. The Militia? They’re believers. Fanatics. They’ll be worse.’

‘Then we’ll be more careful. Cleverer. More determined.’ Louis looks at them both. ‘What we’re doing matters. Hiding Josie matters. Every false paper we make, every piece of intelligence we pass, every life we save, it all matters. The Militia doesn’t change that.’

‘We need a plan for her,’ Tina says. ‘What does she do if they come for us and she escapes? Where would she go?’

Andrée thinks for a moment. ‘I think the only possibility is her friend Monique. Her mother knows the story and is on our side. I’ll talk to her. And I’ll have a word with Marie-Thérèse. Warn her of Mme Charbonnier, make sure her daughter doesn’t cause any trouble for Josie. She mentioned rather pointedly that they’re at school together.’

Andrée heads to the school and is welcomed into Marie-Thérèse’s office, the door firmly closed behind them. She tells the headmistress that Mme Charbonnier has commented on the fact that they have Josie living with them.

Marie-Thérèse holds up her hand, silencing Andrée.

‘Every girl in my school will be kept safe, Andrée. Let’s leave it at that.’

Her voice is calm, but her defiance and determination are clear. The two women clasp hands.

Andrée walks home through streets that suddenly feel more dangerous. Every face could be Militia. Every glance could be surveillance. The war has come closer, has become more personal.

The enemy wears a French face now.

* * *

Later that evening, Josie is at the piano, practising scales. Andrée stands in the doorway, watching. This Jewish child they're hiding, the Militia will hunt her. Will torture Andrée for information about her and perhaps about anything else she knows. Will kill them all if they're caught.

Josie looks up, smiles. 'Tata Andrée, listen to this! I've been working on a piece by Bach. It's hard, but I think I'm getting it.'

Andrée thinks back to only last week, when she had handed one of her precious music books to Josie and watched as Josie read the cover.

'J. S. Bach. Notebook for Anna Magdalena Bach.'

Andrée had explained how Anna was Bach's wife and he gave her two handwritten books of his music. What she now holds is a copy of one of them.

Opening the book, Josie had clutched it to her chest. 'I'll treasure it always, and when I can, I will play for you.'

She plays. The music fills the apartment, sweet and clear. Andrée closes her eyes; lets it wash over her. Outside, a Militia might form, but inside, there's music. There's this child, playing Bach.

For now. That's all they have. This moment. This day. This note, and the next, and the next.

It will have to be enough.

Chapter Twelve

ALL ABLE-BODIED FRENCH MEN ARE TO REPORT TO THEIR LOCAL POLICE STATION TO BE TRANSPORTED TO WORK IN GERMANY. THOSE NOT COMPLYING WILL BE ARRESTED.

Kommentiert [TB1]: TYPESETTER - Please set as extract

Barely a month has passed since they learned of the French Militia. Now blue-uniformed men walk the streets of Paris, carrying sidearms and rifles. Young men emboldened by power and weapons, who threaten all they pass. Men. Women. Children. With no training, their initiation into violence starts with intimidation and bullying. Snatching a bag from an elderly woman who dares to look them in the eyes. Waving their pistols in the faces of children, better scare them now to ensure compliance later.

The young men of Paris now have a choice. Present themselves and be conscripted to work in the ammunition factories in Germany, or join the criminals, thugs and zealots of the Militia and be judge, jury and executioner to their fellow Parisians.

* * *

The knock on the door silences the Thursday-afternoon meeting. Andrée glances at her watch.

'It's all right, it will be Josie home from school. I'll let her in.'

The group is gathered in the tiny kitchen. It seems best this way: if there's a knock on the door, they can leave down the backstairs. As Andrée leaves the room, Agent whispers to Louis, 'Why is she knocking when she lives here?'

'Since the Militia came to town, we've asked her to knock whenever she comes home. If there's no answer, she is to go back to the park and wait there for one of us to collect her.'

'You're worried about . . . ?' Félix asks.

'Someone else waiting behind the door for her.'

‘I’m sorry, Louis, but that doesn’t sound like a well-thought-out plan at all. How long do you expect her to stay in the park if something has happened to you?’ Dancer says.

‘We know. We know. Andrée is trying to come up with a better arrangement,’ Tina tells them. ‘For now, it’s the best we can do.’

Andrée returns to the kitchen. They hear Josie head to her room, to wait.

‘Let’s finish up – Monique will be here for her lesson soon,’ Andrée says.

‘We’ve overrun today. So much to plan,’ Louis says. ‘Now we all know what we’re doing for the coming week, the focus for all of us being to identify men whom we know can be trusted to accept our help in keeping them safe, both from the Germans and the Militia. Agent, Félix, you have the Sorbonne; Cat, you have your circle of friends and your family’s contacts. Dancer, I know you want to help, but we can’t risk having you approach men, unless you have known them for a long time and are absolutely confident where their loyalties lie. Andrée is meeting with Doctor René tomorrow to see if he can increase his output of documents, and by how much. Remember, we are not alone – every network in Paris is doing the same thing.’

Everyone rises, the women kiss each other, the men kiss the women, shake hands with each other. These simple gestures are the only outward signs of the profound respect and trust they have for each other.

‘I’ll go down the backstairs,’ Félix says, heading to the discreet door in the corner of the kitchen, the maid’s entrance of old.

‘I’ll follow you in a couple of minutes,’ Agent says.

‘Andrée, may I have a word?’ Cat asks.

‘I’ll see Dancer out the front door,’ Tina says.

‘I’ll check on Josie,’ Louis says, following Tina out of the kitchen.

Andrée and Cat stand, slightly awkward now, in the small room.

‘I’ve got an invitation to Le Bal Blomet. Charles Trenet is performing there. I was wondering if you would like to come with me. I mean, with your love of music, I thought you of all people would appreciate hearing him.’

‘Charles Trenet? Oh yes, I’d love to come.’

‘He’s playing just one night, next Wednesday. My father knows the owner of Le Bal Blomet, who offered him a table, but my mother doesn’t want to go, so he’s given it to me.’

Andrée looks away into the distance, thinking of another time, another place.

‘Is everything OK?’ Cat asks her.

A warm smile brightens Andrée’s face. ‘I was remembering the last time I was at Le Bal Blomet. Josephine Baker held us spellbound the entire evening.’

‘She’s refused to sing in Paris under occupation.’

‘Yes. Who can blame her? She knows the room will be full of Germans, and she won’t sing for them,’ Andrée says.

‘Unlike Charles Trenet.’

‘Oh, I don’t have a problem with him doing whatever he must to survive. It’s no more than what we are all doing.’

Cat nods and sighs.

‘You’re right, of course. I’ll come by around eight o’clock. I hope M. Trenet, and perhaps my company, will put that smile I just saw, briefly, back on your face.’

‘Thank you, I’ll be ready. Now, am I seeing you to the front door or the back door?’

‘Cat always sneaks out the back way.’ He smiles at her.

As the back door shuts behind Cat, there is a quiet knock on the front door.

‘That will be Monique, I’ll get it,’ Andrée calls out.

She opens the door to Monique and her mother as Josie runs from her room. The two girls embrace.

‘Thanks, Andrée, I’ll pick her up in an hour,’ Stéphanie, says, turning to leave.

‘A moment.’ Andrée moves close to Stéphanie and speaks softly. ‘I was wondering if I could see you in the next day or two? There’s something I’d like to talk to you about.’

Stéphanie looks around Andrée to the two girls making their way to the piano. ‘I take it this has nothing to do with Monique’s progress on the piano?’

‘No.’

‘How about tomorrow morning while the girls are at school? I can come here, or you are welcome to come to me.’

‘Thank you. I’ll see you at your apartment around nine.’

Stéphanie takes Andrée’s hand and squeezes it.

Their apartment is two streets away. Andrée has been here once before, dropping Monique off when Stéphanie wasn’t able to collect her. But this morning, climbing the stairs, Andrée feels the weight of what she’s about to ask.

Stéphanie answers on the first knock. ‘Come in. I’ve made real coffee – just don’t ask where I got it.’

The apartment is warm, neat, filled with morning light. They sit at the small dining table, cups between them. Stéphanie waits, doesn’t push, gives Andrée time to find the words.

‘I want to ask you something,’ Andrée begins. ‘Something difficult.’

‘Go on.’

‘If something happens to me . . . to my parents . . . If we’re arrested, or worse . . . I need to know that Josie will have a safe place to turn to. That someone will take care of her.’

She looks up, meets Stéphanie’s eyes. ‘Would you and your husband take her? Would you keep her hidden, keep her safe?’

Stéphanie sets down her cup. Her face is grave. ‘You know what you’re asking. If they discovered I was hiding a Jewish child . . .’

‘I know. I know exactly what I’m asking. And I have no right to ask it. But I don’t know who else to turn to. You know her. Monique loves her. She trusts you all.’

Andrée’s voice cracks. ‘I can’t bear the thought of her being alone. Of her being taken.’

Stéphanie is quiet for a long moment. Andrée watches emotions cross her face: fear, calculation, compassion. Finally, she speaks.

‘Yes.’

‘Yes?’

‘Yes, we’ll take her. If it comes to that, if you’re arrested, if you can’t care for her any more, we’ll take Josie. we’ll keep her as safe as we can. We’ll treat her as our own.’

She reaches across the table, takes Andrée’s hands. ‘But you have to promise me something in return.’

‘Anything.’

‘You must survive. You and your parents. You must come back for her. Because Monique, my husabnd and I, we can hide her, we can feed her, we can keep her safe. But we can’t replace you. If her own family doesn’t come back, she will need you. We can’t be her family. You are. So, you stay alive, Andrée. You stay alive and you come back.’

Andrée’s eyes burn with tears. ‘I’ll try. I promise I’ll try.’

‘Good. Now, practical matters – if something happens, how will I know? How will Josie get to me?’

‘I’ll tell Josie that if we’re arrested during the day when she’s at school, she is to come to you. I’ll show her how to be discreet, how to avoid being followed from our building, and to enter your building only when she is sure she is alone.’

‘And if she’s home when they come?’

Andrée hesitates. ‘They came once before for her, and she got away and came to us. If she can’t get out of the apartment, she knows where there are hiding places. But if she can’t hide, if they find her . . .’ She can’t finish the sentence.

‘Then we pray they don’t.’ Stéphanie squeezes her hands. ‘We’ll take every precaution. We’ll be smart. We’ll be careful. And when this war is over, we’ll sit together and remember this morning. We’ll remember being afraid. And then we’ll laugh about it because we survived.’

‘I hope you’re right.’

‘I must be right. The alternative is unthinkable.’ She stands, pulls Andrée to her feet, embraces her.

‘Please stay safe, cher ami.’

Walking back down the stairs, Andrée feels lighter and heavier at once. Lighter because Josie has a safety net now, someone else who will protect her. Heavier because she had to ask, because the danger is real enough to need contingency plans.

If something happens. If they come. This child will have somewhere to go. Someone to care for her.

It’s not enough. But it’s something.

* * *

Andrée stands before her sparsely filled wardrobe, feeling absurd. She’s going to a nightclub. With a fellow Resistance operative. In the middle of an occupation. While hiding a Jewish child. While forging papers for men fleeing conscription. While risking arrest and torture every single day.

It’s ridiculous. And yet, she’s excited.

She chooses the blue dress, the one she loved wearing before the war. It still fits, though she’s thinner now. Everyone’s thinner now. She puts on lipstick – precious, hoarded –

and combs her hair. In the mirror, she looks almost like the person she was three years ago. Almost.

'You look beautiful,' Tina says from the doorway.

'I look nervous.'

'You look like a woman going out for an evening. There's nothing wrong with that. You're allowed to live, Andrée. Even now. Especially now.'

At eight o'clock precisely, Cat arrives. He's wearing a suit: elegant, expensive, the kind that marks him as aristocracy. His hair is combed back, his shoes polished. He looks as if he belongs in the best clubs in Paris.

'You look wonderful,' he says, and means it.

'You don't look so bad yourself.'

'Shall we?'

They walk through Paris, arm in arm, looking like any couple going out for the evening. German patrols pass them without a second glance. Why would they? Well-dressed, respectable, moving with confidence. Not the kind of people who hide Jews or forge documents or pass intelligence to London.

Le Bal Blomet is in Montparnasse, its façade modest but its reputation legendary. Before the war, it was where Paris came to be entertained. Now it's where Germans come to pretend they're cultured, to show they appreciate French artistry even as they crush French freedom.

Inside, it's warm, dimly lit, filled with cigarette smoke and expensive perfume. The tables are full. German officers in uniform, French collaborators in evening wear, a few brave souls who've come to hear Charles Trenet, regardless of who else will be there.

Cat leads Andrée to a table near the stage. Not front row, too visible, but close enough to see, to hear. A waiter appears immediately, takes their order. Wine. Real wine, not the swill most of Paris drinks now.

'Your father's connections?' Andrée asks, glancing around at the crowd.

'Something like that. The owner owes our family a favour. Several favours.' He leans closer. 'Don't worry. We're safe here. Just another couple enjoying an evening out.'

The lights dim. Conversations quiet. And then he's there.

Charles Trenet walks onto the stage and the room goes quiet. His reputation as a 'singing vagabond' arrives with him, his smile wide and infectious. Not yet thirty years of age, his brief stint in the army has done nothing to diminish his fresh-faced looks.

The band strikes up, its opening chords softening to silence as Trenet pulls the microphone close to his mouth and the band waits for its signal to join him. He pauses. Only when he knows he holds the room –

'BOOM!'

And the band joins in, the audience applaud. The night has begun.

He is not singing his signature song the way he recorded it; this is his version for a live audience. A version to wake them up. Show them the man behind the recordings and still photographs.

As the last note sounds, the room is thrown into darkness. The audience cheer wildly, stamp their feet and the dim lights return.

Between songs, Trenet speaks or rather croons to the few women in the room. He tells them of the special place Montparnasse has in his heart, a place he now calls home. How his love of jazz brought him here and how fortunate he was to meet the poet and Catholic mystic Max Jacob, who inspires his lyrics.

During the performance, Andrée becomes aware of Cat's hand resting near hers on the table. Not touching. Not quite. Just there. Present.

She shifts her own hand slightly. Their fingers brush. He doesn't pull away. Neither does she.

They sit like that, hands almost but not quite entwined, listening to Charles Trenet sing songs of love and loss and defiance. Around them, Germans applaud, thinking he's performing just for them.

When the performance ends, the room erupts in applause. Trenet bows, blows kisses, disappears backstage. The lights come up. The spell is broken.

'That was extraordinary,' Andrée says.

'He's extraordinary.' Cat stands, offers his hand. 'Shall we go? Or would you like to stay for another drink?'

'Let's walk. I need air.'

Outside, the night is cold and clear. Stars shining brighter than ever in the blackout sky. They walk without speaking at first, letting the music settle in their minds.

'Thank you,' Andrée says finally. 'For tonight. For . . . normality.'

'You don't have to thank me. I wanted to spend time with you. Not with my colleague. Not with another Resistance member. Just with you. Andrée.'

They stop walking. Face each other. The street is empty, quiet. Just them and the darkness and the possibility of something beyond war, beyond danger, beyond resistance.

'I know. I know we can't think about the future when we might not have one. But when this is over, when we survive – and we will survive – I want to take you out again. Properly. Without having to pretend. Without looking over our shoulders.'

'When this is over,' Andrée echoes. It seems impossible. Like believing in miracles.

‘When this is over,’ he repeats firmly. ‘Promise me you’ll remember. Promise me we’ll have that evening. Music and wine and no fear.’

‘I promise.’

He takes her hand properly now. Raises it to his lips. Kisses it gently, like they’re in a different century, a different world. ‘Then I’ll hold you to that.’

They walk on, hand in hand now, no longer pretending. Two people who choose danger every day but tonight have chosen each other, just for a moment, just for this walk home through occupied Paris.

At her building, they stop.

‘Goodnight, Andrée.’

‘Goodnight.’

She climbs the stairs, feeling brighter than she has in months. Inside the apartment, Tina and Louis are still awake, reading by lamplight. They look up when she enters.

‘How was it?’ Tina asks, smiling.

‘Perfect,’ Andrée says. ‘It was perfect.’

She doesn’t elaborate. Doesn’t need to. Some things are meant to be kept close, held private. A secret not of danger but of hope.

Lying in bed, Andrée thinks about Cat’s words. *When this is over*. As if it’s certain. As if they’ll survive. As if there’s a future waiting for them beyond occupation and fear and resistance.

She doesn’t let herself believe it completely. That way lies disappointment, heartbreak. But she allows herself this: a small hope. A possibility. A promise made under stars in occupied Paris that might, somehow, be kept.

Chapter Thirteen

'We think we've found a communication centre,' Louis tells the group gathered once again in the tiny kitchen. It's Thursday. Joséphine sits at the piano in the living room, and the sound of scales fills the apartment.

'I met with the Colonel yesterday and he has given me the name of the château to which he believes communications from Berlin to France are being routed, and from there to the U-boats operating in the Atlantic. He wants one of us to carry out a surveillance expedition. I think that someone should be Cat.'

Silence hangs in the air. Locating German communication centres has long been a priority for many of the Resistance networks.

'Why Cat?' Félix asks. 'Why not me?'

'Yes, Papa, why not Félix?' Andrée asks, avoiding eye contact with her father and with Cat. She cannot admit to herself, let alone to the others, why she does not want Cat going on such a dangerous mission.

'I know why,' Cat says quietly. 'I'm the bigger risk-taker. You all think I can be too careless at times and maybe you're right. Félix, on the other hand, is wiser, cautious, and ultimately more valuable to the network.'

Turning to look directly at Andrée he continues: 'If this château is the communication link between Berlin and the U-boats, then this is a crucial mission. I am the best person for it.'

Andrée cuts eye contact, hoping no one around the table sees the flush that flares on her cheeks. That's unlikely. Everyone in the room is a trained observer.

'Agent, Dancer, Tina, what do you think?' Louis asks. He doesn't need to ask Andrée. He knows what she thinks – she's just told the whole room.

‘Either one of them can carry out this mission. If I had to choose one – sorry, Félix – I agree it should be Cat,’ Agent replies.

‘I’m also sorry, Félix. But we need your old head on young shoulders here,’ Dancer says softly. She turns to Cat and continues. ‘Don’t think I’m saying you are more expendable. But you are the right man for this mission.’

‘Cat, please be careful. If this is a main communication and command centre, it’s going to be closely guarded, and there will be collaborators in the town too,’ Tina warns.

No one speaks for a moment. In the next room, the piano scales stop, as if Josie has registered the silence in the kitchen. After a pause, the notes strike up again, stronger now.

‘So, where is this château? What’s its name?’ Cat asks calmly. He wants to do this.

Andrée focuses on her hands, which are shaking slightly.

‘Château de Pignerolle,’ Louis tells them. ‘It’s in Saint-Barthélemy-d’Anjou, about three hundred kilometres away, towards Angers.’

‘I know it. I’ve passed through, visiting family in Nantes. I could say I’m heading there if I’m stopped,’ Cat says. ‘Plus, of course I’m the only one of us with a car.’

‘What do you know about the château ?’ Dancer asks.

Cat scratches his head, thinking. ‘Well, I think it was originally set up as an equestrian centre, but last I heard, the Polish government-in-exile had taken it over, after Poland was invaded. Stands to reason they are no longer there.’

‘And the Germans have now taken up residence,’ Tina adds.

‘When can you leave?’ Louis asks.

‘I’ll need a few days to acquire enough petrol to get me there and back. I have some contacts on the black market. And I’ll ask René to do me a permit.’

‘Do you think it will be a problem?’ Agent asks. ‘I might be able to help.’

‘I think my guys will come through, but thanks. I’ll get in touch if I need your help.’

Andrée sees Cat to the door. He smiles at her. ‘See you when I’m back,’ he says quietly.

She forces herself to look him in the eye.

‘Is that a promise?’

‘On my honour.’

They look at each other for a moment longer, and then he is gone.

* * *

Four days later, Cat’s car rumbles through the Loire countryside. The petrol cost him more than he wants to think about right now: fuel is incredibly scarce, as the Germans send it east for the war effort. Black market, extortionate, but necessary. His cover story is simple: visiting family in Nantes. Plausible. Boring. The kind of story that won’t invite questions. All should be well. Or so he hopes.

He passes through two German checkpoints without incident. His papers are impeccable, thanks to René, and his aristocratic bearing does the rest. The soldiers barely glance at him. Rich Frenchman, collaborator class, no threat.

Saint-Barthélemy-d’Anjou appears in the late afternoon, a small town dominated by the château on its hill. Even from a distance, Cat can see it is heavily fortified. Guard posts. Barbed wire. Swastika flags snapping in the wind. This isn’t just a communication centre. This is something significant.

He parks in the town square, and climbs out of his car, adopting the expression of a man with legitimate business. A café sits on the corner, its windows grimy, its interior dim. Perfect.

Inside, he orders coffee, if it can be called that, and positions himself by the window. The château is visible from here, perched above the town like a watchful eye. He counts guard rotations, notes vehicle movements, memorizes faces.

‘You’re not from here.’ The voice comes from behind him. An old man, weathered, suspicious.

Cat turns, smiles easily. ‘Just passing through. On my way to Nantes to visit family. Thought I’d stop, stretch my legs. Beautiful town you have here.’

‘Was beautiful. Before *they* came.’ The old man spits the words. ‘Before they took the château, filled it with their machines and their soldiers.’

‘The château? I remember it as an equestrian centre years ago. What are they doing there now?’

The old man leans closer, voice dropping. ‘Communications. Radio equipment. Trucks coming and going at all hours. And officers. High-ranking ones. Someone said their uniforms were those of U-boat officers, but you don’t see any ocean down the street, do you? Something big is happening up there.’

‘Interesting,’ Cat murmurs, filing this away. ‘Do they bother the town much?’

‘Some. Requisitions, mostly. Food, wine, whatever they want. And there’s Bertrand.’ The old man’s face darkens. ‘Local boy. Joined the Militia. Now he struts around like he owns the place, reporting on neighbours, arresting anyone he doesn’t like. He’s a filthy traitor.’

A warning. Cat files this away too. ‘Sounds unpleasant. I’ll be on my way soon. Don’t want any trouble.’

He leaves the café as dusk falls, walks the perimeter of the town, getting closer to the château. There’s a service road for delivery trucks, with fewer guards at this entrance. Perhaps he can get in this way too.

Returning to his car, he finds the town’s only inn and takes a room for the night. The proprietor is nervous, asks too many questions, but Cat is charming, spinning his cover story once again, adding details about his family in Nantes. He is going to help his elderly

relatives, but now it's curfew and he has no choice but to spend the night. Boring yet believable. Eventually the man relaxes.

'You'll want to stay inside tonight,' the proprietor warns. 'Curfew is strict here. The Militia patrol, and they're not gentle with anyone they find on the streets.'

'I appreciate the warning.'

Cat has no intention of staying inside.

At midnight, he slips from his room. He is dressed in black, a small flashlight in his pocket. The service road beckons. He needs to get close enough to count the aerials, identify the equipment and anything else that might be useful.

Cat slips through shadows, keeping to the cover of the trees. The château looms above, lit from within. He can hear generators humming, see the silhouettes of guards on patrol.

Closer. Just a bit closer. There, a ground-floor window, partially open, for ventilation no doubt. He has a clear view inside. Radio equipment. Maps on the walls. Officers bent over documents.

He's counting aerials, six, seven, eight visible from this angle, but he reckons there will be more on the other side of the roof. That's when he hears footsteps. Heavy boots on gravel. Coming ever closer.

Cat freezes, presses himself against the château wall. It's a patrol. Two soldiers, rifles slung over shoulders, talking in low voices. German. They're heading straight for him.

No time to run now. They'd hear him in any case. See him. He has just seconds to decide. He spots a door recessed in shadow. He tries the handle. Locked. Of course it's locked.

The footsteps draw closer. Ten metres. Five.

Cat does the only thing he can. He steps out of the shadows, straightens his jacket, adopts an expression of irritation. When the soldiers round the corner, they find him standing there, looking annoyed.

'Excuse me,' he says in perfect German, his accent aristocratic, bored. 'I seem to have gone the wrong way. I'm looking for the east entrance. I have a meeting with Oberst Richter.'

The soldiers stop, lower their rifles slightly. One of them, the older one, squints at him. 'Who are you? What are you doing here at this hour?'

'Frédéric Garlon. I'm with the telecommunications advisory committee from Paris. The Oberst requested my presence to consult on the new relay system.' He says this with perfect confidence, as if it's obvious, as if they should know this already.

The younger soldier looks uncertain but accepting. The older one is more sceptical. 'Papers.'

Cat reaches slowly into his jacket – no sudden movements – and produces his identity card. The soldier examines it by torchlight. The forgery is excellent, but will it hold up to scrutiny?

'This says you're from Paris. Tell us exactly why you're here.'

'I'm here because your communications equipment keeps failing, and the Oberst is tired of excuses. So here I am, at midnight, trying to find the east entrance to inspect the relay station before tomorrow's official meeting. If you'd prefer, I can report to the Oberst that his own guards prevented me from doing my job . . .' He lets the threat hang in the air.

The soldiers exchange glances. Authority. Threats of disciplinary action. It's a gamble, but it's the right gamble. The older soldier hands back the papers.

'East entrance is that way.' He points. 'Around the building, past the motor pool. You'll need to check in at the guard post.'

‘Thank you. Carry on.’ Cat nods dismissively and walks in the direction indicated, heart pounding but face impassive. Behind him, he hears the soldiers resume their patrol, grumbling about French technicians and late-night inspections.

He walks until he’s out of sight, then melts back into the shadows. That was too close. Far too close. But he has what he needs now, confirmation that this is a major communications hub, a rough count of equipment, and the layout of the grounds.

He’s about to retreat back to the trees when he sees it: a truck, parked behind the motor pool. The back doors are open, revealing piles of crates. And on those crates, stencilled markings. He moves closer, squinting in the darkness. Radio equipment. New models. And documents, he can see folders, files, papers stacked in boxes.

This is too good to pass up. If he can get just one of those files, one set of documents.

He scans the area. He’s alone for the moment. They’re lazy here, he muses, relying on the perimeter security. He climbs into the truck, reaches for the nearest box.

‘What the hell are you doing?’

The voice is French. Cat spins around. A young man stands there, perhaps twenty, wearing the new dark-blue Militia uniform. What was the name the old man mentioned? Bertrand? Maybe this is him.

‘I asked you a question. What are you doing in that vehicle?’

Cat’s mind races. The German story won’t work on a Frenchman. He needs something else, something fast. He steps down from the truck, hands visible, non-threatening.

‘Checking inventory. I’m with the supply coordination office from Paris. These shipments keep arriving with missing items, and I’m here to verify . . .’

‘Bullshit.’ The young man’s hand goes to his pistol. ‘I know everyone who works here. I’ve never seen you. And no one checks inventory at midnight.’

‘Look, I just arrived this evening. Check with the Oberst . . .’

‘Oh, I will. Right after I arrest you for trespassing and attempted theft. The Germans will be very interested in you, I think.’ He pulls his pistol, aims it at Cat’s chest. ‘On your knees. Hands behind your head.’

Cat calculates the distance between them. The young man is clearly inexperienced, he’s holding the weapon all wrong, too tight, his finger already on the trigger. One wrong move and it could discharge. But if Cat doesn’t move, he’ll be arrested, interrogated, tortured. Probably shot.

‘I said, on your knees!’

Cat starts to kneel, lowering himself slowly. Then, in one fluid motion, he pivots, sweeps his leg wide, connects with the young man’s knee. Bertrand goes down hard, the pistol fires, deafening in the night, the bullet goes wide, ricochets off the truck.

Cat is on him in a second, wrenching the pistol away and using it to strike the young man across the temple. Not hard enough to kill, but enough to knock him unconscious.

The shouting starts up immediately. The gunshot has alerted the guards. Cat hears boots thumping towards him, voices growing ever closer. He grabs the nearest two files from the truck, no time to look at them, and runs.

Through the motor pool, past various outbuildings, towards the perimeter fence. Behind him, searchlights flare to life, sweeping the grounds. Sirens begin to wail. The entire château is waking up, angry and alert.

Cat reaches the fence, scrambles over, barbed wire ripping into his jacket. He snags his hand, draws blood, but he doesn’t stop. He drops to the other side and keeps on running.

Now under cover of the trees, he can hear dogs. He can’t stop.

He runs for twenty minutes, maybe more, until his lungs burn and his legs shake. Somehow he manages to hang on to the heavy files he’s taken. At last he comes to a stream,

where he wades into the freezing water. He follows it downstream, hoping to break his scent trail. He prays the dogs will lose him now.

When he finally stops, chest burning, hands bleeding, he flicks on his torch and inspects the documents he grabbed. Two files. One marked 'Funkverkehr Atlantik' – Atlantic Radio Traffic. The other, 'U-Boot Kommunikation' – U-boat Communication.

Colonel Pallas is going to be very, very interested in these.

He makes it back to town as dawn breaks, retrieves his car, drives away before anyone can connect him to the intruder at the château. The checkpoints on the way back are more thorough. News of the break-in has spread, but his papers hold. His aristocratic demeanour holds. And crucially, no one searches the car where the files are hidden in a compartment under the driver's seat.

Arriving back in Paris, he slides the files under a floorboard before collapsing on his bed and sleeping a full twelve hours.

* * *

Two days later, Cat limps into the Thursday meeting. His hand is bandaged; he told a doctor in a town fifty kilometres away that he cut it on farming equipment. His face is scratched and bruised. Andrée, Tina, Félix and Agent watch as Louis leads him into the kitchen.

Andrée sees him and her hand goes to her mouth, but she stays seated, keeps her face neutral. Around the table, the others are less restrained.

'Where's Dancer?' Cat asks.

'Couldn't make it,' Louis tells him. Cat should know better than to ask. The less they know, the better.

'What the hell happened to you?' Félix asks.

'Well, Château de Pignerolle is definitely a major communications centre,' Cat says, setting two battered files on the table. 'These detail Atlantic radio traffic and U-boat

communication. They're routing everything through there – messages from Berlin to the Atlantic fleet, position reports.'

Louis picks up the files and opens them, his eyes widening. 'This is . . . This is extraordinary. How did you get these?'

'I may have improvised slightly.'

'Improvised,' Tina repeats flatly. 'You were supposed to observe. Gather intelligence. Not steal classified documents and get into a fight.'

'There was a fight?' Agent leans forward.

Cat shrugs, winces. 'A small one. With a Militia member who caught me in a truck full of documents. I may have knocked him out. And then there were the dogs. And the searchlights. And the drive through checkpoints where I was certain I'd be arrested.' He grins. 'But I wasn't. And we have the files.'

'You're an idiot,' Félix says, but he's smiling. 'A brilliant, reckless idiot.'

'I prefer to think of myself as thorough.'

Louis is still skimming through the files, shaking his head in amazement. 'Colonel Pallas needs to see these immediately. This intelligence, if we can get it to London, can be used to intercept U-boat communications, redirect Allied shipping, save lives.'

He looks up at Cat. 'You took an insane risk.'

'I need to get these to Dancer,' Andrée says, forcing herself to focus. 'She can transmit the key information straight to London. But we need to photograph these documents first, return the originals somehow. If the Germans realize these specific files are missing –'

'They already know someone broke in and stole documents,' Cat points out. 'These were in a truck with dozens of boxes. They'll have to inventory everything. By the time they realize what's missing, we'll have already used the intelligence.'

The meeting continues, planning how to extract and transmit the information. Andrée can barely concentrate. She keeps looking at Cat, at his bandaged hand, his scratched face, imagining what could have happened. Dogs. Searchlights. Guns.

When the others leave, Cat lingers. Tina and Louis head out to queue for rations.

'You could have been killed,' she says quietly.

'But I wasn't.'

'This time. What about next time? What about the time after that?'

He steps closer. 'We all take risks, Andrée. You, me, everyone in this network. That's what we do. That's what we've chosen.'

'I know. But . . .' She stops, realizing she might say too much.

He takes her hand with the one that isn't bandaged. 'I'm sorry I worried you. But I'm here. I'm safe. And we now have intelligence that could turn the tide on the war in the Atlantic. Tell me that isn't worth a few scratches.'

'You're impossible.'

'So I've been told.' He smiles.

And despite everything – the fear, the anger, the relief – she finds herself smiling back.

'Just make sure you get the files to Dancer, and she gets them to London as quick as she can.'

'I'll take them to her as soon as I'm done teaching at the school in the morning. I've got students due here any minute, so you'd better go.'

Later, alone in her room, Andrée thinks about those files, about the risks Cat took to get them, about the lives that might be saved because of the intelligence they contain. The war is grinding on, brutal and relentless. But they're fighting back, in their own way. With forged papers and stolen documents and reckless courage.

Only time will tell if it is enough.

Chapter Fourteen

'Would you like me to walk you to school today?' Andrée asks Josie, watching her put her on her coat and stuff her gloves into her pockets.

'You don't have to, but I'd love that.'

Josie's words hit home. All too often Andrée has let her walk alone or with her parents when they leave to open the bookshop. She'd told herself Josie didn't need her company, that meeting up with Monique and the other children all heading in the same direction is safe enough. She bites her lip, just enough pain for her to remember Josie's needs are not only her physical safety, but feeling needed, wanted.

'I'm sorry, Josie, it's been a busy –'

'Time, yes, I know. You're doing important work, aren't you?'

Again the girl's words hit home.

'Yes, dear Josie, our work is important, but never as important as you are to us. You are the most important thing in my life, and Grand-Mère and Grand Père feel the same way.'

'Thank you, Tata. I'm ready to go, if you are.'

'I am. I might even put my gloves on my hands,' Andrée says, laughing.

'What are you doing today?'

'After my lessons, I am meeting a friend, but I'll be here this afternoon when you get home.'

'Promise?'

'Promise.'

The guilt Andrée feels doesn't abate as they walk through the park towards the school. She knows what Josie can't know. After she leaves the school, she will go to her parents' bookshop. Louis felt it would be safer for him to take the files to the shop in a bag of books, for Andrée to collect them there, before heading to Dancer's. There were enough eyes in the

apartment block to give them concern. All their movements in and out were carefully considered and executed; above all, they had to avoid arousing the slightest suspicion. New tenants had moved into an apartment on the first floor and even Maurice had been unable to learn anything about them. This fact alone made them uncomfortable. Could they be collaborators, planted to report on the other tenants? Had their apartment and their meetings been compromised? Had Mme Charbonnier said something about Josie living with them?

As they walk through the park, Andrée notices the first signs of a new season. Small green shoots now appear, poking through the soil, reaching for the sun. The plane trees are covered with the buds of new leaves. Soft and pale green, they will soon grow and darken, providing an umbrella of shade for the summer days ahead. She points this out to Josie. Arms linked, they continue through the park and say goodbye as they enter the school gates and go their respective ways. Andrée watches Josie till she is out of sight. She sees Mme Charbonnier approach, Josie who simply smiles and keeps walking. Good girl, Andrée thinks to herself.

After her morning teaching, Andrée carries her guilt into the bookshop. Her parents have been looking out for her. Louis turns the sign to closed.

'Is everything all right?' Tina asks.

'Yes, of course, why do you ask?'

'You look upset,' her father tells her.

'I'm fine.'

'Andrée. Daughter,' Louis demands.

'It's just, well, Josie pointed out I haven't been taking her to or from school much lately.'

'Is that all?' Tina asks.

Andrée hesitates before answering. She doesn't want to worry her parents any more than she needs to.

'Mme Charbonnier was standing outside the school gates earlier. She was on her own, just standing there, as though she was waiting for Josie.'

'Then you need to say something to her. Confront her. Ask her about her interest in Josie. People like her are cowards. She will deny everything, but it may scare her off if she knows that you've noticed,' Louis says.

'You're right. I'll go with Josie whenever I can, and make a point of having a "friendly chat" next time she seems too interested in Josie. In the meantime, I need to get the files to Dancer, see if she needs help transmitting them.'

'Your father was up most of the night photographing each page. I'll take the rolls of film to Gypsy; she can get them to London in case the transmissions don't go through or are compromised,' Tina says as Louis hands two paper bags to Andrée.

'I've put them in two bags with some groceries, so it looks as though you're carrying shopping.'

* * *

Andrée makes her way to Dancer's apartment. She hasn't been here since Hanukkah. Powerful images come back to her. So lost is she in the enchantment of that night that she nearly bumps into a man walking towards her. She consciously slows down, takes a deep breath. She doesn't want to look like a woman in a hurry, a woman on a mission.

She arrives at Dancer's apartment and rings the bell: three quick, three slow. Dancer opens the door, glancing past Andrée to check the street. They climb the stairs in silence, only speaking when they're inside.

'You have them?' Dancer was informed the previous evening that Andrée would be visiting today with urgent intelligence, ready for transmission.

Andrée sets the bags on the table.

Dancer opens them, pulls out the files, her eyes widening as she reads the labels.

‘Atlantic Radio Traffic. U-boat Communication. My God – Cat got them.’

‘Only just,’ Andrée says, and tells her about the encounter with the patrol, the fight with the Militia member, the escape, the dogs and the searchlights.

Dancer listens, shaking her head. ‘He’s going to get himself killed one of these days.’

‘I know.’

‘But not today. And these files . . .’ She flips through the pages, her expression growing ever more serious. ‘This is extraordinary information. Code frequencies, transmission schedules, relay protocols. If London can use this to intercept U-boat communications, they could save hundreds of ships, thousands of lives.’

‘Can you transmit it tonight?’

Dancer looks at the papers, calculates. ‘Not alone. This is too much. Each transmission carries risk. The longer I’m on air, the more likely I am to be intercepted. To send all this would take me three, maybe four, nights. That’s too dangerous.’

‘What if we split it? You take one file, someone else takes the other?’

‘Who? The only other operator we know in Paris is . . .’ She pauses. ‘Suzanne. The agent you brought in from the drop.’

‘Exactly. She’s been training operators, but she can transmit too, can’t she?’

‘She can. She’s one of the best. And she has her own wireless, her own codes.’ Dancer nods slowly. ‘It could work. I’ll send the Atlantic Radio Traffic file. You take the U-boat Communication file to Suzanne. We transmit on different frequencies, at different times. Safer that way.’

‘I don’t know where she lives though.’

‘I do. In the eleventh arrondissement. Rue de la Roquette, number forty-seven, third floor. The knock pattern is the same as the one you use here: three quick, three slow. Tell her I sent you. She’ll know what to do.’

‘How do you know where she lives?’ Andrée asks, suddenly feeling uncomfortable. After she and Suzanne had returned from Draveil, Andrée had handed her over to an agent from another network, who was placing her in a secure apartment. Andrée was never told where, but somehow Dancer knows.

‘I thought you knew I also worked for another network, just like you and your parents do sometimes.’

‘And you’ve met Suzanne?’

‘Yes, I was taken there to learn how to operate the new wireless.’

‘Ah, that makes perfect sense.’

‘Andrée, you can trust me.’

Andrée hugs her, breathing heavily. ‘I’m sorry, I know I can. I don’t know what I was thinking.’

‘No need to be sorry. Now get out of here. I want to prepare the documents while Philippe is at school, hide them and be ready to go tonight.’

Andrée takes the U-boat file, tucks it into her bag. It’s bulky, suspicious, but there’s no other way.

‘When will you transmit?’

‘After midnight, when there’s less radio traffic to interfere. Tell Suzanne to do the same, but I’ll start at one a.m., she should wait till three. That way if the Germans detect one transmission, they won’t immediately find the other.’

‘Understood.’ Andrée moves towards the door, then turns back.

‘Be careful. Cat nearly died getting these. Don’t let the risks he took be for nothing.’

‘I won’t. And Andrée? Tell him . . . Tell him it was worth it. What he did. Tell him we’ll make sure London gets every word.’

* * *

The 11th arrondissement is on the other side of Paris. Andrée takes a metro line heading in a different direction, changes trains twice, doubles back once to ensure she’s not being followed. The file in her bag weighs heavily on her arm. Information that could win the war. Or get her executed.

Rue de la Roquette is a narrow street, buildings crowded together, washing lines strung overhead. Number 47 is indistinguishable from its neighbours, peeling paint, cracked steps, the tired look of occupied Paris.

There is a concierge, but Andrée manages to slip in behind an old woman with a basket and the concierge barely looks up as the woman stops to chat with her. Andrée climbs the stairs to the third floor, checking each landing. Empty. Good. She raps at the door, three quick knocks, three slow.

The door opens a crack. A woman’s face appears. Suzanne. She looks different, her hair darker, a face free of make-up. She’s dressed like a working-class Parisian. But her eyes are the same. Sharp. Intelligent. Dangerous.

‘Andrée,’ she says, opening the door wider, ‘I wasn’t expecting you.’

‘Dancer sent me. We have something that needs transmitting tonight.’

Inside, the apartment is sparse. A bed, a table, a chair. In the corner, Suzanne lifts a loose floorboard to reveal the wireless set. Compact, deadly, the lifeline to London.

Andrée explains about Cat’s mission, the stolen files, the need to split the transmission. Suzanne listens intently, nodding all the while.

‘Three a.m., you said. I can do that. U-boat communications – this is priority intelligence. London will want it immediately.’ She takes the file, scans the first few pages.

‘Code frequencies. Transmission protocols. Position reporting procedures. This is gold, Andrée. Absolute gold.’

‘The operative nearly got himself killed. Dogs, searchlights, a fight with the Militia.’

Suzanne sighs. ‘We’ll make it worth it. I’ll transmit every page. London will have the complete file by dawn.’

She pauses.

‘Andrée, I know it’s hard, but agents like this are how we’ll win the war.’

Andrée leaves, lighter now without the file, but heavier with the knowledge of what’s riding on tonight’s transmissions. If the Germans detect the signals, if they triangulate the locations, Dancer and Suzanne could be arrested. Tortured and executed.

But that won’t stop them. In the Resistance, the wireless operators are referred to as pianists. They refuse to stop playing, and this is what makes them invaluable.

* * *

Tina walks through Saint-Germain-des-Prés with the confidence of a woman who belongs in this fashionable area. She’s carrying her larger handbag, which today holds five rolls of film: Louis’s photographs of Cat’s stolen documents. Insurance, in case the transmissions fail or are compromised.

Le Fleuron gleams in the afternoon light. Inside, German officers crowd the tables, laughing, drinking wine that most Parisians can’t afford. Tina’s stomach turns, but she keeps her expression neutral, almost bored.

The maître d’ recognizes her. ‘Mme Levallois. How lovely to see you. Are you lunching with us today?’

‘Just coffee, if possible. I’m here to see Mme Burdet.’

‘Of course. This way.’

