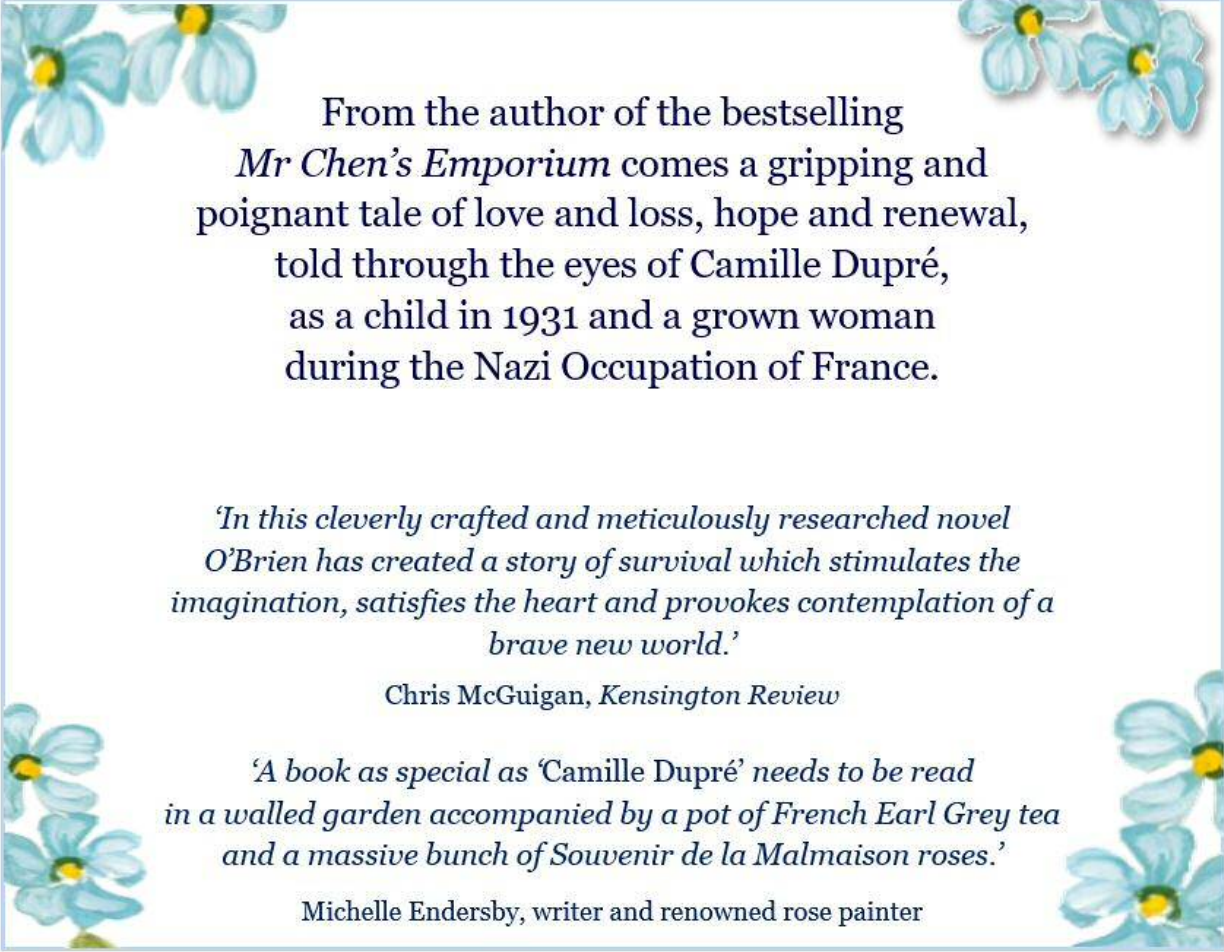


DEBORAH O'BRIEN

CAMILLE  
DUPRÉ





From the author of the bestselling  
*Mr Chen's Emporium* comes a gripping and  
poignant tale of love and loss, hope and renewal,  
told through the eyes of Camille Dupré,  
as a child in 1931 and a grown woman  
during the Nazi Occupation of France.

*'In this cleverly crafted and meticulously researched novel  
O'Brien has created a story of survival which stimulates the  
imagination, satisfies the heart and provokes contemplation of a  
brave new world.'*

Chris McGuigan, *Kensington Review*

*'A book as special as 'Camille Dupré' needs to be read  
in a walled garden accompanied by a pot of French Earl Grey tea  
and a massive bunch of Souvenir de la Malmaison roses.'*

Michelle Endersby, writer and renowned rose painter

CAMILLE DUPRÉ



DEBORAH O'BRIEN

# BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*Mr Chen's Emporium*

*The Jade Widow*

*A Place of Her Own*

*The Trivia Man*

*The Rarest Thing*

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Dedicated to the beautiful Daphne May.