He leads her to a table near the back of the restaurant. Once again, she's partially obscured by a pillar. Perfect.

Tina orders coffee, real coffee, somehow Le Fleuron still has it – and waits. Around her, conversations flow in German and French. The officers are discussing strategy, while French collaborators laugh altogether too raucously at jokes that aren't funny. The whole scene disgusts her.

Ten minutes later, Gypsy arrives. She sweeps in as though she owns the place, rather than simply being the manager. Her crimson dress and bold burgundy lipstick are impossible to ignore. German officers turn to watch her glide by. One calls out a greeting and she blows him his kiss, continues to Tina's table.

'Tina, ma chère. How wonderful to see you.' She kisses Tina's cheeks and sits with a flourish.

'I'm desperate for a drink. It's been the most exhausting week.'

The performance has begun. Two old friends, meeting for a gossip. Nothing suspicious. Nothing worth noting.

They talk about the weather, the shortages, mutual acquaintances. Tina complains about rationing. Gypsy complains about awkward suppliers for her restaurant. Anyone listening would be bored within minutes.

Half an hour later, Gypsy reaches into her bag for her compact, checks her lipstick.

'Oh, Tina, I almost forgot. I have more photographs for you. From before the war. Remember?'

'Oh, yes. I'd love to see them. The others brought back such lovely memories.'

Gypsy produces a small envelope, slides it across the table. But she doesn't release it immediately. Waits for Tina to place her handbag on the chair beside her, open and accessible.

‘I hope Louis will enjoy them too,’ Gypsy says, her hand dipping into Tina’s open bag. The movement is fluid, practised, invisible. Her fingers find what they’re looking for, the small package of film rolls Tina wrapped in a handkerchief, transferring it to her own bag in one smooth motion.

At the same time, Tina takes the envelope of photographs – real photographs, genuine memories – and tucks it into her now-lighter bag.

The exchange takes three seconds. No one notices. Why would they? Two women sharing old photos. Harmless and sentimental, just like all women.

‘Thank you, Gypsy. These will mean so much to him.’

‘My pleasure. Now, I must run. Lunch service starts soon and my customers are always so demanding.’ She stands, kisses Tina’s cheeks again. ‘Take care of yourself, ma chère. These are such difficult times.’

‘You too, Gypsy. Stay safe.’

Gypsy sweeps out, the film rolls hidden in her bag, destined for a courier who will get them to London through channels that even Tina doesn’t know about.

The photographs are backup, insurance. If the wireless transmissions fail, London will still get the intelligence.

Tina finishes her coffee slowly, savouring every sip. A luxury. A small reminder of what life was like before the occupation, what it might be like again when this nightmare is over.

If this is ever over.

* * *

By the time Andrée returns home, it’s past five o’clock. She’d promised Josie she’d be there when she came home from school. Promised. That word echoes as she climbs the stairs, each step heavy with guilt.

The apartment is quiet when she enters. Too quiet. ‘Josie?’

No answer. Then she hears it, piano music. Not ‘Clair de Lune’. Something else. Slower. Sadder.

Andrée moves to the doorway of the sitting room. Josie sits at the piano, her back straight, her fingers moving over the keys with careful precision. She’s playing a piece from the Bach notebook, the Minuet in G minor. Beautiful and melancholy.

Josie doesn’t stop playing when Andrée enters. She doesn’t acknowledge her presence at all, just carries on, her eyes fixed on the music, glancing down occasionally to find a note.

Andrée waits until the piece ends. The last chord hangs in the air, fades to silence.

‘That was absolutely beautiful, Josie.’

Josie’s hands rest on the keys. She doesn’t turn around. ‘You promised you’d be here.’

She finally turns to look at her, and her eyes are red. She’s been crying.

‘Grand-Mère and Grand-Père weren’t here either. I know if you don’t open the door when I knock, I’m to run to Monique’s home, but M. Dupont had followed me up and used his key to let me in. I was here all alone. And I know I’m supposed to be brave, I know I’m not supposed to be scared, but I was. I was scared something had happened to you.’

Andrée’s chest tightens. ‘Oh, Josie. I’m so sorry. I should have been here. You’re right. I promised and I broke that promise.’

‘What if you don’t come back one day? What if they take you like they took Maman and Léon? What if I’m alone again?’

Andrée pulls her close, and Josie doesn’t resist. Just melts into the embrace, small and scared. ‘I will always come back to you. Always. Do you hear me?’

‘You can’t promise that.’

She has no reply for that. This little girl is wiser than any child should have to be.

They sit like that, wrapped around each other, the piano silent now. Outside, Paris continues its dangerous dance. Inside, a woman and a child cling to one another, both scared, both trying to be brave, but both knowing that promises are fragile things in wartime.

'Play for me?' Andrée asks finally. 'Play something happy.'

Josie wipes her eyes. 'I don't know if I remember any happy pieces.'

'Then play something that makes you feel less sad. Can you do that?'

Josie thinks, flips through the Bach notebook, finds a page. The Minuet in G major, the companion to the piece she played before. Same structure, different key. Major instead of minor. Light instead of dark.

She begins to play. The notes are still careful, still measured, but there's something hopeful in them. Something that reaches for joy even when joy seems impossible.

As Andrée listens, watching Josie's fingers dance over the keys, she thinks about what lies ahead. The files have been delivered and the transmissions scheduled. The film rolls are safely with Gypsy. These are small victories, small acts of resistance, but added together, they become a powerful instrument of defiance.

But none of it is more important than this child and keeping her safe.

Andrée makes a silent promise, not to Josie this time, but to herself. She will be more careful with her promises. She will only make the ones she can keep. Because Josie has lost too much already.

The music continues, filling the apartment. And for this moment, right now, it sounds like hope.

Chapter Fifteen

‘Would it be too much to ask for spring to come early this year?’ Tina laments.

Outside, the day remains grey and damp. Now three months into the new year, the cold weather has kept both citizens and the occupiers indoors. Reports of abuse and abductions plateaued throughout the winter. Raids on homes, however, have increased.

But as temperatures rise, simply being on the street becomes dangerous. The feared Militia hunt in packs, inflicting their bully-boy tactics and open violence on anyone they encounter.

Everyone suddenly feels weak. They have no energy for the simple tasks they once took for granted, walking to the shop for rations or taking children to school. It had crept up on them slowly. They hadn’t read the signs that deprivation and the wrong sort of food were quietly sapping the strength needed to get through each day. Louis has taken to making Tina lie down and rest most afternoons. His fear for the woman who is his whole life can no longer be hidden. It is clear for Andrée to see. Josie notices too.

It is Saturday. No need for anyone to rush anywhere. There’s no school and the bookshop is closed. The Levallois family is enjoying the small baguette, warmed in the oven, divided equally between them. Today there is cheese. And in the centre of the table, on one of Tina’s finest plates, a single pear stands to attention.

The knock on their front door late yesterday evening had Andrée send Josie to her room. The adults went to the door together.

‘Who is it?’ Louis had called out with a bravado he hadn’t truly felt.

Andrée and Tina held hands. The three of them determined to face whoever was on the other side of the door together. United.

‘It’s me, Maurice. I have something for you.’

Together they mouthed the name ‘Maurice’.

‘Somebody dropped it off and asked me to get it to you straight away.’

‘This is highly unusual,’ Louis whispered as he opened the door to the concierge.

‘I’m sorry to disturb you at such a late hour. I hope I didn’t frighten you.’

‘Maurice, no, no, of course not. More surprised than frightened,’ Louis lied. ‘Come in, please, let me close the door behind you.’

Maurice stepped inside the apartment as Louis peered down the corridor. No one was watching.

‘Somebody rang the front doorbell, and when I opened up, he thrust this package into my hands and asked me to deliver it to you straight away. And here I am,’ the concierge explained.

‘Did you know this person?’ Tina asked, the concern in her voice evident.

‘No, never seen him before. He’s not . . . not one of the usual gentlemen who visit you . . . for piano lessons.’

Louis took the package from Maurice. ‘Thank you, Maurice. It is very kind of you to deliver it to us, and I’m sorry you were disturbed at this hour.’

Andrée stepped in front of her father, the warmth of her smile genuine. ‘Yes, thank you, Maurice. We are most grateful.’

‘You’re very welcome. I will do anything for you. Just ask. I know it is an extra burden, having your . . . niece staying with you.’

‘I can’t tell you how much that means to us, and how much we appreciate you,’ Andrée told Maurice, opening the door to let him out.

Andrée joined her parents in the kitchen as the three of them gazed at the small innocuous parcel. ‘Well, open it. Let’s see what a stranger out on a cold wet night has brought to us.’

‘It’s food. It’s cheese. I can smell it,’ Tina exclaimed, pulling the cardboard apart.

The first thing they saw was a small note. '*I hope this helps. Thank you for taking a Jewish girl into your home. To save one is to save all mankind*,' Tina read.

'Is it signed? Do we know who it's from?' Andrée asked.

Tina turned over the piece of paper over. 'No.'

Delicately, with a reverence akin to handling something precious, Tina lifted the items from the box and placed them on the table.

Three small blocks of different cheeses. A small loaf of almost-fresh bread. Some processed sausage. A pear.

* * *

Now Josie licks her finger to dab up the crumbs on her plate, a gesture that always makes Andrée and her parents smile sadly. Louis has joked privately that if they were to leave the room before Josie finished her meagre meal, she would pick up her plate and lick it. Still, the child is so thin. The daily effort to find enough food for them all is wearing them down. Andrée and her parents are engaged in a private battle over who will take the least food, all of them wanting to spare a little extra for Josie. But they know they each need sufficient calories to keep going, caring for the child, and managing their work for the Resistance.

'What would you like to do today, Josie? Or is that a silly question?' Andrée teases.

No response.

'Josie?' Andrée says again.

Louis and Tina turn to look at Josie.

The pear. Josie is fixated on the object in the centre of the table, oblivious to anyone and anything else in the room. Tina reaches over and places her hand on Josie's arm, now creeping across the table, her fingers only inches from the piece of fruit.

'Josie?' Tina says softly.

Returning her attention to the room, to the people around her, Josie turns to Tina. 'What did you say, Grand-Mère?'

'I know you would love to taste the pear now, but we're saving it. We're having visitors this afternoon. Dancer and Philippe are coming to see us. We thought we would share it with them.'

'That's a lovely idea. Of course we can share it with them. I can't wait to see Philippe again. Can I show him what I can play on the piano?'

'I think he'd like that. Maybe you could give him a lesson?' Andrée suggests.

Josie laughs. 'No, you're the piano teacher in this family, not me.'

Louis and Tina exchange looks.

'I know I'm not really your family, but you make me feel like I am.'

'Dear child, you are part of our family,' Louis says gently. 'Even when your Maman and Léon return and you're no longer living with us, you will always be part of our family.'

* * *

At three o'clock, the knock comes. Josie runs to the door, opens it a crack before flinging it wide open when she sees Dancer and Philippe.

'Philippe!' She throws her arms around the boy, who hugs her back with equal enthusiasm. They haven't seen each other since the first night of Hanukkah, but the bond formed that night remains strong.

Dancer kisses Andrée's cheeks, embraces Louis and Tina. She looks tired, Andrée thinks. Thinner than before. The work and the lack of food and basic supplies is taking its toll on all of them.

'Thank you for inviting us,' Dancer says. 'Philippe has been asking about Josie constantly. He wanted to know when he could visit.'

‘Well, here you both are,’ Tina says warmly. ‘Come in, sit down. We have something special for you.’

They gather around the table. The pear on the china plate is still positioned in the centre.

‘Is that real?’ Philippe asks, his voice hushed.

‘It is,’ Louis says. ‘A gift from a kind stranger. And we wanted to share it with you.’

‘It’s a pear, isn’t it? I’ve never had a pear,’ Philippe whispers.

Josie takes his hand. ‘I had them sometimes before . . . Anyway, they’re very sweet. And juicy. You’ll love it.’

Louis takes a knife, cuts the pear into six equal pieces with surgical precision. Each slice is perfect, identical. He distributes them solemnly, as if conducting a sacred ritual.

‘Together,’ Tina says.

They eat at the same time, all six of them biting into their pieces. The flavour explodes on Andrée’s tongue. She’d forgotten fruit could taste like this. Rich. Complex. Alive.

Philippe’s eyes close. A single tear runs down his cheek. ‘It’s the best thing I’ve ever tasted.’

Josie eats hers slowly, making it last. When she’s done, she licks her fingers carefully, catching every drop of juice. No one teases her. They all understand. This moment is precious. This taste of normality, of sweetness, of something beyond rationing and occupation.

Once they’ve washed their hands, the children move to the piano at the far end of the room. Andrée hears Josie explaining to Philippe how to sit, how to support his wrists. ‘Like this, see? For curved fingers, not flat. Tata Andrée says to pretend you’re holding a small ball.’

Philippe tries, his hands awkward on the keys. A discord of notes. Josie laughs, not unkindly. ‘No, no. One at a time first. Like this.’ She demonstrates, playing a simple scale. C major, ascending, descending. ‘Now you try.’

‘I need to talk to you about something,’ Dancer says quietly. ‘Something that happened last week.’

Louis and Tina exchange glances.

‘Let’s move into the kitchen for a moment. We can chat while I make us a cup of coffee,’ Louis says brightly, glancing at the children.

They move swiftly into the kitchen and stand in their usual spots out of habit. Louis stokes the fire.

‘What is it?’ Andrée asks.

‘I transmitted intelligence for another network. Medical supplies, supposedly being dropped by the Red Cross. Coordinates in the Loire Valley, near Angers. Times, quantities, everything detailed.’ She pauses. ‘The supplies never arrived. The operatives waited at the drop point, but nothing arrived.’

‘Could it have been the wrong location?’ Tina asks.

‘No. They had the exact coordinates. But they weren’t the only ones there.’ Dancer’s voice drops even lower. ‘The Germans were waiting for them. Two members were arrested.’

Andrée’s stomach drops. ‘The Germans knew about the drop.’

‘Yes. Which means either the intelligence was false from the beginning, a trap, or someone informed. Either way, the area around Angers isn’t safe for drops any more. We need to get word to London, and to Colonel Pallas. No more operations in that region until we know what happened.’

‘I’ll tell the Colonel,’ Louis says. ‘He needs to warn other networks too.’

Dancer nods, but she’s not finished. Andrée can see it in her face.

‘What else?’ she asks.

Dancer looks at her hands. ‘London has offered me additional training. Physical training. Weapons training. They say operators should be able to defend themselves if caught. That we should be able to fight our way out if necessary.’

‘And . . . ?’ Tina prompts gently.

‘And I don’t know what to do. Part of me wants to be able to do more, fight harder. I transmit intelligence, but I’m not . . . I’m not active in the way you all are. The way Cat is, or Andrée. I sit in my apartment and tap out messages. It doesn’t feel like enough.’

‘It is enough,’ Louis says firmly. ‘Dancer, what you do is vital. Without radio operators, we’re blind. We’re isolated. You connect us to London, to the Free French, to hope.’

‘I know. I know all that. But the training would make me more useful.’

‘Or dead,’ Andrée says bluntly. ‘Radio operators who start doing fieldwork get noticed. You’re valuable because you’re invisible, Dancer. Because you’re careful.’

Dancer’s eyes flash. ‘I can be careful *and* trained. I can be invisible *and* armed.’

‘Armed?’ Tina repeats.

‘They’ll teach me how to use a gun, a pistol, and how to hide it at home.’

‘With Philippe there?’ Andrée asks quietly.

The words hang in the air. From the other room, they can hear Philippe attempting the scale again, Josie encouraging him.

‘Better! Much better! Now try it with your other hand.’

Dancer’s face crumples. ‘I know. That’s what I’m finding difficult to reconcile. If the Militia raid my apartment and find a gun, they won’t just arrest me. They might discover that Philippe is Jewish.’

‘You’d be putting him at risk,’ Tina says gently.

‘He’s already at risk, just by being my son. By living in that apartment while I transmit intelligence to London. By having a Jewish father. I guess I would be putting him at greater risk.’

She looks up, her eyes wet. ‘I want to do everything I can to fight them. Everything. But I can’t sacrifice Philippe to do it. I can’t.’

Louis reaches across to Dancer, takes her hand. ‘Then you have your answer.’

‘Do I? Because it feels like cowardice. Like I’m choosing safety over the fight.’

‘You’re choosing your son,’ Andrée says. ‘That’s not cowardice. That’s love. And you’re still fighting. Every transmission, every message, every risk you take sitting in that apartment tapping out code while the Germans hunt for radio signals, that’s fighting. You don’t need a gun to be brave.’

Dancer wipes her eyes. ‘But if they come for me, if they find the wireless, if I can’t fight . . .’

‘Then you’ll do what we all will do,’ Tina says. ‘You’ll stay silent as long as you can. You’ll protect the network. And you’ll hope that the people you’ve saved, the intelligence you’ve passed, the lives you’ve helped preserve, you’ll hope that matters more than one arrest.’

‘It does matter,’ Louis adds. ‘Every message you send matters. You’re not just another field operative. You’re something more important. You’re our voice to London.’

From the other room, music begins. Not scales now. A melody. Simple, halting, but recognizable. Josie is playing something, and Philippe is trying to join in, playing single notes on top of her phrases.

Dancer listens, a small smile breaking through. ‘They sound good together.’

‘They do,’ Andrée agrees. ‘Two children, making music in the middle of a war. That’s what we’re fighting for. Not for revenge. Not for violence. For this. For Jewish children to play piano together without fear.’

Dancer nods slowly. ‘I’ll tell London I’m more useful as I am.’

‘Good,’ Tina says. ‘Now, shall we see what our young musicians are creating?’

They move to the doorway of the sitting room. Josie sits at the piano, Philippe beside her on the bench. She’s teaching him ‘Clair de Lune’, just the opening, the simplest part. His fingers fumble, but she’s patient.

‘Like this, see? Your thumb here, your middle finger here.’ She demonstrates, then has him try again.

This time, he gets it. The notes emerge, tentative but correct. Josie beams. ‘Perfect! You’re a natural, Philippe!’

The boy’s face lights up with pride. He plays again, more confident this time. Josie joins in, playing the next part, and together they create a fragment of beauty. Incomplete. Imperfect. But beautiful, nonetheless.

Andrée watches Josie correcting Philippe’s hand position, exactly as Andrée has corrected hers a hundred times. The student has become the teacher. The child who arrived terrified and broken is teaching another child how to make music.

‘She’s mimicking you,’ Dancer whispers. ‘Every gesture. Every correction. I see you in the way she plays, Andrée.’

‘No,’ Andrée says softly. ‘She’s entirely herself. But she’s learning. She’s growing up, up.’

They stand in the doorway, the four adults, watching. Outside, Paris shivers under occupation. The Militia patrol the streets. The Germans tighten their grip. The war grinds on, relentless and cruel.

But inside this apartment, there is music. There is a shared pear. There are children learning to play the piano, to find joy in small things, to be children despite everything.

Chapter Sixteen

'What are you talking about?'

It's Thursday. 'Piano lessons' day. Josie has heard the front door open and close, their special guests saying au revoir, and assumed it was fine to come out for her lesson.

'Josie, I didn't hear you come out,' Andrée says, getting to her feet abruptly and going to the girl standing in the doorway. It's clear from Josie's expression that she has overheard at least part of the conversation they've been having with Agent, who is sitting at the dining table.

'Please tell me, what were you talking about?'

'It's nothing for you to worry about. You're safe here. It's just business.' Andrée smooths her hair, which has freed itself from the plaits Tina struggles with each morning and is now tumbling down her back.

Tina interjects. 'She has a right to know. Josie, come and sit down, and I will tell you what we have just learned from our friend here.'

Josie glares at Agent. So he's responsible.

Agent clears his throat. 'With the warmer weather, the Germans have increased their search for Jewish families.'

Josie gasps, turning from one adult to the next, fear etched onto her features, her hands beginning to tremble.

Tina gently reaches out to take Josie's hands.

He continues, addressing the little girl seriously. 'Not here in Paris, but in the other cities and towns of France.'

'So I'm still safe?' Josie mumbles.

'As safe as you were yesterday,' Louis tells her. 'We must remain vigilant, be careful who we speak to. The Germans just had a break over winter, it seems.'

‘There are many people in Paris, and all across France, who are doing all they can to stop the Germans, to make life here difficult for them,’ Andrée tells her.

‘Like you. All of you. You’re fighting, aren’t you? In some way.’

‘We will always fight for you, Josie,’ Tina smiles.

‘And for our country. I know it’s not just about me. It shouldn’t be just about me. It must be about everyone in Paris.’

‘My God, how did you get so wise so young?’ Louis asks.

‘It happened the day they took away Maman and Léon. I know you don’t want me to know anything about what you are doing, and I understand that. I’ll never ask you any questions, but I heard you mention Jews and it frightened me.’

‘You have a right to know what is happening, not only to Jews but to all of us. If you trust us, I promise we will share with you anything we think you should know. It will help keep you and all of us safe if you know some of what’s going on in the streets and houses of our city,’ Tina says, massaging Josie’s hands.

‘You understand there will be things we don’t tell you, things you might hear from others at school? Ask us about them if they bother you. We will do everything to keep you informed without scaring you,’ Andrée says.

‘But it is scary. I am scared most days.’

‘If we promise to tell you as much as we can, will you make a promise to us?’ Tina asks.

‘What?’

‘That you will tell us when you are scared.’

Andrée turns away from the table, hands covering her mouth. When she turns back, she faces Josie.

‘I know when you’re scared. I’ve always known, and I am so sorry I haven’t done enough to help you. I’ll do better from now on. I promise that too.’

Josie releases her hands from Tina and reaches out to Andrée. ‘How do you know when I’m scared, Tata?’ She asks the question as if she knows the answer.

Andrée looks into her eyes. ‘I hear it in your playing, in your music. In your choice of music. I can tell.’

‘I don’t know what I’d do without the piano,’ Josie says, tears welling up in her eyes. ‘Some days, when I’m frightened and really upset, it helps me forget why I’m here. It hears me somehow. One day I was hitting the keys hard, and it wouldn’t let the sound be loud. It stayed quiet and calmed me. Does that make sense? Can it really do that?’

‘You understand the power of music, Josie. It’s something that usually takes years to grasp, but you have found your own way to use that power to reach your soul, carry you to another, safer world. But remember that, as well as the piano, you have Grand-Mère, Grand-Père and me to help you during these bad times. I’m so proud of you.’

Josie throws her arms around Andrée, weeping quietly. It has been months since they’ve seen her cry. Agent quietly stands and places his hand on the child’s shoulder, before slipping out of the back door.

‘Would you like to play a duet with me?’ Andrée whispers into Josie’s hair.

‘“Clair de Lune”?’

‘“Clair de Lune”.’

Tina and Louis sit side by side on the sofa as they listen to the haunting sounds created by their daughter and the young girl they have come to call their granddaughter.

* * *

The following Monday, Tina boards the early train to Rambouillet. An hour outside Paris, far enough away to feel different to the city, close enough to return the same day. Her cover story

is simple: visiting her cousin Marguerite who is recovering from illness. She has the cousin's address memorized, the details of her illness rehearsed. Pneumonia. Recovering slowly. Needs company. With her, a large carpet bag, knitting needles protruding from balls of wool recycled from one of Andrée's old jumpers . The physical part of her cover: an older woman passing time on a train journey, knitting.

The train is half empty. There are a few workers, a German soldier sleeping with his head against the window, an old woman with a chicken in a basket. Tina sits with her handbag on her lap, her coat buttoned despite the warm weather. She looks like what she is, a woman in her sixties, unremarkable, invisible. She takes out her knitting. Knit one. Purl one. A scarf in the making.

At Rambouillet station, she steps onto the platform, orients herself. The church sits in the main square, opposite the Café du Vieux Chêne. Colonel Pallas's instructions were specific: she was to arrive at eleven o'clock, head to the church and sit in the pews. You're praying for the speedy recovery of Cousin Marguerite. Wait.

The contact will approach only if they're certain it's safe. If they don't come, return the next day at the same time. And if necessary, a third day.

Three days. Three visits to the church at the same time. Every instinct Tina has developed as a member of the Resistance screams that this is dangerous. Patterns are dangerous. Leaving Paris by train three days in a row is suspicious behaviour. Any repeated behaviour puts her at high risk of being noticed. But there's no other way. The camera and the film she is to collect are too valuable. The network needs them to document German positions, troop movements, fortifications.

The church is modest, its facade yellowed with age. Its interior is dim. It is empty. There are no worshippers on a weekday morning. Tina chooses a pew towards the back.

The deacon appears: a young, slim man. He walks down the aisle, giving Tina a long look. She wonders whether this is the most conspicuous place possible. He would know his parishioners, but she appreciates that it's safer than the café across the square. His eyes meet hers in the gloom, but he merely nods, moves on and disappears again.

Eleven fifteen. No one enters the church.

Eleven thirty. A woman enters, glances at Tina and sits across the aisle. She has a shopping basket. She's a local, Tina decides.

At noon, Tina stands up to leave, chilled from sitting so long in the unheated building. The first day has yielded nothing.

* * *

The second day, Tina takes the same train at the same time. This consistency is part of her brief, but it makes her skin crawl. Anyone watching will notice. Anyone looking for patterns will see.

At the station at Rambouillet, she spots him immediately. A man in a grey coat, leaning against the wall, reading a newspaper. But he's not really reading, that's obvious. She watches his eyes flick up, scan the platform, return to the paper. Gestapo or Militia, Tina thinks, and decides Gestapo. He doesn't quite look like a local.

She doesn't change her pace. Doesn't look at him directly. Just walks past him and into the town, towards the square. Her heart hammers but her face remains calm. An old woman visiting her cousin. Nothing suspicious. Nothing worth noting.

Le Vieux Chêne is busier today. There are more locals sitting out front. Tina enters the church and takes her pew. The deacon is at the front, arranging the altar cloth, moving about as though preparing for a service. Now she notices something else. A couple are here today, across the aisle. They are whispering together, and there's an urgency to their conversation. Are they locals? Or are they watching?

Eleven fifteen. The same middle-aged woman as yesterday enters, carrying a shopping basket. She sits two pews over.

Tina's instincts prickle. Is this the contact? The instructions didn't specify male or female. But her eyes are on the cross at the front of the church. She doesn't appear to have noticed Tina. The deacon moves down the aisle again, and once again Tina meets his eye: he's wondering why he has a new parishioner, keen, here two days running. She clasps her hands tightly and gazes towards the front of the church, praying to a God she doesn't believe in that today isn't the day she is caught. Eleven forty-five. The woman leaves.

At noon, Tina once more leaves the church. On the street, she passes the woman with the shopping basket. For just a moment their eyes meet. The woman's expression is apologetic. Sorry, they seem to be saying. Not today. It's too dangerous.

Tomorrow then. One more try.

* * *

Tina almost doesn't go. Louis is against it. 'Three days is too many. They've noticed you by now. The locals will probably be talking about you. That couple in the church, the man at the station, they're watching, I know it.'

'It's the last time,' Tina tells him. 'The contact needs to be certain. Needs to know I'm committed, not a Gestapo trap. And to the locals, I'm an old woman who's rediscovered her faith.'

'And if they arrest you?'

'They won't. I'm just there to visit my cousin. What threat am I?'

But on the train, her confidence wavers. Three days. Three identical trips. Anyone watching will see the pattern. And patterns get people killed.

The man in the grey coat is at the station again. This time he's not pretending to read. He's watching passengers disembark, his eyes sharp, calculating. When Tina passes, she feels

his gaze follow her. Her neck prickles but she doesn't turn. Just keeps walking, slow and steady, an old woman with nowhere urgent to be.

The church is deserted today. Tina sits in her usual pew and arranges her features into something resembling piety. And waits.

Eleven o'clock comes and goes, then eleven fifteen. The deacon appears again, today with the parish priest. They both look at her from the front of the church. They don't seem friendly or welcoming, and Tina's mouth goes dry. The locals have certainly noticed her by now. She's not from here after all, and anything out of the ordinary is bound to raise suspicion. Tina steels herself to tell her story. But the priest and the deacon disappear again into the vestry.

At eleven thirty, the door opens. The woman from the previous two days enters, the one with the shopping basket. But today she's not alone. A young man accompanies her, perhaps thirty, wearing work clothes, carrying a cloth bag.

They sit next to Tina in her pew. There's no pretence now. They're not keeping their distance. Maybe it's because the church is totally empty.

'Madame,' the woman says, her voice low, 'I'm so sorry we're late. Marguerite asked us to fetch you. She's feeling much better today and would like you to come for lunch.'

Tina's relief is so intense she almost sags. The cover story. They're using the cover story. 'Oh, wonderful. I've been praying for her.'

'She's on the mend, thank God. Come, we'll walk you there.' The woman takes Tina's arm, helps her stand. The young man picks up the cloth bag, heavier than it looks, Tina notices. Something substantial inside.

They leave together, the woman chattering about Marguerite's recovery, the young man silent and watchful. No one looks at them for long as they pass the café. Just family, collecting an elderly visitor.

They walk for ten minutes or so away from the square to a silent street, where the woman's demeanour changes. The chatter stops. Her grip on Tina's arm loosens.

'We were being watched,' she says quietly. 'Gestapo at the station, and Militia informants in the café across from the church. The sacristan and priest were in the church so that's why we waited. We had to be certain it was safe to approach you, that you weren't bait.'

'I understand. Three days was dangerous. I'm sorry.'

'It's not your fault. These are the protocols and it's better to be careful than caught.' She glances at the young man. 'This is my son. He helped to collect what you need.'

The son speaks for the first time. 'These were dropped from London a week ago. I wasn't spotted picking them up, but I'm very happy to get rid of them. I wouldn't want to get caught with this stuff and I hope you don't either.

'Thank you, I don't plan on getting caught, but I want to get them back to Paris and pass them on as soon as I can.'

They turn into an alley, stop beside a doorway. The son looks up and down the street before opening the cloth bag, from which he begins removing small boxes.

'Put them in your bag,' the woman instructs. 'Wrap them in your shawl, and if anyone searches you, say it's your late husband's camera. Sentimental value, but you're taking it to sell in Paris: times are hard and you need the money. And you found the rolls of film with it so you're selling them too.'

Tina transfers the items carefully, her hands trembling slightly. The weight is significant. A heavy camera and several rolls of film. For evidence of German positions yet to be photographed. Intelligence yet to be gathered.

'Thank you,' she says. 'This is invaluable.'

‘Use them well. Many people risked much to get these.’ The woman pauses. ‘Don’t come back to Rambouillet again. If we need to make another delivery, we’ll find a different location. Three days was two too many.’

‘I won’t. I promise.’

The son looks past her, down the alley. ‘You should go. The train leaves in twenty minutes. Don’t miss it. The one later on is always more heavily patrolled.’

They walk her back to the main street, point her towards the station, then disappear back into the town. Tina doesn’t look back. Just walks, steady and slow, an ordinary woman who’s had a nice lunch with her cousin, and now she’s heading home.

At the station, there’s no sign of the man in the grey coat. Relief, but also worry – where is he? Watching from somewhere else? Following someone else?

On the train, Tina finds a seat, places her bag beside her, keeps her hand on it. The weight of the camera and film is both reassuring and terrifying. If she’s stopped, if they search her bag, she’ll be arrested, tortured and probably executed.

But no one stops her. No one searches. The train pulls away from Rambouillet, carrying her back towards Paris, towards home, towards the people waiting for these cameras to document the occupation, to gather the intelligence that might help end this war. She just has this last journey to travel.

Closing her eyes, Tina dreams of the train journey she and Louis took on their honeymoon. Paris to Brittany. The walks along the craggy granite coastline with its countless coves, rugged rock formations and beautiful beaches. They explored the quiet villages and unspoilt countryside and made memories to last their lifetimes. Once again, she is young and hopelessly in love with the dashing young man walking beside her, his arm around her shoulders, his head resting gently against hers.

She is jolted back to the present. She hadn't registered that the train has stopped at a small station. The yelling of uniformed Gestapo and Militia officers who have boarded her carriage obliterates her dream entirely. Identification papers are being demanded, and passengers fumble, flustered, trying to locate their documents. An elderly gentleman is struck around the head for taking too long.

Instinctively, Tina drops the bag beside her to the floor and kicks it under the seat in front.

A Militia man stops beside her. 'Papers. Hurry up.'

Tina quickly opens her handbag. The papers are on top. As she hands them over, she sees his eyes drop to the bag not fully hidden beneath the seat. She continues to hold the documents out towards him while fear grips her. Her hands shake.

A commotion breaks out at the other end of the carriage – one of his fellow thugs is dragging a young woman from her seat. She is kicking and screaming.

'Give me a hand!' the other Militia man calls out.

Tina sits holding up her documents, frozen, not knowing how the man in front of her will respond – help his colleague, or turn his attention back to her. Suddenly he moves to help his colleague. Slowly she Tina turns to watch the two of them bundle the woman – still kicking, still screaming – off the train. The door closes. The train pulls out of the station.

She closes her eyes. Breathes slowly. Three days. Three dangerous days. But she has what they need and now she's almost home. The mission is nearly complete. She doesn't allow herself to think of what has happened to the young woman.

* * *

That evening, Louis, Andrée and Agent stand in the kitchen as Tina unwraps the camera.

Agent examines it carefully. It's in perfect condition. 'A Leica,' Agent says admiringly. 'This will go to our best photographer. The resolution on these is extraordinary. We'll be able to document German fortifications in detail London has never seen before.'

'And the film?' Andrée asks.

'Ten rolls. Enough for over three hundred photographs if used carefully.' Louis opens one of the small boxes, examines the film canister but doesn't open it. 'This is excellent work, Tina. Dangerous, but excellent.'

'I won't do it again,' Tina says firmly. 'Three days was too many. The locals were suspicious. The Gestapo was watching. We were lucky.'

'Agreed,' Agent says. 'Next collection, we use a different location, different operative. We can't risk patterns.'

From the other room, piano music drifts. Josie, doing her evening practice. Bach tonight. The Minuet in G major. They listen. It's light and hopeful. She is unaware of what her grandmother has just risked.

This is the Resistance. Not glorious. Not dramatic. Just dedicated people taking calculated risks, day after day, hoping that somehow, eventually, it will all add up to change the course of the war.

'I'll distribute these tomorrow,' Agent says, wrapping the camera again.

'Good,' Louis says. 'And Tina . . .'

'I know. No more three-day missions. I've learned my lesson.'

'I was going to say thank you. What you did took courage. Real courage.'

Tina reaches for his hand. 'We all do what we must. For Paris. For France. For the child in the next room who deserves to grow up free.'

The music continues. Josie finishes the minuet, repeats a tricky phrase, slowly, and again faster. Practising. Learning. Growing. Living.

And in the kitchen, four conspirators sit with a stolen camera, planning how to use it to fight back.

Chapter Seventeen

On a Sunday morning in June 1943, the dawn quiet of the Levallois apartment is shattered by hysterical screaming.

Andrée, Tina and Louis burst from their bedrooms, wrapping robes around their nightwear. They fight to get into Josie's room first.

The screaming continues. 'NOOOO! I'M SORRY. I'M SO SORRY.'

'Josie, it's all right. It's all right. It's just a nightmare. You're safe.' Andrée speaks in hushed tones as she attempts to hold Josie, who is sitting up in her bed, her arms thrashing and legs kicking under the covers. Her hair, wild, covers her face.

'Josie, you're with me, Tata Andrée. Everything's going to be all right. Shush now. Come on, Josie. There's my girl.'

'Josie, we're all here,' says Tina from the end of the bed. 'Grand-Père's here with me. We're not going to let anything harm you.'

Slowly Josie calms down, collapsing into Andrée's embrace. Tina holds her hands, soothing, comforting her taut fingers.

As the sobs subside, Andrée pushes Josie's hair from her face, pulling it back over her shoulders. When she tucks it behind her ears, Josie's puffy red face is revealed.

'I'm sorry. I'm so sorry,' she gulps. 'How could I?'

'Josie, ma petite, you've done nothing wrong. Nothing. It was just a nightmare,' Louis says gently.

'But I have. You don't understand. I have. How can he forgive me?'

'Who, Josie? What can you have done that's so bad you can't be forgiven?' Andrée asks.

'I just remembered what today's date is.'

'It's what – the sixth of June?' Andrée isn't quite sure herself.

‘Yes. Léon’s birthday is the fifth. It was his birthday yesterday and I didn’t remember. I didn’t say happy birthday to him, even though he’s not here. I should have remembered. It’s his first birthday away and I didn’t remember.’ She turns her head into Andrée’s chest, still sobbing uncontrollably.

‘We should have asked you when your Maman and Léon’s birthdays were so we could mark them,’ Tina says, as Josie’s crying grows softer.

‘That’s kind of you to say, Grand-Mère, but I should have remembered. I did remember two days ago, but yesterday, well, I was having so much fun in the park with you and Monique and her Maman. The sun was warm and it felt so normal to be outside, sitting and playing in the park.’

‘Normal is a hard word to say these days,’ says Tina gently. ‘I’m happy you felt that way. I did too, for that brief time. It reminded me of when Andrée was your age and we would have picnics on the weekend.’

‘Josie, we can’t take away the pain you’re feeling right now, but what can we do to help you today?’ Louis asks.

She hesitates.

‘Could we walk past our old apartment building? I see it every day when I walk through the park, but I’d like to touch it. Just once. I don’t want to go inside. Just go to the front door.’

‘How about I get breakfast started, then?’ Louis says, ruffling Josie’s hair.

Josie offers a weak smile, looking from one adult to another. ‘Do you think anyone wished Léon happy birthday yesterday?’

‘Your Maman would have, whether they were together or not. And they would both be wondering how you are, what you’re doing. We must believe they are together, looking after each other,’ Tina whispers.

‘Like you’re all looking after me?’ Josie says.

‘Josie, there are many days you do more for us than we can possibly do for you. Many days,’ Louis tells her.

* * *

After breakfast, they walk together. It’s a bright morning, the trees full and green. Other families are out, taking advantage of the weather, trying to forget, for an hour or two, that they live in an occupied city. That there are people missing, who should be with them.

They walk in silence, Louis ahead, scanning the street with eyes that have learned to see danger before it arrives. Tina walks on Josie’s other side to Andrée, creating a protective circle around the child.

The building appears as they round the corner. Four storeys, brick and grey stone, indistinguishable from a dozen others on this street. But Josie stops walking. Stands still. Stares.

‘First floor,’ she whispers. ‘The windows on the left. That was my room. And that one next to it, that was the sitting room where Papa read to us. And the kitchen where Maman . . .’ Her voice breaks.

Tina’s arm enfolds her. ‘We don’t have to go closer. We can look from here.’

‘No. I want to. I want to see if . . .’ She doesn’t finish the sentence, but they all understand. She needs to see if anyone’s there. If Ruth came back. If Léon is home. If the miracle happened, all the while knowing it hasn’t.

The building’s main door is closed but not locked. Louis nudges it open, checks inside. Josie runs her hands over the timber door, over the damage around the lock where the Gestapo had broken in.

The foyer is empty, dim, smelling of damp and cabbage.

‘The concierge,’ Josie says suddenly. ‘M. Blanc. He was kind to us. He gave Léon extra bread sometimes.

‘I might just step inside,’ she says.

‘We’re right here with you,’ Tina says as Louis pushes the door wide open. No sign of the concierge. It’s risky being here, but if anyone asks, they’ll say they’re visiting a friend. It feels like a risk worth taking.

They stand in the foyer, looking up the stairs. Josie’s eyes follow the banister up, up to the first-floor landing. ‘We used to race,’ she says. ‘Léon and me. Up the stairs. He always won. He had longer legs.’ A small smile. ‘But I was faster going down. He was too careful, afraid he’d fall, but I just ran.’

Louis clears his throat. ‘You were a brave girl even then.’

‘Not brave. Just . . . not thinking about falling.’ Josie steps closer to the stairs, places her hand on the banister. The wood is worn smooth by hundreds of hands over many years. Her hand, Léon’s hand, her mother’s hand. All of them touched this same wood.

‘Can I go up? Just to the landing. Just to see the door?’

Andrée looks at Louis. He nods. ‘We’ll all go.’

They climb together, slowly, Josie’s hand never leaving the banister. The hallway is narrow, the walls green, the paint peeling. Three doors. Josie walks to the middle one.

‘This one.’

She stands in front of it, not touching, just looking. The door is painted brown, chipped at the bottom where something, luggage, furniture being moved in and out, scraped against it repeatedly. There’s a small brass knocker, tarnished now. And beneath it, a number. 7.

‘Seven. Léon’s lucky number. He said it was a good sign, living at number seven.’

She reaches out, touches the door with her fingertips. Just touching. Not knocking. Not opening. Just touching this threshold between the life she once had and the life she has now.

'Happy birthday, Léon,' she whispers. 'I'm sorry I forgot yesterday. I'm sorry I wasn't here. I'm sorry for everything.' The tears come again, silent this time, streaming down her face.

Andrée kneels beside her, pulls her close. 'He knows, Josie. Wherever he is, he knows you love him. He knows you didn't forget him. You just forgot the date. That's not the same thing.'

'Do you think he forgives me?'

'There's nothing to forgive. But yes. I think he does. I think he understands. And I think he's proud of you for being so brave, for surviving, for living when everything told you not to.'

Josie nods against Andrée's shoulder. They stay like that for a long moment, kneeling on the landing, the door of number seven behind them, the stairwell echoing with memories of races and laughter and a family that was.

Finally, Josie pulls back. Wipes her eyes. 'I'm ready to go home now.'

'Home?' Tina asks gently.

'Yes. Home. To rue Blomet. That's home now.' She takes one last look at the door, at the number seven, at the place where her old life ended. Then she turns away. 'Can we go?'

They descend the stairs together. At the bottom, in the foyer, Josie pauses. Looks back up one more time. Then she takes Andrée's hand, and they walk out into the sunlight.

'Thank you,' Josie says as they walk back towards rue Blomet. 'For bringing me. For letting me see it one more time.'

'Any time you need to go back, you tell us,' Louis says. 'We'll go with you. Always.'

‘I don’t think I need to go back again. I think . . . I think I’ve said goodbye now. To that life. To that apartment. Not to Léon or Maman or Papa. Never to them. Just to the place.’

And somehow, walking through the June sunshine, surrounded by the three people who’ve become her family, Josie stands a little straighter. Walks a little easier. The weight she’s been carrying, the guilt of forgetting, the grief of remembering, hasn’t disappeared. But it’s shifted. Changed. Become something she can bear.

* * *

July arrives, hot and airless. The streets of Paris shimmer in the heat, yet the city moves cautiously, as though the warmth itself is not to be trusted. Parisians have long since learned to speak softly, to keep their eyes down. Rationing bites harder than ever – queues form before dawn outside shops that may have nothing left by the time most reach the front. German staff cars still cruise the boulevards with casual arrogance. There are soldiers on every corner, a constant reminder of who holds the city. And yet life insists on continuing – children play, thinner than they should be, neighbours exchange whispered news, and the smells of what little food can be coaxed from empty shops drift from open windows into the heavy summer air.

It is simply life now, this lesser version of living – endured day by day, held together by habit, by love, and by the stubborn refusal to give up hope.

The school term is winding down, just days left before the summer holiday begins. Josie and Monique walk together through the schoolyard at morning break, discussing plans for the summer.

‘Maman says we might go to her sisters in the countryside for a week,’ Monique says. ‘If we can get the travel permits.’

‘I’ll miss you.’

‘I’ll miss you too. But we’ll write letters. Every day.’

They're laughing about this when it happens. A girl, older, walks past them. She's tall, well-dressed, her hair in perfect plaits. Josie recognizes her as Céline Charbonnier in the form above.

The girl's shoulder connects with Josie's, hard, deliberate. Josie stumbles, catches herself.

'Watch where you're going,' Josie says, more surprised than angry.

The girl turns, looks down at her. 'You watch where you're going. Bloody Jew.'

The words hang in the air. Around them, other students stop talking. Stop moving. 'Jew' hangs in the air.

Josie feels the blood drain from her face. Her heart hammers. This is it. This is how it ends. Someone will tell. They'll come for her.

But then something else rises up. Something fierce. Something that sounds like Andrée's voice in her head: You have a right to exist. You have a right to be here.

Josie straightens her shoulders. Looks the girl in the eye. 'So what?'

The girl blinks, surprised. 'So what? So what? You're a Jew. You're not supposed to be here. You're not supposed to be in this school.'

'And yet here I am.'

The girl's face twists with anger. 'Not for long. I'll tell. I know my Maman wants to. I'll tell them who you really are. Who's been hiding you. That piano teacher, that bookshop family, they'll all be arrested. And you'll be sent away. Just like you should have been months ago.'

Fear grips Josie's throat. Andrée. Louis. Tina. Arrested because of her. But she forces herself to stay calm, forces her voice steady.

'You should tell someone. You should tell Mlle Évrard. She's the principal. I'm sure she'd want to know.'

‘I will. I’ll tell her right now . . .’

‘Did I hear my name?’

The voice comes from behind them. Every girl in the yard freezes. Marie-Thérèse stands there, tall, imposing, her eyes moving from the older girl to Josie and back again.

‘Mlle Évrard,’ the older girl stammers, ‘I was just . . .’

‘Just what, Céline? What were you saying to Joséphine?’

Céline’s confidence wavers. ‘I was just saying that she . . . that she doesn’t belong here.’

‘Doesn’t belong here? Interesting. Joséphine Levallois is enrolled in this school, is she not? She attends classes, completes her work, contributes to our community. She seems to me to belong quite well.’

‘But she’s a . . . she’s a Jew. Everyone knows it. She shouldn’t be allowed –’

‘Céline.’ The principal’s voice is quiet but carries absolute authority. ‘Come with me.’

‘But, mademoiselle . . .’

‘Now.’

Mlle Évrard walks towards the school building, not looking back. Céline has no choice but to follow, her face red with humiliation and anger.

Josie stands frozen, watching them go. Around her, the other students begin to whisper, to move, to pretend they weren’t watching.

Monique grabs Josie’s hand. ‘Are you all right?’

‘I don’t know. What’s going to happen?’

‘Mlle Évrard will handle it. She always does.’

Ten minutes later, a younger teacher approaches them in the yard. ‘Joséphine Levallois? Mlle Évrard would like to see you.’

Josie's legs feel weak as she walks across the yard, through the corridors, to the principal's office. The door is ajar. She knocks softly.

'Come in, Joséphine.'

Mlle Évrard sits behind her desk. Céline is nowhere to be seen. The headmistress gestures to a chair. 'Please, sit.'

Josie sits, her hands folded in her lap, waiting.

'First, I want you to know that Céline has been reminded of several things. She has been reminded that she attends this school at my pleasure, by my permission and my permission alone. She has been reminded that this permission can be revoked at any time. And she has been reminded that in this school, we do not tolerate cruelty or prejudice of any kind.'

Josie nods, not trusting herself to speak.

'Second, I want to tell you something. There is no difference, Joséphine. None. Not between Jewish people and any other race, culture or creed. We are all human. We all deserve dignity. We all deserve safety. Every single one of us. Do you understand?'

'Yes, mademoiselle.'

'Good. Because I want you to remember that. On days when people like Céline try to make you feel small, make you feel different, make you feel less than . . . I want you to remember that you are not. You are a student at this school. You are under my protection. And while you are on these grounds, no one will harm you. Do you understand?'

'Yes, mademoiselle. Thank you.'

'Now off you go, break is over.'

As Josie closes the door behind her, Marie-Thérèse sighs deeply. She always knew this day would come. She has been prepared for it. She hopes her talk with Celine will be

enough. Enough to remove the threat to Josie and the other Jewish girls she protects on her patch. But she can’t be sure.

Chapter Eighteen

It's the school summer break and Josie has to be forced away from the piano to spend time outside. Only invitations from Monique and visits from Dancer and Philippe can tempt her away with any enthusiasm.

Summer lingers, oppressive and airless. Paris swelters. Josie practises piano with the windows open, her hair pinned up off her neck, her dress sticking to her back, sweat dripping onto the keys, salty droplets staining the ivory.

The food situation worsens with terrifying speed. Ration cards buy less each week. A loaf of bread that once fed the family for two days now barely covers one. Tina waits in queues for hours, in the August heat, all for half a kilo of potatoes. The greengrocer apologizes. It's all he has.

'They're starving us out,' Agent says at the Thursday meeting, his voice flat with exhaustion. 'The Germans are taking everything. Shipping it back to the Fatherland. Leaving us with scraps.'

'Then we steal it back,' Félix replies, leaning forward, eyes bright with anger. 'We raid their supply depots. We sabotage their shipments. We make them pay for every potato they steal from us.'

Their intelligence-gathering shifts focus. They now have a new target: German food depots. Félix agrees to recruit students at the Sorbonne for the raids. The students don't need to know about the network. The promise of a share of the food will be enough. And there's always the motivation of annoying the enemy, as long as they don't get caught.

Doctor René's forgery operation expands. Fifty documents a month now, each one perfect, each one a lifeline. Cat continues his reconnaissance missions, deeper into enemy territory, closer to discovery. Dancer transmits constantly, her windows open to dissipate the

heat, the radio under a loose floorboard that she can kick into place if footsteps pound up the stairs.

It's Saturday morning. Tina and Andrée go about their daily chores, listening to Josie play Chopin's 'Raindrop Prelude'. They work in silence, the notes carrying them to another world. Tina has secured an egg from an unknown source and is creating an omelette for lunch, using flour and a scraping of suet. She beats air into the egg, but how will it ever be enough to feed four? Swedes are roasting in the oven, their most frequent daily fare. Andrée has been out and queued up for their ration of bread and returned triumphant with a small pat of butter and some cheese. Louis is out at a meeting.

They ignore the small error Josie makes, but not her muttered: 'Come on, Josie, get it right'.

'We need to find something else for her to do, this heatwave is stifling. And with school closed we're not getting the lunchtime meal for her, or the vitamin bars. Thank goodness we're able to grow some vegetables in the square,' Tina moans.

'I keep dreaming about getting the poor girl out of Paris. Do you think Tata Sofie would let me bring her to Barbizon to-stay with her for a week?'

Sofie is Tina's oldest and best friend, whom Andrée thinks of as her aunt.

'Sofie would love to see you anytime and that includes Josie. Write to her suggesting the week after next. Some time in the countryside could be just what the two of you need.'

'I'll do it right away. I won't tell Josie until it's confirmed, don't want to get her hopes up. Papa should be back soon; I wonder what he'll have for us this week?'

'He had so much mail to give Colonel Pallas he might be going through it to make sure there isn't anything in there for us. We are lucky to have Maurice looking the other way as we get so much post.'

'He's a good man.'

‘Are you still going to see René this afternoon?’

‘Yes. He wants me to meet a friend of his - Jacques. He vouches for him, so we must trust him.’

‘Is this the official that works at the Mairie?’

‘Yes. He’s joining Doctor René in the counterfeit documents department.’

Tina laughs. ‘It’s an official department, is it?’

‘That’s what I’m calling it. Jacques has access to the official seals we need to authenticate identity cards and the ration coupons we’re producing. I should start receiving more soon and we can get the others to distribute them among the other cells. We were saved by his excellent work: I suspect it’s where Josie’s papers and ration card came from.’

‘Grand-Père, you’re home!’ Josie calls out, pausing her playing.

‘I could hear you as I was coming up the stairs. It sounded wonderful, Josie. I love that piece.’

Tina and Andrée join them, Tina takes Louis’s hat and places it on the hook by the front door as Andrée takes his briefcase from him. ‘Everything all right?’ she asks.

‘Everything is fine. Let me listen to this one playing for a moment or two, then I’ll join you at the table.’

Josie grabs his hand, leading him to his chair before sitting back at the piano bench.

After lunch, as Andrée prepares to leave for her visit with René, Louis pulls her aside.

‘Would you ask René if he could pay us a visit tomorrow? I have something I need to discuss with him.’

‘You don’t want me to tell him?’

‘No. It is something for him and me. I’ll fill you and your Maman in when he’s here.’

‘Of course, Papa. I’ll be back as soon as I can.’

* * *

Andrée's metro ride to René's apartment on rue Lagrange feels different today. She's been here many times, collecting documents, delivering intelligence, coordinating the network's medical needs, but meeting someone new always carries a risk.

She reaches the door to the building and rings using the usual signal. The door opens immediately: René is waiting in the foyer for her. She enters and greets him with a smile. He has his medical bag in one hand and he looks exhausted. He's older than Louis, perhaps seventy, his hair is completely white, but he still treats patients in the neighbourhood as well as carrying on his clandestine activities.

'Andrée, come on up. Jacques is already here.'

Andrée follows him up the stairs and into his apartment. The shutters are closed. A man stands in the living room, his features obscured in the dim light. Andrée guesses he's in his forties, wearing a neat suit, with spectacles perched on his nose. He looks exactly like what he is, a civil servant. Unremarkable.

No introductions are made. She doesn't believe Jacques is his real name. The less you know, the safer you are. Rule number one of the networks.

Jacques extends his hand. His grip is firm, confident. 'Mademoiselle, the doctor speaks very highly of you and your family.'

'And of you too,' Andrée replies, studying him. Can he be trusted? René vouches for him. Her instructions are to meet him. She must follow orders.

'Please, sit.'

René gestures to chairs around a small table upon which is a briefcase.

Jacques clicks open the locks. 'The doctor tells me your network needs identity documents, ration cards, work permits and travel authorizations. Is that correct?'

‘Yes. We have people who need to disappear. Jews we’re hiding who need new identities. Young men avoiding the work conscription who need exemption papers. Resistance members whose real identities have been compromised.’

Jacques nods. ‘I work at the Mairie. Specifically, in the records department. I have access to birth certificates, death certificates, identity cards. And most importantly, I’ve replicated the official seals.’

‘How?’ Andrée asks him.

‘I have access to the seals during working hours. I created impressions using clay, then had a printer friend make another set of the rubber stamps from the moulds.’ He smiles. ‘It helps to be meticulous. To be patient. To be someone no one notices.’

‘And the paper? The card stock?’ René asks.

‘I can acquire small quantities. I have to be careful not to take enough to draw attention, but I can provide a steady supply. Twenty, thirty cards a month. Maybe more if we’re careful.’

He pulls out several documents from the briefcase. ‘Here. These are samples. Look at them closely.’

Andrée picks up the first, an identity card. The photograph shows a young man, perhaps twenty-five, dark hair, serious expression. The text reads ‘Pierre Dubois, born 12 March 1918, Lyon.’ The card feels right. The weight, the texture. She holds it up to the light. The watermark is perfect.

She looks at René. ‘This is where Josie’s ration card came from?’

He inclines his head: yes.

‘Look at the seal.’

‘I’ve seen hundreds of identity cards,’ Andrée says. ‘Checked them, examined them, looking for forgeries. This would pass. Even under close inspection, this would pass. I was amazed when we received Josie’s one.’

‘That’s the idea,’ Jaques says. ‘I don’t make forgeries. I make genuine documents using false information. There’s a difference.’

René picks up another document, a ration card. ‘And these?’

‘Same principle. Official paper, official stamps, official signatures. The only thing false is the person’s identity. But the document itself? Completely authentic. We just have to remember who you give these to so they can be exchanged when the authorities change the colour of the card.’

Andrée examines a work exemption certificate. She’s received and dispersed many from René, but he has struggled to keep up with the changes the Germans keep making in their efforts to catch the forgeries. The one she holds now would save a young man from being shipped to Germany.

‘Medical exemption. Heart condition. Signed by . . .’ She looks up and smiles. ‘A Doctor Mercier? And of course, the patient doesn’t have a heart condition.’

René smiles.

‘In to my professional medical opinion, he does. Who’s to question a doctor’s diagnosis? It’s amazing how many young men in Paris are developing serious medical conditions that make them unfit for labour in Germany.’

The civil servant packs the documents back into his briefcase. ‘I can provide you with twenty identity cards this month. Fifteen ration cards. Ten work exemptions. Next month, more. The system is in place. It just needs to keep running.’

‘What do you need from us?’ Andrée asks.

‘Photographs. Good quality. Clear faces. Neutral expressions. It’s too risky for people to come to the Mairie. I’ll also need basic information: name, birthdate, birthplace, height and hair colour. With this information it’s easy to create an identity profile.’

‘We have photographers. So that bit’s easy.’

‘Good. Bring me the photographs and information next week. I’ll have the first batch of documents ready the week after.’

Andrée hesitates. ‘Why are you doing this? You have a good job. A safe position. Why aren’t you just keeping your head down? Why risk everything?’

The man removes his spectacles, polishes them carefully. ‘Because I see what they’re doing. Every day, I see it. Young men being shipped off. Jews being registered, marked, hunted. Families torn apart. And I sit at my desk, stamping official documents that help them do it. That make it all legal. All bureaucratically correct.’

He puts his spectacles back on.

‘I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t fight back. Even in this small way. Even if all I can do is forge papers and steal seals, it’s something. It must be something.’

Andrée nods. She understands completely. ‘Thank you. You’re saving lives. Every document you create saves a life.’

‘Then let’s save as many as we can.’

René walks him to the door, checks the stairs before letting him leave. When he’s gone, he turns to Andrée.

‘What did you think?’

‘I think the work he’s doing is invaluable. And I think we need to protect him at all costs. If the Germans discover what he’s doing, if the Militia get hold of him . . .’

‘I know. We’ll be careful. He knows to destroy everything if there’s any sign of danger, but he has a plan. We all have our plans.’

‘Indeed, we do.’ She pauses.

‘Papa asked if you could visit us tomorrow. He said it’s important. Something he needs to discuss with you.’

René frowns. ‘Did he say what it’s about?’

‘He did not.’

‘I’ll come by tomorrow afternoon. Does two o’clock suit you?’

‘That’s perfect. Thank you, Doctor René. For everything. For all of this.’

‘We do what we must, Andrée. All of us. Now go home. Be careful. The streets are more dangerous every day.’

* * *

René arrives precisely at two o’clock. Josie is in her room, giving the adults the privacy they need for their meeting. Louis, Tina, and Andrée sit around the table as René settles into the fourth chair.

‘Thank you for coming,’ Louis says. ‘I have news from Colonel Pallas. A mission.’

‘A mission?’ His eyebrows rise. ‘For whom?’

‘For you and me. We leave in two days.’

Tina’s hand goes to her mouth. Andrée feels her stomach drop.

‘Where?’ asks René.

‘Saint-Nazaire.’

René whistles low. ‘The port on the Atlantic coast? That’s deep in German territory. The U-boat pens are there.’

‘Exactly. The British bombed it successfully last year – Operation Chariot. They destroyed the dry dock and crippled the Germans’ ability to service the larger U-boats. But Pallas has intelligence that the they are rebuilding. Possibly even expanding. London needs

eyes on the ground. Detailed reports on the reconstruction, the size of the barracks being constructed, troop numbers and defensive positions.'

'And they want us to provide those reports?'

'Yes. You're a doctor. I may own a bookshop now, but I'll remind you that I'm an architect and draughtsman – our papers will confirm our occupations. We have legitimate reasons to be in a port city, you for medical consultations, me for architectural assessments of bomb damage. Our cover story is that we're evaluating civilian infrastructure for potential repair. The Germans might even facilitate our access.'

'How long?' Andrée asks, her voice tight.

'A week. Perhaps ten days. We'll stay at the church. Our contact there is Sister Bernadette, the senior nun. She's been working with the Resistance for over a year. She'll provide shelter, arrange meetings with local informants, help us move around the city without drawing attention.'

'A nun,' Tina says. 'They're using nuns now?'

'They're using everyone who's willing to fight,' Louis says. 'Sister Bernadette runs a small hospital attached to the church. Doctor René will be visiting to consult on medical matters. I will be surveying the church building itself, as it was damaged in the bombing. So, we will have legitimate reasons to move through the city, meet people and ask questions.'

René leans back in his chair. 'It's dangerous, Louis. Saint-Nazaire is heavily fortified. The Germans are paranoid about another attack. Security is tight. If they suspect us . . .'

'I know. But the Colonel believes the need for the intelligence makes the risk worthwhile. The Allies are planning something. Something big. They need to know the state of the Atlantic defences. If the U-boat pens are operational again, if the garrison is at full strength, they'll have to adjust their calculations.'

'When do we leave?'

‘Day after tomorrow. Early train. I have all the necessary papers, travel permits, identification, letters of authorization.’

René laughs, startling Andrée. She has never before heard him laugh in all the time they’ve worked together.

‘So, old friend, you and Colonel Pallas knew I wouldn’t say no.’

‘I knew,’ Louis says, reaching across the table to squeeze his arm.

Andrée finds her voice. ‘Papa, you’re sixty-seven years old. This is fieldwork. This is dangerous fieldwork. Let someone younger go. Let Félix go, or Cat . . .’

‘May I remind you that I’m seventy?’ says René.

But Louis answers seriously. ‘Cat is too reckless. Félix is too valuable in Paris. And being sixty-seven, or even seventy, is an advantage, not a liability. Old men don’t look dangerous. Old men with legitimate professions, travelling for legitimate reasons, we’re invisible, Andrée. That’s our strength.’

Tina speaks, her voice steady despite the fear in her eyes. ‘If you’re going, you’re going. I won’t waste time trying to talk you out of it. But promise me you won’t take unnecessary risks. Get the intelligence, get out, come home. Don’t be a hero, Louis. Just come home.’

Louis takes her hands. ‘I promise. The Doctor and I will be careful. We’ll get the information London needs, and we’ll come home. To all of you.’

René nods. ‘We’re too old to be heroes, Louis and me. We’ll observe and report back. There will be no heroics.’

‘What do you need from us?’ Andrée asks.

‘Keep the network running while we’re gone. Agent is in charge – Pallas will liaise with him – while Félix will handle any immediate issues. Dancer will maintain radio contact with London. Everything continues as normal.’

‘And Josie?’ Tina asks. ‘What do we tell her?’

Louis considers. ‘That I’m going on a business trip. She doesn’t need to know the details. The less she knows, the safer she is.’

‘She’ll worry,’ Andrée says.

‘She worries anyway.’

Louis looks around the table. ‘This is important. The intelligence we gather could save thousands of lives. Could help end this war. That’s worth the risk. The U-boats operating out of there are already causing so much damage and death.’

René stands. ‘I should go. I have preparations to make. Medical supplies to pack. Cover stories to memorize.’

Louis stands. ‘Day after tomorrow. First train after curfew. We’ll meet at Gare Montparnasse. Seven a.m. Platform four.’

René extends his hand to Louis.

‘I’ll be there.’

After he leaves, the three of them sit in silence. Finally Josie emerges from her room, book in hand.

‘Is the meeting over? Can I practise now?’

‘Of course, ma petite,’ Louis says, forcing brightness into his voice. ‘Play something cheerful. Something happy.’

Josie sits at the piano, considers, then begins to play. Mozart. A sonata. Light and sparkling and full of joy.

Louis watches her, committing this moment to memory. This is what he’s fighting for. This is why he’ll go to Saint-Nazaire, risk capture, risk torture, risk death. So that children like Josie can play Mozart in apartments in Paris without fear.

Tina's hand finds his. Squeezes tight. She knows what he's thinking. She always knows.

'Come home,' she whispers. 'Whatever you find there, whatever you learn, make sure you come home.'

'I will,' he promises. 'I will.'

And in that moment, listening to Josie play Mozart, holding his wife's hand, surrounded by love and music and hope, he means it. He will come home. He will survive this mission. He will see his family again.

Anything else is unthinkable.

Chapter Nineteen

The train to Saint-Nazaire leaves Gare Montparnasse at seven o'clock in the morning, just two hours after the end of curfew. Louis kisses Tina goodbye at the apartment – tearful farewells at the station would be too conspicuous – and arrives at Platform 4 with ten minutes to spare.

Doctor René is already there, looking every inch the respectable physician. Dark suit, medical bag, spectacles and an air of professional dignity. He could be travelling anywhere, for any reason. Nothing suspicious. Nothing worth noting.

'Ready?' he asks.

'As ready as I'll ever be,' replies Louis.

They board separately, find their compartment, settle in. The train lurches forward, and Paris begins to slide away. Louis watches the city disappear, thinks of Tina and Andrée and Josie. They're safe. That's what matters.

The journey takes seven hours. They pass through checkpoints at Chartres, Le Mans, Nantes. Each time, German soldiers board, demand papers, examine documents with varying degrees of scrutiny. Each time, Louis feels his heart accelerate. But their papers are perfect. Travel permits signed and sealed. Letters of authorization pristine.

At Nantes, a young German officer studies Louis's papers for what feels like an eternity. 'You are an architect?' he asks, in heavily accented French.

'Yes, sir. Structural assessment of civilian buildings damaged in the bombing last year. The Ministry wishes to understand the extent of repairs needed.'

'And you?' He turns to René.

'Physician. Medical consultation for the staff at Église de Saint-Nazaire.'

The officer hands back their papers.

‘Saint-Nazaire is a restricted military zone. You will report to the commandant’s office upon arrival. You will not photograph military installations. You will not speak to military personnel without authorization. Is that clear?’

‘Perfectly clear,’ Louis says.

The officer moves on. They exchange glances. The restrictions tell them everything they need to know. The Germans are nervous. Paranoid. Good. Paranoid occupiers make mistakes.

Saint-Nazaire appears in the early afternoon. Even from the train, Louis can see the devastation. Entire blocks reduced to rubble. No attempt has been made by the occupiers to clear or rebuild residential areas. But where the port has been scarred and blackened they see reconstruction. Cranes. Workers. German efficiency rebuilding what British bombs destroyed.

They disembark, show their papers again at the station checkpoint and are directed to a waiting German corporal.

‘Follow me,’ he tells them, after they’ve given him their story. ‘You must report to the commandant’s office.’

Not a request. An order. Louis and René follow, carrying their bags, trying to appear grateful for the assistance rather than alarmed by the surveillance.

The commandant’s office is in a requisitioned hotel overlooking the port. Commandant Weber is a career officer, perhaps fifty, with the exhausted eyes of a man trying to manage an impossible situation. He examines their papers, makes notes, stamps additional authorizations. Too tired or bored to ask questions.

‘You will stay at the church, yes?’

‘Yes, sir. Église de Saint-Nazaire. Sister Bernadette is expecting us.’

‘Good. The sisters do excellent work. Very cooperative.’

He hands back their papers. ‘You have three days. Submit your reports to this office before you leave. Any observations of military significance will be reported to me immediately. Failure to comply with all requests will result in arrest. Do you understand?’

‘We understand, Commandant.’

‘Corporal Schmidt will escort you to the church.’

The journey through Saint-Nazaire is illuminating. Louis counts guard posts, notes defensive positions, observes troop movements. The port is swarming with activity. U-boats are visible in the pens. There are cranes reconstructing the damaged dry dock and building more pens. Hundreds of workers, some French, some German, are all watched by armed guards.

The Église de Saint-Nazaire sits on a hill overlooking the harbour. It’s a small church, Gothic stone, one tower partially collapsed from the bombing. Attached to it are a convent and a modest hospital building.

Corporal Schmidt deposits them at the gate. ‘Report to the commandant’s office in three days. Do not attempt to leave Saint-Nazaire without authorization.’ He salutes, leaves.

Louis and René stand at the gate, looking at the church. Somewhere inside, Sister Bernadette is waiting. Their contact and lifeline. Their only hope if things go wrong.

Louis knocks on the heavy wooden door of the convent. It opens almost immediately to reveal a young nun, perhaps twenty, her face serene.

‘Doctor Martin and M. Lavigne?’ she asks using the names she has been given, the names on their false papers.

‘Yes, sister.’

‘Sister Bernadette is expecting you. Please, come in.’

They enter, and the door closes behind them with a solid, reassuring click. Inside, the church is cool and dim. Candles flicker. The smell of incense permeates the air. Walking

towards them is a woman in her sixties, her habit perfectly arranged, her eyes sharp and intelligent.

'Gentlemen, welcome to Saint-Nazaire. Or as I prefer to call it, the armpit of occupied France.' She extends her hand. 'Sister Bernadette. Delighted to meet you, despite the circumstances.'

Louis blinks. This is not the demure, pious nun he expected. René laughs outright.

'You can call me Benny.'

'Now, let's get you settled before some overeager German decides to search the church. Again. They do so love their searches. Keeps them busy, I suppose. Follow me.'

She leads them through the church, into the convent, up a narrow staircase to a small room with two beds, a table with the prerequisite bible, a crucifix on the wall.

'Your accommodation. Not the Ritz, but considerably safer. You'll take meals with the sisters: you're safe with all of us here. Breakfast at six, lunch at noon, dinner at six. Mass at seven morning and evening. You're not required to attend, but it looks better if you do. Germans respect piety. Or at least they're suspicious of those who don't display it.'

Louis sets down his bag. 'Sister, we appreciate . . .'

Sister Benny silences him with a look. 'No need for speeches. You're here to spy on the Germans, gather intelligence and report back to London so they can bomb us again. Which, frankly, I'm entirely in favour of. The first bombing was quite exciting. I do hope they manage to finish the job next time.'

René stares at her. 'Sister, you're . . . remarkable.'

'I'm practical. And I'm French. And I'm furious. The Germans have turned our beautiful port into a submarine fortress. They've conscripted our young men. They've stolen our food, our dignity, our freedom. If I can help end this occupation by hiding a few spies in

my convent, I'm delighted to do so. Now, you must be exhausted. Rest for an hour, then I'll introduce you to some local friends who have information you'll find useful.'

She turns to leave, then pauses at the door.

'Oh, and gentlemen? If there's a raid, there's a hidden panel in the floor beneath that rug. It leads to a crawl space that connects to the crypt. You can hide there for days if necessary. We've done it before. I do hope it won't be necessary, but one never knows. The Germans are so unpredictable.'

She smiles. 'Welcome to the Resistance in Saint-Nazaire. Do try not to get us all killed.'

And she's gone.

Louis and René look at each other.

'I think I'm in love with her.'

'She's a nun.'

'A nun with a magnificent sense of humour and absolutely no fear. If I weren't already married to medicine, I'd be tempted.'

Louis laughs, and for the first time since leaving Paris, he feels hopeful. If Sister Bernadette is helping them, they might survive this mission.

* * *

In Paris, Josie sits at the piano, playing Chopin. Badly. Her fingers stumble, miss notes, hit wrong keys. She stops, starts again. No better.

'Josie, what's wrong?' Andrée asks from the doorway.

'I can't concentrate. I keep thinking about Grand-Père. Where he is. If he's safe.'

Andrée sits beside her on the bench. 'He's on a business trip, ma petite. He'll be home in a few days.'

‘I know that’s what you told me. But I’m not stupid, Tata Andrée. I know you don’t tell me everything. I know there are things you keep from me to keep me safe. But I also know when you’re worried. And you’re worried about Grand-Père.’

Andrée takes her hand. ‘Yes. I’m worried. But worrying doesn’t help him. What helps him is us continuing our lives here, being safe and being smart. Can you do that for me?’

‘I can try.’

‘Good. Now, play something that makes you feel better. Not Chopin. Something joyful. Something that reminds you of good things.’

Josie thinks, then begins to play. Mozart. The same sonata she had been playing when Louis announced his trip. Light and sparkling, full of hope.

Andrée listens, watches Josie’s fingers move across the keys. This child who has lost so much but still finds joy in music. This child who worries about an old man on a dangerous mission, who plays Mozart to make herself feel better.

‘That’s better,’ Andrée says when the piece ends. ‘Much better. Now, how about we work on that Bach prelude you’ve been avoiding?’

Josie groans, but she’s smiling. ‘You never let me avoid anything.’

‘That’s my job. To push you. To make you better. To keep you learning and growing and becoming the pianist I know you can be.’

‘Even when there’s a war?’

‘Especially when there’s a war. The war will end, Josie. But your music? That’s forever.’

* * *

After they have rested, Sister Bernadette introduces Louis and René to the local Resistance. They meet in the church crypt, away from prying eyes. Four people: a dockworker, a baker, a teacher, a fisherman. No names are given, only occupations.

‘What can you tell us about the U-boat pens?’ Louis asks the group.

The dockworker pulls out a folded sheet of paper. ‘I’ve made sketches. They’re rough, but accurate. The main dry dock, the one the British bombed, is being reconstructed. It will be operational in three months, perhaps sooner. They’re also expanding the submarine pens. Adding capacity for additional U-boats.’

Louis studies the sketch. It’s crude but detailed. Measurements. Structural notes. Exactly what London needs. ‘May I keep this?’

‘Memorize it, then destroy it. We can’t risk it being discovered.’

Louis nods, begins committing it to memory.

The dockworker continues. ‘The garrison is being expanded. Two thousand additional troops arrived last week. They’re constructing new barracks on the east side of the port.’

‘Defensive positions?’ René asks.

The fisherman answers. ‘Anti-aircraft batteries every five hundred metres. Machine-gun nests overlooking the harbour. They’re terrified of another attack.’

‘Which tells us they believe another attack is likely. The Germans don’t waste resources on defences unless they have intelligence suggesting they’re necessary,’ Sister Bernadette adds.

For two hours, they share information. Troop numbers. Supply routes. Weak points in the defences. The baker provides information on food deliveries, where supplies come from, how often, which routes they use. The teacher describes the forced labour system, which French workers are trustworthy, which are collaborators.

Louis takes mental notes, asking questions, clarifying details. René does the same. Between them, they’re gathering a comprehensive picture of Saint-Nazaire’s defences. Exactly what London needs.

‘We need to see the port ourselves,’ Louis says. ‘Make our own observations.’

‘Dangerous,’ the dockworker warns. ‘Security is very tight. If you’re caught sketching, or taking photographs, you’ll be immediately arrested, no question.’

‘We have cover stories. I’m assessing civilian structures. The doctor is visiting the hospital. We have legitimate reasons to move through the city.’

Sister Bernadette smiles. ‘And I will accompany you. Who would suspect an old nun and two elderly gentlemen? We’re invisible. The Germans barely see us.’

‘Sister, you’re putting yourself at tremendous risk,’ René says.

‘My dear doctor, I’ve been at tremendous risk since the occupation began. I’m a Catholic nun hiding Resistance fighters, sheltering escaped prisoners and passing intelligence to London. One more act of defiance won’t make much difference.’

* * *

In Paris, Cat knocks on the apartment door at seven o’clock. Andrée answers, wearing the same blue dress she wore to hear Josephine Baker. It feels even looser than it did that night.

‘You look beautiful,’ he says.

‘You said that last time.’

‘It was true last time. It’s true now.’

Tina appears behind Andrée. ‘Take her out. Make her forget her worries for a few hours. She’s been impossible since Louis left.’

‘Maman!’

‘It’s true, ma chérie. You’ve been pacing, distracted, unable to settle. Hardly reassuring for Josie. Go. Listen to music. Dance if they let you. Be young. Your father will be home soon.’

‘I’ll have her back before curfew,’ Cat promises.

‘Of course. Take your time. We will be fine.’

They walk through Paris, arm in arm. The city is beautiful in the fading light, despite the occupation. Despite everything.

'Where are we going?' Andrée asks.

'Back to Le Bal Blomet. But tonight, they're featuring a jazz quartet. American. The real thing. Or as close to it as we can get in occupied Paris.'

'But haven't the Germans banned it?'

'The Germans are idiots. They banned jazz officially, but half of them love it. So it gets performed under different names. Tonight it's called "Saint Louis Blues". Tomorrow, who knows what. The names change, but the music stays the same.'

'Well, I don't care what they call it; I just love good music.'

'We could be in for a treat. I've heard a whisper that later tonight Django Reinhardt will perform after the Germans are too drunk to know who he is.'

'Now, that would be a treat.'

Inside, the club is dim and crowded. There are the usual Germans in uniform and French collaborators, but also a scattering of locals who simply love music. Cat finds them a table in the back and orders a bottle of wine.

The quartet begins to play. Saxophone, piano, bass, drums. The rhythm is infectious, alive. Andrée feels herself relax for the first time in days.

'Better?' Cat asks.

'Better. Thank you for this.'

'We all need moments like this. Moments where we're just people. Listening to music. Feeling alive.'

Between sets, he takes her hand. 'Andrée, when this is over –'

'Don't. Don't make promises about when this is over. We don't know if we'll survive. We don't know if there will even be a "when this is over".'

‘I know. But I need to say it anyway. When this is over, I want to take you to concerts. Real concerts. Without Germans in the audience. Without fear. I want to walk through the streets of Paris with you without checking over my shoulder.’

Andrée looks at him. This man who risked everything at Château de Pignerolle. This aristocrat who could have fled to London like so many of his ilk. He could have stayed safe, but instead he has chosen to fight. This person who makes her feel human.

‘Ask me again when this is over. When we’re both still alive. When my father is home safe. When Josie’s mother has returned. Ask me then, and I’ll give you an answer. That’s the best I can do for now.’

He lifts her hand to his lips. ‘Then I’ll wait. However long it takes, I’ll wait.’

The quartet starts playing again. This time the rhythm is slower. A ballad. Several couples stand, begin to dance. He raises an eyebrow. ‘May I?’

‘Here? With all these Germans watching?’

‘Especially with all these Germans watching. Let them see that we’re still French and still capable of joy despite everything they’ve done to us.’

She stands, takes his hand and they move to the small dance floor. His arm around her waist. Her hand on his shoulder. They move to the music, and for three minutes the war doesn’t exist. There’s just the saxophone, the soft piano, the bass and the brushes of the drum, and two people dancing in a club in Paris.

When the song ends, they return to their table. Andrée feels lighter. Not happy, happiness seems impossible these days, but lighter. Cat has given her that. A moment of normality. A glimpse of what life might be like when this war is over.

As the evening wears on, the Germans in the room get louder. They drink more and more. Some have fallen asleep at their tables. The club owners decide it’s time to send the final act onto the stage. Andrée gasps when she sees that it is indeed Django Reinhart. His

swagger is exaggerated by the cane he uses to walk to the stool in the spotlight. He carries his guitar in his free hand, a hand with two badly deformed fingers. A hush settles on the room.

With his signature coiffed moustache highlighting his warm smile, Django Reinhardt props himself on the stool. He knows the subdued applause was for his own safety. Most of the German officers have left or are drunk to the point of unconsciousness. It's safe enough to play.

As the first notes ring out, Andrée leans forward, placing both elbows on the table, her chin in her hands. She is immediately lost in the music.

The night air is warm as Andrée and Cat spill out of the club and into the street. Their footsteps are loud on the empty pavement. It is later than they intended. It is always later than they intended when Cat is involved.

They are barely a block from the club when a car slides out of the shadows and stops alongside them. Two Gestapo officers climb out unhurriedly, the way men do when they know they hold all the cards.

'Papers.' The taller one barely looks at them. His colleague circles the couple slowly, scrutinising then with the particular insolence they have perfected.

Cat opens his jacket pocket with a mildly bored expression and produces his documents. Andrée quietly opens her handbag, takes out her own.

The officer looks Cat up and down.

'You have been at a club? Together?'

'We have,' Cat says, with the air of a man confirming something entirely unremarkable. He glances at Andrée.

'I have been trying to convince this woman to marry me for three years. Three years, gentlemen.' He shakes his head slowly. 'Tonight she finally said perhaps. Perhaps! Can you imagine? I have been more warmly received by the Germans than by this woman.'

The taller officer blinks. His colleague suppresses something that might, in another life, have been a smile.

Cat presses on, shaking his head. ‘I ask you – is *perhaps* a word a man wants to hear after three years? You are men of the world. You understand my position.’

The officer looks at Andrée, who arranges her expression into something she hopes resembles dignity. He looks back at Cat. He hands their papers back.

‘Move along.’

‘Goodnight, gentlemen,’ Cat says pleasantly. ‘I hope your evenings are more fruitful than mine.’

They walk. Steadily, unhurriedly, for one block. Then Andrée’s composure collapses entirely. She claps both hands over her mouth, shoulders shaking, tears of laughter running freely down her face.

‘Three years!’ she whispers.

‘I was being conservative,’ Cat says, straightening his jacket. ‘I didn’t want to seem desperate.’

* * *

The next morning in Saint-Nazaire, Sister Bernadette, Louis and René walk through the city. The sister chatters cheerfully about church matters, pointing out buildings, discussing reconstruction. To any observer, she’s giving visitors a tour.

But Louis is counting. Guard posts every hundred metres. Machine-gun emplacements. Anti-aircraft batteries. The garrison to the east, massive, still under construction. Barracks for at least two thousand men, maybe more.

They approach the port. German guards stop them.

‘This area is restricted.’

‘Of course,’ Sister Bernadette says pleasantly. ‘These gentlemen are assessing the damage to civilian structures. The church, the hospital, the school. We need to understand what can be repaired. Surely you don’t object to us looking at damaged buildings?’

The guard hesitates. An elderly nun. Two old men. Not exactly threatening.

‘You have five minutes. Do not approach the submarine pens. Do not photograph anything. Do not speak to workers.’

‘As you can see, we have nothing with us. No camera, just here to observe.’

‘Five minutes.’

‘Thank you, young man. Five minutes will be quite sufficient.’

They walk along the perimeter. Louis takes in everything. The dry dock is being reconstructed, just as the dockworker told them. The submarine pens are expanding and being reinforced. The defensive positions are extensive.

Sister Bernadette keeps up her damage report at a volume for all to hear, should they be interested, providing a perfect cover for Louis and René to observe military installations.

‘Five minutes are up,’ the guard calls.

‘Thank you so much. You’ve been most helpful,’ Sister Bernadette says, and they retreat.

Back at the church, in their room, Louis begins sketching from memory. The port layout. The defensive positions. The garrison size. René adds notes, troop numbers, supply routes, weaknesses in the perimeter of the complex.

‘This is excellent intelligence,’ René says. ‘London will be impressed.’

‘If we can get it to them. We still must get out of Saint-Nazaire. Through the checkpoints. Home to Paris.’

‘Sister Bernadette will help. She’s helped others escape. She’ll help us.’

There's a knock on the door. Sister Bernadette enters, carrying a tray with bread, local cheese and a small carafe of wine: a feast. 'Sustenance for our intrepid spies. I thought you might be hungry after your walk.'

'Sister, you're amazing,' Louis says.

'I'm practical. There's a difference. Now, show me what you've drawn. I want to know what all my risk-taking has accomplished.'

Louis shows her the sketches. She studies them carefully. 'Impressive. Thorough. Tell me: how do you plan to get this information out of Saint-Nazaire?'

'We'll carry it. Hide it in our luggage. The papers authorizing our visit also authorize our departure.'

'And if they search your luggage at a checkpoint?'

Louis and René exchange a glance. What other option do they have?

Sister Bernadette sighs. 'Luckily for you, I have a courier system. Young women, nuns in training, who travel regularly between Saint-Nazaire and Paris. They carry correspondence, church documents, religious materials. The Germans barely glance at them. I'll have one of my sisters carry your intelligence. She'll deliver it to whatever address you give me.'

'Sister, that's . . .'

'Risky? Yes. But less risky than you two carrying sketches of military installations through a German checkpoint. Trust me, gentlemen, I've been doing this for two years. I know how to get stuff out of Saint-Nazaire. You focus on gathering it. I'll handle the delivery.'

Louis feels relief wash through him.

'Thank you. Truly. My apartment is a safe-drop zone; I'll write the address down for you.'

‘Thank me when you’re safely back in Paris. Now, eat. Rest. Tomorrow, we do it all again. Different route, different areas, more observations. We have two more days to gather everything London needs. Let’s make every minute count.’

As the door closes René sighs. ‘I really do want to marry her.’

* * *

That evening in Paris, Josie lies awake. She gets up, pads softly to the piano and sits down. She doesn’t turn on the lamp but merely lets the darkness fold around her shoulders.

Then she plays quietly, her fingers barely pressing the keys. ‘Clair de Lune’. The piece that always comforts her. The first proper piece that Andrée taught her. The piece that sounds like moonlight on water, like safety, like home.

Tina hears the music from her bedroom. She gets up and goes through to the living room and sits beside Josie.

‘Can’t sleep?’

‘I’m worried about Grand-Père.’

‘So am I, ma petite. So am I.’

‘Will he come home?’

‘Yes. He’ll come home. He promised me, and your Grand-Père always keeps his promises.’

‘Maman promised she’d come back for me. Papa promised he’d keep us safe. They couldn’t keep those promises. Sometimes promises break, Grand-Mère. Sometimes people don’t come home.’

Tina pulls her close. ‘You’re right. Sometimes promises break. Sometimes people don’t come home. But we must believe they will. Because if we stop believing, if we stop hoping, then the Germans will have already won. Do you understand?’

‘I think so.’

‘Good. Now play for me. Play something that makes you feel less sad.’

Josie thinks, then begins to play. Bach. The Minuet in G major. The one she played for Philippe. A piece that’s light and happy and full of possibility.

Tina listens, and in the darkness she prays. Not to God, not after everything that’s happened. But to something. To fate or to luck. Or to whatever force governs survival and return.

Bring him home. Bring Louis home. Let this child who has lost so much keep her Grand-Père. Let me keep my husband. Please. Please.