And in memory of my literary agent, Sheila Drummond,  
without whose friendship, support and enthusiasm,  
I would not have had a career as a novelist.

# NOTE TO THE READER



Some French and German phrases are used in this novel. For those foreign words and expressions which are not translated or explained in the story itself, there is a Glossary at the end of the book. Likewise, for the historical figures, events and organisations mentioned in the text.



*Nothing weighs more than a secret.*

Old French proverb  
attributed to Jean de la Fontaine (1621-1695)



# PROLOGUE



*Le nid dont la cigogne sage,  
Embellissoit le voisinage.*

The good stork's nest beautifies the neighbourhood.

Old rhyming proverb

Summer, 1925

St-Jean-de-Rivière

Languedoc, Southern France

High Mass was over and the congregation spilled out onto the village square. It was so hot the ladies adjourned to the shade of the chestnut trees for their weekly get-together. Claspings my mother's hand, I found myself staring up at the branches, laden with furry catkins which would magically turn into nuts later in the season. On the edge of the square the girls of my age were playing hopscotch or tossing knucklebones, but I preferred to be with the grown-ups.

The women were gathered together in earnest conversation – it was hard to tell them apart in their cloche hats and drop-waist dresses with short hems that skimmed their knees. One day I wanted to have my own cloche hat instead of the straw bonnet Maman made me wear to protect my pale complexion. Not that it had done any good. My face was dotted with so many freckles they'd almost joined together.

Nearby my little brother Claude was sleeping in his stroller, along with a row of babies and toddlers in prams and pushchairs. My father and the other men were playing bowls on a patch of bare ground across the other side of the Place Saint-Jean. The click of metal balls colliding with each other echoed across the square. Meanwhile my rumbling stomach was telling me it was time for lunch, but my mother was lingering with her friends who had gathered in a circle around her.

‘Maman, can we go now?’ I asked, tugging on her skirt.

‘In a moment, Camille,’ she replied testily, not even looking at me.

I knew better than to persist. Instead, I stood close by, kicking at the edges of the stone path and scuffing the leather of my new shoes. Meanwhile the ladies continued their chatter as if I wasn’t there. Suddenly I heard someone say:

‘I’m so sorry you lost the baby, Louise.’

Before I could stop myself, I gasped in surprise, but they were so preoccupied they didn’t notice a little girl with her mouth agape. Besides, their faces were turned towards my mother.

My mind was racing. How could Mummy have lost a baby? Unless the stork left the baby outside by mistake. In the barn, or even the chicken coop. Had anyone bothered to look there? I gazed up at my mother and her friends.

‘Maman,’ I began, anxious to tell her my theory.

She peered down at me and said, ‘Sssh, it’s rude to interrupt adults when they’re speaking.’

My eyes filled with tears – I was only trying to help. Across the square my father was engrossed in his game of bowls. None of this made sense. If you had lost a baby, shouldn’t you be out searching for it instead of wasting time in the village?

Another lady patted my mother’s shoulder. ‘You can always try again in a few months, Louise.’

Try again? Did that mean Mummy would ask the stork to bring another baby? But why wasn’t anyone trying to find the one she had lost?

As I considered these possibilities, my mother said quietly, ‘The doctor told me not to try anymore.’

The ladies clicked their tongues and uttered long, loud sighs. Someone said, ‘There, there!’

I looked from one face to the other, struggling to solve the puzzle. At that moment I made a decision. As soon as we arrived home, I would scour every nook and cranny until I found the missing baby. And what a heroine I would be when I returned with the little one in my arms and presented it to my parents.



Back at the farmhouse, we hung up our Sunday best and changed into our everyday clothes. Then we assembled at the big table in the kitchen, while Papa said grace and my mother served up a *cassoulet* which had been simmering on the woodstove all morning. I gobbled mine so quickly that my father made a joke about Goldilocks devouring the porridge belonging to the Three Bears, but Maman reminded him it was not a laughing matter. Little girls should never gulp down their food. Wary of upsetting my mother more than I already had, I forced myself to count to ten between each mouthful.