The music continues, filling the apartment, for a short while, with the fervent belief that all will be well.

* * *

Two days later, Louis and René board the train back to Paris. Sister Bernadette stands on the platform, waving cheerfully, looking for all the world like an aunt seeing off visiting relatives.

‘Safe travels, gentlemen! Do come visit again!’

Louis waves back, feeling ridiculous and grateful in equal measure. Their intelligence is already on its way to Paris, carried by a young nun named Sister Marie who left yesterday evening.

It will arrive home before he does. Their luggage contains nothing incriminating. And that’s the best they can do. Everything else is down to fate.

René shakes hands with the sister, holding it for a moment or two longer than would be considered polite.

The train pulls away. Louis watches the fortified port disappear, but everything they saw is tucked safely away in his mind. Troop numbers. Defensive positions. The reconstructed dry dock. The expanded submarine pens. Intelligence that might save lives.

At Nantes, German soldiers board the train and move through the carriages checking papers. As usual, they're looking for young men, for obvious Resistance fighters, rather than elderly men. But they question Louis and René, nonetheless.

'Purpose of visit to Saint-Nazaire?'

'Structural assessment. Architectural consultation. Medical consultation. All authorized by Commandant Weber.'

Louis hands over the paperwork, complete with Weber's stamp and signature.

The soldier studies it, hands it back. 'Carry on.'

At Le Mans, the same process. At Chartres, again. Each time, Louis's heart pounds. Each time, the papers hold. Each time, they're waved through.

Paris appears in the late afternoon. Gare Montparnasse. Home.

They part ways at the station. 'Well done, Louis,' René says. 'We did it. Now go home. Your family is waiting.'

Louis walks through Paris, savouring every familiar street. He made a promise to Tina. He's keeping it. He's coming home.

At rue Blomet, he climbs the stairs slowly, savouring the anticipation.

'Grand-Père!' Josie yells as he comes through the front door.

She charges into him, almost knocking him off his feet. Tina is there seconds later, and then Andrée, and they're all talking at once, hugging him, touching him, confirming he's real, he's here, he's home.

'I told you he'd come back,' Tina says to Josie, tears streaming down her face.

'You did. You were right. He came home.'

Louis holds them all, breathes in the smell of home, chicory and piano polish and safety. The mission has exhausted him, not least because of the destruction he saw in Saint-

Nazaire, and he knows full well that the information he gathered will lead to more bombing, more death.

But right now, in this moment, he's home. With his family. And that's all that matters.

'Play for me, Josie,' he says. 'Play something happy. I need to hear something happy.'

Josie runs to the piano, sits, begins to play. Mozart. The same sonata she's been playing all week. But this time, she plays it perfectly. Every note clear. Every phrase precise. Because Grand-Père is home. Because promises were kept. Because sometimes, miraculously, people do come back.

Tina whispers, 'A package came for you yesterday evening.' Louis smiles. Sends a silent thank-you to the one and only Sister Benny.

He sits with Tina and Andrée, listening. The music fills the apartment.

Outside, Paris continues its dangerous dance. The war grinds on. The occupation persists.

But so does the Resistance.

So does the music.

Chapter Twenty

‘And you’re sure she has a piano?’ an anxious Josie asks Andrée.

‘Yes, Josie, she has a piano. I’ve played it many, many times over many years.’

‘And she’s your aunt?’

‘Not like a relative. Like I said, she and Grand-Mère have been friends since they were little girls. I call her Tata Sofie because I love her like family. That’s what you should call her too.’

‘Of course. I can’t wait to meet her, as long as her piano is working,’ she exclaims, her excitement now brimming over. ‘And she lives in the forest?’

‘Right on the edge of the forest.’

With the heat continuing unabated, Andrée has arranged to take Josie to see Sofie at Barbizon. It’s a risk, but, they agree, no greater than staying where they are. The child will get some fresh air and sunshine, and the food will be slightly better. Louis is home safe; her activities can wait. The network understands her need to take care of this child.

‘When was the last time you stayed with her?’

‘Four years ago. Before the Germans came. When we were . . .’

‘Free?’

‘Yes. When we were free.’

‘Are you two going to hurry up or would you rather miss your train?’ Tina interrupts them, handing Andrée a small bag with cheese and bread for their journey.

Josie runs to the piano, runs her hands over the keys. ‘I’ll be back soon,’ she promises, before closing the lid.

Louis emerges from the bedroom with their small suitcase.

‘Travel light, travel safe. That’s what I told your mother when she was young, Andrée. Now I’m telling you both.’

‘We’ll be careful, Papa. A week in Barbizon. Fresh air. The forest. Josie needs this. We both do.’

‘I know. Just . . . be vigilant. Even outside Paris, the Germans are everywhere. The Militia are everywhere. Don’t talk to strangers. Don’t draw attention. Keep your papers at the top of your bag for easy and quick access.’

‘We’ll be invisible,’ Andrée promises. ‘Two girls on holiday. Nothing suspicious. Nothing worth noting.’

Tina embraces them both. ‘Send word when you arrive. And Josie . . .’

‘Yes, Grand-Mère?’

‘Play that piano every day. Don’t forget your practise just because you’re on holiday.’

Josie laughs. ‘I won’t. I promise.’

* * *

The train to Fontainebleau takes an hour. Then a local bus to Barbizon, another twenty minutes through countryside that feels impossibly green after the grey stone of Paris. Josie presses her face to the window, watching fields and woodland slide past.

‘It’s so beautiful,’ she breathes.

‘Wait until you see Tata Sofie’s house. You can walk for hours and never see another person.’

‘Is that safe?’

‘Safer than Paris. Fewer Germans so fewer eyes watching. Out here, people mind their own business. As long as we’re careful, we’ll be fine.’

Barbizon is a small village, perhaps three hundred people, clustered around a main street. Artists’ studios, a church, a bakery, a café. And beyond it all, the forest, ancient, vast, mysterious.

Tata Sofie's house sits at the end of a narrow lane. Stone walls, blue shutters, a garden bursting with summer flowers. The door opens before they even knock.

'Andrée! Oh, my dear girl!'

Sofie, small and wiry, with her greying hair pinned up and eyes that sparkle with intelligence and mischief, is waiting at the open door. She embraces Andrée, then turns to Josie.

'And this must be Joséphine. Tina wrote to me about you. Welcome, child. Welcome to my home.'

'Thank you, Tata Sofie. Andrée says you have a piano.'

Sofie laughs. 'Straight to the important matters. Yes, I have a piano. An old upright, a bit out of tune, but it plays. You're welcome to use it whenever you like. Now, come in, come in. I've made lunch. You two look like you need feeding up.'

Inside, the house smells of baking bread and lavender. The piano stands in the sitting room, exactly as Andrée remembered. Josie goes to it immediately, lifts the lid, plays a quick scale. The tuning is indeed questionable, but the tone is warm, the keys responsive.

'It's perfect,' Josie announces.

'Good. Now, come eat. You can play later. Food first, music second. That's my rule.'

Sofie provides a delicious lunch of fresh bread, cheese, and tomatoes from the garden. Here a system of bartering has developed as neighbours share what they grow and what they have bought, both legally and on the black market. Sofie catches up what's happening in Paris. Andrée is cautious with her news, sufficiently vague. And Sofie is careful not to ask too many questions. They both understand. The less said, the safer everyone is.

'I have new neighbours since you were last here,' Sofie says. 'Colette Durand and her daughter, Solène. They moved here last year from Chartres. The husband died in a German

bombing raid. Colette wanted to get away from the city, somewhere quieter. Somewhere safer.'

'How old is Solène?' Josie asks.

'Twelve. Just your age, I think. She's a lovely girl. A bit wild, perhaps. Knows every path in the forest, every secret place. She's been desperate for a friend her own age. All the other children here are either much younger or much older.'

'Could I meet her?' Josie asks, a note of keen interest in her voice that makes Andrée's heart ache. When was the last time Josie sounded this hopeful?

'I'll introduce you this afternoon. They live just down the lane. Colette is a good woman. Devout. Goes to church every Sunday. She's become a good neighbour. Helps me with the garden, brings me eggs from her chickens, takes vegetables home from my garden.'

* * *

That afternoon, Sofie takes them down the lane to a smaller cottage, painted yellow, with chickens scratching in the yard. A woman answers the door. She has dark hair streaked with grey and kind eyes.

'Colette, this is my goddaughter Andrée and her niece Joséphine. They're staying with me for the week.'

'How lovely! Solène will be so pleased. She's out in the forest, of course. That girl spends more time with the trees than with people. Let me call her.' Colette steps into the doorway and cups her hands around her mouth.

'Solène! Solène, come home! We have visitors!'

A few minutes later, a girl appears from the trees. Tall for twelve, all limbs and energy, with wild dark hair and a smudge of dirt on her cheek. She stops when she sees the visitors, suddenly shy.

‘Solène, this is Joséphine. She’s staying with Mme Sofie for a week. I thought you might like to show her around.’

Solène studies Josie. Josie studies Solène. A long moment passes. Then Solène grins.

‘Do you like climbing trees?’

‘I don’t know. I’ve never tried.’

‘Never? We’ll fix that. Come on. I’ll show you my favourite places.’

‘Is it safe?’ Andrée asks Colette quietly.

‘The forest? Safer than anywhere else. Solène knows every path, every hiding place. The Germans patrol the roads, but they rarely venture into the forest. Too easy to get lost. Too easy to walk in circles. The girls will be fine.’

‘Go,’ Sofie tells Josie. ‘Explore. Be a child. That’s what you’re here for.’

Josie looks at Andrée for permission. Andrée nods, her throat tight. When was the last time Josie was free to play alone outside with a friend?

‘Be back in time for supper,’ Andrée says.

‘We will,’ Solène promises. ‘Come on, Joséphine. I’ll show you the old oak. You can see the whole forest from up there.’

‘Call me Josie.’

And they’re off, running into the woods, two girls who barely know each other, already friends.

Andrée and Colette watch them disappear.

‘She needs this,’ Andrée says. ‘She’s been through so much. She needs to just be a child.’

‘Solène too,’ Colette replies. ‘Losing her father, moving here. They’ll be good for each other, I think.’

* * *

In Paris, Louis answers a knock at the door. It's mid-afternoon, and he's not expecting anyone. He checks through the spyhole first, always, before opening up.

A man stands there. He's middle-aged, nondescript, carrying a briefcase. He could be anyone. A salesman. A clerk. No one worth remembering.

Louis opens the door a crack. 'Yes?'

'I was sent by Colonel Pallas. It's going to be a long hot summer. May I speak with you?'

The code phrase. Louis opens the door wider. 'Come in.'

Inside, Tina is at the table, immediately alert. The man sits when invited, sets down his briefcase; it is a prop, a copy of an old magazine its only contents.

'My name doesn't matter. Colonel Pallas vouches for me. That should be enough.'

'Of course. What do you need?'

'A meeting place. Our usual location has been compromised. The Militia raided it two days ago. We got word in time. But now we have nowhere to meet. Colonel Pallas suggested you might be willing to help.'

'How many people?' Louis asks.

'Two, sometimes three. We need to meet once a week. Tuesday afternoons. No more than an hour.'

Louis and Tina exchange glances. Their apartment is already a meeting place for their own network. Adding another cell increases the risk exponentially.

But Colonel Pallas sent him. Colonel Pallas vouches for him.

'What kind of work does your cell do?' Tina asks.

'Better you don't know. No names, no details. Just a room, once a week. If anything goes wrong, if we're raided, you can honestly say you don't know who we are or what we do. Plausible deniability. For your protection.'

Louis considers this proposition. The man is right to a degree: the less they know, the safer they are. If the Gestapo comes, if the Militia interrogates them, they can't reveal what they don't know.

'Our bedroom,' Tina says suddenly. 'You can use our bedroom. It's at the back of the apartment. No one overlooks it.'

'Tuesday afternoons,' Louis adds. 'One o'clock. No earlier, no later. You arrive separately, one at a time. You leave the same way. You bring nothing that could incriminate you if you're stopped on the street. And if anyone asks, you're friends dropping by. Nothing more.'

The man nods. 'Understood. We'll be careful. You won't even know we're here.'

'I doubt that,' Louis says.

'When do you want to start?' Tina asks.

'This Tuesday?'

'All right. But let me speak to the Colonel first. He'll confirm with you that all is agreed.'

'Thank you.'

'But understand this – if you bring danger to our door, if this compromises our own work or threatens my family, we'll end the arrangement immediately.'

'Fair enough. Thank you, monsieur, madame. You're doing important work. We all are.'

He leaves as quietly as he arrived. Louis locks the door behind him and leans heavily against it.

'Are we mad?' he asks Tina.

'Probably. But what else can we do? They need a safe place. We have one. If the situation were reversed, we'd hope someone would help us.'

‘I know. I just wish Andrée and was here. I don’t like making this decision without her.’

‘She would agree. You know she would. She’d say the same thing I’m saying: we help because we must. Because that’s what resistance means.’

Louis nods. ‘Tuesday then. Strangers in our bedroom, doing God knows what. The things we do for France.’

* * *

In Barbizon, Josie returns at suppertime, as the day stretches into long summer evening, flushed and happy, her dress torn, leaves in her hair. Andrée has never seen her look so alive.

‘We climbed the old oak! And Solène showed me the cave where she hides treasures. And we saw a deer! A real deer, so close I could almost touch it!’

Sofie laughs. ‘I see Solène is already corrupting you. That girl is half wild, I swear.’

‘Can I see her again tomorrow?’

‘Of course. But first, dinner. And then, piano practice. You promised Grand-Mère.’

Josie groans but she’s smiling. After the best dinner they’ve eaten in a long while, she sits at Sofie’s piano and plays. Chopin. Bach. A bit of Mozart. The out-of-tune keys don’t bother her. She’s too happy to care.

That night, in the small bedroom Sofie prepared for them, Josie falls asleep almost instantly. Andrée lies awake, listening to her breathe. This is what childhood should be. Climbing trees. Exploring forests. Making friends. Not hiding. Not fear. Not constant vigilance.

For this week, Josie gets to be a child. And that, Andrée thinks, might be the most important thing she’s ever given her.

* * *

The days blur into a pattern. After breakfast, Josie runs to meet Solène and the two girls disappear into the forest. Andrée and Sofie work in the garden, talking about everything and nothing.

On the fourth day, Colette joins them. ‘The girls are good for each other,’ she says. ‘Solène has been so lonely. And Joséphine, she’s blossoming. I can see it.’

That afternoon, however, something changes. Josie doesn’t come back at the usual time. Dusk falls. Still no Josie. Still no Solène.

Andrée stands at the edge of the forest, calling. ‘Josie! Josie, it’s time to come home!’

Nothing.

Colette appears, equally worried. ‘They know to be home before dark. This isn’t like Solène.’

‘Should we go look for them?’ Sofie asks.

‘In the forest at night? We’d be lost within minutes. We just have to wait. Maybe give them another hour. Then we . . .’

There’s a sudden movement. Two figures emerge from the trees, running. Josie and Solène, dishevelled, frightened, but unharmed.

Andrée runs to meet them. ‘What happened? Where were you?’

‘Germans,’ Solène gasps. ‘In the forest. A patrol. We heard them so we hid.’

‘They came so close,’ Josie adds, her voice shaking. ‘We were behind the big rock, near the stream. They walked right past us. We stayed quiet. We didn’t move. We barely breathed.’

Colette pulls Solène into her arms. ‘How close?’

‘Five metres. Maybe less. We could hear them speaking in German. I didn’t understand much – something about their route?’

Andrée’s blood runs cold. ‘You could have been seen. You could have been caught.’

‘But we weren’t,’ Josie says. ‘We were invisible. Like you taught me. We were invisible, Tata.’

‘No more going so deep into the forest,’ Colette says firmly. ‘Stay close to the village. Stay where I can call you.’

‘But, Maman . . .’

‘No arguments, Solène. The forest isn’t safe any more if the Germans are patrolling. You’ll stay close. Both of you. Do you understand?’

The girls nod, chastened.

That night, Josie is quiet. She doesn’t want to practise piano. She picks at her dinner. Finally, in bed, she speaks.

‘Tata Andrée?’

‘Yes, Josie?’

‘Even here we’re not safe. Even in the forest, even in a tiny village far away from Paris. The Germans are everywhere, aren’t they?’

Andrée considers lying. Considers offering false comfort. But Josie deserves truth.

‘Yes. Even here we must be careful. But you did everything right today. You hid. You stayed quiet. You kept yourself safe. I’m proud of you.’

‘I was scared.’

‘Being scared is smart. Being scared keeps you alive. It’s when you stop being scared that you get careless.’

Josie is quiet for a long moment. ‘Can I still see Solène tomorrow? If we stay close to the village?’

‘Yes. You can still see each other. You deserve friendship. We just have to be smart about it.’

* * *

On Tuesday morning Louis and Tina prepare the bedroom. They move personal items, clear space, set out chairs borrowed from the kitchen. At precisely one o'clock, the first knock comes.

Louis opens the door to a woman carrying a small basket of vegetables. 'Good evening. Thank you for the use of your home. These are for you – a small token of how much we appreciate your help.'

'Of course. Please, come in.'

She enters, nods to Tina, following him to the bedroom.

Louis returns to the living room and hands Tina the basket of vegetables. Potatoes, a cabbage and three tomatoes.

'Oh my, this is too much, Louis. They don't have to do this, we are doing what we can. Letting them meet here doesn't come with a cost.'

'I know, but I think we just say thank you and accept the generous gift.'

'Andrée and Josie aren't even here to share it. I'll try to save it until they return.'

Three minutes later, two men arrive together, one of them the gentleman who was sent by Colonel Pallas. They disappear into Louis and Tina's bedroom; the door closes behind them.

Louis and Tina stay in the living room. They can hear murmurs through the door. Voices, but not words. Movement, but not specifics.

'Do you think we should offer them something?' Tina whispers. She's overwhelmed by the gift of vegetables.

'Better not. The less interaction, the better. They do their work, we do ours. No mingling.'

At two o'clock, the bedroom door opens. One by one, the strangers leave. A quiet, 'thank you', from each. And then they're gone, melting into the streets of Montparnasse.

Louis locks the door behind them. In the bedroom he finds everything exactly as he left it. Tina helps him return the chairs to the kitchen.

'That went well,' Tina says.

'Did it? We have no idea what they're doing. What they're planning. What risks they're taking that could come back to us.'

'We're all taking risks, Louis. Theirs are no different to ours. We give them a safe place. They fight the Germans. That's all we need to know.'

* * *

The final day in Barbizon arrives too quickly. Josie spends the morning with Solène, staying close to the village as promised. At lunch, Colette makes a request.

'Andrée, I know this is asking a lot, but there's a family camp near here, just outside Fontainebleau. It's run by the church, very respectable, very safe. Families from the parish attend and there are supervised activities, meals are provided. Solène and I are going, and I wondered if we could take Joséphine with us for a night. You could stay on with Sofie.'

Andrée hesitates, but the look on Josie's face is compelling.

'The camp is safe. The parish has been running it for years,' Sofie assures Andrée.

'Please,' Josie says quietly. 'I've never been to a camp. I've never . . . Solène is my friend. Please can I go?'

How can she possibly say no? How can she deny Josie this small piece of childhood fun?

'I'll write to my parents and tell them we're staying on for an extra couple of nights,' Andrée says, trying to ignore the feeling that she's making a mistake. 'But then we must get back to Paris.'

Josie's face glows with happiness.

That evening, Sofie and Andrée sit in the garden, watching the sun set over the forest. The air smells of lavender and pine. Josie has gone to bed already because she has an early start in the morning.

'Tell me about Josie,' Sofie says. 'Tina's mentioned her in her letters, but not the details. Not the whole story.'

Andrée hesitates. But this is Sofie, Tina's oldest friend. Someone who can be trusted. 'She's Jewish. Her mother sent her to us when they came for her family. In the middle of the night among all the chaos of her family and neighbours being taken, she followed her mother's instructions and ran to us. Now it's up to us to protect her until the war ends.'

Sofie nods slowly. 'I suspected as much. The way she looks over her shoulder. The way she flinches at loud noises. She's learned to be afraid.'

'She lost her father from illness a couple of years ago. Her mother and brother were then taken. We don't know if they're alive. We hope they are, but there's no way of finding out.'

'And you've kept her safe all this time.'

'We've tried. We changed her name, enrolled her in school with our surname, taught her to be invisible. But she's still a child, Sofie. She still needs to play, to have friends, to be happy. That's why I brought her here. That's why I'm letting her go to this camp. She needs to remember what it's like to just be a child.'

Sofie takes her hand. 'You're doing a brave thing. A good thing. That girl is lucky to have you. And if you hadn't noticed, that child is becoming a young woman, a teenager.'

'I'm lucky to have her. She's . . . she's become, well, like my daughter in all the ways that matter. When her mother returns, when this war ends, I'll have to give her back. And it will break my heart. But for now, she's mine to protect. And I will protect her with everything I have.'

* * *

Louis arrives at Doctor René's apartment at the agreed time. He rings the doorbell, three long, three short, and René comes down to let him in. In the apartment, they act quickly: the documents are ready. There are twenty identity cards and fifteen ration coupons. All perfect forgeries, courtesy of Jacques's careful work.

'These are for Agent?' René asks.

'Yes. His colleagues at the Sorbonne. The Germans are targeting academics now, sending them to work camps in Germany. Agent needs these to help them disappear.'

'Good. Every person we save is a victory.'

René hands over the package, carefully wrapped, innocuous-looking. 'Be careful, Louis. The Militia are everywhere. The Gestapo are paranoid. Don't take unnecessary risks.'

'I'm meeting Agent at Le Fleuron. It's a public place with plenty of witnesses. Gypsy will be there as cover. We'll just be three friends having lunch. Nothing suspicious about that.'

'Be careful just the same.'

Louis tucks the package into his briefcase, and on top he loads papers, books and his architectural drawings. The forged documents won't be found unless someone makes a thorough search.

Le Fleuron is busy when he arrives. German officers preside at several tables. There are also a few brave souls who simply want a decent meal and can afford the prices. Louis spots Agent already seated, looking professorial in his suit and spectacles.

'M. Levallois,' Agent greets him. 'Thank you for meeting me. Please, sit.'

Louis sits, places his briefcase beside his chair. 'I have the materials you requested.'

'Excellent. Shall we wait for . . .'

'Gentlemen.'

Louis looks up to find a German officer looming over the table. Behind him, another officer, younger, his hand resting on his holster.

'Good afternoon, sir,' Agent says pleasantly. 'How can we help you?'

'Identity papers. Both of you.'

Louis's heart pounds but his hands remain steady. 'Of course.' He reaches into his jacket for his papers. Agent does the same. The officer examines them carefully.

'Louis Levallois. Architect. And you –' he looks at Agent – 'Hubert Doré. Professor of history at the Sorbonne.'

'That's correct.'

'What is your business together?'

'M. Levallois is advising on renovations to the university library. We're discussing architectural plans,' Agent says smoothly.

The officer's eyes narrow. 'You are meeting in a restaurant? Not at the university?'

'We're having lunch. We're allowed to have lunch, aren't we?' Louis keeps his voice mild, unthreatening. An old man slightly confused by the tone of the questioning.

'Open your briefcase.'

Louis's stomach drops. 'My briefcase?'

'Now.'

'Is there a problem, officer?' Agent interjects.

'The briefcase. Now. Or we will take you both to headquarters for questioning.'

Louis reaches for the briefcase, moving slowly. Stalling. Where is Gypsy? She should be here by now. She's supposed to be here.

He places the briefcase on the table. His fingers fumble with the clasp. 'I'm sorry, officer. My hands. Arthritis. It makes the clasps difficult sometimes.'

'Open it, or I will.'

The younger officer steps closer, hand now gripping his pistol. Other diners are watching. The restaurant has fallen into silence.

Louis opens the first clasp. Then fumbles with the second. ‘I apologize. These old fingers . . .’

The officer grabs the briefcase, yanks it away. ‘Enough. I will open it myself.’

This is it, thinks Louis. He’ll find the forged documents and arrest us both. And then . . . torture, interrogation. The network compromised.

The officer opens the briefcase.

‘Mon cher! There you are! I’m so sorry I’m late!’

Gypsy sweeps into the restaurant in a cloud of perfume and crimson silk. She’s breathtaking, elegant, confident, every inch the sophisticated Parisian woman. She goes directly to their table, kisses Louis on both cheeks, then Agent.

‘The traffic was impossible. And then I couldn’t find my gloves. You know how I am about my gloves.’

She turns to the German officer, gives him a dazzling smile. ‘Oh, are you checking papers? How thorough of you. Here’s mine.’ She produces her identity card with a flourish.

The officer looks at her, then at the identity card. ‘Mme Burdet, I know who you are, the manager of this fine establishment we find ourselves in.’

‘That’s right. These two gentlemen are my dear friends. We’re having lunch to discuss –’

‘The renovations to the Sorbonne library,’ Agent interjects.

Gypsy doesn’t miss a beat. ‘I’m going to be donating to the renovations and M. Levallois is graciously going to let have a look at his plans. You never know, I might want to add a little bit of my own design. Brighten it up a bit.’

‘Mme Burdet, I would be delighted with anything you wish to contribute to the design,’ Louis smiles at her.

The two German officers are not sure where to look. The senior of them notices colleagues with more medals and decorations than he has now glaring at them.

‘I think a touch of purple to match your dress, and some sparkle, would be a welcome addition to the library,’ Agent throws in.

Gypsy laughs, musical and light. ‘Now, officer, you were checking his briefcase. I hope you find his boring architectural drawings; just know they haven’t been stamped with my personal flair.’

She waves her arms around the restaurant, owning the sumptuous décor that brings so many Germans to her establishment.

The officer looks down at the briefcase in his hands. Looks at Gypsy, radiant and charming. Looks at Louis and Agent, two elderly men having lunch with a beautiful woman.

He closes the briefcase and hands it back to Louis.

‘Enjoy your lunch,’ he says with a sharp nod, and turns to go, his colleague on his heels.

Gypsy sits, signals the waiter. ‘Bernard, wine, please. And the fish for all of us. I’m absolutely famished.’ She keeps her voice bright, cheerful, but her eyes are sharp. Alert.

They sit in silence for a moment. Then Agent speaks, very quietly. ‘Thank you.’

‘Don’t thank me yet. They’re still watching. We need to have lunch. Make it look real.’

She smiles brilliantly, as if they’re discussing something delightful.

‘How long can you stay?’

‘An hour,’ Louis says.

‘Perfect. Then we part ways, and you two never meet in a public place again. Understood?’ she reprimands them.

‘Understood,’ Agent agrees.

The food arrives. They eat. They talk about nothing, weather, opera, university gossip. Gypsy is effervescent, charming, keeping up a steady stream of chatter that covers any awkwardness. The Germans lose interest, focus on other diners.

When they finally leave, Agent takes the briefcase. A smooth handoff, covered by Gypsy kissing Louis goodbye, her handbag brushing against the briefcase as Agent lifts it.

‘Thank you, for lunch. For everything,’ Agent whispers.

‘Thank you, my dear. We must do this again soon, I so enjoy your company,’ she says.

They separate. Louis walks home, his hands finally starting to shake. That was too close. Far too close.

* * *

The next morning, Andrée waits at Colette’s house for Josie to return from camp. She is eager to hear about Josie’s adventures. But when the bus pulls up and the children disembark, Josie seems withdrawn. She says a quick goodbye to Solène and joins Andrée.

‘Did you have a good time?’ Andrée asks.

‘It was fine.’

‘Just fine? You were so excited.’

‘Can we go home?’

Something is wrong. Very wrong. Andrée takes her hand. ‘Of course. Let’s say goodbye to Colette and –’

‘I already said goodbye. I don’t want to talk to them. Please. Can we just go?’

Andrée doesn't argue. They head back to Sofie's house, where they're to spend a last night. Josie doesn't speak the entire way. Only when they're safely inside, when the door is locked behind them, does she collapse onto the sofa, sobbing. She heaves great, wrenching sobs that shake her entire body. Andrée holds her, bewildered, frightened.

'Josie, what happened? What did they do?'

'They tried to make me Christian,' she chokes out. 'Mme Durand and the other adults. They said they were saving my soul. They made me read the Bible – the Christian parts. They taught me their prayers. They made me thank Jesus before every meal. Mme Durand started talking about washing away my sins, said I would go to hell unless I was a Christian.'

Rage, pure white-hot rage, floods through Andrée.

'Did she hurt you?'

'No. But she scared me. She kept saying she was trying to save me. That I couldn't go to heaven if I stayed Jewish. That my soul was in danger. She said my parents would want this. She said if I loved God, I would accept Jesus.' Josie looks up at Andrée, her face wet with tears. 'I told her I am Jewish. My Papa was Jewish. My Maman is Jewish. Léon is Jewish. I am Jewish. And I will always be Jewish. Even if it means I go to hell. Even if it means God doesn't love me. I will be what my family is.'

Andrée pulls her close. 'You were right. You are right. And God does love you. Your God. The God of your parents. You don't need to be Christian to be loved, Josie. You don't need to be Christian to be saved. You are perfect exactly as you are.'

'I never want to go back there. I never want to see Mme Durand or Solène again. Or that camp. Or any of those people.'

'You won't. I promise. You will never have to see them again.'

Andrée leaves Josie with Sofie and goes directly to Colette's house. She knocks hard on the door. Colette opens the door and pales when she sees Andrée's face.

‘Andrée, I –’

‘How dare you.’ The words come out quiet. Deadly.

‘I was trying to help. To save her soul. She’s living in sin, Andrée. She’s Jewish. She needs –’

‘She needs nothing from you. Nothing. Do you understand what you’ve done? Do you understand the trust you violated?’

‘I thought you would understand. I thought you would want her to be saved. To be safe. Christians are safe. Jews are hunted. If she converts, she could –’

‘She is not converting. She will never convert. Her mother gave her to me as a Jewish girl, and I will return her to her mother as a Jewish girl. That is my promise. That is my duty. You had no right.’

‘I was trying to protect her!’

‘You tried to erase her. You tried to take away the one thing she has left of her family, her faith, her identity. You tried to baptize a child against her will. That’s not protection. That’s not salvation. That’s violence.’

Colette’s face hardens. ‘She’s going to hell, Andrée. I tried to save her from hell. If you send her back to her mother as a Jew, you’re condemning her to eternal damnation.’

‘Then let her be damned. Let her stand with her family in whatever afterlife awaits them. She would rather go to hell with her people than to heaven as a traitor to them.’

‘You’re making a mistake.’

‘No. You made the mistake. You betrayed my trust. You hurt a child who has already been hurt more than any child should be. And you did it thinking you were doing God’s work. Well, if your God wants Jewish children forcibly converted, then I want nothing to do with him.’

Colette doesn't answer. Just stands in her doorway, righteousness and hurt etched into her features.

Back at Sofie's house, after Josie has gone to sleep, worn out by all the emotion, Andrée tells her Tata everything and the older woman's face goes white.

'I vouched for her. I told you she was safe, I'm so sorry, Andrée. I had no idea. I know she goes to church, that she seems devout, but I never thought – I never imagined she would do something like this.'

'It's not your fault. She hid it well. And she thinks she did the right thing. That's what makes it even worse. She thinks she was saving Josie. But now we must ask ourselves: will she tell the authorities that we're hiding a Jewish child?'

Sofie's face hardens. 'You take Josie back to Paris. Leave Colette to me. I don't think she will say anything, but I'll make very sure she doesn't, mark my words.'

The next morning they make hasty goodbyes, Josie managing a watery smile. The magic of the week is undone, Josie's holiday dream turned to a nightmare.

* * *

Back in Paris, Andrée tells Louis and Tina everything. They sit at the table, listening in horror.

'I'll talk to her,' Tina says.

'Maman, I don't think . . .'

'Let me try.'

Tina goes to Josie's room, knocks softly. 'Josie? It's Grand-Mère. May I come in?'

A long pause. Then, 'Yes.'

Tina enters. Josie sits on her bed, hugging her knees. Tina sits beside her, takes her hand.

‘Andrée told us about Colette. I’m so sorry, ma petite. That should never have happened to you.’

‘She said I was going to hell.’

‘You’re not going to hell. You’re going wherever your family goes. And wherever that is, it will be full of love and light, because you’re all good people. And you’re not going there for a very long time.’

‘But what if she’s right? What if being Jewish means God doesn’t love me?’

‘Josie, look at me. God loves you. Your God. The God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. The God of Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. The God your father prayed to. The God your mother prays to. That God loves you more than you can possibly imagine. You don’t need to be anything other than what you are.’

‘I want to be more Jewish. I want to know more. I don’t want to forget. I don’t want them to make me forget.’

Tina smiles. ‘Then we’ll help you remember. We’ll ask Dancer if we can come for Shabbat dinner. We’ll ask her to teach you more about Jewish traditions, Jewish holidays, Jewish prayers. She may not have been born Jewish, but when she married a Jewish man, she took on his way of life. You won’t forget, Josie. We won’t let you forget.’

‘Promise?’

‘I promise. You are Jewish. You will always be Jewish. And when your Maman comes home, she will find you exactly as she left you, a more grown-up Jewish girl, with a Jewish heart, who knows who she is and who her people are.’

Josie throws her arms around Tina, crying again. But these tears are different. They are tears of relief, of release and of gratitude. She sits up straight: she is a Jewish girl. Strong. Brave. Unbroken.

Chapter Twenty-one

The war grinds on.

That's the phrase Louis uses whenever Josie asks how long until it's over. 'The war grinds on,' he says, and she understands. Not weeks. Not months. No end in sight. Life becomes a rhythm of survival. Wake up. Check if there's bread. Queue for rations. Attend piano lessons or give them. Thursday meetings. Friday evenings at Dancer's when it's safe. Sleep. Repeat. The city grows greyer, thinner, hungrier. The occupation tightens its grip like a fist closing around a throat.

Gatherings of more than a handful of people are forbidden, the Militia enforcing the rule with the enthusiasm of men who have discovered that cruelty comes with a uniform. They move in packs through the streets, stopping whoever they please, demanding papers, looking for reasons to exert brutality. Most days they don't need one.

Josie continues at school in Mlle Évrard's care, thinner than last year, quieter, more watchful than ever. The other girls whisper about the war; about fathers and brothers sent to Germany, about the families who have been disappeared overnight. It has been a difficult summer for so many of the school's students. The whispers carry weight now. Fear.

One morning, between her piano lessons at the school, Andrée slips quietly into the back of Joséphine's classroom. Josie is at her desk, but she is somewhere else entirely: hollow-eyed, hunched against the cold, lost in the particular stupor that hunger and exhaustion produce in children. The teacher calls on her. Josie doesn't respond. The teacher repeats the name – Levallois – sharply, and still Josie doesn't move. Andrée's heart seizes. This teacher, she realizes, she doesn't entirely trust. She's new to the school and doesn't necessarily know Josie's history.

It is Monique who comes to the rescue yet again, nudging Josie firmly with her elbow, bringing her back to the room. Josie blinks, murmurs an apology, and the moment

passes. But Andrée stands in the back of the room, in the shadows, long after the lesson has moved on, her hands pressed flat against her sides, breathing carefully.

Monique's father was conscripted into forced labour in July. They haven't heard from him since. Monique comes to piano lessons and is no longer the bright sunny girl Andrée first met. Her fingers stumble over pieces she once knew so well. Andrée doesn't correct her, reasoning that sometimes music isn't about precision, sometimes it's about just having something to do with your hands while your world falls apart.

One Sunday, Cat appears unannounced, a rarity. He has managed – through means Andrée knows better than to ask about – to find a little extra food. A small parcel. She decides to take it to Stéphanie and Monique. She knows their need is great, and the concierge shared some extras with them earlier in the week.

She is two streets from their building when they stop her. Two militiamen, young, bored, looking for something to do with their afternoon. They eye the bag immediately.

'What's in there?'

Andrée keeps her voice light, her smile easy. She lets them look and draw their own conclusions about the contents, conclusions that are entirely correct. What follows is several minutes she will not easily forget, during which she laughs at things that aren't funny, defers to men she despises and deploys every quiet weapon available to her. By the time they wave her on, she is shaking – not with fear but with something closer to fury. She walks the rest of the way to Stéphanie's building with her jaw tight, thinking of all the things she wishes she said, all the things she wanted to do. She would like to have spat in their faces. She still would.

Stéphanie opens the door and takes one look at her. 'Come in. Are you all right? Sit down.'

'I'm fine,' Andrée says, and holds out the parcel.

The mysterious cell continues to meet in Louis and Tina's bedroom every Tuesday. They arrive separately, leave separately, never speak to their hosts beyond a quiet 'thank you'. Louis still doesn't know their names. Doesn't know what they're planning. He doesn't want to know. Ignorance is their only protection if the Gestapo or Militia comes. But how much protection is ignorance, even if believed, given that they've allowed their home to be used for clandestine meetings?

One Tuesday evening, going into the bedroom, Louis finds a note tucked under a book on the dresser. Just three words: *You are appreciated.*

He shows it to Tina. She smiles sadly. 'We're all in this together. Even the strangers.'

Autumn arrives and the leaves carpet the streets of Paris in gold. The city is especially beautiful – even under occupation – because its radiance feels like an act of defiance.

Josie and Andrée walk through the Jardins du Luxembourg on a Saturday afternoon. German soldiers patrol the paths. French children play in the fountain, pretending everything is normal. The pretence is exhausting.

'Do you remember what normal was like?' Josie asks.

'Before the war?'

'Yes. I try to remember, but it's getting harder. I can't remember what Papa's voice sounded like. I can't remember the smell of Maman's perfume.' Her voice breaks. 'I'm forgetting them.'

Andrée stops walking, takes both of Josie's hands. 'You're not forgetting them. You're surviving. There's a difference. And when your Maman comes home, when you see her again, you'll remember everything. The sound of her voice, the smell of her perfume, the way she laughed. It's all still there, Josie. It's just buried beneath the need to survive.'

'What if she doesn't come home?'

This is the question on all their minds. The question none of them has dared speak aloud.

Andrée takes a deep breath. ‘Then you’ll remember anyway. And you’ll tell your own children about her. About your Papa. About Léon. You’ll make sure they’re never forgotten.’

* * *

They’re gathered in the kitchen for their meeting one Thursday when Agent arrives, late, which is unlike him. The others look up. One glance at his face and the quiet conversation dies.

He sits down heavily without removing his coat.

‘Colonel Pallas’s courier was arrested three days ago,’ he says.

No one speaks.

‘They had her at Militia headquarters.’ He stops. Starts again. ‘They wanted names, addresses, meeting places.’ He looks at the table. ‘She gave them nothing. Not a word. For three days, she uttered not one word.’

Tina sets down the cup she is holding very carefully, as though it might break.

‘She died this morning.’

The kitchen is very quiet. Outside, a car horn sounds. Then silence again.

It is Louis who moves first. He goes to the back of the pantry and crouches down, shifting things aside, and returns with a bottle of wine – one of the last, dark with age, saved for a moment that matters. He sets it on the table without a word, finds glasses and fills each one.

He raises his glass. The others follow.

‘She could have saved herself,’ Agent says, his voice rough. ‘She knew enough to save herself. She chose not to.’

‘She died for us,’ Louis says quietly. ‘For all of us in this room. And for group like us across this city.’

‘Then we honour her silence,’ Tina says. ‘We keep fighting. We don’t let her death mean nothing.’

They drink. To a young woman whose real name they never knew, whose face some of them never saw, who died in the dark so that others might stay hidden. They stand with their glasses raised a moment longer than necessary, because it feels wrong to put them down too quickly, to move on too soon.

Agent looks around the table at each of them. ‘She didn’t break,’ he says, almost to himself. ‘Whatever they did – she didn’t break.’

No one answers. There is nothing to add to that. They sit together in the kitchen and let the silence hold her memory.

* * *

The winter of 1943 arrives early and is vicious. There’s no coal for heating, so Tina drapes blankets over the windows to keep out the draughts, but the icy air seeps through anyway. They wear their coats indoors, layers of jumpers and vests beneath. Josie practises piano with fingerless gloves, her breath misting in the air, her stiff fingers clumsy.

The cold joins rank with their enemies, threating to strike them down as much as any Militia man. Louis has taken to disappearing into the cellar on weekend afternoons, returning with chairs so old and forgotten that no one can remember where they came from. He breaks them apart quietly, methodically, feeding the pieces into the stove one by one. He doesn’t talk about it and neither does Tina. There is dignity in not naming the acts they’ve been forced into by desperation.

The food situation grows ever more precarious. The ration cards provide barely enough to survive. A slice of bread for breakfast, stale but warm, a scraping of jam

sometimes. There's usually watery swede soup for lunch, followed by roasted swedes for dinner, if they're lucky.

Tina has lost even more weight, her wedding ring loose on her finger. Louis's clothes hang on him like he's a scarecrow. Andrée's cheekbones have sharpened, her eyes are hollow.

'You're all getting thinner,' Josie observes.

'So are you, ma petite,' Tina says gently.

'But I'm young. I'm supposed to be thin. You're . . .' She doesn't finish. She doesn't need to.

'We all need to eat more. But there isn't more. So we share what we have and we manage.'

Maurice continues to help when he can. A potato appears on their doorstep. An egg. Once, a small chicken. He never says where it comes from and they never ask. Probably the black market.

One evening, Maurice knocks with a package. 'Someone left this for you downstairs. I didn't see them.'

Inside: bread. Real bread, fresh bread, the crust golden, the inside soft. A small jar of jam. And a note: *For the family who saved me. Anonymous gratitude*.

They don't know who it's from. Don't know which of the dozens of people they've helped over the years felt compelled to give something back. But they eat the bread slowly, savouring every bite, knowing that somewhere in Paris, someone they saved is thinking of them.

* * *

Hanukkah begins on the 21 December. Dancer invites them to celebrate once again. But this year is different. This year, there's almost no food. This year, even hope is a luxury they can barely afford.

They gather in her apartment, the Levallois family, Dancer and Philippe. They are six souls warming each other with their presence since there's no fuel for the stove.

Dancer has managed, miraculously, to make latkes. Tiny ones, barely the size of a saucer, made with black-market potatoes and precious oil saved drop by drop. She serves them solemnly, one per person. It feels like a feast.

'This is all I have. But it's enough for the miracle. One portion that should feed one, feeding six. Just like the oil that burned for eight days when it should have lasted only one.'

Josie lights the shamash. She says the blessing in Hebrew, her voice clear and strong and lights the first candle. She's been practising with Dancer on the occasional Friday evening they spend together. She knows it perfectly now. The words are muscle memory, heart memory.

'*Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha'olam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Hanukkah*.'

They sing Ma'oz Tzur. Quietly, because walls have ears and betrayal wears many faces. But they sing and remember and refuse to be erased.

'Why do we celebrate Hanukkah?' Dancer asks, teaching even in hunger, even in darkness.

'Because the Maccabees won,' Philippe says. 'Because they fought back and won.'

'And because the oil lasted eight days,' Josie adds. 'Because miracles happen. Even when there's no reason to hope, miracles happen.'

‘Exactly,’ Dancer says, her eyes bright with tears. ‘We celebrate resistance. We celebrate survival. We celebrate the miracle of still being here, still being Jewish, still being us, despite everything they’ve done to destroy us.’

They don’t let the candles burn down, but put them out as they’re short supply. Then they eat the tiny latkes and Josie plays dreidel with Philippe. Dancer found the small spinning top among her husband’s possessions when she was cutting down a pair of his trousers to make some warm ones for Philippe. They gamble for nothing, there are no chocolate coins, no nuts or dried fruits. But they spin the wooden top anyway, laughing when it lands on *gimel*, groaning when it lands on *nun*. The sounds of childhood echo through the apartment, precious and rare.

Walking home through the December darkness, Josie asks, ‘Do you think Maman is celebrating Hanukkah? Wherever she is?’

Andrée’s throat tightens. ‘I hope so. I hope she found a way. Even if it’s just lighting a match in secret. Even if it’s just saying the blessing in her mind. I hope she’s celebrating.’

‘I hope so too.’

* * *

None of the adults feel any enthusiasm for Christmas, but they make an effort for Josie’s sake. The tree and decorations come up from the cellar. Their sparkle brings smiles as the family sits looking at it, dreaming of a time when once again gifts will surround it, when abundance won’t be a distant memory.

On Christmas Eve morning, Louis disappears down into the cellar via the back staircase and is gone so long that Tina sends Andrée down to find out what’s become of him. They reappear triumphant, carrying wood for the stove – an increasingly scarce commodity.

‘Where on earth did you find it?’ Tina asks as she stokes the stove.

‘Maurice mentioned there was a set of old shelves down there that hadn’t been moved in twenty years,’ Louis answers. It’s as though he’s discovered gold.

‘That man,’ Tina replies. ‘I’d invite him to come and sit with us this evening, but I know he’d refuse. It would put him in danger. But he is our guardian angel.’

Later that day the doorbell rings: three long, three short.

Mystified, Louis opens the door.

Gypsy stands there in her furs. ‘Mes chers, I’m not coming in – can’t stop. I would have sent someone but there’s no one at the restaurant I trust. Here.’

She thrusts a basket into Louis’s stunned hands, blows a kiss, and is gone down the stairs before he can thank her.

Tina takes the basket into the kitchen. Inside is a small chicken, smuggled from Le Fleuron, and two potatoes. An olive-oil bottle contains enough red wine for a glass each.

‘She crossed the city carrying this. Risked arrest so we could eat,’ Tina says in wonder. ‘I’ll stretch this for three days. Roast tonight, cold tomorrow, and broth from the bones.’

Josie gives gifts she made herself. For Tina, a bookmark embroidered with flowers, the stitches tiny and precise. For Louis, a drawing of the bookshop, every detail perfect. For Andrée, a poem about music copied in careful handwriting, the words chosen with love.

Louis hands Joséphine a package. ‘This is from Tata Andrée and me.’

Slowly, carefully, Josie unties the string, folding it neatly to be used again. The paper is treated with reverence, smoothed and placed with the string. She holds a book with a simple cover of Prussian blue with black lettering: *Clementi, Sechs Sonatinen. Opus 36.* Six Sonatinas. Without being told to, she flips the cover open and reads the inscription before throwing herself into Andrée’s arms.

Tina gives her a handkerchief embroidered with the initials *J.L.*. Not her real initials. But the ones that keep her safe.

'Thank you, Grand-Mère. It's beautiful.'

'When this is over, when your Maman comes home, I'll embroider you a new one. With your real initials. I promise.'

If she comes home. The words hang in the air unspoken. In the afternoon, Josie and Andrée play Christmas carols on the piano and they all sing. '*Il est né le divin enfant . . .*' The music feels defiant somehow. A reminder that joy existed once. That it might exist again.

The mysterious cell doesn't meet that week. Even Resistance fighters take Christmas off. But the following Tuesday, they return. Same routine. Same silence. Same efficiency.

* * *

The new year arrives without fanfare. There is nothing to celebrate. 1944 will be another year of occupation. Another year of war. Another year of dying slowly.

The cold intensifies. January is brutal, merciless. People freeze to death in their apartments, mostly old people on their own mostly, having no one with whom to share body heat. The Levallois family sleeps together in the living room, sharing blankets, sharing warmth, keeping each other alive. It's the only way.

Food grows scarcer still. The Germans have requisitioned everything and the ration cards buy almost nothing. The Germans have decreed that only day-old bread can be sold. No one is to enjoy fresh bread. A tiny scraping of butter if you're lucky. And sometimes an egg.

One morning, Tina faints from hunger and cold while standing in the ration queue. Fortunately Louis was with her that day. He brings her home and forces her to eat his portion of bread.

'I can't. You need –'

'Eat, Tina. Please.' His voice breaks. 'I can't lose you. Not now. Not like this.'

She eats. But she cries while she chews, knowing that Louis is sacrificing himself for her, knowing that they're all making sacrifices for each other, all knowing that it might not be enough.

Josie sees everything, her grandparents growing weaker, the gnawing hunger in their eyes, the way their hands shake, the way they move slower each day. She tries to give them her portions, but they refuse.

'You're still growing, ma petite. You need it more.'

'But you're dying.'

Dying. The word hangs in the air. They're all dying. Slowly. From hunger and cold and despair.

'We're surviving,' Andrée corrects her firmly. 'Not dying. There's a huge difference.'

But Josie isn't sure she believes that any more. And neither, if she's honest, is Andrée.

February brings no relief. The cold persists. The hunger persists. Hope dies a little more each day. People stop talking about when the war will end. They just try to make it through another day. There is no fuel to heat the school, so it closes for week. The children stay at home, huddled under blankets, trying not to freeze.

Monique stops coming to piano lessons. Her mother sends word: she's sorry but they can't pay any more. Everything they have goes on food. Music is a luxury they can no longer afford.

Andrée would be willing to not charge them for lessons, but she understands. Monique needs to conserve her strength. Coming to rue Blomet, walking up the stairs, sitting at the piano, practising, it all takes energy. Energy requires food and there is none.

To compound their growing desperation, the network loses a member. Félix is arrested during a sabotage operation – caught cutting communication lines, wire cutters still

in his hands, no plausible excuse available to him. He is taken to Militia headquarters. They wait for news, but days pass. Eventually, word comes through. Agent arrives at the Thursday meeting carrying the heavy weight of the information.

Félix is dead. Executed. Shot in the courtyard like an injured animal.

They don't know if he talked. They have no idea if he compromised the network. Should they scatter, change their meeting place, assume they're burned?

No one moves. Andrée feels Cat's hand find hers beneath the table.

Agent tells them what he knows, which isn't much. Whether he said anything before the end – whether their names were spoken in that courtyard or in the rooms before it – he does not know. They may never know.

The meeting is sombre. A rare visit from Doctor René, plus Agent, Dancer, Cat, Louis, Tina, Andrée. Seven people who used to be eight. How many more will they lose?

'We keep going,' Agent says, his voice hollow. 'That's all we can do. We keep going.'

They file out in ones and twos, as always. Andrée sees them to the door, one after another, each leaving with a quiet word or none at all. Cat is last. He waits in the hallway while she closes the door behind the others, and when she turns back he's standing there with his coat half on, watching her. That expression on his face again: unguarded, stripped of the easy charm he wears like a second skin.

'I don't know what I'd do,' he says quietly, 'if something happened to you. I genuinely don't know.'

Andrée looks at him for a long moment. There are a hundred things she could say. Instead she reaches up and touches his face briefly, just for a moment.

He covers her hand with his before she can lower it.

They stand like that in the dim hallway, just the two of them, the cold pressing in at the edges of the door.

‘Go home safely,’ she says softly. ‘That’s what you can do.’

He nods, buttons his coat and slips out into the night.

Andrée closes the door and leans against it for a moment in the silence.

It’s getting harder to believe. Harder to hope. Harder to remember why they’re fighting. The Allies seem no closer, and liberation feels impossible. They are simply enduring the brutality of occupation.

At home, Josie practises piano less. She is too weak, too cold, too hungry. Her fingers stumble and her concentration is minimal. Andrée doesn’t push her. What’s the point? Survival is more important than ‘Clair de Lune’. Survival is more important than Chopin. Survival is all that matters now.

Chapter Twenty-two

When spring arrives, it brings no warmth. Paris remains cold and grey and starving. The flowers bloom in the parks, tended by no one, enjoyed by no one. This abundant beauty feels obscene when people are so hungry.

The mysterious cell continues to meet, and Louis can't help but wonder how they still have the strength. What are they planning that's so important it's worth using precious energy, precious calories, on meetings?

One Tuesday, after they leave, he finds another note. *Liberation is coming. Hold on*.

He shows it to Tina. She reads it, laughs bitterly. 'Liberation. From where? The Allies are still stuck in Italy. The Russians are hundreds of miles away. Who's coming to liberate us?'

'Maybe they know something we don't.'

'Maybe they're just as desperate as we are. Clinging to hope because the alternative would mean giving up.'

The following Tuesday, as the strangers arrive for their meeting, the man who first visited the Levallois apartment, the unnamed leader of the other cell, pulls Louis aside in the hallway.

'Monsieur, Colonel Pallas has asked if you would join us today. We need to discuss a critical mission. Your expertise is required.'

Louis's pulse quickens. A mission. After all these months of hiding strangers, of providing a safe place, of not knowing, and now, finally, action.

'Of course. I'll join you.'

He follows the man into his own bedroom. The door closes. And for the first time, Louis learns what they've been planning. What they need from him. Where he needs to go.

Normandy.

* * *

Tina and Andrée have been pacing the living room, exchanging glances, desperate to know why Louis attended the meeting. ‘Later,’ was Louis’s only response each time they pressed him. Now Josie is asleep, they gather around the table in hushed tones, the lamp turned low.

‘Colonel Pallas gave the order, specifically for me. I must go.’

‘Louis, how much can you tell us? Why Normandy? Where in Normandy do they want you to go?’ Tina’s voice is tight with fear.

Louis takes a breath. ‘I’m to travel to Bayeux. I’ll be met there. They need my draughtsman skills, my architect’s eye, to outline the bunkers and German positions along the coast. I’m to map them.’ He pauses. ‘Nothing was said explicitly, but I can only guess that an invasion is being planned. If I can provide details of the German fortifications, it will help the Allies. That’s my guess. Why else would they ask me to enter the lion’s den?’

‘If you’re right, if the Germans fear an invasion is coming, the whole area will be crawling with soldiers. How can you possibly get close enough to see their defences?’ Andrée’s voice rises, panic creeping in.

‘We don’t know how close I can get. Or if I can get close enough to report back accurately. But I must try.’

He looks at them both.

‘Tell me you understand.’

Silence. Heavy. Suffocating.

‘Is anyone from their cell going with you?’ Tina finally asks.

‘Yes, their leader.’

‘Do you know his name?’ Andrée asks.

‘I do, but I’m not going to tell you. I know we’ve always said there will be no secrets between us. However, in this instance, I’m breaking my promise.’

Andrée understands. If she doesn't know the name, she can't be forced to reveal it.

'What if something happens to you? How will we know?' Tina fails to keep the quiver from her voice.

Louis reaches across the table, takes her hands. 'How about we believe I will be coming home?'

'What do we tell Josie?'

'The same thing we've always told her. I'm going away to help bring about the end of the war. She's never asked for more information. She won't this time.'

'What is your cover story? Do you have papers?' Andrée asks, already thinking like a Resistance operative.

'I'll be travelling on forged papers under a false name. I'll carry nothing that identifies me. Should something happen to me, there will be no trail back to you or to our home. Your safety was my one requirement for accepting the mission.'

Tina's eyes fill with tears. 'Your one request was for our safety – not yours.'

'Always yours,' he says simply.

* * *

The next morning, Josie learns that Grand-Père will be going away for a few days. As predicted, she asks no questions. She's learned not to. She hugs him tightly before she leaves for school. Blows him a kiss from the doorway. With a beautiful smile, she mouths the words 'I love you'.

As soon as the door closes behind Josie, Louis goes to his bedroom to change. He wanted Josie to see him as she sees him every day, in a smart shirt and trousers. Her professional and respectable Grand-Père.

When he walks back into the living room he is dressed in worn trousers and scuffed shoes, a blue work shirt frayed at the collar. He looks like a labourer or a farmer. Like someone easy to ignore.

‘Those trousers definitely don’t fit you any more,’ Tina says, her voice catching. She undoes his belt, pulls it a notch or two tighter. The weight he’s lost!

‘I thought I had a cap somewhere, but I can’t seem to find it.’

‘I’ll look,’ Tina says, heading to the bedroom. She needs a moment, just a minute, to compose herself.

With the located cloth cap placed just so on his head, Louis wraps his arms around Andrée and Tina. ‘You know I’ll be careful. I will come home.’

Andrée struggles to get the words out. ‘How . . . how long do you think you’ll be gone?’

‘What you’re really asking is how long you should wait before you start worrying.’

‘Oh no, husband. We started worrying the second you told us you were going on this mission.’

Louis laughs quietly, but it’s a hollow sound.

‘Fair enough.’ He pauses. Thinks. Calculates distance, risk, possibilities. ‘A week. Give me a week.’

One final embrace. One final look at the apartment, at his home, his sanctuary. Then he’s gone.

* * *

The days pass like years. Tina jumps at every footstep on the stairs. Andrée stares out the window, peering at every figure in a cap, hoping and praying it’s her father. Josie watches but says nothing. She’s learned that sometimes silence is kindness.

On Sunday, the fifth day after Louis left, Andrée's appetite vanishes. She doesn't care.

'He'll come home,' Tina says firmly. 'He promised. He'll come home.'

On day six, in the afternoon, before Josie is due back from school, there's a knock at the door.

Andrée freezes. Tina's hand goes to her throat. Is it Louis? Or is it the Gestapo or Militia? Are they coming to tell her he's been arrested? Or worse, executed?

Tina opens the door.

Louis stands there. He looks even thinner, even more gaunt. He's unshaven, his face grey with exhaustion. His clothes are filthy, reeking of travel and fear. But he's alive. His eyes are sparkling. Triumphant.

The sparkle tells Andrée and Tina everything they need to know. His mission was successful.

They pull him inside and draw him into a tearful hug. Tina runs her hands over his bristly face again and again, confirming he's real, he's here, he came home to them.

When they finally release him, when the tears dry up, they sit down. Louis unbuttons his shirt, pulls out several pieces of paper hidden between his shirt and undergarments.

'I must get these redrawn immediately. My . . . friend will be here in an hour to collect them and take them to the Colonel. This was, after all, his mission.'

'Not before bathing,' Tina says, half joking, half serious.

'Tina, please. These are critical. They need to get to London immediately. Every hour matters.'

'And we need this place smelling fresh and clean before Josie gets home. To the bathroom now. And don't forget to shave.'

Knowing this argument is not one he's going to win, Louis heads to the bathroom.

As the door closes, Tina and Andrée immediately grab the sketches laid out on the table. They can see the outline of the coastline, the Baie de Seine unmistakable. The roads leading down to each beach are shown in careful detail. There are bunkers scattered along the coast, fortifications and gun emplacements.

Only Louis knows what all the squiggles represent. What the measurements mean. What the Germans have built against an invasion of the land they themselves invaded.

In an hour, these sketches will be marked up, clarified, sent to Colonel Pallas and then to London.

'We can but dream,' Tina says quietly, reverently, touching the papers like they're holy relics. 'Dream that, with these, the war will turn.'

For the first time in a long time, they feel a glimmer of hope.

* * *

The word comes in May, passed from cell to cell, from network to network.

The word is invasion.

The Allies are coming. It's no longer a rumour, or a dream, but fact, gathered from intelligence supplied from London and confirmed by multiple sources. The invasion of France is imminent. It is mere weeks away. Maybe even days.

Only Louis, Tina and Andrée know of the small part Louis played in these developments. The information he risked his life to gather. The maps he drew that might save thousands of Allied lives on the beaches of Normandy.

The secret cell returns for their Tuesday meeting and again Louis is asked to join them. As the door closes behind the last stranger Louis tells Tina and Andrée what has been said in hushed tones, in their bedroom. They sit at the dining table, hardly daring to believe it.

'Liberation,' Tina whispers. 'Real liberation. Not someday, but soon.'

'What do we do until then?' Andrée asks.

‘We survive, ma petite. We take care and we prepare. And when the moment comes, we fight.’

They tell Josie. Not the specifics, she doesn’t need to know about sabotage and railways, about the violence that’s coming. But they tell her that they believe liberation is close. They trust her not to tell anyone else – no one at all.

‘How soon?’ she asks, her voice small, hopeful.

‘Soon. Just weeks away.’

For the first time in months, Josie smiles. Not the polite smile she saves for school. Not the careful smile she uses with strangers. Instead she beams, joy breaking through despair.

* * *

It’s a month of rain. Cold, relentless rain that soaks through their clothes to their skin. The apartment develops leaks. Tina puts out pots to catch the drips. The sound of water hitting metal becomes the soundtrack of their lives. Drip. Drip. Drip. Doctor René brings medicine when he can. Aspirin for Tina’s headaches. Vitamins for Josie. But medicine can’t treat hunger. Medicine can’t cure cold or anguish.

Josie turns to the piano less and less. It’s a cold spring, and the apartment is freezing. The music feels hollow, pointless. What good is Beethoven when you’re starving? What good is beauty when you’re dying? But one night, she plays anyway. Not Beethoven. Not Chopin. It takes Andrée a few notes to recognize ‘Ma’oz Tzur’, the Hanukkah song her father taught her. She plays it repeatedly, adding chords, the melody filling the apartment with defiance, with resistance, with the refusal to surrender.

‘Why that song?’ Andrée asks.

‘Because it’s about fighting back. About not giving up. About miracles when everything seems hopeless.’ Josie’s hands don’t stop moving. ‘We need a miracle, Tata Andrée. We need the oil to last eight days. We need something to change.’

‘Maybe it will. Maybe it already is, and we just don’t know it yet.’

Spring is slow to arrive. But with the news of possible liberation, hope feels almost like warmer weather, or like a candle in the darkness. A small, flickering, fragile glow, but burning nonetheless.

The network redoubles its efforts. More acts of sabotage take place and more missions are allocated. All of Paris is preparing for what comes next. The Resistance has waited four years for this moment. They won’t waste it.

Dancer transmits constantly now. Hour after hour, her fingers tapping code, sending intelligence to London about troop movements, supply lines, defensive positions. Sending anything that might help to end the war.

The knock at the door is unexpected. Andrée opens it to find Cat standing in the hallway, hat in hand, wearing the expression of a man who has just made a decision he hasn’t entirely thought through.

‘Come for a walk with me,’ he says.

Andrée looks at him. ‘A walk?’

‘Yes.’

‘Now?’

‘If you’re not busy.’

She gets her coat.

They meander through the neighbourhood, falling into step the way people do when they have walked together before and intend to again. The streets are quiet in the thin afternoon light. After a while, Andrée glances at him sideways.

‘So,’ she says, ‘why did you come?’

‘I was passing.’

‘You were not passing. I live nowhere near any place you might be passing.’

‘I wanted some air.’

‘Cat . . .’

He is quiet for a moment. Then, almost reluctantly, as though the admission costs him something: ‘I just wanted to. That’s all. I wanted to see you.’

Andrée says nothing. But her expression softens, and she doesn’t ask again.

They find their way to the park without discussing where they’re going and walk the path beneath the trees. The first spring leaves have arrived. Flowers push through the soft earth seeking the sun. It is crisp but not unbearably cold. Around them other people move through the afternoon – an old man with his dog, two women with a pram, a boy on a bicycle. Just a city going about its quiet business.

Their hands brush as they walk. It happens again, and this time their fingers catch briefly before letting go. A faint smile from Cat, eyes forward. An equally faint smile from Andrée, also looking straight ahead. Nothing is said. Nothing needs to be.

They are on the far side of the park when they hear it – the end of the school day and the shouts of children spilling out through the gates, followed by rapid footsteps on the path behind them.

‘Tata Andrée!’

Josie arrives at a run, slightly breathless, cheeks pink from the cold, school bag swinging from one shoulder. She inserts herself immediately between them, taking Andrée’s arm on one side and beaming up at Cat on the other.

‘I didn’t know you were coming today,’ she says to him, as though his appearance requires no further explanation and is simply a welcome development.

‘Neither did I,’ Cat says, which makes Josie laugh.

The three of them walk back through the park together, Josie chatting happily, describing her day in the particular detail that children reserve for audiences they trust.

Cat listens with genuine interest, asking questions, making her laugh again.

Andrée walks beside them and feels something she hasn’t felt in a long time – ordinary. They’re just out for a stroll, enjoying each other’s company.

At the entrance to their building Josie stops on the step and turns, bright-eyed, clearly in no hurry to go upstairs.

Cat looks at Andrée. Andrée looks at Cat.

Josie looks at them with the serene patience of someone who has nowhere else to be.

Cat puts his hat back on. ‘Goodbye, Josie,’ he says.

‘Goodbye,’ she replies, not moving an inch.

He glances at Andrée one last time – just a look, brief and warm – and then turns and walks away down the street. Andrée watches him go until he rounds the corner.

‘He’s nice,’ Josie says, satisfied, and pushes open the door.

Andrée follows her inside, still smiling.

* * *

Cat continues planning operations to sabotage railways, demolish bridges and cut communication lines. All missions are timed to activate when the invasion begins. It is a schedule of coordinated chaos to paralyse the German response.

Agent gathers students, professors, anyone at the Sorbonne he knows he can trust and together they plan who to target, where to attack and how to rise up when the moment comes.

Doctor René increases production, aiming for eighty forged documents a month now. Jacques works overtime. Every Jewish person hiding in plain sight, every Resistant, every

fugitive who needs to disappear gets papers that will keep them safe when the chaos of liberation comes, when identities blur, when the Germans lose control.

The Germans, however, are not their only problem. The Militia remain as dangerous as ever, perhaps more so now that their time is running out, knowing they'll soon face justice when the country is liberated. Desperate men are often the most dangerous.

The mysterious cell's Tuesday meetings take on new energy. Louis can hear excited voices through the bedroom door. There's urgency too, they're planning something big, important. He doesn't know what and doesn't ask.

On the last Tuesday in May, there's another note. *Thank you for your courage. When liberation comes, remember you helped make it possible.*

Louis shows it to Tina.

'We're going to make it,' she says through tears. 'After everything. After all the suffering, all the loss, all the fear. We're going to make it.'

'I hope so. God, I hope so.'

* * *

June brings the sun, and Paris enjoys its first truly warm days since last summer. The trees burst with green and the flowers are a resplendent symphony of colour. Life returns to the city, as if the earth itself knows freedom is on the doorstep.

Josie wakes on the morning of the fifth. She will not forget Léon's birthday this year, or in all the years to come. Lying in bed, she quietly talks to him.

'Léon, mon cher big brother. I don't know where you are, whether you are safe, with Maman or alone. You're eighteen. You're a man now. Happy birthday, Léon. I love you.'

Across the Channel, tens of thousands of Allied soldiers are boarding ships, checking weapons, writing letters home, before they storm the beaches of Normandy.

They will use the intelligence Louis risked everything to provide.

ACT III

Liberation

1944–1945

Chapter Twenty-three

'It was wonderful. Oh, Grand-Mère, Grand-Père, you should have been there.'

Josie bursts into the apartment, Andrée tagging along behind. Josie's excitement is infectious. She too can't wipe the smile from her face.

Tina and Louis put down the books they are reading in the long summer twilight. It is well past Josie's bedtime. Curfew looms. They've taken a risk being out at night – a huge risk.

Louis beckons. 'Come – sit and tell us all about it.'

'It was the most wonderful night of my life.'

'Better than the other concerts Tata has taken you to?' Tina asks.

'Yes. I knew more pieces of the music. Oh, the violist, she was amazing. And of course the pianist. I always watch the pianist.'

'They played Bach, among others,' Andrée adds.

'Was it a full house?' Louis asks.

Josie frowns. 'Yes. Of course. And too many Germans, all in their horrible uniforms and medals. And the women sitting with them all wore silk and lace and way too much jewellery and make-up.'

'Were you safe there?' Tina asks, concerned.

'Oh yes, they don't bother me. I'm with my Tata Andrée. No one is going to touch me when I'm with her.'

Josie hugs Andrée for the umpteenth time. 'Thank you so much. I don't think I will sleep tonight.'

'It is very late. I tell you what – the school year is coming to an end. Why don't you sleep in tomorrow? Take the day off. I'm sure Mlle Évrard won't mind,' Tina suggests.

Josie thinks for a moment. ‘Mmm, that would be nice. That way I can spend the day with you and help at the bookshop if you like.’

‘Or you could just sleep in and spend the day reliving this evening,’ Andrée suggests.

‘How about, if I wake up on time, I’ll go to school. If not, I’ll stay home.’ she kisses them all goodnight.

Andrée drops into a chair. Exhausted.

‘She is so happy. Thank you, ma chère. I know taking Josie to concerts takes its toll on you, walking into the lion’s den as you both do,’ Tina says.

‘You’re right, Maman. I worry when we arrive and again when we leave. But during the concert, like Josie, I lose myself in the music, and while it’s playing all thoughts of war and hunger just disappear. I’m in *my* Paris.’

‘I suggest we all call it a night. There’s lots to discuss at our meeting tomorrow. We haven’t heard from Dancer for a week, but I’m sure she is fine. It seems with the Allies approaching, the Germans are getting more dangerous, more reckless. And as for the Militia . . .’ Louis doesn’t continue.

No one needs him to finish the sentence. They all know. The Militia are worse than the Germans. More brutal. More zealous. French hunting French.

* * *

‘Good morning. What a beautiful day!’ Josie joins the others at the table.

‘I thought you were going to sleep in. You’re dressed for school,’ Tina says.

‘I told you I wasn’t going to sleep. Well, maybe I did a little. I want to go to school so I can tell Monique and the others about last night. May I go, please?’

‘Of course, but come and eat something first.’

The excitement of last night stays with Josie. She gobbles down the small piece of bread, gulps the glass of powdered milk. She throws her arms around the necks of Andrée, Tina and Louis in turn.

'Have a good day. I know I'm going to. I love you.'

As the front door closes behind Josie, silence hangs in the apartment. Finally, Andrée speaks.

'She's so happy. Please tell me it will continue. That we will give Ruth and Léon back a happy, well-adjusted, brilliant young teenager.'

'I meant to tell Josie we're not opening the shop today. Hopefully she will come straight home and not go there looking for us,' Andrée says.

'She will work it out. The three of us have got plenty to do between now and the others coming this afternoon. Some of the documents I must pass on are extremely compromising. We need to decide who is getting what, and who is doing what. Let's clean up and get into it,' Louis says.

* * *

An hour later there are documents and a wad of French banknotes scattered over the table. Louis, Tina and Andrée are sorting, discussing and planning for the afternoon meeting.

It is during these discussions that a loud hammering on the door makes them all freeze.

They glance at one another, uncertainty and fear on all their faces. The evidence of their Resistance work lies exposed, damning and utterly undeniable.

'I'll get it,' Andrée says, her voice steadier than she feels.

Louis and Tina frantically start gathering up the documents in front of them. Papers slide, flutter. Their hands shake. The knocking continues, louder, more insistent.

‘I’m coming,’ Andrée calls out, taking her time, scrabbling with the lock and latches. She’s buying seconds for her parents to hide the evidence.

As she opens the door, it is shoved violently inwards, catching her shoulder, sending her stumbling back.

‘Militia. Let us in.’

Louis and Tina quickly place the piles of documents on the kitchen bench, throwing a towel over them. The money Louis stuffs into his pocket, his hands fumbling in their urgency.

‘What do you want?’ they hear Andrée say. Her voice is strong and clear. No sign of fear.

‘This is the Levallois apartment?’ A brute of a man in his mid-forties, overweight in his uniform, storms up to Andrée. Six other similarly dressed men, hands on their holsters, advance into the room like prowling wolves.

‘Yes, this is the Levallois apartment. What do you want?’

‘We want you. You and everyone else living here. Now tell me, who else is in the apartment?’

Louis and Tina appear in the doorway. ‘Just the two of us,’ Louis says.

‘No one else?’

‘You’re welcome to look around, but you won’t find anyone else. What is this all about?’ Louis asks.

‘We believe the three of you have been actively involved in seditious and traitorous behaviour against the occupying forces of Germany.’

‘Says who?’ Tina is defiant.

‘We have our informant. We now have you. What I need from you are the names of other traitors you have been conspiring with.’

‘We have nothing to say to you, other than it is you who are the traitors to France and the French people,’ Andrée says with defiance.

The slap comes without warning. The crack of his palm against her face echoes in the room. Andrée’s head snaps to the side. She staggers backwards into her father’s arms.

‘Sit down, all of you. I’ll give you a chance to telling me names and addresses here, in the comfort of your own home. Or we can do it at headquarters.’

Tina fusses over the red mark blooming on Andrée’s face as Louis guides them to the sofa where the three of them sit holding hands. A united front. A family refusing to break.

The leader turns to his men. ‘Search the place. There will be evidence somewhere of their treason.’

The Militia head to the bedrooms. The sound of drawers being pulled out, violently emptied. Small ornaments and perfume bottles crash to the floor, shatter. Glass breaking and wood splintering; this is the sound of the systematic destruction of a home.

The leader drops into Louis’s chair, facing the family. ‘Nice place you have here. Pity it’s not going to look so nice once we’ve finished. You could save it by simply telling us where we will find the evidence I know is here.’

Tina glares at him. ‘We have nothing to say to you.’

‘As you wish. Now, we understand you are expecting company some time today. A little gathering of your network. Am I right?’

Louis’s stomach drops. They know about the Thursday meetings. Someone has told them. Who? Who betrayed them?

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ he says.

‘Play it your way.’

One by one, the Militia come back into the living room, reporting that they have found nothing of consequence. Their faces show frustration and anger at coming up empty-handed.

The leader takes a piece of paper from his jacket pocket. Examines it and then looks at Andrée with an expression that makes her skin crawl.

'Mlle Andrée Levallois. You're a piano teacher who gives lessons both here and at the local girls' school, is that right?'

Andrée doesn't respond. Her silence is answer enough.

'I'll take that as confirmation. Now, these private piano lessons –' he looks around the room, finds the piano – 'you use your students who come here as cover for your traitorous activities. The people who come here on Thursday afternoons . . . they're not all parents of your students, are they?'

Involuntarily Andrée and her parents squeeze hands. How does this traitor know this? Who told him? The questions scream in their heads.

'Well, what we will is enjoy each other's company and see who knocks on the door. I'm in no rush.'

Panic rises in Andrée's throat. The network: Agent, Doctor René, Cat, Dancer. All of them walking into a trap.

'They're children. Just children. They're innocent,' Andrée blurts.

'We don't care about the children. It's the adults who will come that we are interested in.'

What this traitor does not know is that there will be only one child knocking on the door today. Josie. As it's so close to the end of the school year, and times are so hard, Andrée has ended lessons for the summer for the rest of her students. Only Josie will come home.

The realization hits Andrée like a physical blow. Josie. She'll come home and be caught.

The leader abruptly stands and yanks Andrée to her feet, shoving her in the direction of two militiamen. 'Take her to headquarters. Maybe these two will be more helpful not knowing what is happening to her there.'

Louis jumps to his feet. 'Leave her! Take me! Leave my daughter alone!'

He is brutally pushed back onto the sofa. His hip connects with the arm. Pain shoots through him.

'It's all right, Papa. I'll be fine. You stay with Maman.'

'Take her away.'

'I love you,' Andrée calls out as she is hustled from the room, from the apartment, from her parents. Her voice doesn't break. She won't give them that.

'We love you too, ma chère. We'll see you soon,' Tina calls out, her voice catching on the lie. She doesn't know if they'll see each other again. None of them does.

Downstairs, Maurice watches as Andrée is marched through the foyer. As she passes their eyes meet. Andrée throws him a small smile and a nod of appreciation for all he has done for them.

* * *

The remaining five Militia make themselves comfortable. One sprawls in Louis's usual chair. Another examines Tina's books, discarding them carelessly. They light cigarettes, polluting the air. Making themselves at home in someone else's life.

Tina and Louis watch the clock on the wall. Each tick is agony.

Twelve noon.

One o'clock.

It's been nearly two hours since Andrée was taken. Not a word spoken. Just the Militia waiting for their prey, while Louis and Tina wait for disaster.

Tina suddenly speaks. 'I'm hungry. I don't know about you.'

'I'm not interested in your hunger,' the leader tells her.

'I have food in the kitchen. I can make something for all of us. Cook up something. If we are to leave here, why don't we eat what we've got so it doesn't go to waste?'

The leader thinks for a moment. His stomach growls. They haven't eaten since early morning. 'Why not? We're not going anywhere.' He points to a colleague. 'Go with her.'

The designated militiaman follows Tina into the kitchen and watches as she takes bread from the cupboard. From a different cupboard she takes two precious eggs, the last small hunk of cheese, and two small beef sausages that someone left with Maurice that very morning. She's relieved the young man watching her doesn't think to ask where it came from. Bowls and utensils join the food on the bench. Tina is careful not to disturb the towel covering the hidden documents. These men are quite hopeless, she thinks to herself.

'Excuse me, young man. I don't like anyone in the kitchen when I'm cooking. Why don't you join the others, and I will bring it out to you when I'm done?'

Without a word, he retreats back into the living room.

Tina puts a pan on the stove. Within moments, the smell of sausage cooking fills the apartment. Rich. Intoxicating. A rare treat.

Satisfied no one is watching, she quickly moves the compromising documents over to the stove and opens the door, stoking the flames. Evidence must be destroyed while she's alone in the room.

With one hand feeding the documents into the flames, the other stirring the pan, breaking the eggs into a small bowl to whisk with a fork, the meal comes together. Her

fingers throb. Blisters forming as she burns her hand along with the papers. But she doesn't stop.

Only when she is sure all the papers have been destroyed by the fire does she turn the tap on. She holds her burnt hand under the water. The relief is immediate.

'Can I go and give her a hand?' Louis asks the Militia leader.

A nod of the head, which he reads as permission, and he joins Tina as she rinses the last of the ash away.

'I've come to help. What can I do?' he asks loudly.

'Grab the board and cut up the bread and cheese. I'll cook up the eggs when the sausage is ready.'

Louis sees the towel that had been covering the documents now in a heap. Sees Tina's reddened fingers. Understands immediately what she's done. Taking her injured hand in his, he kisses each blistered finger.

He has loved this woman since they were teenagers. He has never loved her more than he does in this moment.

Putting his arms around her waist, he draws her close. 'Have I told you lately how much I love you?'

She smiles. 'Not since this morning.'

'Keep talking as if I'm still in the room. I'm going to sneak down the backstairs and find Maurice. Ask him to warn the others, not to let anyone come up.'

Tina nods, understanding.

As he grasps the doorknob to open the discreet door in the corner the leads to the back staircase, Tina speaks up, louder than necessary.

'I think if I beat these eggs long enough, I can make them stretch out for everyone to have a bit.'

The door closes soundlessly behind him.

* * *

Regretting he is still wearing his slippers, Louis stumbles and slides down the worn timber stairs. The wood is smooth, treacherous. Second floor. First floor. On the ground floor, he cautiously peers down the corridor, looking at the apartments beyond and the foyer leading to the front door.

He doesn't for a moment think about walking out that door. Escaping. Leaving Tina. Leaving Andrée. His destination is Maurice's small apartment. It is Maurice who can save their network.

Now glad he is in his slippers, he is silent.

As always during the day, Maurice's apartment door is ajar. Louis knows he will be sitting just inside, where he can hear everyone coming and going, taking note of who they are. For convenience, the front door is not locked during daylight hours.

Knocking gently, he pushes the door open. 'Maurice, are you there?'

Maurice is at the door immediately. Worry all over his face. 'M. Levallois, are you all right? The Militia . . . I saw them taking Mlle Andrée away.'

'Shush. Yes, Tina and I are fine, and Andrée will be too. I need your help.'

'Anything.'

'Please, please, Maurice, do not let anyone come up to our apartment today. No one. None of our usual guests. Not Josie. Do you understand?'

'I understand. No one will get past me to come to your apartment. No one. I promise.'

'Thank you, Maurice. You have done so much for us. I must go.'

'I will pray for you, for your dear wife and daughter. And little Josie too,' the concierge says in a hushed voice to Louis's back.

Back on the third floor, Louis sneaks into the kitchen as the leader of the Militia enters from the other side of the room.

'What's taking you so long?' he directs at Tina. Seeing Louis with his hand on the door, not quite closed, he turns on him.

'Where do you think you're going? Were you trying to escape? Is that a back way out of here?' He pushes Louis aside, ripping the door open to peer at the staircase leading down.

'What are you talking about, man? I'm in my slippers. Do you think I would try to escape in my slippers?' Louis says calmly.

'Lunch is ready. Help me take it into the living room. There's plenty here for you and your friends,' Tina says.

Louis grabs the board with bread and cheese in one hand, the platter with the fried sausage and beautifully scrambled eggs in the other. Tina thrusts plates and cutlery at the Militia leader.

She catches the glance Louis throws at her. Maurice will stop them. The network will be safe.

* * *

Tina and Louis watch as the militiamen eat the contents of their home. Sausages, surprise gift, that were meant to give them the energy to survive. Eggs hoarded for a special treat. Cheese traded for precious ration coupons. All of it consumed by the men who came to destroy them.

Once they've finished eating and have washed the dishes, Tina and Louis return to the sofa and watch the clock on the wall.

Two o'clock chimes.

'I don't suppose you are going to tell me what time your meeting is scheduled?' the leader asks.

‘What meeting?’ Louis responds.

Two thirty. If any of the network were going to arrive, they would be here by now. Maurice has done as he said. Tina and Louis relax, fractionally. Their friends are safe. But Josie . . .

Two forty-five. If Josie got past Maurice, and she’s so good at sneaking past him, making a game of it, she would be here by now. Unless of course she was delayed talking to Monique.

Two fifty-three. A gentle knock on the door.

Tina and Louis know it’s Josie. That’s her polite knock. The knock that says it’s just me, I’m home.

Terror floods through them. Absolute and paralysing.

‘Up. Up,’ the leader orders them, his pistol now drawn. His colleagues are also on their feet, pistols aimed at them, faces eager.

‘Take them into a bedroom,’ their leader tells his men.

With pistols at their backs, Tina and Louis slowly walk towards Andrée’s bedroom, closest to the front door.

The soft knocking comes again. More insistent now. Josie wondering why no one’s answering.

The leader stands before the door, one hand on the handle, the other holding his pistol, aiming it at where the person on the other side will be when the door opens.

He pulls the front door open, staring at the young girl in front of him.

Josie doesn’t move. There’s a gun in her face and a brute of a man behind it. She doesn’t react when she hears her name being called the first time. Then she sees the bedroom door nearby opening and Grand-Mère smiling, calling out to her.

‘No lesson today, Joséphine. No piano lesson. Run and tell Monique there’s no lesson for her either.’

The code words. Josie hears them through the roaring in her ears. Run. Tell Monique. Run to Monique. Go!

Distracted by Tina’s appearance, the leader turns away. His pistol does not. It tracks Josie, follows her. But his attention is divided.

Josie stands long enough to see large hands drag her Grand-Mère back into the bedroom. Hands that grip too hard. Someone is shouting. Then she runs.

Down the corridor. Down the stairs. Her feet barely touching the steps. Heading for the front door, she hears and ignores Maurice.

‘Josie – in here!’

But she is out the door and gone before he can finish his sentence.

Damn that child, he mutters to himself. Why today of all days did she succeed in her game of sneaking past me? He breathes a sigh of relief when no one comes down the stairs after her.

Back in the apartment, Tina and Louis are dragged back into the living room and pushed onto the sofa. Tina rubs her arm where she was struck, where bruises are already forming. The leader turns on his inept colleagues, berating them for not keeping Tina under control.

‘It was just a child,’ the chastened militiaman answers back.

‘Luckily for you,’ the leader says, waving his pistol in the man’s direction.

Louis clutches his chest. His heart is still pounding, threatening to burst. ‘Josie, Josie,’ he whispers.

‘She got away, mon amour,’ Tina comforts him, her hand finding his. ‘She got away.’

* * *

Outside the apartment, Josie runs. Turning into the next street, she sees the park and realizes she has automatically run towards her old apartment. Monique's apartment is in the opposite direction. She's too frightened to go back now in case the militiamen are outside the apartment, searching for her.

She hurries across the street and enters the park. The beautiful park where she and her family, the Levallois family, and her friends, have had so much fun. She looks for a place to hide. The trees are still young, a long way off maturity. She is too exposed here.

But the fountain has large shrubs nearby. She can hide there.

Finding a thick bush, Josie crawls behind it, her back against the wall. She cannot see out, but no one can see her either. She should be safe for the moment in this hiding spot, but she's alone.

In shock, and suddenly very exhausted, she falls asleep.

* * *

Back in the apartment, Tina and Louis sit with their captors, still watching the clock, each hour an eternity.

Four o'clock.

Five o'clock.

Six o'clock.

Seven o'clock.

Outside, the sun is fading into the long summer twilight.

Louis finally speaks. 'No one's coming.'

'So somehow they got tipped off.' The leader's face darkens with rage. 'On your feet. Let's go.'

'Where?' Tina asks, though she knows. She knows.

'The same place your daughter is. A place where you will answer our questions.'

He points to one of his men. ‘You, stay here until morning. If anyone knocks on the door, arrest them. I’ll send reinforcements to relieve you in the morning. We’ll stay here for as long as it takes for your friends to come looking for you. Now get up.’

‘Can I put some shoes on?’ Louis asks, looking down at his slippers.

‘You won’t need shoes where you’re going.’

At gunpoint, Tina and Louis are marched out of their apartment, one militiaman remaining behind, settling into Louis’s chair with a satisfied smirk.

As they walk through the foyer, Maurice steps out of his apartment, his face anguished.

‘Thank you, Maurice. You’ve been a good friend,’ Louis calls to him.

‘I’m sorry,’ is all Maurice can say. ‘I’m so sorry.’

The leader turns on him. ‘Get inside before I decide to question you too.’

Maurice retreats but stands in his doorway, watching them go. Bearing witness.

* * *

The sound of a young couple laughing, looking for a discreet place to be together, wakes Josie. Crawling out from the bush that protected her, she sees the couple walk away, arms around each other, oblivious. She doesn’t know how long she has slept.

She must decide. Go back to the apartment or go to Monique’s. She decides she can do both. She can walk past the Levallois apartment building. She must, to get to Monique’s. Perhaps M. Dupont can tell her if it’s safe to go home.

Brushing off bits of dirt and leaves, she walks to the steps that lead up from the park to the street. In the warm summer evening, plenty of people are out walking. Families. Couples. She can merge in with them. Try to stay invisible.

Turning on to rue Blomet, Josie slows her pace. Two cars are parked outside her apartment building. She can't remember if they were there when she came home from school. Slowly, she approaches the building.

She's next door now. She stops. What to do?

The decision is made for her. The door to her building opens and Grand-Mère and Grand-Père are marched out, each with a militiaman holding on to their arms, gripping them like criminals.

Gasping, she pushes herself hard up against the building, trying to disappear into stone.

Both Tina and Louis seem to sense her presence and turn in her direction. They're smiling at her. Actually smiling. As if this is normal. As if everything is fine.

She can't smile back. Her face is frozen. Her body is frozen.

The man holding Grand-Père pushes him towards one of the cars. 'Take her in the other,' he calls out to his colleague holding Grand-Mère.

'Please, can't we go together?' Grand-Père calls out, his voice cracking.

'Say goodbye,' the man says, smirking, enjoying their pain.

As Louis is pushed into the waiting car, he turns his head to Josie, mouthing words she can read even in the darkness. 'I love you.'

Frozen against the wall, Josie watches the two cars drive away. As they turn the corner, Maurice steps outside onto the pavement. Turning to go back inside, he sees Josie and rushes to her.

'Are you all right?'

She can only nod yes. Her voice is gone. Everything is gone.

Josie looks at the door of their building, starts to move towards it.

‘No, Josie, you can’t go in. They’ve left one of the cowards upstairs in your apartment. Don’t let them take you too.’

Josie nods again. She understands.

‘Do you have somewhere you can go?’

She finds her voice, small and broken. ‘Yes. I’m to go to Monique’s.’

‘Your friend.’

‘Yes. My friend, Monique. Her Maman will look after me until it’s safe for me to come back here.’

Until it’s safe. The lie they both know is a lie. But what else can they say?

‘Then hurry along, little one. It’s getting dark. You don’t want to be outside after curfew.’

Josie doesn’t need to be told twice. She runs.

* * *

‘Maman, Josie’s here,’ Monique calls out, having opened the door to a soft knock.

Stéphanie appears in the doorway. Takes one look at the girl’s face, white, terrified, hollow, and knows what has happened.

‘Come in, Josie. You’re safe now. You’re safe.’

Josie steps inside. The door closes behind her. And in the hallway of Stéphanie’s apartment, surrounded by the familiar smell of cooking and security, she finally breaks down.

She collapses to the floor, sobbing. Great wrenching sobs that shake her entire body. Stéphanie kneels beside her and pulls her close, rocking her like a baby.

‘They took them,’ Josie chokes out. ‘They took all of them. Grand-Mère. Grand-Père. And I think they must have taken Tata Andrée – I didn’t see her. The Militia took them. And I ran. I ran and left them and they took them away.’

‘You did exactly right,’ Stéphanie says fiercely. ‘You ran. That’s what they wanted. That’s what Andrée would have wanted. For you to find your way here. You’re safe with us.’

But Josie doesn’t feel safe. None of them are. Not any more.

The Levallois family has been arrested. The network is compromised. And somewhere in Paris, in a Militia interrogation centre, Andrée, Tina and Louis are facing the consequences of their resistance.

And Josie, a twelve-year-old Jewish child, is alone again.

Chapter Twenty-four

Andrée sits in the back of the Militia car, a guard on either side of her. All she can think about is Josie. Will she remember to knock when she comes home? Will she be able to run, to get away from men with guns pointing at her? Will she make it to Monique's? Can Stéphanie feed two children now her husband has been sent east? How terrified Josie will be. When it all becomes too much, she thinks of her parents back in their apartment, held at gunpoint, waiting. Are they frightened? Of course they are. Their fear will not be for themselves but for her, their only child, and Josie, and their friends.

She knows where she is going. Everyone in the Resistance knows. 44 rue le Peletier. Militia headquarters. On the street of horrors. The place people enter and often don't leave.

The building is unremarkable. Grey stone. Tall windows. It could be an office building, a bank, a government ministry. But Andrée knows what happens inside. Everyone knows.

They take her through a side entrance, downstairs into a basement. The air grows colder, damper, the June sunshine nothing but a memory. She can hear voices, doors slamming, a sound that might be someone crying or might be water pipes gurgling. She tells herself it's the plumbing.

Her cell is three metres by two. Cold stone walls. No window. There's a bucket in the corner and the smell coming from it makes her gag. How many people have been kept here? How many have suffered here?

The door slams. She hears the lock turn. And Andrée is alone.

* * *

The sun is fading when Tina and Louis are led from the cars that had delivered them here to the building where they know their daughter is also a prisoner. They glimpse each other briefly as they are forced through the enclosed central courtyard.

‘I love you, mon amour,’ Tina calls out.

Louis turns around to look at his wife and receives a slap over the head for his attempt.

Thrown into separate cells without light, husband and wife scramble around on the floor until they find something resembling a mattress. Alone they curl up and attempt to sleep.

They both know it won’t be long before they will be interrogated. They will need all their strength and willpower to protect those they love; their network and all the Resistance fighters who will help bring peace to Paris, to their beloved city, where they hope that Josie might grow up and thrive.

* * *

‘You must eat something,’ Stéphanie cajoles Josie. She and Monique have divided their meagre evening meal into three.

‘Thank you, madame, but I am not hungry. Please, you and Monique eat it.’

‘You have to eat,’ Monique begs her.

Josie looks at her closest friend, her saviour at school, and sees tears in her eyes.

‘I’ll just have a bite of the bread, please have the rest,’ she whispers.

‘We will make a pact with you. One bite now, but two bites tomorrow morning,’ Stéphanie says with a forced smile.

Josie nods and takes a tiny mouthful.

‘You’ll sleep in Monique’s room. You’ll be safe here.’

Safe. The word feels like a lie. How can she be safe when her family is gone? When the people she loves are in the hands of the Militia?

* * *

They come for Andrée in the night. She doesn't know what time; there are no clocks, no windows, no way to mark the passage of the hours. Just darkness and waiting.

Two guards drag her from the cell and march her down a corridor. Her legs shake from sitting so long on the cold stone floor. They take her to a room bathed in bright light. There is a table, some chairs, and a man sitting behind the table, smoking.

'Mlle Levallois. Please, sit.'

She sits. The chair is metal, cold through her dress.

'I am Captain Vernet. I have some questions for you.'

She doesn't respond.

'You and your parents have been very busy. Distributing forged documents. Meeting with known operatives. Working against the occupying forces. Quite the family enterprise.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

He smiles with his mouth only. 'Of course you don't. No one ever does. But we'll talk, we have all the time in the world. And eventually, Mlle Levallois, you'll tell me everything.'

The questions begin. Names? Addresses? Meeting places? Who do you work with? Where do they live? What are they planning?

Andrée gives him nothing. Not a single name. After an hour, or is it two, Captain Vernet stands.

'We'll continue in the morning. Perhaps after a night without sleep, you'll be more cooperative.'

They take her back to the cell. But they don't let her sleep. Every hour, guards come and bang on the door or shine their torches in her face. They shout more questions. They leave and then come back and do the same again, and again, and again.

By morning, Andrée's mind is foggy with exhaustion. But she holds on to one thought: I will not betray them. I will not.

* * *

Josie slowly eats the small portion of bread she had agreed to the previous night. Stéphanie passes her a bowl of warm powdered milk, offers it to her with a smile. She shakes her head. How can she eat when she doesn't know if her family is eating? When she doesn't know if they're alive.

Monique sits with her but doesn't try to make her talk. Stéphanie has told them they will not be going to school today. On Monday she will take them in and tell Mlle Évrard what has happened.

Throughout the day the two girls sit on the sofa. Sometimes they hold hands. Sometimes Monique reads aloud from books Josie doesn't hear.

At night, Josie lies awake in the dark, staring at the ceiling. Where are they? What's happening to them? Are they together? Do they know she's safe?

She thinks about the last thing she said to each of them. 'I love you,' to Grand-Père. A smile to Grand-Mère. A quick hug for Tata Andrée.

She didn't say goodbye properly or tell them how much they mean to her. She didn't know she needed to.

* * *

The interrogations continue, but with different officers now. They're the same questions, however. Always the same questions. They try different approaches. Some guards are friendly. Others threatening. And still others, violent.

Andrée learns to retreat inside herself. To find a place in her mind where their voices can't reach her. She thinks about music. About 'Clair de Lune'. About Josie's fingers on the piano keys.

She doesn't think about her parents. She can't. If she thinks about them, she'll break.

On the third day, they show her photographs of people she knows: Agent, Dancer, Cat and Doctor René.

'Tell us their names. Tell us where they live. Make this easier on yourself.'

She looks at the photographs. Absorbs the faces, taking some comfort from them, but says nothing.

Captain Vernet leans in close. 'Your parents are here. Did you know that? In cells just like yours. They're being asked the same questions. Sooner or later, one of you will talk. Why shouldn't it be you? Why make them suffer when they'll give us the information anyway?'

'Because you're lying,' Andrée says. 'If any of us knew anything, you wouldn't need the others. You'd already have your answers.'

He smiles. 'Perhaps you're right. Or perhaps I'm just thorough. We'll find out.'

* * *

Stéphanie tries to keep things normal for Josie and Monique. It is a Saturday in summer, such a beautiful day. She suggests they all go for a walk. Monique wants to, but Stéphanie sees the fear in Josie's eyes at the suggestion of being into the streets and she doesn't push it. She prepares their sparse meals, does laundry and tries to maintain some routine.

But nothing is normal. Josie moves through the apartment like a ghost. Present but not present. Breathing but not living.

* * *

They take Andrée to a different room. This one is smaller. There are no windows or table this time. Just a chair bolted to the floor with hooks on the walls that she tries not to look at.

Captain Vernet isn't here. There are different men with harder faces, uttering fewer words.

‘Last chance to cooperate,’ one of them says. ‘After this, things get unpleasant.’

Andrée closes her eyes. Thinks of Josie. Prays she is safe.

‘Nothing to say? Very well.’

The pain comes in waves. Sharp. Brutal. Efficient. They know what they’re doing. They’ve done this before. Many times.

She retreats to the place in her mind where music lives. She plays ‘Clair de Lune’ in her head. Every note. Every phrase. Perfect and untouchable.

She doesn’t give them names. She doesn’t give them anything.

* * *

Stéphanie hands Josie underwear and a dress of Monique’s. ‘We need to wash your clothes, my dear.’

Josie undresses and puts the fresh clothes on without a word.

‘Tell you what. If you two don’t mind staying in the apartment on your own for a short while, I will go back to your apartment and see if the concierge will let me in. Perhaps I can get some of your own things. How does that sound?’

‘We’ll be fine, Maman,’ Monique says.

‘Can I come with you?’ Josie finally speaks. ‘Tata Andrée may be there; I didn’t see her go.’

Stéphanie encourages Josie to sit on the bed beside her and takes her hands in hers. ‘I don’t think that would be wise. Let me go, and if everything there is all right, then of course I will take you back home immediately.’

‘Home,’ the girl whispers.

‘Yes, home, but I need to go there and make sure it is safe. Understand?’

‘Yes.’

A short while later,, Stéphanie turns into rue Blomet.

She is moving quickly, her head down, rehearsing what she will say to the concierge, when a figure steps quietly into her path. She startles before she recognizes him – Maurice, the man himself, cap pulled low, expression carrying the gravity of someone with something urgent to say.

'Mme Stéphanie.' His voice is barely above a murmur. 'You shouldn't go any further.'

She stares at him. 'How did you know where I was going?'

'I know most things that happen in this neighbourhood,' he says simply. 'The Militia are still in the Levallois apartment. They have been there since the night of the arrest. They are waiting.' He pauses, letting the weight of that settle. 'Anyone who knocks on that door – anyone who shows their face on that staircase – they are taking them in.'

Stéphanie feels cold move through her that has nothing to do with the weather.

'La petite,' Maurice says, 'she is with you?'

'Yes.'

He nods slowly, as though this confirms something he already suspected. He produces a small notebook from his coat pocket, a stub of pencil. 'Your address, madame. I will bring what food I can. It won't be much, but it will be something.'

Stéphanie gives it to him without hesitation. You learn that there are people in this city you can trust without needing to know why.

'Tell the child she is safe,' Maurice says, tucking the notebook away. 'Tell her M. Dupont is watching, and he will let you know when things change.'

He touches the brim of his cap and is gone.

Stéphanie stands on the pavement for a moment, steadying herself. Then she turns and makes her way through the park, to the girls' school, to Mlle Évrard.

The headmistress opens the door, takes one look at Stéphanie's face and steps aside to let her in. Stéphanie explains quietly. The arrest, the child, what she has come for. Mlle Évrard listens without interrupting, her expression grave and still.

'Wait here,' she says.

She disappears and returns with her arms full: a spare school smock, neatly folded, a dress that will need taking in but will do, and a small bundle of underwear wrapped in brown paper.

'They are spare clothes I keep here, just in case,' Mlle Évrard says, setting them in Stéphanie's arms. 'They will fit Josie well enough.' She pauses, then adds more quietly: 'You will tell her she is not forgotten? That there are people looking out for her.'

'I will,' Stéphanie says. 'Thank you.'

Mlle Évrard shakes her head. 'Don't thank me. Just keep her safe.'

Josie and Monique are sitting together at the dining table when Stéphanie comes home, both watching the door with the stillness of children who have been waiting and are trying not to show it.

Stéphanie sets everything down, pulls up a chair and sits facing them both. She takes Josie's hands in hers.

'I'm sorry, my love. I couldn't get into your apartment.' She keeps her voice steady, gentle. 'I was stopped before I could get there. The Militia are still inside. M. Dupont made sure I knew before I got too close. He knows you are here with us, and he will tell us the moment it is safe to go back.'

Josie is very still.

'I need you to understand why I'm telling you this,' Stéphanie continues. 'Not to frighten you, but because you are old enough to know the truth. And because knowing the truth is how we keep you safe – the way your family wanted you kept safe.'

Monique reaches under the table and takes Josie's hand.

Stéphanie lifts the folded clothes and holds them out. 'Mlle Évrard sent these for you. A dress, a smock, some things you will need. She wanted you to know that you have people looking out for you. You are not forgotten.'

Josie looks down at the small, neat bundle in her lap. Her chin trembles once, then stills. She nods.

'Thank you,' she says, very quietly. 'Thank you for going.'

'You don't need to thank us. We're doing what's right. What anyone should do.'

But Josie knows most people wouldn't. Most people look the other way. Most people choose safety over righteousness.

The Levallois family didn't look away. And now they're gone.

* * *

They bring Andrée back to her cell. She can barely walk. The guards half carry, half drag her before throwing her inside. The stone floor is cold against her face. She doesn't try to get up. She can't.

Hours pass. Or maybe only minutes. She can no longer tell.

When her cell door opens again, two guards enter and pull her to her feet.

'Someone wants to see you.'

They take her down a different corridor. Through a door. Into a larger room.

Captain Vernet stands near the wall. Smiling. That same cold smile.

'Mlle Levallois, I want to show you something. Someone, rather.'

The guards hold Andrée upright. She can barely focus. Everything hurts. But then she sees . . .

Across the room there's another door. When it opens there are more guards, and, standing between them, Dancer.

Andrée's breath catches. Dancer. Her friend and comrade is now a beaten bloody mess who can barely stand.

'Do you know this woman?' Captain Vernet asks.

Andrée doesn't answer. Can't.

'She knows you. She's told us quite a lot about you. About your parents. About the Thursday meetings. About the forged documents. About everything, really. She was very . . . cooperative. Eventually.'

Dancer lifts her head. Meets Andrée's eyes. Her face is bruised, swollen. But her eyes are clear. They are desperate eyes, and so apologetic.

'Andrée,' Dancer's voice is hoarse, thoroughly broken, 'I held out. I swear I held out. But they brought Philippe into the room. They put a gun to his head. They said they would shoot him right there in front of me if I didn't talk.'

Tears stream down Dancer's cheeks. 'I'm sorry. God, I'm so sorry. But he's eight. He's just a child. I couldn't let them. I couldn't . . .'

'I understand,' Andrée says. Her voice sounds strange to her own ears, distant and calm. 'You chose your son. I would have done the same.'

'I'm sorry,' the broken woman sobs. 'I'm so sorry.'

'Where is Philippe now?' Andrée asks.

Captain Vernet smiles. 'He's safe. Unharmed for now, if she continues to cooperate.'

'Then she will,' Andrée says. 'She'll tell you whatever you want. For Philippe. She'll do anything for Philippe.'

'I know,' Captain Vernet says. 'Mothers are so predictable. Take them both back to their cells.'

As the guards drag Dancer away, she calls back, 'Andrée . . .'

'It's all right,' Andrée says. 'Tell Philippe we all love him.'

Then she is gone. And Andrée is alone with Captain Vernet.

'You see,' he says, 'everyone breaks eventually. Even you, Mlle Levallois. It's only a matter of time.'

'Perhaps,' Andrée says. 'But by then, it won't matter. By then, they'll have scattered. Changed locations. Gone underground. Whatever information you get from me will be useless.'

'We'll see,' he says. 'We'll see.'

* * *

It's early morning, before dawn Andrée guesses, when her cell door opens.

'Get up. You're being transferred.'

Transferred? She doesn't know if that's good or bad. Transferred where? To what?

They take her upstairs, walk her through corridors and into a courtyard. Two cars wait, their engines running. Other prisoners are being loaded. Andrée recognizes none of them.

But then she sees them.

Across the courtyard, illuminated by the floodlights, being brought out of a different entrance, her parents.

Louis and Tina look old, so much older than a mere five days ago. They look even thinner and they're both hunched over. Her father's face is bruised. Her mother's arm hangs at an odd angle.

But they're alive. They're here. They're . . .

Louis sees her first. His eyes widen. Then he smiles. As if seeing her is enough. As if knowing she's alive makes everything bearable.

Tina follows his gaze until her eyes alight on Andrée. Her hand goes to her mouth.

'Maman,' Andrée calls out. 'Papa.'

The guards pull Andrée towards one car and her parents towards the other. But for this moment, they can see each other. For this moment, they know they have all survived.

'We love you,' Louis calls.

'I love you too,' Andrée calls back. 'I didn't break.'

'We know,' Tina says. 'We know, ma chérie. We're so proud of you.'

'Hold on, ma fille,' Louis calls out. 'I overheard the guards talking – they've landed, the Allies have landed in Normandy, they'll be here soon. Vive la France!'

The smile that begins on Andrée's face hearing this wonderful news disappears at the sight of Louis being punched in the head to shut him up. But it's too late.

'Josie?' Andrée calls out.

'She did what she was told,' Tina calls back, her voice breaking.

Andrée slumps in the arms of the men holding her. 'She got away, Josie's safe,' she whispers to herself.

The guards shove Andrée into a car. The door slams. Through the window, she watches her parents being loaded into a different vehicle. Louis helps Tina, supporting her injured arm. The trace of a triumphant smile remains. Even now, even here.

The cars pull away in separate directions. Andrée watches until she can no longer see the other vehicle. Then she closes her eyes.

Fresnes Prison. That's where they're going. She overheard the guards talking. Fresnes is in the suburbs south-east of Paris. It's the place where prisoners are sent before deportation to the east, to places with names that mean death.

But her parents are alive. And maybe even still together. And somewhere in Paris, Josie is safe.

Andrée holds on to these thoughts.

* * *

In Monique's apartment, Josie wakes from a nightmare. She sits up in bed, her heart pounding.

It's been five days since they were taken. Five days of not knowing. Five days of silence.

She gets up quietly, careful not to wake Monique, and goes to the window. Somewhere out there, she thinks, they must be alive.

'Please . . .' she whispers to the darkness. 'Please bring them home to me.'

But the darkness doesn't answer. The city sleeps on. And in Fresnes Prison, the Levallois family face an uncertain future.

Separated. Imprisoned. But unbroken.

They held the line. They protected their network. They refused to betray their comrades.

It's all they have left. But it's everything.

Chapter Twenty-five

Andrée's cell in Fresnes Prison is smaller than the one at rue le Peletier. There is a metal bed frame bolted to the wall, with a thin mattress that smells of previous occupants. The bucket again, but also one barred small window high up on the wall, too high to see through.

Andrée sits on the mattress, her back against the wall. Are you her parents somewhere in this prison, locked in similar cells? Are they together? Can they communicate?

The questions circle endlessly in her mind. Questions for which there are no answers, just the faint knocking on the heating pipes, not consistent enough to be background noise, but annoying enough to prevent sleep. On the second evening, something about the knocking sound catches her attention. The next time Andrée hears the tapping she stands on her bed, straining up towards the pipes that run high along the cell wall.

Now she can the voices of other women identifying themselves, their cell numbers, why they're here.

'Andrée, my name is Andrée Levallois. I came in two days ago. Can anyone hear me?'

'I can hear you, Andrée. You are probably directly below me, or next to me. Our voices can only travel a short distance. You tell me about yourself; I'll tell whoever hears me and word will get around of your arrival. Do you understand?' a voice says.

'Yes! Oh yes! I think my parents were brought here at the same time, can you help me find them? What is your name?'

'I'm Giselle. What's your mother's name? Your father will be in the men's prison across the courtyard, and we can't communicate with them, I'm afraid.'

'Thank you, Giselle. My mother is Tina – Augustine Levallois.'

'I heard you,' another voice says. 'We'll spread the word. How are you?'

'Thank you. I'm alive. I just need to know my Maman is too. What is your name?'

‘Marie.’

‘Thank you, Marie and Giselle. Is there anything you can tell me about what happens here? So far I’ve been left alone.’

‘That won’t last. Stay strong – we get information every now and then from outside and we share it. If you hear anything, can you let us know? We communicate at night-time when there aren’t many guards around,’ Giselle says.

‘Hold on, Andrée. The Allies are coming and Paris will be free very soon,’ Marie adds.

‘Music to my ears,’ Andrée tells them.

‘I like that phrase, music to my ears,’ Marie says.

‘I am a piano teacher.’

‘What I wouldn’t give to hear you play. Tell me your favourite piece, so I can think about it as I fall asleep,’ Giselle says.

‘“Clair de Lune”. It’s a favourite of mine for many reasons,’ Andrée says, seeing Josie, her fingers striking each key, fluid, perfectly in tune, her eyes closed.

‘Thank you, Andrée, I’ll send the melody down the line. Everyone will be humming it to sleep tonight,’ Marie says.

* * *

The days pass and Andrée marks them by the light coming through the high window. Morning. Afternoon. Evening. Night. One day. Two days. Three. Each day she, Giselle and Marie speak. Each day she is told no one has news of Tina. Andrée tells herself it is probably because her mother’s hearing has been deteriorating, and she can’t hear the conversations through the pipes or can’t reach up high enough.

Food comes twice a day. Watery soup. Stale bread. She forces herself to eat, knowing full well that survival requires calories. Even here. Especially here.

There have been no interrogations yet. Perhaps they're letting her wait. Letting fear do their work for them. Or perhaps they've moved on to her parents.

The thought makes her stomach clench. Papa. Maman. What are they doing to you?

From a deep sleep, Andrée wakes to the sound of singing coming through the pipes and also coming from outside her cell. The women are singing La Marseillaise, the French national anthem, at the tops of their voices. Andrée hurries to the cell door, to the small gap where food is handed through, and joins in. The guards shout at the women to be quiet, threaten them with beatings, but they sing even louder.

As quickly as it started, the singing stops. Andrée hurries to her lifeline, the heating pipes above her head. 'What's happening? Why the singing?'

'We're saying goodbye to Sara. She's being executed this morning. We sing every prisoner to their death. Sorry, Andrée, we should have warned you, ,' Marie says.

'Courage, Andrée. Courage,' Giselle adds.

* * *

Louis lies on his mattress, staring at the ceiling. His ribs ache where they kicked him. His jaw throbs where they struck him. But he's alive and he's breathing. He can endure this.

He thinks about Tina. Is she in pain? Are they hurting her? The thought is unbearable. They have been together for forty years. Forty years of love between them. And now they are separated by stone walls, and he is unable to protect her, unable to hold her hand, unable to tell her it will be all right.

He thinks about Andrée, his brilliant, brave daughter. She didn't break. He knows she didn't. She's too strong, too stubborn. She gets that from Tina.

And Josie. Sweet Josie. Is she safe? Did she make it to Monique's? Is she eating? Sleeping? Does she know they love her?

He closes his eyes. Tries to sleep. But sleep doesn't come easily in Fresnes. The sounds of the prison doors clanging, footsteps echoing up and down the corridors, voices crying out, make rest impossible. There has been no communication between the men in his block. He is utterly alone.

* * *

Tina's cell has a crack in the wall. She can see it when the light comes through the window. A thin line running from floor to ceiling. She traces it with her eyes. Follows it up and down. It gives her something to focus on besides the pain in her arm, the fear in her heart.

They set her arm after two days. Roughly, and with no anaesthetic. She screamed. Couldn't help it. But it's set now. Splinted with wood and wrapped with cloth. It will heal, if she lives long enough for it to heal.

She thinks about Louis constantly. Is he eating? They provide so little food. He always gave her a bigger portion when rations were tight.

She thinks about Andrée. Her baby. No matter how old she gets, she'll always be Tina's baby. Did they hurt her? The thought makes Tina want to scream, to beat her fists against the walls, to demand they bring her daughter to her.

But she does none of those things. She sits. She waits. She traces the crack in the wall with her eyes. And she endures.

* * *

Josie wakes in Monique's bedroom. For a moment she forgets where she is. Then reality crashes back in: the Levallois apartment, the Militia, the arrests. It all happened just a month ago, but it feels like a lifetime.

It's 10 July and Josie is thirteen today. Her Maman isn't here to celebrate her birthday. Léon isn't here. The Levallois family aren't here. She's alone with people who are kind but aren't her people.

Stéphanie tries to mark the occasion with a small cake made from hoarded sugar and the two precious eggs that Maurice dropped off yesterday. She lights a single candle.

Monique sings 'Happy Birthday' softly, but all Josie can think is, I'm thirteen and everyone I love is gone.

She blows out the candle and makes the only wish she can think of: *Bring them home. Please bring them all home.*

* * *

Josie and Monique walk to school. It's the last week of the school year before the long summer holidays.

Josie slides into her seat beside Monique. Thirteen, especially now, feels like something to be quietly endured rather than celebrated. But she has been thinking about what it means to be a teenager. Is she meant to feel different somehow? She doesn't.

She is bent over her exercise book when the classroom door opens and Mlle Évrard steps in. The class teacher looks up, surprised. Mlle Évrard raises one hand in a small apology for the interruption and then turns to look directly at Josie with an expression that is warm and deliberate and gives nothing away.

'Girls,' she says, addressing the rest of the class with calm authority, 'I believe there is something we need to attend to before the morning goes any further.' She clasps her hands together. 'Today is Joséphine's birthday. She is thirteen years old.' A pause. 'I think that deserves a song – don't you?'

There is a beat of surprised delight, the particular pleasure of an unexpected thing on an ordinary morning, and then the classroom fills with voices – some tuneful, some not, all of them enthusiastic, all of them turned towards Josie.

Josie sits very still while they sing. She looks at her desk. She tries to smile. She manages it, just, for most of the song.

But by the final phrase something has come loose in her chest that she cannot contain. Her eyes brim, and then spill over with tears, and there is nothing to be done about it.

The singing trails off. A few of the girls exchange uncertain glances. Monique puts her arm around Josie immediately, without a word.

Mlle Évrard crosses the room unhurriedly and crouches down beside Josie's desk so that they are eye to eye. She doesn't rush her. Doesn't tell her not to cry.

'There,' she says softly, covering Josie's hand with her own. 'There, my dear. You are allowed to feel it all. Every bit of it.'

Josie presses her lips together and nods, tears sliding silently down her face.

'Thirteen,' Mlle Évrard says gently. 'That is something, Joséphine. That is a great deal, in fact.' She squeezes her hand once, firmly, before standing. 'Now, can we have a birthday girl who has dried her eyes before lunch?'

Josie wipes her face with the back of her hand and manages, this time, a real smile.

'Good,' says Mlle Évrard. And returns to the door as though she has simply stopped in on her way somewhere else.

* * *

In Fresnes, Andrée doesn't know it's Josie's birthday. Doesn't know what day it is at all. They have all blurred together. The interrogations have started. The officers change, but the questions are the same. They took their time coming for her, which made her hope that they'd forgotten all about her. But in the end, they came.

She gives them nothing. Not a name. Not an address. Not a whisper.

They tell her Louis has talked. They tell her Tina has given them everything. They show her documents they claim her parents signed. Confessions. Lists of co-conspirators.

She doesn't believe them. Her parents wouldn't break. They're Levallois. They hold the line.

‘Your parents are weak,’ the ageing Captain who witnesses her beatings tells her. ‘Old. Broken. They told us everything to make the pain stop. Why do you protect the people who betrayed you?’

‘Because you’re lying,’ Andrée says. ‘If they’d talked, you wouldn’t need me. You’d already have your arrests. Your raids. Your victories. But you don’t. Which means they held.’

For the first time he lashes out. Slaps her. Hard. Her head snaps to the side and blood fills her mouth.

‘Stubborn,’ he says, ‘just like your father. That stubbornness will kill you both.’

So he’s alive, Andrée thinks. He’s alive and he’s here.

* * *

One morning they take Louis for interrogation. He’s been many times before. But this time feels different. The guards are rougher and there’s an urgency to their bullying. As if time is running out.

The Allies landed in Normandy. Everyone knows the news, Germans and prisoners alike. The liberation of France is coming, but will it come soon enough?

In the interrogation room, they ask Louis the usual questions, and he gives the same answers. *I know nothing. I am nothing. Just an old man. A bookseller. Formerly an architect. Nothing more.*

‘Normandy,’ one of the interrogators says. ‘You were there. We know you were there. Who sent you? What did you report? Who has the intelligence you gathered?’

Louis’s heart stutters. Somehow they know about his trip to Normandy, but they don’t know any details. They have no idea who sent him or where the maps he produced were sent. All they know is that he was there.

‘I’ve never been to Normandy,’ he says. ‘I’m a Parisian. I don’t travel.’

‘Liar!’

The beating intensifies. Systematic. Professional. Designed to break bones, to rupture organs, to kill slowly.

Louis retreats into his mind, thinking of Tina, of their first stolen kiss behind a bookshop when they were seventeen. He thinks about every detail of their wedding day, the birth of Andrée. Their years of love are condensed into moments of memory.

He thinks of Josie, and prays that she is out of harm's way, happy at the piano.

He thinks of the maps he drew and the intelligence that reached London. The invasion has taken place, and he knows he helped. In his small way, he helped liberate France.

His heart, weakened by age, by starvation, by torture, begins to fail. The pain feels distant. The voices around him fade into silence and everything grows dim.

His last thought is of Tina. I'm sorry, my love. I'm so sorry.

And then nothing.

* * *

It is late July when they come for Tina. It is early, before breakfast and before the morning light has fully penetrated her cell.

'Get up. You're being released.'

Released? The word doesn't make sense to her. Since when have they *released* prisoners? They deport people. They kill people. They don't *release* people.

'What about my husband? My daughter?'

The guard's face shifts. Something almost like pity crosses it. 'Your husband died yesterday, during interrogation. Come now or you'll never leave this place.'

The world tilts. Dead. Louis is dead. Tina's legs give out and she collapses.

The guard catches her, not unkindly. His tone changes. 'I'm sorry, madame. But you must come now. Get up.'

How does she get up? How does she stand? How does she breathe when Louis is dead?

But she does. Somehow she does. Because Andrée is still here. Still alive. They told her about Louis. So if Andrée was dead, they would have told her that too.

Andrée needs her to survive. To be there when, if, she's released.

Tina stands and follows the guard through corridors, upstairs, through doors. They give her papers, her release documents. They tell her not to leave Paris, that she must report weekly to the police. They tell her she's being watched.

She doesn't hear any of it. Louis is dead.

They drive her to Montparnasse and drop her at the corner of rue Lecourbe and rue Cambronne. She stands there in her torn dress, her arm still in its splint, alone with her grief.

Tina walks, putting one foot in front of the other while people try not to stare at this broken and beaten woman. This is Paris under occupation, where minding your own business keeps you alive. In these dark days, survival trumps compassion.

She walks to rue Blomet.

Maurice is sweeping the steps outside number 135. When he sees Tina, he hurries to her side, taking her good arm in his, and without a word walking her to their building. Slowly they climb the stairs. When she stumbles, he is there to catch her.

With his master key, Maurice unlocks the door. Tina pushes open the front door to a home she feared she might never see again.

Inside, there is devastation. Every inch of every room has been ransacked. Their furniture, lovingly collected over the decades, has been overturned and broken. The books, which gave each of them so much comfort, lie torn and scattered. Miraculously, the piano, Andrée's beautiful piano, is untouched.

‘I’ll get you something to eat,’ Maurice, says, visibly shaken. He backs out of the room quietly, closing the door behind him.

Tina walks through the wreckage. In the bedroom, their bedroom, she sits on the edge of the bed. Louis’s pillow still bears the impression of his head.

She picks it up. Holds it to her face and breathes. It smells of him.

And then, finally, she collapses, sobbing, her body, her mind, in agony. She feels she will never stop crying. She has lost not only her husband, but her soulmate, her accomplice, her best friend. There are no words for her grief, and her grief feels bottomless.

He is gone.

* * *

It’s the beginning of August 1944 and Paris is holding its breath. The rumours of the approach of the Allies are everywhere. Every few days, Josie has walked to 135 rue Blomet; is Andrée back? Her grandparents? Stéphanie doesn’t like it, it’s dangerous, the Militia might be watching, but Josie needs to go. She doesn’t go inside, but she needs to know.

Today when she arrives at the building, she sees Maurice in the foyer. She smiles but he doesn’t smile back. Instead . . . there’s an expression on his face she’s never seen before. She can’t read it.

‘Josie! Come here, child.’

She approaches, her heart hammering. Is this the bad news she’s been dreading?

‘Ma petite, I’m so glad you’re here –’ and now Maurice smiles – ‘Madame Tina returned a few days ago. She’s upstairs, but . . . but she’s not well, Josie. She’s had a very tough time. You understand?’

‘Grand-Mère is home? She’s alive?’ Joy floods through her. ‘What about Grand-Père? And Tata Andrée?’

Maurice’s face crumples. ‘M. Levallois . . . I’m sorry, ma fille. He died. In prison.’

The world stops. Grand-Père. Dead.

‘And Tata Andrée?’

‘Madame Tina doesn’t know. Doesn’t know anything. They told her nothing.’

Josie’s legs shake. She sits down heavily on the stairs. Why can’t she catch her breath? Grand-Père is dead. Tata Andrée is imprisoned. Grand-Mère is upstairs, alone, broken.

‘Can I see her?’ Josie asks.

‘Not yet, child. She’s . . . she’s not ready. Give her a few more days. She needs a little more time to recover.’

‘But she’s alone.’

‘I check on her, don’t worry. I make sure she’s fed. She will get better.’

Josie simply nods. She can’t find the words.

‘Go to your friend’s house. Stay safe. In a few days, when Madame is stronger, I’ll send word. You can see her then. Yes?’

‘Yes. Thank you, monsieur. You are a good friend to us. Please tell Grand-Mère how much I love her.’

Maurice has spent so long watching out for the Levallois that he’s come to think of them as his family. There is nothing he wouldn’t do for them, then, now or in the future. He slumps on the stair beside Josie. He no longer has the words to express his grief. He finds himself nodding, just as Josie did. She leans over and gently kisses him on the cheek, fighting back her tears.

Josie walks back to Monique’s apartment. She’s numb inside.

Grand-Père is dead. The man who took her in, who made her feel safe, who promised she’d see Maman again. Gone.

That night, she doesn't cry. Her grief feels too big for mere tears. It sits in her chest like a stone, heavy and cold and immovable.

Monique sits with her, holding her hand. They say nothing. What is there to say?

* * *

In Fresnes, Andrée doesn't know her father is dead. Doesn't know her mother has been released. Knows nothing of the world beyond the walls of her cell.

The interrogations have stopped. For three days now, no one has come to fetch her.

She doesn't know if this is good or bad. Have they given up on her? Or are they planning something worse?

Outside her high window, she can hear distant explosions, artillery fire. The Allies are close, that's obvious, and everyone in the prison knows. The guards are nervous, their tempers frayed. This means more violence, or mercy, depending on the guard.

Liberation is coming, but will it come in time?

Andrée lies on her mattress, conserving her strength, asking the universe for reassurance that her parents are alive, that Josie is safe.

* * *

Three agonising days pass before Maurice knocks on Stéphanie's door and asks to speak to Josie. Stéphanie holds her hand as Maurice tells her that her Grand-Mère would like her to come home.

'Let me get your things,' Stéphanie tells Josie, wiping tears from her eyes. As much as she has loved having Josie living with them, she knows the girl doesn't belong here. And deep down she cannot deny the feeling of relief, the lifting of a fear that has sat with her since the day Josie arrived – the threat her presence posed for her and Monique. The relief turns quickly to guilt. *We all do what little we can until we reclaim our country.* She cared for a

young Jewish girl the same age as her own daughter. She can only hope there are many more like her out there who would do – who are doing – the same.

'Thank you. Thank you,' Josie whispers as she hugs Stéphanie. 'You saved my life.'

'And I'd do it again. Monique and I are here whenever you need us.' And she means it.

Josie turns to Monique. 'You're the best friend I've ever had. We will be friends for life.'

* * *

'Slow down, Josie – these old legs can't keep up with you,' Maurice calls out.

For safety he walks on the opposite side of the street. An old man on his own. A young girl going about her business. Just one problem: there's no slowing Josie down. She needs to get home to her Grand-Mère.

'If you must go on ahead, wait at the bottom of the stairs for me. I want to take you up and let you in.'

'Hurry,' Josie urges him.

Maurice huffs and puffs into the building where Josie waits, one foot on the bottom step, tapping impatiently.

As he holds open the door into the apartment for Josie to enter, he catches the look of fear on her face. She's where she belongs, but the realization that only one of her adoptive family is inside is etched on her young face.

Cautiously she steps inside. She sees Tina siting on the sofa, staring at nothing. 'Grand-Mère, it's me.'

Tina turns to look. She forces a warm smile on her face, opens her arms wide and exclaims, 'Josie! Dear, dear child.'

Josie runs, throwing herself onto the sofa, into the arms of Tina. Together they sob quietly.

'I'll leave you,' Maurice says. 'I'll bring some food up later.' Before leaving he glances around the room, which looks better since he helped Tina put it back together. It almost looks like a home once more. As he closes the door, he hears Tina whisper, 'Play for me Josie, play "Clair de Lune".'

* * *

The mood in Paris is changing. There's an electric anticipation in the air. Word passes from trusted neighbour to trusted neighbour. Someone with a radio relays news snippets from the BBC's Radio Londres; the Allies are advancing after their Normandy breakthrough. While hope is in abundance, so is fear. Nobody knows exactly when liberation will arrive in Paris, or what the Germans and the dreaded Militia will do with the changes coming their way.

Word reaches Maurice, which he passes on to Tina, that German troop morale is low. Their presence on the streets has declined. This news is complicated by the rumour that Hitler has ordered his commander in Paris to stamp out any insurrection without pity.

The Militia take to the streets in greater numbers. They are more dangerous than ever, knowing that the power they so cruelly wielded will soon be curbed. They fear retribution. They have become desperate and unpredictable; like wounded animals, they are to be avoided even more than previously.

Whispered conversations and spread rumours freely among the population of Paris. Yes, there's hope, but people dare not act, not until the Communist Resistance fighters take to the streets, leading the rebellion and erecting barricades. When the police leave their posts to join the last battles, it is the beginning of the end.

Chapter Twenty-six

'OUT, OUT!'

Andrée hears these hollered commands. Or is she dreaming? She groans, tries to roll over on the metal cot that has been her bed for . . . how long now? She can't be sure, the days and nights have blurred. The pain of repeated beatings lingers into her restless sleep. She feels the sting of the whips a second, third, fourth time every night.

'OUT, OUT!'

The voice is louder now, unmistakable.

She barely registers as the door to her cell is flung open, her eyes struggling to focus on the guard now advancing on her, swinging a rod. Curling into a ball, she tries to protect her head.

'Get up and get out! Now!' is screamed into her face as a hand roughly drags her from the bed onto the floor. Another blow to her back. Crawling, she makes her way to the door and into the stream of women staggering past.

Kind hands reach down, bring her to her feet. An arm wraps around her waist, helping her to move, to walk.

'What's going on?' she stammers.

'We're being moved. All of us. They're emptying the prison,' her Good Samaritan whispers.

'Where are they taking us?'

'I don't know. Just keep moving. I've got hold of you.'

Andrée looks up at the hundreds of women shuffling ahead of her, then glances behind to see just as many.

'Maman! Maman, where are you? It's Andrée!' she calls out.

'Your mother is here?'

‘Yes. I must find her.’ Andrée struggles to free herself from the woman’s hold.

‘Wait until we’re outside. There’ll be more room there and you’ll be able to find her. It’s too crowded here. And you don’t want to attract attention; you’ll only get beaten. Maybe your mother too.’

Herded outside, Andrée looks at the first sliver of sun introducing a new day.

Around her, the night slowly fades, the buildings on the other side of the quadrangle taking shape. Over there she can see the men’s prison, where the men are being marched out. They stagger too, trip and fall. But there too, they help each other.

‘I must look for Maman. Thank you so much. I don’t think I would have made it outside without you.’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Andrée. Andrée Levallois.’

‘Okay, Andrée. And your mother’s name?’

‘Augustine. Tina Levallois.’

‘Why don’t you go one way and I’ll go the other? I’ll ask if anyone knows your mother? One of us must find her.’

‘You would do that for me?’

‘I would do this for anyone. Every one of us has or had a mother. Go. And be quiet. Try to meet back here.’

The women part. Andrée moves as quickly as her injuries allow, staring into the faces beside her, in front of her, behind her. Eventually she starts asking everyone she sees, ‘Do you know Augustine Levallois? Have you seen her? Has she whispered her name down the pipes?’

No one risks speaking. Brief shakes of the head. Looks of sympathy. Nothing more.

The hundreds of men and women stand as the sun rises, bathing the courtyard in brilliant light. Their eyes wince in the light of day; it's been so long. Andrée is grateful for the inaction of the guards who have gathered at one end and appear to be waiting for instructions.

When she's certain she's seen the faces of all the women around her, she hurries back to the arranged meeting point. Her new friend is there. The look on her face tells Andrée she hasn't found Tina.

'I'm sorry, Andrée. I asked. No one knows anything about your mother. Maybe she's not here. When did you last see her? Maybe she's at home. Safe and sound.'

Safe? Released? The thought hadn't occurred to Andrée. Could it be? Could Maman be free?

'I think my parents were brough here at the same time as me. I wonder if he's over with the men. How can I find out?'

'You can't. We risked a beating moving around and talking to the women just now. Imagine what would happen if you approached the men. Hopefully there will be another opportunity to find out about him wherever they're taking us.'

'You're right, of course. Am I losing my mind?'

'You're a daughter wanting to know about her parents. If I knew my parents were here, I'd be doing the same.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't even ask your name.'

'I am Jeanette Roussel.' She smiles. 'And you're Andrée Levallois.'

'Yes,' Andrée says. 'I hope you don't mind my saying, but you look very young. What are you doing here?'

Jeannie manages a small laugh. 'I'm twenty-four.'

‘Oh, my goodness, you are young. What could you possibly have done to end up here?’

It was meant as a statement, not a question. But Jeanette answers anyway.

‘I was a member of the Alliance. I ran a scientific intelligence network. I was on my way to London to debrief, but something went wrong and now I’m here.’

‘I’m so sorry. How long have you been in this place?’

‘Since April. And you? Is it impolite to ask why you find yourself here, about to be sent to who knows where?’

For the first time since her capture, Andrée returns the small laugh. ‘I’m probably guilty of many things in the eyes of the Germans. Like you, I was involved with the Resistance, as were my parents. We were also harbouring and protecting a young Jewish girl for well over a year. The Militia finally caught up with us.

‘Andrée, what an incredible woman you are. The little girl, did they . . . ?’

‘No. They didn’t get her. She came home from school. The Militia ambushed her, but before they could grab her, my brave mother used our signal that she should run. She got away. I pray she’s safe now with others who will protect her.’

‘What’s her name?’

‘Joséphine. She’s twelve. She was eleven when she moved in with my parents and me.’ Andrée begins to shake, her voice cracks. ‘Oh no, it was her birthday recently. She’s thirteen now.’

The sound of buses drawing up silences them. The buses, dozens of them, plough between the groups of men and women, causing them to scatter and jump to safety. Several are too slow, are hit and quickly gathered up by the women near them. No one will be left behind.

As the buses halt and their doors fling open, guards begin pushing and hitting prisoners, driving them onboard. Only when there's no standing room left does each driver close the doors and pull away.

As Andrée scrambles aboard a bus, all seats taken, she's forced towards the rear, where she holds on to the back of the nearest seat. She frantically looks around for Jeanette but can't see her. They became separated in the mêlée of panicking women dodging blows from guards.

As the bus drives through the imposing gates onto the streets of Paris, Andrée joins the women peering through windows, not knowing what to expect. Is their beloved city in ruins? They've heard the recent explosions. Heard the whispers between guards that the Allies are on French soil, heading towards Paris.

The shelling continues as the bus joins the main road, then slows to a crawl. Through the windows, the women see trucks, cars, every manner of vehicle, all heading in the same direction. All laden with food, clothing, fine furniture and other looted goods. German troops walk beside the flotilla, unable to obtain a ride. They too are fleeing. Out of Paris. Out of France. Away from the advancing Allied soldiers.

'They're running,' someone whispers. 'The Germans are running.'

'Liberation is coming,' another woman says. 'We just have to survive until it gets here.'

* * *

The buses arrive at Gare de Pantin in the far north-eastern suburbs of Paris, one of the few remaining railway stations still operational. The French railway system is near complete breakdown, sabotaged by the Resistance, bombed by the Allies. This station still functions, but barely.

The men are unloaded first. Fifteen hundred of them are driven with whips and rifle butts towards waiting cattle cars. Andrée watches from the bus window, searching for her father's face among the mass of prisoners. But they're too far away.

Then it's the women's turn.

'Out! Move! Quickly!'

They stumble off the buses and into blazing sunlight. Andrée feels the August heat on her skin. The air shimmers and the platform radiates heat like an oven.

Wooden cattle cars line the tracks. They're windowless except for small barred openings high up. The doors slide open.

'Inside! Move!'

Dozens of women are pushed, shoved, beaten into each car. Then more. Then more, their bodies pressed together. There's no room to sit and barely room to breathe.

Andrée finds herself crushed into the middle of the car. There are women on all sides. The heat is suffocating. And together with the smell of unwashed bodies, the fear and desperation of the women is overwhelming.

'Jeanette?' she calls out. 'Jeanette Roussel?'

'Here!' a voice calls from near the door. 'Is that you, Andrée? I'm here!'

Relief floods through her. It feels as if she's not alone. Someone she knows is in this car.

The door slides shut and they hear it being padlocked. The small barred opening is the only source of light.

And then, nothing. The train doesn't move. They wait.

* * *

One hour passes. Then two. Three. Four. Five.

The heat intensifies as the summer sun beats down on the wooden roof. The packed car is becoming an oven. Women gasp for air, scream for help, beat on the walls, beg for water. Some faint.

There is no water.

Andrée tries to stay calm. Tries to breathe slowly and to conserve her energy. She needs to survive this, but the heat is brutal. Her dress clings to her body, soaked with sweat. Her lips crack and her throat burns.

Around her, women continue to pass out, but there's no room to fall. Instead, they're held upright by the press of bodies.

'Why aren't we moving?' someone cries. 'Why are they keeping us here?'

No one answers. No one knows.

Six hours have passed in this terrible place. The sun sets and the temperature drops slightly. But the damage is done.

Finally, too late for some, the door slides open. Guards stand there, silhouetted against the lamp lights.

'Bring out your dead. Now.'

Women near the door begin passing bodies. One. Two. Five. Ten. How many died in this carriage alone? How many across the whole train?

The bodies are dumped alongside the tracks. There is no ceremony; they are discarded like rubbish.

The door slides shut and is once again padlocked. And then, just before midnight, the train finally moves.

* * *

The journey is slow. Agonizingly slow. The railway is so damaged that the train stops frequently. Then follows hours of more waiting, until they move a few kilometres and stop again.

It takes two days to cover sixty miles.

There is no food, no water. The women must even ration the air, taking turns to stand beneath the small barred opening.

More women die, but their bodies remain in the carriage. There's no way to remove them. The living stand among the dead.

Andrée retreats into her mind and plays 'Clair de Lune', note by perfect note. The music keeps her sane.

She thinks of Josie and once again prays the girl is safe, prays to God that she knows how much they all loved her.

She thinks of her parents. Papa. Maman. Are you alive? Did you survive?

Day three. Day four. Day five. The train continues east. Always east.

The cars remain locked. They wait. Another day. Another night.

* * *

Finally, the door slides open. Andrée's eyes blink in the blinding light. But there is fresh air finally, despite the shouting and the barking of dogs and the guards with their whips.

'OUT! MOVE!

Andrée finds her legs can barely support her weight. Her lips are cracked with thirst. Hunger burns in her stomach. She's weak. But somehow she survived the journey. How many of them made it? How many died? She doesn't know and finds she doesn't want to know.

She looks around the platform, fenced in by barbed wire. Guard towers overlook the station and uniformed women with whips patrol. And beyond are gates, buildings, barracks, smokestacks.

Andrée reads the sign above the gates: ‘Ravensbrück’.

They’ve arrived in the notorious concentration camp for women. Andrée closes her eyes. This nightmare is real.

‘Stay close,’ Jeanette whispers beside her. ‘Whatever happens, we stay together. Yes?’

‘Yes,’ Andrée whispers back. ‘Together.’

They’re herded towards the gates. Whipped if they move too slowly. Beaten if they stumble. And then they’re inside the camp.

They have arrived in hell. But Andrée is alive.

Against all odds, she’s alive. She survived rue le Peletier. She survived Fresnes. She survived the journey from Paris. She will survive this too. For Josie. For her parents. For everyone who’s counting on her to live. To bear witness.

She will survive.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Reeling from their journey, the women are marched through the chaos of the camp to the French area where other women greet them, gawking at the clothing some of them wear. While dirty and unkempt, some of the newcomers are dressed in the clothes they were snatched in only days or weeks ago: well-cut dresses, skirts, blouses and shoes. One woman has a Chanel scarf draped around her elegant neck.

Andrée and the other new arrivals are stunned by the appearance of the thousands of women crammed into such a small space. It is obvious the women of Ravensbrück have been beaten and starved, that disease is rampant. With night falling, the new arrivals are herded down a narrow alleyway into a small clearing. There they spend their first night.

Side by side, they each claim a small space to lie down for the first time in days and sleep. Andrée and Jeanette whisper long into the night, trying to guess what fate awaits them.

The next morning the women are forced into groups and taken into what they are told is the quarantine block. Andrée and Jeanette try to make eye contact with any of the dozens of women for whom this block is already home. The women stretch out on their small cots, claiming their space. Their unspoken message: no room here. Eventually Andrée catches the eye of one woman who nods begrudgingly. Come here. I'll make room for you.

Only when all the newcomers have been given a bunk to share – each bedbug-ridden straw mattress holding two bodies, sometimes three – do the conversations begin. The newcomers are peppered with requests for news of beloved France. The whispers of joy at learning the Allies are on French soil and advancing on Paris carry from one bunk to another.

'Our turn,' Andrée says gently. 'Can we ask what to expect here?'

Silence. Finally . . .

'I'm sorry you spent your first night where you did,' one of the women, two bunks down, says.

‘It was fine. We got to lie down for the first time in days. I slept,’ Jeanette says.

The reticence of the old-timers doesn’t go unnoticed by Andrée. ‘There’s something you’re not telling us.’

‘They deserve to know. They’ll find out eventually,’ one woman says.

‘Tell us,’ Jeanette says.

‘You spent your first night in this hellhole in the execution yard. Where they have taken so many of our sisters to be shot, for asking for food, for water, for nothing at all. The ground you slept on runs red with the blood of women who came before you.’

Silence. This is what survival here will look like. Swallowing what cannot be swallowed. Standing on ground soaked in the blood of the dead. And living on in defiance.

* * *

Each day, hundreds more women arrive at the camp. Women from all over occupied Europe, rounded up in their home countries or transferred from other camps. The French women are crowded into increasingly overcrowded barracks. Andrée asks everyone she encounters about Tina, but no one has heard of her.

Then the selections begin.

Those deemed too sick or too injured simply disappear without explanation or goodbye. One morning a woman is in her bunk, the next she is gone.

Many of the young, healthier women are taken away, to work elsewhere, they are told. Jeanette, sharp-minded even here, is one of them.

On the morning, they come for her, Andrée holds both her hands.

‘Remember what we both know: what can be done when even one person refuses to look away.’

‘I’ll remember,’ Jeanette says. ‘And you remember to survive. That’s all. Just survive.’

Then she is gone. And Andrée is alone again.

With disease overrunning the camp, the women triage themselves, separating the clearly infectious from those so far unafflicted. They organize their own small systems of survival. They share food when food is given. They hold the sick when no one else will. And they hang on by their fingernails into whatever shred of dignity they have left, refusing to let go.

Andrée learns the rhythms of Ravensbrück. She learns which sounds to fear, which guards to avoid, the women she can trust. She is thin, thinner even than she was at Fresnes, but she is standing.

* * *

'Are you coming, Grand-Mère? Please come,' Josie pleads.

Tina can't help but smile at the joy and excitement radiating from Josie, dressed in her best dress, dancing around the room as though her feet can't quite keep still.

'You must go, Josie. You need to witness this day. It's our liberation! I'm told General de Gaulle will be there; you might see him.'

'But I want you with me.'

'I'm not feeling up to crowds today. You go and come back and tell me everything. I'll want to see it all through your eyes.'

Josie stills for a moment. 'I wish Tata Andrée and Grand-Père were here with us. They should be here. This is what they fought for.'

'I know.' Tina's voice is soft. 'I'm sure Grand-Père is looking down at us, watching every moment.'

'And Tata Andrée . . . ?'

'Wherever she is, we must hope she knows what today is. And that she'll be back with us very soon. Now run along. You don't want to miss a thing.'

Josie wraps her arms around Tina's neck, kisses her on both cheeks.

'I get to see this day because you and Grand-Père and Tata Andrée gave me a home and made me part of your family. I don't know how to repay you. Maman would want me to do something.'

Tina cups Josie's face in her hands. 'I cannot express in words my love for you. Now go. Don't miss a thing. I want to hear every detail when you come home.'

* * *

The streets of Paris are rivers of people.

Josie is swept up almost from the moment she steps outside. Strangers embrace each other, weeping and laughing at the same time. Women kiss soldiers, Free French soldiers, Allied soldiers, soldiers of every uniform and every nation. Children sit on their father's shoulders, waving flags. Old men who have lived through one German invasion and then another stand on the pavements with tears streaming down their faces.

Paris is free. After four years, two months and eleven days, Paris is free.

Josie makes her way towards the Champs-Élysées, carried forward by the great tide of humanity. The avenue is lined ten, fifteen, twenty people deep. She wriggles and apologizes and squeezes her way towards the front, small enough still to slide through the gaps that adults cannot manage.

An American soldier sees her. He is young, freckled, barely older than she is, wearing a uniform far too large for his slim frame.

'Hey, kid!' He grins and holds something out to her. 'Here, this is for you.'

A chocolate bar! Wrapped in American paper. Josie stares at it. When did she last have chocolate? Before the war, certainly. Before everything. She can barely remember the taste.

She takes it. Holds it to her nose. The smell alone makes her mouth flood with saliva. She's about to tear the wrapper . . .

And then she thinks of Tina, alone at home. Still grieving, and not yet strong enough to face the crowds. Tina who lost Louis. Tina who doesn't know where Andrée is. Tina who, for all her grief, smiled when Josie left and told her to miss nothing.

Josie tucks the chocolate carefully into her pocket. 'Thank you,' she calls back in English to the soldier, who gives her a thumbs up before being swallowed by the crowd. She'll share it with Grand-Mère. Every square. Every last crumb.

* * *

A roar goes through the crowd like a wave.

He is here.

General Charles de Gaulle, impossibly tall, impossibly composed, walks the length of the Champs-Élysées as though the liberation of Paris is simply the natural order of things restored. Behind him, the soldiers of the French 2nd Armoured Division march in formation, their boots striking the cobblestones in a rhythm that Josie feels in her chest.

She strains on her toes to see the man who refused to surrender. The man who broadcast from London when France fell. She's heard his voice on Louis's hidden radio dozens of times in the dark of the apartment. And here he is, walking through the free streets of Paris.

People are screaming his name, throwing flowers and weeping. The noise is like nothing Josie has ever heard, four years of silence and fear and whispering exploding at once into pure, overwhelming joy.

And then . . .

Shots.

A crack from somewhere above. Then another. Then several at once, from a building to the right, from a rooftop further along. Snipers! Hiding in the buildings that line the avenue, firing down into the celebrating crowd.

A man a few metres from Josie drops without a sound. There one second, gone the next.

Then the screaming erupts and the crowd becomes a stampede. People panic, push through the throng, falling, getting up, running in every direction. Josie runs too. She doesn't know where she's going, just away from here, from the shots, away from the open avenue, towards the shelter of the buildings.

Another crack.

Something hits her from behind. An enormous weight crashing into her, driving her towards the ground. For a terrifying second she thinks she's been shot. But there's no pain. Just the weight of a woman, fallen across her back, driving her down onto the pavement.

'Get off me!' Josie twists, struggles. The woman doesn't move. Can't move.

She's been hit. The woman who fell on Josie has been shot.

Josie wriggles free, gasping. Gets to her feet. Looks at the woman for one terrible second, a stranger, perhaps forty, her eyes open and shocked. Josie doesn't stop; she can't stop. Around her everyone is running and she joins them, sprinting the last metres to the nearest building, throwing herself through a doorway with a dozen others who crowd against the walls inside, breathing hard, listening to the shots outside.

Someone has their arms around her. She doesn't know who. She doesn't pull away.

The shooting continues for what feels like forever but is probably less than a minute. Then comes silence. Finally, the French and English soldiers take control and the crowds begin to emerge from doorways and peer up at the rooftops.

Josie steps back out onto the boulevard. Her legs are shaking. Her palms are scraped raw from the cobblestones.

'Are you hurt?' a woman asks her.

'No. No, I don't think so.' She looks down at herself. Her knees are bleeding through the torn fabric of her dress.

Further along the avenue, the procession has reformed. De Gaulle continues to walk, his head held high, as if the snipers were merely an inconvenience. Nothing can stop this day.

Josie straightens her dress, wipes her palms on her skirt and joins the crowds once more.

* * *

She walks all the way to Notre-Dame, watches de Gaulle disappear inside amid an extraordinary press of people and noise. Then she follows the great wave of Parisians winding through the city, street by street, all the way back to Montparnasse.

She is still shaking slightly when she reaches rue Blomet. She can still see the man who dropped, the face of the woman who fell on her. The crack of the gunshots still ring in her ears.

But Paris is free. And she is here to tell her story.

Tina looks up the moment Josie opens the door. She takes one look at the state of her dress and bloody knees and is on her feet in an instant.

'What happened? Are you hurt? What . . . ?'

'I'm fine. I'm completely fine.' Josie collapses onto the sofa. 'Sit down, Grand-Mère. I'll tell you all about it.'

With great excitement and dramatic flair, she describes everything: the crowds, the soldiers, de Gaulle walking the Champs-Élysées as if he owned every cobblestone. The French 2nd Armoured Division. The roaring, weeping, joyful masses of people.

Then the snipers. The shots. The man who fell. The woman who perhaps saved Josie's life simply by falling on her at the right moment.

Tina has gone white. Both hands pressed to her mouth. Shaking.

'Josie, ma petite, you could have been killed.'

'But I wasn't. We agreed I'd come back and tell you all I saw, and here I am.'

Tina's hands are trembling. Josie reaches for them.

'I'm all right, Grand-Mère, I promise. And I have something for you. A present from an American soldier.'

She reaches into her pocket.

Her hand finds nothing.

She checks the other pocket. Empty too. She shoves her hands deeper and turns the pockets inside out.

The chocolate bar is gone.

She sits for a moment, staring at her empty hands. Then she understands. When the woman fell on her. When she was driven down onto the cobblestones and wriggled free, scrabbling on hands and knees across the boulevard, it must have fallen out then. The most precious thing she was carrying, the gift she'd saved to share, the one square of sweetness in all this chaos, lying somewhere on the Champs-Élysées, trampled under the feet of a liberated people.

She looks at Tina. And then, despite herself, despite the shaking and the shock and the woman who might be dead in the street, she starts to laugh.

'What?' Tina asks, bewildered. 'What's funny?'

She can hardly get the words out. 'An American soldier gave me a bar of chocolate. I was going to bring it home for us to share.' She holds up her empty hands. 'And when I was

knocked down by the woman who took a bullet that might have been meant for me, it must have fallen out of my pocket. It's probably somewhere on the Champs-Élysées.'

Tina stares at her. Then she too begins to laugh, a broken, helpless, relieved laugh, the kind of laughter that saves you from crying.

'Only you,' Tina says, wiping her eyes. 'Only you, Josie. A bullet misses you by centimetres and you're upset about the chocolate.'

'It was for *us*.'

'I know, ma chérie. I know.'

They sit together in the lingering summer twilight of the liberated city, laughing and crying in equal measure. Outside, Paris still celebrates. Music and singing and shouting drift up through the open windows.

Paris is free. Louis is gone. Andrée is somewhere unknown.

But they are here, together.

* * *

The rumour is spread by whispers. From block to block and bunk to bunk and mouth to ear, so quietly that the guards can't hear, or pretend not to.

Paris is free!

Andrée hears it from the woman in the bunk above, who heard it from a Polish woman, who heard it from a Dutch prisoner whose guard had let slip something he shouldn't.

Liberation. The Allies entered Paris on 25 August 1944, to the ringing of church bells, after four years of silence. The next day de Gaulle walked the Champs-Élysées amidst cheering, happy crowds.

She sits on her bunk and holds the words in her mind. Turns them over carefully, the way you might handle something incredibly fragile.

Paris. Free.

Around her, as the whispers spread, women begin to weep, very quietly. Crying openly is dangerous here, but the tears come anyway. From Parisian women who haven't seen their city in months or years, from French women and those of other nations who understand what this means, and from women who have given everything, their freedom, their health, their people, for this moment.

Paris is free. Which means France is fighting back. Which means the war is turning, has turned, and could be nearly over.

Which means, someday, they might go home.

Andrée thinks of Josie. Today, on this day of liberation, where is she? Somewhere in Paris, perhaps on the Champs-Élysées, knowing Josie, wriggling her way to the front of the crowd, craning her neck to see de Gaulle. Perhaps with Maman and Papa. Maybe they're all celebrating in the street with strangers who are not strangers on a day like this.

She thinks of her mother, Tina, whom she hasn't seen since they were in the courtyard at rue le Peletier. Tina, whom she has tried not to think about, because worry is a door she cannot afford to open, not here, not if she is to survive. Is Tina safe? Did they release her? She turns her mind from the thought of the poor women who died on the trains.

And Papa. Where is he? At home? Or was he on the men's train?

She thinks of Louis, who drew the maps of Normandy and returned to Paris with them hidden in his clothes. He helped make this liberation possible in his own small, essential way.

'You did it, Papa,' she whispers, so quietly no one can hear. 'You helped them get here. You helped free France.'

There is no answer, just the sounds of the camp, the distant guards and the wind whistling through the barbed wire.

But Andrée stays sitting on her bunk a little longer than usual. She lets herself feel this moment of joy beneath the horror of her present reality. There is hope beneath the despair.

Paris is free.

And across hundreds of miles of occupied Europe, in a liberated city, a thirteen-year-old girl is surely celebrating. Josie, who survived. Josie, who ran. Josie, who carried their secret safely through the war.

Andrée closes her eyes. And for a moment, just a moment, she is back on rue Blomet. She hears Josie playing ‘Clair de Lune’, finding her way through the difficult passages, getting them right.

I’ll come home, she thinks. I don’t know how. I don’t know when. But I’ll come home.

And Josie will play for me.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Autumn barely announces itself before winter pushes it aside. It is not enough that the women in Ravensbrück are beaten, starved, and dying of infectious diseases that continue to sweep through the camp, but the camp is filled to overflowing, with new prisoners arriving every day as the Germans evacuate camps further east, retreating before the Red Army's advance.

The cold bites hard. Illness runs rife and rations are scarcer than ever. The guards are increasingly angry, their fear as the war turns against them spilling into violence against the women they hold captive.

Andrée had no idea of exactly where she was when she first arrived. She recognized the name and knew only that it was somewhere in northern Germany. The birch forests surrounding the camp could have been anywhere in this part of Europe. But with the arrival of winter Ravensbrück reveals its true identity. Bitterly cold winds from the Baltic scatter sandy soil across the camp, coating unwashed clothes and bodies, stinging eyes. With the tree branches bare, the full ugliness of their desolate surroundings declares itself.

When Andrée is stricken with fever, when her body finally succumbs to the hunger and the cold and the exhaustion, the women in her block look after her. They feed and care for her. They take turns hiding her from the guards during roll call, holding her upright when she can barely stand, whispering to her to hold on, to just hold on a little longer.

As her strength returns, one of the women, a Parisian named Marceline, perhaps fifty, with kind eyes and steady hands, takes her to work alongside the weakest prisoners. Work buys life. This is privileged indoor work, away from the freezing wind. They dismantle the garments that arrive daily from other camps. Sorting fur from fabric, unpicking stitches with fingers numb from cold.

Many days at work, her friends allow her to sleep under a pile of dismantled fabrics. Slowly, as her strength returns, she joins them properly in their task.

As she painstakingly unpicks the stitching from a coat or jacket, she imagines its owner. Who was she? Where is she now? Did she have a family? A husband? Children? Is she dead, or still alive somewhere in this hell?

Each coat tells a story. Some are elegant, clearly expensive, handmade for women of means. Others are simpler, well-worn, patched and mended over years. All of them now here, taken apart, stitch by stitch. For what? As the sense that the war might soon end grows stronger, the task seems increasingly futile.

But Andrée is grateful for this indoor work as she feels herself growing stronger. Her determination to survive returns. The French women in her block have created their own small community of resistance within the camp. They share food when food is given. They protect the sick among them. They refuse to betray each other, no matter what.

One day, as her fingers work at a particularly stubborn seam, she begins humming. 'Clair de Lune'. The melody she learned a lifetime ago. The piece Josie plays so beautifully.

Only when she stops does she become aware of the other women in the room looking at her. She sees smiling faces, the first for so long.

'Sing it again,' one of them asks. 'Please.'

Andrée hums quietly, so the guards won't hear. And the women around her stop their work for just a moment to listen. To remember that beauty exists. That music exists. That somewhere beyond these walls there is still a world worth surviving for.

After that, she hums often. Different pieces. Chopin's 'Raindrop Prelude', Mozart's Sonata in C, the Minuet in G major from Bach's Anna Magdalena Notebook. All in major keys – nothing sad. And her workmates and the women in her block request songs like they might have once requested them in a concert hall.

'The one from yesterday.'

'That beautiful happy one.'

‘The one that makes me think of spring.’

It’s not much, but it’s something.

A small defiance.

A small glimmer of beauty.

A reason to keep breathing.

* * *

De Gaulle moves fast and decisively, establishing a Free French Government. Occupation has given French citizens a sense of unity against the enemy. He draws together Gaullists, nationalists, communists, even anarchists into the new government.

The joy of liberation brings with it a wave of retribution. A wild purge, a reckoning like no other. Collaborators are beaten, publicly humiliated and executed without trial. However, none of this, the liberation, the new government, the retribution against the Militia, brings immediate practical relief for the people of Paris. Food shortages continue; rations are reduced further; the black market flourishes.

The mood on the streets of Paris becomes a complicated mix of euphoria and grief. Tina and Josie feel genuine joy but are also exhausted from not knowing where Andrée is or if she will ever come home. They are constantly hungry and of course traumatized. The war in Europe continues but the question of who had done what during the occupation hangs over every neighbourhood, every street, every shop.

‘Mlle Évrard called me in this morning. She’s worried about you, Josie. You’re not showing your normal interest and enthusiasm in your studies. Is something wrong?’ Tina asks.

Josie continues pushing her tiny portion food around her plate in silence.

‘Josie, I can’t help you if you don’t talk to me.’

‘No one can help me,’ Josie whispers.

‘That’s not true. You have wonderful teachers. They believe in you as I do.’

‘I know.’

‘Are you struggling with your lessons? Do you want extra help? You just must tell me, ma petite.’

‘I know. I know. My teachers can give me all the lessons and I can learn them, except for the lessons I want most desperately.’

Tina drops her head into her hands, fighting her tears.

‘Oh, Grand-Mère, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.’

Josie rushes to Tina, dropping to her knees, wrapping her arms around her. For what seems an eternity, the old woman and the young girl comfort each other in the only way they can. Holding each other and whispering words of love and support.

‘It’s not good for you to be on your knees, Josie. Sit down and let’s talk.’

Josie drags her chair closer to Tina.

‘Would you like me to find somebody who can give you piano lessons? To help you advance?’

‘No. No. That’s not what I want at all.’

‘You want your Tata Andrée.’

‘Yes. Only her.’

‘Then, Josie, you will need to be patient a little longer. The war is not over, but it will be. Andrée will come home when it’s over.’

‘I’m sorry. I promise I will keep practising so that when she does come home, she will see me, *Joséphine, the pianist*, and she will teach me more.’

‘That’s the spirit. Can I ask you to have the same spirit at school?’

‘I will. I’ll try. I do want to learn. I haven’t told anyone yet, but I think I would like to be a teacher one day. Do you think I can?’

‘My dear Josie, you can be anything you want to be.’

* * *

The weeks pass. November arrives cold and grey. Josie throws herself into her schoolwork with renewed determination. Mlle Évrard notices the change and reports back to Tina. ‘Whatever you said to her worked. She’s herself again.’

But at home, sitting at the piano, her hands in her lap, Josie thinks about Grand-Père, for whom she will never play again. She thinks about Tata Andrée and wonders whether she will ever play for her again. She wonders about her mother and Léon, where they might be now. She wants to show them how well she plays, how much she has learned.

Tina finds her there one evening, her head resting on the closed lid.

‘Tata Andrée would be so proud of you,’ she tells her.

* * *

Hanukkah arrives on early, on 29 November. Last year they celebrated with Dancer and Philippe. This year Dancer and Philippe are gone.

Josie knows what happened. Dancer was arrested. Tortured. She broke after days of resisting when they threatened Philippe and she gave up the Levallois family to save her son. And then she and Philippe disappeared. No one knows where they went. No one has seen them since the arrests.

‘Do you think they’re alive?’ Josie asks.

‘I hope so. I pray so. Dancer did what any mother would do. She chose her child. I can’t fault her for that.’

‘Do you think Tata Andrée has forgiven her?’

‘I know she has. She would have done the same for you.’

On the first night of Hanukkah, Josie and Tina light candles at the dining table. Just the stubs of two candles in ordinary holders. But they say the blessing anyway.

Josie's Hebrew is better. She's been practising. Preparing for the day when she can show Maman how she has kept her faith.

'*Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha'olam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hadlik ner shel Hanukkah*.'

Tina squeezes her hand. They have no latkes this year. No doughnuts and no dreidel. No gifts. Just two candles burning in the darkness of a Paris winter. They are two women, one nearing the end of her life, one whose life is just beginning, remembering who they are and where they come from and why they are here together.

'We celebrate resistance,' Josie says, echoing Dancer's words from last year. 'We celebrate survival.'

'Yes,' Tina says. 'We celebrate the miracle of still being here. Still being us. Despite everything.'

They sit together, watching the candles burn down. And Josie thinks of Maman. Of Léon. Of Dancer and Philippe. Of everyone she's lost and everyone she's hoping to find again.

The candles flicker. But they don't go out. Not yet.

* * *

Christmas morning arrives cold and quiet. Like too many recent Christmases, there is no feast. The food situation hasn't improved since liberation. But Tina has saved what she could. She's banked her rations, which have now stretched to a small chicken, a few potatoes and a little cheese. Maurice continues to bring them what food he can glean, which they share with Stéphanie and Monique.

Josie helps her prepare the meal. They work companionably together in the small kitchen.

'Do you think Tata Andrée is celebrating Christmas?' Josie asks.

‘I hope she’s somewhere warm. Somewhere safe. I hope she knows we’re thinking of her.’

‘Do you think she’ll come home soon?’

Tina pauses, her hands still in the potato water. ‘I don’t know, ma petite. The war is still going. The camps are still there. But when it ends, when it finally ends, she’ll come home. I must believe that.’

‘I believe it with all my heart,’ Josie says, wrapping her arms around Tina.

Tina revels in the hug. Thinking.

‘Josie, there is something I want to tell you.’

Josie pulls back to look her in the eyes.

‘Three days ago, I wrote to the Mission for Deportees and Prisoners of War in Switzerland. Maurice got hold of the address for me. They are going to try to trace where Tata Andrée was sent and where she is now.’

‘Really? Do you think they can help?’

‘If anyone can, they can. We must be patient. While the war continues, communication is difficult.’

‘I can be patient. Well, for a little while.’ She pulls Tina close again. ‘Oh, Grand-Mère, to think they might be able to tell us where she is. It’s the best Christmas present ever. Thank you for writing to them. Thank you for telling me.’

‘I wasn’t sure whether I should. I don’t want to get your hopes up. But you have a right to know everything I do.’

They eat their meal at midday. Tina gives Josie a new handkerchief, embroidered with her real initials, as promised. She need no longer fear being a Jewish girl living in Paris.

‘Now you can be yourself again,’ Tina tells her.

Josie gives Tina a drawing she made at school. It depicts the apartment on rue Blomet. The piano. The three of them – Louis, Tina, Andrée – standing together. And Josie at the piano, playing.

'This is how I remember it,' Josie says. 'Before everything changed. This is what I want Tata Andrée to come back to.'

Tina's eyes fill with tears. There will be no coming back for her beloved Louis.

That afternoon they sit by the window and watch Paris. The city is still scarred from occupation. It still has more healing to do, but now at last it's free.

'Merry Christmas, Grand-Père,' Josie whispers to the sky. 'I miss you.'

Tina wraps an arm around her. 'He misses you too. And he's so proud of you. We both are.'

* * *

There is no Christmas in Ravensbrück. The guards don't acknowledge it. The prisoners don't celebrate it. It's just another day of cold and hunger and survival.

But the women in Andrée's block whisper 'Joyeux Noël' to each other. A small resistance.

She thinks of Josie and her parents. Are they together? Are they warm? Are they eating something better than the watery soup she's been given today?

That evening, as they huddle on their bunks trying to conserve warmth, Marceline asks, 'Andrée, will you hum for us? Something for Christmas.'

So Andrée hums '*Il est né le divin enfant*'. The melody her mother sang to her as a child. The song she's sung every Christmas of her life.

Around her, women begin to cry for the Christmases they've lost, the families they may never see again and the lives they lived before this hell.

But they're still here. Still human enough to cry over a Christmas carol hummed in the darkness.

And that, Andrée thinks, is its own kind of victory.

* * *

The day after Christmas, the guards walk through the blocks, pointing at various women. 'You. You. You. Out.'

Andrée is chosen, along with forty other women from her block. They're herded into the courtyard, made to stand in the freezing wind while the guards confer.

'What's going on? Where are they taking us?' she whispers.

'Work camp,' a woman says. 'Maybe.'

She doesn't say any more. They all know what the alternative is.

Finally an officer speaks. 'You are being transferred to Rechlin sub-camp, where you will work in the forests. You will follow orders. If you work hard, you will be fed. If you do not, you will be punished. Do you understand?'

No one answers because it's not really a question.

'You leave in one hour. Bring nothing. You own nothing. Move.'

As they go back into the barracks, Andrée catches Marceline's eye. Marceline is not among those selected. She's staying at Ravensbrück.

'Survive,' Marceline mouths. 'Just survive.'

Andrée nods and tries to force a smile to her lips but fails.

An hour later, they're loaded onto trucks open to the freezing air. There are no seats, they are just bodies packed together.

The trucks drive out of the gates of Ravensbrück and into a blizzard, heading deeper into Germany, and away from the east and the advancing Russians.

Rechlin. Andrée has never heard of it.

She survived rue le Peletier, Fresnes and the journey to and incarceration in Ravensbrück.

She will survive this too.

She must.

The truck drives on through the winter darkness and Andrée closes her eyes and hums so quietly only she can hear.

‘Clair de Lune’. Josie’s song. The song that keeps her sane.

The song that reminds her she’s still human.

Chapter Twenty-nine

The forest is endless.

That's Andrée's first thought when they arrive at Rechlin and are marched through the gates to the worksite. Birch trees stretch in every direction, their branches heavy with snow. It would be a beautiful sight, if you could only forget why you're here, forget the guards with their whips and dogs, and not least forget the cold biting through your thin dress and threadbare coat to your bones.

The work is brutal, but simple. They are to cut down trees, strip them of their branches and drag the trunks to the collection point, where they'll be loaded onto wagons and taken away.

They're given axes and saws. Most of the women have never held such things before. Andrée certainly hasn't. She's a piano teacher. Her hands know ivory keys and sheet music, not the weight of an axe blade or the bite of a saw.

But she learns. They all learn. Because the alternative is dying in this freezing forest with no one to bury you.

The first day, Andrée's hands blister. The second day, the blisters burst. By the end of the first week, her palms are raw meat. But still she swings the axe. Still she pulls the saw. Still she drags logs through snow that comes up to her knees.

The cold is worse than anything at Ravensbrück. Here there's no escape. The barracks are unheated. The thin blankets they're given might as well be paper. At night the women huddle together for warmth, but it's never enough.

January arrives with temperatures that plunge below well below freezing. The icy air makes Andrée's lungs burn with every breath. This is a cold that kills. And still they work, from dawn to dusk. Often longer.

Andrée's feet soon succumb. The shoes they have given her, if they can be called shoes, are little more than fabric wrapped around wooden soles. They provide no warmth and little protection.

By mid-January she cannot feel her toes. By the end of the month her feet have turned black. She has severe frostbite, the kind that doesn't heal.

Walking is agony. Every step sends fire snaking up through her legs. But she must walk, she must work. These guards don't care about frostbite, about her pain. Their rules are simple: work or die.

So Andrée works.

* * *

'Happy New Year, Grand-Mère.'

Josie kisses Tina on both cheeks. They're sitting at the dining table with weak chicory coffee that Josie has taken to drinking too, and the last of the bread Maurice brought them yesterday. Not much of a celebration. But it's far better than nothing.

Maurice is a miracle worker – their rations are so meagre that it's barely enough to survive on, but he provides little extras every day or two. They never ask where he gets the food. He says little, but they know he's watching over them, and it makes them feel a little safer, a little more hopeful.

'Happy New Year, ma petite.' Tina tries to smile. Tries to find hope in a new year, that 1945 might bring an end to their suffering. But she is overwhelmed by grief for Louis and worry about Andrée.

'Do you think the war will end this year?' Josie asks.

'I do hope so.'

'The radio says the Russians are advancing. The Americans and British too. They're pushing the Germans back on all sides. It must end soon, mustn't it?'

‘It must, ma petite.’

‘I haven’t wanted to ask . . .’

‘No, Josie, I haven’t heard from Switzerland. Patience, remember.’

But Tina doesn’t say what she’s really thinking: What if Andrée doesn’t last until liberation? What if she’s already gone and we just don’t know it yet?

She keeps these thoughts to herself. Locks them away. Josie deserves hope, and Tina will give it to her, even if she has little left of her own.

* * *

Walking is no longer possible for Andrée. Not really. She can just about stand, but putting weight on her blackened feet sends such waves of pain through her body that she sometimes screams. The guards beat her for screaming. So she learns to bite down on her pain.

On hands and knees, she crawls from the barracks to the worksite, dragging herself through the snow, hauling logs when she can grip them with hands that are themselves beginning to show signs of frostbite.

The other women try to help. They take turns supporting her, letting her lean on them, carrying more than their share of the work so Andrée can do less.

But there’s only so much they can do. They too are weak. They too are suffering from frostbite.

The women don’t have the energy to get to know each other. Conversations, even at night, are rare. It’s body heat the women want from each other, not their history.

One woman, a Belgian named Claire, whispers to Andrée one evening in the barracks, ‘You should go to the infirmary.’

‘What infirmary? You know there’s nothing like that here.’

‘I just . . . your feet. They’re getting worse.’

‘I know they are.’

‘If you can’t work . . .’

‘Then I die. I know. So I’ll keep working.’

And she does. Day after day. Week after week. Standing when she can. Crawling when she must. Working until her body gives out and she collapses in the snow, and the guards kick her until she gets up again.

At night, in the barracks, she hums. ‘Clair de Lune’. Chopin. Bach. The music is all she has left. All that reminds her she was once something other than this broken creature crawling through the snow.

* * *

Maurice knocks on the door with a package wrapped in brown paper. Tina opens it to find bread, real bread, not the tasteless grey stuff from the ration queue, and proper cheese, a *Camembert de Normandie*.

‘Maurice, where did you –’

‘Never ask, Madame Tina, just accept it. You and Josie need to eat. I have also taken some to Mme Stéphanie and Monique.’

Tina’s eyes fill with tears. ‘Thank you. Thank you so much.’

‘It’s nothing. Really. How is Josie?’

‘She’s . . . she’s coping. Better than I am, I think. She has hope. I don’t know where she finds it, but she does.’

Maurice steps inside, closes the door. ‘And you? How are you?’

They’ve become friends over the months. More than friends, they’ve become confidants. He is the only person Tina feels she can speak to honestly and who understands.

‘I’m tired, Maurice. So tired. And I don’t . . . I don’t think she’s coming back.’

There. She's said it. The thought she's been carrying for months. The fear that wakes her at three in the morning. The certainty that grows stronger every day. Andrée isn't coming home.

'You don't know that.'

'It's been eight months, Maurice. Eight months since they took her. Eight months of no news. Just silence.'

'I understand, of course. And no word about Josie's mother and brother either. We don't know even where they were taken. I've heard rumours, but I don't want to believe them. They are too horrible. Evil.'

'It's all right, Maurice. It's good of you to not want to tell me about the camps, but I've heard about them too.'

'The camps are still operating. People are still alive in those places. The Russians are liberating camps in the east. The British and Americans will liberate the ones in the west. Andrée could be in any of them. She could be alive and soon she will be rescued.'

'Or she could be dead. Louis is dead. Why should Andrée be any different?'

Maurice takes her hands. 'Because you must believe. For Josie. For yourself. You must believe until you know for certain. Otherwise, what's the point of any of this?'

Tina nods. He's right. She knows he's right. But believing is so hard. Hoping is so hard. Every day is so hard.

'I'll keep believing,' she says finally. 'For Josie. For Andrée. I'll keep believing.'

* * *

Josie sits at the piano, her fingers hovering over the keys. She hears the music in her head, and it fills her with hope.

Today she's working on a Chopin nocturne from one of Andrée's books. It's difficult. More difficult than anything she's learned before. But she's determined. When Tata Andrée comes home, she'll play it for her. Perfectly.

When. Not if. When.

She practises for hours every day. Bach in the morning before school. Chopin in the afternoon when she gets home. Scales and arpeggios. Sometimes she makes up her own melodies, improvises, lets her fingers wander across the keys and find their own music.

Tina listens from the kitchen. The music is beautiful and defiant. It is proof that music survives even when everything else is broken.

'That's lovely, Josie,' she calls. 'Are you composing your own music?'

'It's not right yet, but yes, I'm trying to find my own sound, the sound of my life, not Bach's or Chopin's. Does that make sense?'

'Maybe one day you too will become a famous composer.'

Josie laughs. 'I don't think so, but maybe one day I can teach someone else to play.'

'Your own children perhaps,' Tina says.

'And grandchildren. I will teach them to play just like Tata Andrée taught me. I just must stop making so many mistakes.'

'Everyone makes mistakes, but you keep playing. That's what matters.'

Josie nods, starts the passage again. Gets it right this time and smiles to herself. It's progress. When Tata Andrée comes home, she'll be so proud.

* * *

The guards are twitchy. Even Andrée, crawling through the melting snow with blackened feet, can see it. They're waiting for something to happen. They're scared of what is heading their way.

‘The Russians,’ the women whisper to each other when the guards aren’t listening. ‘The Russians are coming.’ They’re getting closer every day, and when they arrive, the Germans will run. Or fight. Or kill everyone to hide the evidence of their barbarity.

No one knows what they will do. But everyone is afraid.

Andrée tries not to think about it. Instead, she turns her attention to making it through each day, through each hour and minute.

Her feet are beyond recovery, she knows this. Even if she survives, even if liberation comes tomorrow, her feet will never heal properly. The frostbite has gone too deep and the damage is permanent.

At night, when the pain is worst, when she can’t sleep because her feet burn with a cold fire, she thinks of Josie at the piano playing ‘Clair de Lune’. She imagines her getting better every day as she waits for Andrée to come home and resume their lessons. And Maman and Papa too, all waiting for her.

I’ll go home, she tells herself. I don’t know how. I don’t know when. But I’ll go home.

* * *

The news on the radio is almost too good to believe. The Americans have crossed the Rhine. The Russians are at the gates of Berlin. The war is ending. Not might end. Not could end. *Is* ending.

Josie listens to every broadcast, her face pressed close to the radio. ‘They’re liberating the camps, Grand-Mère. They’re finding people. Survivors. Tata Andrée could be in one of those camps. She could be free any day now. And Maman and Léon. They all could be free very soon.’

Tina wants to share Josie's hope. Wants to believe that Andrée is in one of those camps, waiting to be found. But ten months of silence have worn her down. Ten months of not knowing have taught her that hope is dangerous.

In her heart she fears Ruth and Léon won't be coming home. She's heard about the extermination camps. About the fate of the Jewish people deported east.

'Maybe,' she says carefully. 'We'll see, ma chérie.'

'You don't believe they're alive, do you?'

The question catches Tina off guard. 'I . . . I want to believe.'

'But you don't.'

'I don't know, Josie. I honestly don't know. It's been so long. And with Louis . . . I just . . . I can't let myself hope too much. It hurts too much when –'

'When what? When Tata Andrée doesn't come home? You've already decided she's not coming back, haven't you?'

'No. No, I haven't decided anything. I'm just trying to be realistic. To prepare myself for –'

'For her being dead? That's what you're preparing for? Well, I'm not. I'm preparing for her to come home. Because she will. I know she will. And so will Maman and Léon.'

Josie storms out of the room. Tina sits alone with the radio still broadcasting liberation news. Prisoners are being freed from the camps, but there are so many dead. And yet, some have survived.

Could Andrée be one of them? Ruth and Léon? Is it possible?

Tina doesn't know. Doesn't let herself know. Because if her hopes are shattered again, she'll break completely.

* * *

Maurice finds Tina crying in the hallway that afternoon. He doesn't say anything. Just sits beside her on the stairs and waits.

'I've already lost Louis,' she says finally. 'I can't lose Andrée too. But I think . . . I think I've already lost her. I think she's been gone too long to have survived, and I just haven't admitted it to myself.'

'The war is ending, Tina. The camps are being liberated. If she's alive, she'll come home. And if she's not . . . well. At least you'll know. At least the not knowing will end.'

'I don't know which is worse. Not knowing or knowing she's gone.'

'Not knowing,' Maurice says firmly. 'Not knowing is always worse. Whatever the truth is, it will be better than this limbo.'

Tina nods. He's right. She knows he's right. But that doesn't make the waiting easier.

'And of course Josie is hoping and praying Ruth and Léon will come home. But I think we know differently. Don't we?'

'I think so, but we mustn't take her hope away.'

* * *

The sound of artillery grows closer every day. The guards are openly panicking now. They argue and fight among themselves and some have deserted. Just left in the night. The remaining guards don't know whether to run or stay.

The women stop working and no one berates them. The guards have more important things to worry about than timber production.

Andrée lies in the barracks, unable to move. Her feet are beyond pain now. Beyond sensation. Just dead weight at the end of her legs. Claire and the other women take turns bringing her water, sharing what little food there is. Andrée is not alone in her pain. Many are unable to walk, reduced like her to lying on the wooden slats of their bunks, which they share with two others, starving and in desperate need of medical care.

‘The Russians are coming,’ Claire whispers. ‘Maybe tomorrow. Maybe the next day. You just must hold on a little longer.’

‘I don’t think I can.’

‘You must. You’ve come this far. Don’t give up now.’

‘I’m so tired, Claire. So tired.’

‘I know. But you’re alive. That’s what matters. You’re still alive.’

Andrée closes her eyes. Tries to believe her. Tries to hold on.

* * *

Hitler is dead. The news came yesterday. The war must be nearly over now.

Josie can barely contain her excitement. ‘It’s happening, Grand-Mère. The war is ending. Any day now, Tata Andrée, Maman and Léon will come home. I know it. I know they will.’

Tina tries to smile. Tries to match Josie’s anticipation. But all she can think is: if Andrée were coming home, wouldn’t she be here already? Wouldn’t we have heard something by now?

‘I’m going to practise the Chopin,’ Josie announces. ‘So I’ll be ready when she gets home. So I can play for her. And for Maman and Léon – they will be so surprised.’

‘That’s a good idea, ma chérie.’

Josie runs to the piano and begins playing. The piece is challenging, the notes aren’t perfect, but her tone is filled with joy.’ She’s practising for their return.

Tina listens from the kitchen. And for the first time in months she lets herself hope. Just a little. Just enough to breathe.

Maybe Josie is right. Maybe Andrée will come home. Maybe miracles still happen.

* * *

The guards are gone. Every one of them. They fled during the night, taking whatever they could carry. The women wake to find the gates unlocked, the guard towers empty. Freedom! It's sudden, unexpected and terrifying.

They're in the middle of a German forest with no food, no transport, no way to get home. Will the Russians help them? Will they care? Or will they see only more displaced persons to deal with?

Andrée lies listening to the chaos outside. The women are shouting, crying, laughing. Yes, it's the sound of freedom, but she can't join them because she can't walk. She can barely move.

Claire appears in the doorway. 'The Russians will be here soon. They'll have doctors and medicine. They'll help us get home.'

Home. Paris. Rue Blomet. Josie at the piano. Tina in the kitchen. Louis in his favourite chair . . .

They're waiting. They must be.

'Help me up,' Andrée says.

'But your feet?'

'I know. But I'm not staying here. I'm going home. Even if I must crawl the whole way, I'm going home.'

Claire smiles. Nods. 'Then we'll help you. All of us. We'll get you home, Andrée. I promise.'

'For now, just help me outside. I want to feel the sun on my face. I want to feel freedom.'

Andrée, for the first time in months, lets herself believe she's going home. To Josie. To Tina. To Louis. To music and life and everything she thought she'd lost.

She's going home.

Chapter Thirty

The banging on the door comes early, before Josie has left for school. It's loud, urgent and insistent. Tina's heart stops at the first rap. That kind of knocking, it brings back bad memories. The Militia. The arrests. Everything after.

But when she opens the door, it's Maurice. He's out of breath, his face flushed with excitement.

'The Hôtel Lutetia,' he gasps. 'They've opened it as a repatriation centre for survivors. Tina, it's open for prisoners coming home.'

Josie appears behind Tina. 'What? What's happening?'

Maurice catches his breath. 'The Hôtel Lutetia on boulevard Raspail – you know, the one that German intelligence used as their headquarters during the occupation – it's being turned into a centre for returning prisoners. Concentration-camp survivors, prisoners of war – they'll all come through there. And every day, they'll post lists. Names of those known to have survived.'

'Andrée,' Tina breathes. 'We might find Andrée.'

'And Maman,' Josie says breathlessly. 'Léon too. We might find them all.'

'You should go now,' Maurice says. 'They'll be posting new names every morning.'

Josie is already grabbing her coat. 'Can I miss school? Please, Grand-Mère? Just today?'

Tina nods. School can wait. This cannot.

* * *

The Hôtel Lutetia is in chaos. Hundreds of people crowd the entrance, the foyer, the staircases. Some are returnees, skeletal, haunted, wearing clothes that hang off their frames. Others are searching, calling out names, holding up photographs, begging anyone who'll listen: 'Have you seen my husband? My wife? My son?'

Tina and Josie push their way inside. The foyer has been transformed. Tables are set up with food. There are medical stations. Red Cross workers move through the crowd with clipboards. And on the walls, there are lists. Dozens of them covered with names.

The lists are divided into the arrivals and the deceased.

'You check the arrivals,' Tina says quietly. 'I'll check . . . the other one.'

Josie nods. She doesn't argue.

She starts at the top of the arrivals list, running her finger down name after name. ABADIE, Marie. BERNARD, Jean. CARTIER, Sophie. So many names. So many people returning. But not Andrée. Not Ruth. Not Léon.

When she has made sure, across the foyer she watches Tina scan the other list. The dead. Tina's finger moving slowly, methodically. Checking every name.

Around them, reunions happen. A woman screams in joy, not in pain, and runs to embrace a man so thin he barely looks human. A child finds his father and can't stop crying. An elderly couple clutch one another, weeping, whispering thanks to God.

And there are the others. The families who find their loved ones on the wrong list, who collapse and must be supported by Red Cross workers. They leave the building with a finality that makes Josie's stomach turn.

Tina returns to Josie's side. 'Nothing on my list.'

'Mine either.'

'They'll post new names tomorrow. We'll come back.'

'Every day?'

'Every day. Until we find them.'

* * *

They return the next day. And the next. And the next. In the mornings Josie goes to school. Every afternoon she and Tina take the metro to the Hôtel Lutetia, where they scan the lists, find nothing and walk home in silence.

'Maybe tomorrow,' Josie says each evening.

'Maybe tomorrow,' Tina echoes.

But the days pass and the names they're searching for never appear.

* * *

The Russian soldiers arrive with trucks and medical supplies. They're shocked by what they find. Starving women. Disease. Bodies. The forest camp that no one knew existed.

Andrée is among those taken to a field hospital the Russians have set up. A doctor examines her feet, his face grave.

'Severe frostbite. Both feet. The surrounding tissue is necrotic.'

'Dead? Will I lose my feet?' Andrée asks. Her voice is calm. She's prepared for this answer.

'I don't know. We'll do what we can. Clean the wounds and treat infection. But the damage is extensive. I'm so sorry.'

'Just do what you can. I need to go home. That's all that matters.'

* * *

A Swedish delegation arrives at the field hospital. They are representatives of the White Buses programme, an organization run by the Red Cross that has been evacuating concentration-camp survivors to Sweden for medical treatment.

They've already transferred thousands of women from Auschwitz and Ravensbrück to Malmö. Now they're here, with a brief to prioritize Scandinavians but looking for any survivors who need urgent care.

A woman stops at Andrée's cot and looks first at her chart and then her feet.

‘You’re French?’

‘Yes. From Paris.’

‘You need proper medical care. We will take you to Sweden. There’s a hospital in Malmö with doctors who specialize in treating camp survivors. We can help you.’

‘I need to go home. To Paris. My family . . .’

‘Your family needs you alive, my dear. If those feet don’t get proper treatment, you’ll lose them. Maybe your legs. Maybe your life. Come to Sweden. Get well. And then go home.’

Andrée closes her eyes. Sweden. Further from home. More time away. But she’s alive. She must stay alive.

* * *

The train to Sweden is nothing like the train to Ravensbrück. This one has seats, windows, heat and food. Medical personnel move through the cars checking on passengers, offering water, adjusting their blankets.

Andrée sits by the window, watching Germany slide past. She can’t wait to escape this country that imprisoned and tortured her. That nearly killed her. She’s leaving it behind. Finally.

Beside her, Claire, who was also selected for evacuation, holds her hand.

‘We made it,’ Claire whispers. ‘We actually made it.’

‘Almost,’ Andrée says. ‘We’re not home yet.’

‘But we will be. Soon.’

The train crosses into Denmark, heading for Copenhagen, from where a ferry will cross to the Swedish town of Malmö. The landscape changes; it’s greener, cleaner, untouched by war. Andrée presses her face to the glass and lets herself cry. For the first time in as long as she can remember, her body heaves with sobs.

* * *

They're leaving the Hôtel Lutetia, another day, another fruitless search, when Josie hears her name.

'Joséphine? Joséphine!'

She turns. A man stands there. He's skeletal, barely recognizable, but there is something about his eyes that is familiar.

'Doctor Tessier?' Her voice cracks. 'Is that you?'

Their old family doctor. The one who used to visit when she had fevers, who gave her sweets and told her to be brave. He was arrested the same night as Maman and Léon.

'Joséphine! My God, you're alive. You're here.' He embraces her, this emaciated man who was once so jolly and robust. 'I heard you got away. Léon told me you were going to your piano teacher's family, who have obviously taken good care of you. Thank God. Thank God!'

'Doctor, you have seen Léon? What about my mother? Are they . . . ?'

His face changes. Shuts down. And Josie knows before he says another word. She knows.

'I'm so sorry, Joséphine. Your mother . . . she was killed immediately. At Auschwitz. The moment we arrived. She didn't suffer, I promise you. It was quick.'

The world tilts. Maman is dead. She has been dead for years. All this time she has spent hoping and waiting, and she's been gone since the beginning.

'And Léon?' Tina asks gently, her arm around Josie's shoulders.

Doctor Tessier's eyes fill with tears. 'Léon survived Auschwitz. He was strong, that boy, so strong. They transferred us both to Dachau when they knew the Russians were coming. We were liberated together. It was the twenty-ninth of April. Léon was alive when the Americans came. He knew the war was ending. He knew liberation had come.'

‘But?’ Josie whispers.

‘He had developed typhus in the camp. The Americans brought doctors, medicine, they did everything they could. But he was so weak, Joséphine. His body couldn’t fight any more. He died two days after liberation. He held on long enough to know he was free. And then . . . then he let go.’

Josie can’t breathe; she can barely stand. Tina holds her up while the world shatters around her.

Her Maman has been dead for years, and Léon, poor Léon, survived everything, only to die days after liberation.

‘I’m sorry,’ Doctor Tessier says again. ‘I wish I had better news. But I thought you should know. Léon spoke of you often. He wanted to come home to you. He tried so hard to stay alive for you.’

‘Thank you,’ Tina says quietly. ‘Thank you for telling us and for being with them.’

Doctor Tessier nods and squeezes Josie’s hand one more time. Then he’s gone, back into the crowd, another skeleton searching for his own family.

Josie and Tina stand in the foyer of the Hôtel Lutetia surrounded by reunions and grief, and they hold each other.

‘I’m sorry, Josie,’ Tina whispers. ‘I’m so sorry.’

‘They’re gone. They’re both gone.’

‘I know. I know.’

‘I have no one.’

‘You have me. You will always have me.’

* * *

The hospital in Malmö is like a dream. There are clean sheets and real food. There are doctors who speak kindly to her and treat her like a human being. They operate on her feet,

removing dead tissue, saving what they can. She'll keep her feet, and her legs, but the damage is permanent. She'll never walk the same way again. Her hands will recover in time.

'You're lucky,' the surgeon tells her. 'A few more weeks and we would have had to amputate.'

Lucky. The word sounds absurd. But at least she's alive and she has her feet.

After the surgery, they move her to a rehabilitation home. It is a beautiful building surrounded by gardens on the edge of the city. Huge windows that let in the light. There are other survivors, all working to regain their strength, to remember how to be human.

Andrée learns to walk again, slowly, painfully, and with a cane. Her feet will always hurt, will always act as a reminder of Rechlin, of the forest, of the cold that nearly killed her.

As soon as she is feeling stronger, she writes a letter.

* * *

Maurice taps on the door with an envelope bearing Swedish stamps. It is addressed to M. Louis and Mme Augustine Levallois in handwriting that makes Tina's breath catch.

'It arrived just now,' Maurice says. 'I thought I should bring it straight up.'

Tina stares at the envelope. It's Andrée's handwriting!

'Shall I . . .?' Maurice gestures to the door.

'No. Stay. Please. I don't think I can . . . Please stay.'

He nods and sits.

Tina opens the envelope with shaking hands and pulls out the letter. It is Andrée's handwriting, a bit shakier than before, but unmistakably hers.

She reads:

Dearest Maman and Papa,

I am alive. I am in Sweden, in a city called Malmö. I am receiving medical treatment and will be here for some weeks more. I was liberated from a work camp called Rechlin on the first of May. The Russians came and then the Swedes brought me here.

I am injured, I'm sad to say. My feet were badly frostbitten, but I have had surgery so I will keep my feet, but I will not be able to chase Josie around the way I used to. I will probably always need to use a cane.

I don't know when I will be well enough to come home, but the doctors say I am slowly improving.

Maman, Papa, I need you to do something for me. Please do not tell Josie I am alive. Not yet. If my recovery does not go well, if I do not survive, I do not want her to have hoped and then lost again. I do not know if Ruth and Léon have returned. Please let me know anything you can when you reply. Please let her believe I am still missing until I am well enough to come home. Until I am certain I will make it back to you.

I know this is asking a lot. But I cannot bear the thought of her waiting for me if I do not return. Please understand.

I pray you are both well. I pray Josie is safe. Tell me everything when you write back. The address of the rehabilitation home is at the top of this letter.

I love you both so much. I am coming home. I promise. I am coming home.

Andrée

Tina lowers the letter. Tears stream down her face. Maurice puts his hand on her shoulder.

‘She’s alive,’ Tina whispers. ‘Maurice, my daughter is alive.’

‘Yes, she is.’

‘But I can’t tell Josie. She’s asking me not to tell her.’

‘She’s trying to protect her.’

‘I know. But Josie . . . Josie just lost her mother and brother. She needs to know Andrée is alive. She needs hope.’

‘And if Andrée doesn’t make it home? If she takes a turn for the worse? Then Josie loses her all over again. Andrée is trying to spare her that.’

Tina presses the letter to her chest. ‘What do I do, Maurice? What’s the right choice?’

‘You honour your daughter’s wishes. You keep the secret. And you pray she comes home soon so you can tell Josie the truth.’

Tina nods. He’s right. It’s the hardest thing she’s ever had to do. But he’s right.

‘I’ll write back tonight. Do I tell her about Louis? Maurice, help me – do I tell my daughter her father is dead in a letter or wait for her to come home?’

‘Only you can decide that my friend. But she’s very weak just now.’

‘You’re right. And I won’t tell Josie she’s alive. For now.’

* * *

It’s the beginning of July 1945. The summer has arrived; Paris is bathed in sunshine and Tina has somewhere to be. After packing Josie off to school, she heads for the Hôtel Lutetia.

The plane from Sweden has landed in Paris. Andrée is among the thirty survivors being repatriated. Buses drive them into Paris, to the Hôtel Lutetia.

She walks with a cane, slowly, carefully. Every step hurts.

Tina is waiting for her and when Andrée alights from the bus and hobbles up the steps to the hotel foyer, she sees her mother and nearly collapses. Tina runs, actually runs, and catches her daughter in her arms.

They hold each other for a long time. Neither of them speaks. They don't need to.

Finally, Tina pulls away. Looks at her daughter. So thin. So scarred. But she's real and she's here.

'Papa?' Andrée says.

Tina shakes her head. Can't speak. Just shakes her head.

Andrée's face crumples.

Tina takes Andrée's face in her hands. Forces her to look into her eyes. 'Your father never broke, Andrée. He protected everyone. The network. The work. He died a hero.'

'I know. I know he did.'

Tina tells her about Josie's mother and brother. They cry together. For Louis. For Esther and Léon. For Josie. For everything they've lost. For everything that can never be the same. Similar scenes play out around them. There is so much joy and so much pain.

'Josie,' Andrée says finally. 'I need to see Josie.'

'She's at school. She'll be home at three o'clock.'

'Then let's go home. I want to be there when she arrives.'

* * *

The apartment on rue Blomet looks the same. And completely different. The piano is exactly where she left it. Polished lovingly by Tina yesterday.

'Josie is on it constantly,' Tina tells. 'She practises every day. Teaching herself from your books. Preparing for when you come home. I haven't breathed a word, but she's refused to believe you wouldn't come home. She's even been trying to compose her own music. The sound of her life, she calls it.'

Andrée's throat tightens. 'She still plays?'

'Every day. For hours. I offered to find her another teacher, but she refused. She says that when you come home, she'll be ready for her next lesson.'

Andrée sits at the piano. She rests her fingertips on the keys for a moment before trying a few tentative notes. Music. Fragile and familiar all at once. She thinks of the times she hummed 'Clair de Lune' in the darkness of Ravensbrück, offering what little she had to the women around her. She wonders, not for the first time, whether music can save not only your soul but your life.

She begins to play.

The piece that had kept her sane when sanity seemed a luxury she couldn't afford. The piece, she believes, that brought her home.

Her fingers are stiff, the joints damaged and reluctant, still carrying the cold of that place inside them. The music doesn't sound the way it used to. She plays anyway.

She stops. Her hands rest lightly on the keys, and she stares ahead at nothing. She can't bear to see her mother's face when she asks the question that has threatened to escape since the moment they were reunited. She is frightened to ask. Frightened of the answer.

She must know.

'Why didn't you tell me about Papa in your letter?'

Behind her, Tina looks at her daughter's back, at the curve of her shoulders, her bowed head.

'Ma chère, I couldn't write the words.' Her voice is barely above a whisper. 'I can't say them even now. Please forgive me. You must think me a terrible coward.'

Andrée is off the piano stool before the sentence is finished. She crosses the room and sinks onto the sofa beside her mother, pulling her close.

'No, Maman. No.' She holds her tighter. 'You are the bravest person I have ever known. I understand. I truly do.'

Tina's breath catches. When the words come, they rush out of her.

‘In your letter you asked me not to tell Josie you were alive, in case you didn’t make it. You sounded so weak, ma pauvre fille. I couldn’t write anything that might make you worse. I needed you to come home. I needed that more than anything.’

‘I’m sorry. I’m sorry I asked that of you.’

‘No.’ Tina pulls back just enough to look at her. ‘Don’t be sorry. I was going to explain it myself. But I wasn’t ready yet.’

A silence settles between them, not uncomfortable, just full.

‘Is it too soon,’ Andrée says carefully, ‘to ask if you know anything about the others? Agent, Doctor René, Cat?’

Tina shakes her head slowly. ‘All I know is that they were arrested. Beyond that, nothing. I would tell you if I knew anything. You know I would.’

‘Dancer? Her son?’

‘Nothing. Not been seen or heard from. Maurice tried to make enquiries, but no one seems to know anything.’ She pauses. ‘Or they’re too afraid to say.’

Andrée nods. She leans back against her mother, and for a moment she is a child again, and the world is small and safe and warm.

‘When I’m stronger,’ she says quietly, ‘I’ll find out what happened to them.’ She closes her eyes. ‘But for now, I’m where I need to be. With you. And soon Josie will be home.’

* * *

‘Hello, M. Dupont,’ Josie greets Maurice, who is standing outside his apartment with the biggest smile on his face she has ever seen.

‘Good afternoon, Mlle Josie.’

‘Are you all right? You seem different.’

‘I have never been better.’

Josie trudges up the stairs. School was hot and boring. The teacher droned on about history while all Josie could think about was the Hôtel Lutetia. Another day of checking lists. Another day of finding nothing.

She's halfway up when she hears it.

Music.

Piano music.

'Clair de Lune'.

But not the way she plays it. This is different. It's perfect, beautiful. It is being played the way it's supposed to sound.

The way only one person she knows can play it.

She runs up the stairs, fumbling with her key, before bursting into the apartment.

And there she is.

Tata Andrée is at the piano She's thin and scarred and there's a cane propped against the bench. But she's here.

'Tata Andrée?'

Andrée stops playing and turns to see Josie standing in the doorway.

'Hello, Josie.'

Josie doesn't remember crossing the room. Doesn't remember moving. But she's in Andrée's arms, sobbing, holding on like she'll never let go.

'You're here. You're here. I thought . . . I thought . . .'

'I know. I know, ma petite. But I'm here. I'm home. I'm not going anywhere ever again.'

They hold each other tight. Josie crying into Andrée's shoulder. Andrée stroking her hair, whispering reassurances. Tina watching, crying too.

Finally Josie pulls back and looks at Andrée properly. 'You're hurt. Your legs . . .'

‘My feet. Frostbite. From the work camp. I’ll be all right. I can’t run, but I can walk and that’s what matters.’

‘You’re home. *That’s* what matters.’

Andrée smiles. Touches Josie’s face. ‘Yes. I’m home. And I hear you’ve been practising. Grand-Mère says you’ve been teaching yourself.’

‘I wanted to be ready. For when you came home. For my next lesson.’

‘Then play for me. Show me what you’ve learned.’

Josie hesitates. ‘Are you sure?’

‘I want to hear you play.’

So Josie sits at the piano and she plays the Chopin nocturne she’s been working on for months, the piece she promised herself she’d perfect before Andrée came home.

She makes mistakes, but she doesn’t stop. And when she finishes, she looks at Andrée nervously.

‘That was beautiful, Josie. Truly beautiful.’

‘Really?’

Josie beams. Then her face falls. ‘Maman and Léon . . . they’re not coming home. Neither is Grand-Père.’

Andrée’s heart breaks. ‘No, ma petite. I’m so sorry. This is your home now, here with Grand-Mère and me.’

‘Doctor Tessier told me about them. At the Hôtel Lutetia. Maman died at Auschwitz. Léon died after liberation.’

‘I wish we could have saved them too.’

‘You saved me. You and Grand-Mère and Grand-Père. You saved me.’

They sit together at the piano. Wood and copper. Steel wire and ivory. An instrument with its own memories and stories. It shares this space with three survivors. Three women who lost everything and found each other. Who survived when so many didn't.

'Play "Clair de Lune" again,' Josie says. 'The way you used to. Please.'

So Andrée plays. And Tina listens. And Josie closes her eyes and lets the music wash over her.

The war is over. The occupation is over. They're home. Together. With the piano.

It's not the ending they wanted. But it's the ending they have.

And for now, it's enough.

[MAIN TEXT ENDS HERE]

Author's Note

The Levallois family lived at 135 Rue Blomet, as described in the novel. They owned a small bookshop, which mainly supplied textbooks to the boys' and girls' schools in the neighbourhood.

They are listed in archives of the resistance as:

- Marie-Louis-Alphonse (Louis) Levallois, retired draughtsman.
- Augustine-Claudine (Tina) Levallois, retired embroiderer.
- Andrée-Marie-Madeleine Levallois, piano and singing teacher.

The family of Joséphine (Josie) have requested that her name be changed for the story. I have used different names for her mother and brother also.

Louis died in Fresnes Prison on 26 July 1944. Tina died in Draveil, just outside Paris, on 26 March 1959. Andrée died at her home in Paris on 30 October 1993.

In the post-war years Andrée returned to teaching music in schools and was recognized as an innovative and passionate music educator and practitioner. She wrote a famous and highly regarded music teaching book, *La Musique à travers le Chant* ('Music through singing').

Although I have the real names and aliases of members of the cell that ran from the Levallois's apartment, I have chosen not to identify them and instead use fictional characters who I have given aliases, which they would mainly have used to protect each other in the event of arrest and torture. Some are based loosely on known figures in the Resistance, but they should be regarded as fictitious.

It is likely that the Levallois family used aliases. However, these remain lost to history and I have chosen not to invent new ones.

In a document dated 25 May 1950, Colonel Frédéric-Henri Manhes, Reserve Colonel of the Air Force, Head of the 'Frédéric' Network, Commander of the Legion of Honour, certified that Andrée was a member of the Frédéric Resistance Network. He confirmed that she and her parents were arrested on 8 June 1944 by the Militia, following the arrest of 'Dancer', who had confessed under duress. Manhes was Jean Moulin's representative in occupied northern France but was arrested and deported in 1943, so he was not present for most of the period during which the novel takes place. I have kept him as their ultimate leader for the sake of the story.

In a document dated 11 October 1957, Georges Watrin, known in the Resistance as Lieutenant Drives, certified that Louis was a member of the Goélette Network. He also confirmed that 'Dancer' revealed the name of her leader (Louis) and where the Levallois family lived.

Captain Hubert Cerf de Mauny is listed as a senior member of the Jonque Resistance Network, which Louis also worked for. He was captured visiting the Levallois's apartment following their arrest and died while being deported east. I have very loosely based my character 'Cat' on him.

Colonel Pallas in the novel is loosely based on Colonel André Manuel, the head of the BCRA (the Free French intelligence service), under the direction of London.

In 1948, as part of the process to ensure the accreditation of Resistance networks and their members, both Tina and Andrée gave lengthy written statements to the French authorities, naming Resistance fighters they had worked with and describing the missions carried out by them and others in their cell.

Andrée's identification cards list her as Volunteer Resistance Fighter, card no. 000315; Resistance Deportee card no. 2.001.01697; Combatant card no 557467.

There are many more operatives and acts of bravery than those I have covered in my novel. The story of Louis identifying and sketching the German fortified positions ahead of the D-Day invasion is true. There is no evidence of his travelling to Normandy, but I have assumed he would have done so, in order to provide such detailed information.

Andrée was key in producing false identity documentation for young men evading forced labour in Germany, along with falsified medical certificates for work exemption and ration cards, a lifeline for those hiding people in their homes. Other missions I have attributed to the Levallois family network are based on activities known to have been carried out by other operatives.

Through my research in the archives, I established that fourteen resistance fighters were arrested and in some cases interned, deported and killed as a result of the information given by 'Dancer'. The Militia remained in the apartment of the Levallois family for five days, during which time they arrested several colleagues whom their concierge was unable to forewarn. Maurice is a fictional character, although it's clear that the real concierge at 135 Rue Blomet was sympathetic to the Levallois family and would have been aware that they were hiding a Jewish child. He saved the lives of many operatives during the time that the Militia hid in their apartment. It is noted in the testimonies that thanks to the courage of Louis in alerting the concierge, all members of the Édouard network (the anonymous group I describe in the novel as meeting at the apartment on a Tuesday) were warned and avoided arrest.

Despite several references to the family having been caught after 'Dancer' gave up information under duress, like the characters in the novel, I have been unable to find any information on what happened to her or her son.

Joséphine is known to have been a witness to the arrest of the Levallois family: she arrived home while the Militia were there and escaped after Tina shouted to her that there

were no piano lessons that day. Tina told her that she should go to her friend's house 'to let her know there are no lessons'. This statement was a prearranged code with Josie, telling her to go to her friend, who I have named as Monique, whose mother had agreed to care for her should something happen to the Levallois family. After the family's capture she remained in hiding in Paris until liberation.

Joséphine was born in Thessaloniki in Greece in 1932. She moved to Paris with her parents and brother when she was three years old. She emigrated to the United States at the end of the war. Andrée gave her the piano as a wedding present when she returned some years later to introduce Andrée and Tina to her new husband. The piano sailed back to New York with them on the *Queen Mary*. Joséphine taught her daughters and grandchildren to play on the piano.

Léon was also born in Thessaloniki. He died of typhus in Dachau in July 1945, only weeks after liberation. It is thought he was treated in a field hospital run by the US Army just outside the camp but tragically failed to recover. Josie learned of his death from their family doctor on his return to France, as he had been with Léon in Dachau.

Joséphine's mother, Ruth, was murdered in Auschwitz in 1942. The exact date is unknown.

Joséphine and Léon's father died of natural causes in 1940.

Marie-Thérèse Évrard was the founding principal of the Lycée Camille Sée, a progressive girls' school built in the 1930s in Square Saint Lambert in the 15th arrondissement. It was dedicated to providing girls with an education equivalent to that which was previously offered solely to boys. Mlle Évrard, its first headteacher, was a fierce protector of her girls and was angry and heartbroken at losing so many of her Jewish students. It is known that she allowed the Levallois family and others to keep Jewish children

at the school under assumed names. Another teacher at the school, Jeanne Dumont, received the Medal of the Righteous for saving a Jewish family.

Le Fleuron is a fictitious restaurant, based upon the restaurant which the real 'Gypsy' ran for her deported Jewish owners.

Josephine Baker is known to have aided the French Resistance during the occupation of France and refused to perform in Paris under occupation. Le Bal Blomet was closed for most of the occupation, but I have imagined that it was open on a few surreptitious occasions, as it was located so near the Levallois's apartment. It remains a popular nightclub at the same location.

Django Reinhardt played in Paris during the war, as did Charles Trenet.

On 31 December 1998, at a ceremony in Paris, Andrée was posthumously recognizing as Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem in Israel for saving the life of Joséphine. The citation reads:

> *Andrée-Marie-Madeleine Levallois, music teacher, resistance fighter, deportee. Holder of the elementary certificate of aptitude for teaching music and singing. Taught at the school of Surenes (Seine/Hauts-de-Seine) and obtained the higher level of certificate. Eligible for the competitive examination of the city of Paris. Substitute teacher, appointed to the complementary course of Le Pré-Saint-Gervais (Seine-Saint-Denis). Private piano teacher.*
>
> *From 1942, she became involved in the French Resistance networks, becoming a second lieutenant. In late 1942, with the agreement of her parents, who were also members of the Resistance, she took in one of her young students, the daughter of a Greek Jewish couple*

from Thessaloniki, whom she enrolled in a nearby school under the surname Levallois.

She and her parents were arrested on 8 June 1944. All three were imprisoned in Fresnes Prison, where her father died. Her mother was released but Andrée was deported on 15 August 1944, to the Ravensbrück camp, where she was integrated into the Rechlin Kommando. She was liberated at the beginning of May 1945 and repatriated to Sweden.

Joséphine is survived by her three daughters and three grandchildren.

Andrée is survived by her granddaughter.

Context of the Nazi Occupation

The population of France had suffered severely in the First World War (1.4 million soldiers and 300,000 civilians killed) with a corresponding decrease in birth rate between the wars.

The German Reich invaded France in May 1940 and, after a campaign lasting a few weeks, France surrendered. Under the terms of the armistice, the northern and western regions of France would be directly occupied by the Germans, while the southern and eastern regions were governed by a French regime based at Vichy. Under Marshal Pétain, this nominally sovereign regime was effectively a puppet of the German Reich.

Large numbers of men (an estimated total of 1.5 million) from both zones were transferred to Germany and obliged to work for the German war effort as prisoners of war, or from 1942 as forced labour under the compulsory work organisation (STO). Jewish people were rounded up and taken to concentration or death camps in Germany. From December 1942, Jews were forced to display ‘J’ on their ID. In July 1942, a mass arrest known as the

Vél d'Hiv Roundup saw more than 13,000 Jewish men, women and children deported to Auschwitz. In 1942 alone, almost 42,000 Jews were deported to the camps, Josie's mother, brother and extended family members among them. Jewish people continued to be deported until the summer of 1944. Members of the Resistance and dissidents were also imprisoned and/or deported – hundreds of thousands in all.

Priority for food was given to soldiers fighting at the front, and the terms of the armistice included a requirement for vast amounts of food and fuel produced in France to be sent to Germany. France, a largely agricultural country, became the 'larder' of the Reich, sending almost twenty per cent of its total food production, which was already decreased by the reduction in manpower in agriculture resulting in lower yields.

The rest of the population was subject to severe limitations in food, fuel and other basic items. Rationing was introduced in France from 1940: every citizen had to obtain a ration card in order to obtain basic necessities.

City dwellers with no access to supplies from friends or family in the countryside suffered the most. Rationing initially covered bread, cheese and meat but was extended to almost all foodstuffs in a complex system where every category of society was entitled to specific, constantly diminishing quantities. Basic products were substituted: chicory replaced coffee, saccharine or stewed apple replaced sugar, swedes or Jerusalem artichokes replaced potatoes. Meat, butter, cheese and milk were severely rationed and often unobtainable (by 1943, the monthly ration of meat for an adult was 260 grams, or nine ounces). Vegetables were hard to find, and many grew carrots and leeks on their balconies or in public parks. Bread could not be sold until it was a day old, in order to limit consumption. Croissants, sweets and ice cream were banned. Schools would give out dried fruit or vitamin biscuits to their malnourished pupils. Although illegal, with heavy penalties, the black market thrived.

Travel in the occupied zone was subject to a complex system of permits, and checkpoints and random identity checks were ubiquitous. Petrol for vehicles was very hard to obtain. In Paris a curfew operated from midnight to six o'clock in the morning.

Transportation between different parts of France was severely disrupted and often non-existent due to Allied bombing and sabotage, and a maritime blockade by the British cut off supplies of products from the colonies and all international trade.

The Resistance

On 18 June 1940, immediately after defeat by Germany, General de Gaulle broadcast a speech from London, calling on the French to resist the Nazi occupation. The Resistance developed in both Vichy and occupied France, eventually comprising dozens of primary networks and hundreds of sub-networks, many (but not all) coming under the umbrella of de Gaulle's Free French forces based in London.

The Levallois family worked for several different networks and sub-networks that were part of the Central Office of Intelligence and Action within de Gaulle's forces. Needless to say, the work was dangerous and involved immense risks for Resistance operatives, who were treated extremely harshly if caught (imprisoned, tortured and interrogated, deported, sometimes executed).

Resistance involved diverse and subversive activities: illicitly printing and distributing pro-liberation newspapers, sabotaging electrical power grids and telecommunication networks, sharing intelligence with Allied forces, fabricating false papers for Jewish people, rescuing Allied soldiers, and dismantling and bombing German infrastructure. There were also guerilla fighters who used controversial tactics such as assassinating German soldiers. In retaliation the German military would fire indiscriminately at French citizens.

In 1942, de Gaulle sent civil servant Jean Moulin to unite Resistance groups, resulting in the establishment of the Conseil National de la Résistance in May 1943, which coordinated many resistance group activities.

The Resistance was huge: the archives contain the names of over 600,000 operatives who were identified in the aftermath of the war. It includes large numbers of women: more than 10,000 French women, mainly Resistants and Jews, were arrested, imprisoned and deported to Ravensbrück alone between 1942 and 1944, in addition to those arrested and imprisoned in France, or never caught.

The Piano

Andrée's piano was born in the Rhineland in Germany in 1901. It is a Rud. Ibach Sohn, one of the world's oldest piano manufacturers. Famed for their fine grand pianos, the Rud. Ibach Sohn grand piano was a favourite of Wagner and Richard Strauss, with a custom model produced for Wagner's final composition, the 1879 *Parsifal*.

The Rud. Ibach Sohn piano has a unique birdcage structure, popular in pianos from the 1850s to the turn of the century, so called as wires on its front are vertical like the bars of a birdcage. This rare historical design was meant to take up less space than a conventional grand piano. The birdcage structure makes it delicate and complex to tune.

The piano emigrated with its owner to New York and now lives in Santa Monica.

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She's here, she's there, she's everywhere. My publisher, my editor, my wing-woman, my travel partner, my friend. She's Margaret Stead. Our journey continues, Mav. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for helping me bring this story to the page. Your brilliance in playing with words makes my stories sing. But your friendship is the most valuable thing.

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And then there is Helen. Helen Asquith. We met in Normandy, bonded over warm fires, good food and great wine. Kate had told me what a brilliant historian and researcher you were, and with that recommendation you came on board, joined Team Heather, Margaret and Kate. Your deep dive into archives around France gave us the background, facts and people to write this story. It would not exist without you. *Merci*.

I first learned about this piano in a press release written by the world-renowned composer Hans Zimmer, who, along with Kara Talve, composed the score to the television miniseries of *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*. In his statement he not only praised Kara but the piano she had written the music on. 'Ask Kara about her grandmother's piano,' he said to me when we met. I did. I am grateful to Hans for igniting the spark that led me to talk to Kara.

In the early hours of the morning, in a lounge room at the Soho Hotel in London, Kara told me what she knew of her grandmother's piano. She then sent me a copy of her grandmother's Shoah testimony, so I could see and hear her grandmother talking about her life as a young girl in Paris during occupation. We talked again. Kara, I visited your studio in Santa Monica and saw the piano for myself. You introduced me to your mother, Deb Talve,

and together with Margaret we spent a wonderful day together. The four of us. And your grandmother and her piano. I have written this story for you and Deb. This is your family history. This is the legacy your grandmother has left for you along with her treasured instrument.

Two other people at Bleeding Fingers studios have known about and supported both Kara and me in telling this story. Producer extraordinaire Russell Emanuel and the talented, wonderful Anze Rozman (fellow composer and husband of Kara). Thank you both.

Discovering Andrée might have a surviving granddaughter, Helen went searching. Finding Frédérique Ramos completed the story. Frédérique, the time we spent together in Paris, with you sharing stories of your grandmother, as well as photos and documents, gave the story life from Andree's perspective. I am so grateful for your support in my reimagining your grandmother and the grandfather you never met. Your love for her and the role she played as a member of the French Resistance is an honour and privilege to observe. Thank you so much. Andrée, Louis and Tina exist because of you.

There is a team behind the publication of every novel. No book exists without them, and I am honoured and so lucky to have the best team going at Firefinch Publishing. Blake Brooks, you've had my back on so many of my books. On the ball, marketing and promoting my stories. I am so grateful to have you creating the content to promote this story and me.

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If you have got to this point, read the book, loved the characters and you also happen to know Benny Agius, I hope you saw in the character Sister Bernadette my wonderful friend Benny. Thank you, darling, for letting me 'use you' in this story. Your friendship means everything to me.

In Australia I have a small team who help run my life. My son-in-law, executive assistant Evan Hammond, thank you for embracing everything I ask of you. If you don't know the answer to something, you find it. Your diligence and willingness to learn everything you can to make my life easier I do not take for granted.

We all need a website, and someone to keep it up to date and interesting. Sally McLean continues to do that for me with both a professional and personal touch. Thank you, Sally. You are an incredible woman in so many ways. I love that I can call you my friend.

I am NOT singling him out because he is my 'favourite child' (despite what his siblings say) but because he is my sounding board, keeps me on the straight and narrow and doesn't let me get ahead of myself, while advising me on all matters personal and professional. He is my wise one (not that your brother and sister aren't wise) Ahren Morris. Thank you, darling. Can't promise I'll do any better moving forward. And thank you also to your beautiful wife Bronwyn, who acts as our bookkeeper, trying to keep me in check with missing documents. I keep promising her I will do better, and she knows I will try and continue to fail but she accepts my faults.

My son Jared, daughter Azure-Dea, daughter-in-law Rebecca, thank you for your support and love. And lastly your children, my beautiful grandchildren, who put a smile on my face just thinking about them – Henry, Nathan, Jack, Rachel and Ashton. Love you so

much. I hope that with the publication of this book six-year-old Ashton will finally accept I haven't written a story about his piano teacher.