Finally, I emptied my plate but the dishes still needed to be washed. Once everything had been dried and put away, I raced outside. But where to start? I tried the barn first. It was where my parents housed the weakest of the newborn calves until they were

strong enough to fend for themselves. Desperate for their mothers, they were mooing mournfully. I wondered whether the baby was feeling the same way. Meticulously I searched all the pens but to no avail.

Next I checked the wine cellar which was built into the ground beside the dry-stone barn, its entrance so heavily wreathed in ivy and honeysuckle that it was almost hidden. I really didn't think the stork would leave a baby in there but I looked anyway, foraging through the foliage around the entrance, before descending the wooden steps into the semi-darkness and hunting amongst the barrels and crates. Where are you, little *bébé*? Eventually I decided the stork must have dropped the baby in the vineyard. That would explain why nobody had heard it crying.

Beginning at the far end, I worked along the rows of grape vines. After a while my face started to burn and I wished I had worn my straw hat. I wasn't sure how long it took me to cover the entire vineyard – it must have been hours because when I looked up at the sky the sun had dropped to the horizon. My feet were aching, my throat was dry. There was only one more place to explore and that was the olive grove. Yet I felt unbearably tired. As I stretched out on the grass between the vines, I allowed my eyes to close. Only for a moment . . .



‘Millie, Millie! Where are you?’

It was my father’s voice coming from far away. As I opened my eyes, I realised it was night-time and a full moon was hanging in the sky, illuminating the vineyard with pale metallic light.

‘I’m here, Papa,’ I called.

It wasn’t long before he was by my side, panting and wheezing. He encircled me in his arms and squeezed me so tight I was afraid I’d break.

‘We were so worried about you, Millie,’ he said, still breathing hard. ‘Why did you run away, *ma petite chérie*?’

Disengaging from his hug, I looked him in the face. His skin had turned a silvery-grey in the moonlight. ‘I didn’t run away, Papa. I was looking for the baby. Were you searching for it too?’

‘Baby? What baby?’

‘The one Mummy lost.’



My father was silent for a moment. Suddenly his eyes were wet and glittery. ‘Oh,’ he said quietly. ‘The baby wasn’t lost, not in the way you think. The angels gave us a baby, but they took it back.’

‘Why wouldn’t they let you keep it?’

There was a long pause in which I gazed up at him, waiting for an answer.

‘Well, Millie, you know about angels being messengers of God, don’t you?’

I nodded earnestly, anxious for him to continue.

‘Sometimes God decides He wants a baby back. And Mummy and I had to accept His will.’

‘But won’t the angels bring Mummy another baby?’

‘No, Millie. No more babies.’

‘I wish I could have seen it, Papa, before they took it back. Was it a girl or a boy?’

‘A girl.’

‘I’ve always wanted a sister,’ I said sadly.

‘God doesn’t give us everything we want, Millie. We need to accept His will because in His infinite wisdom He knows what is best for us.’

I couldn't see how not having a sister was best for me, but my father seemed so solemn I didn't argue with him. As I pondered the baby who was delivered and then taken back, I realised there was something wrong with my father's story.

'Why were the angels delivering the baby, anyway, Papa? Isn't that the stork's job? What was *he* doing when all this was going on?'

With a long sigh he said, 'No more questions tonight, Millie. Let's get you back to the house. Your mother is worried sick about you.'

# CHAPTER 1



*Les enfants sont fait pour être vus,  
mais non pour être entendus.*  
Children are made to be seen and not heard.

Old rhyming proverb

April, 1931

St-Jean-de-Rivière, Southern France

‘**D**amned frost. Just when the buds are sprouting,’ my father grumbled as he gazed outside.

My mother cast him a dark look – she didn’t tolerate cursing in her home, even when it came from her husband.

From the kitchen window of our farmhouse I could see rows of grape vines glistening with frost. It looked pretty enough, like powdered sugar.

‘Spring frost, grapes lost,’ Papa continued. ‘That’s what my father used to say. And my *pépé* before him. And all the generations of Dupré men before them, for all I know.’

‘As farmers we’ve always been at the mercy of the weather, Jean-Paul,’ my mother said. ‘There’s no point in getting upset about it.’

That remark only made him more upset and he began to cough – a harsh rasping bark which sounded as though it might crack a rib or two. Maman rushed to the

cupboard and removed a bottle of the syrup the doctor had prescribed to soothe my father's coughing fits.

'Sip it slowly,' she reminded him as she passed him a liqueur glass full of golden liquid.

After a moment his breathing became easier but he remained angry about the frost. 'Louise, if we lose these vines . . .' he muttered.

'They'll recover. They're resilient like you, *mon cher*.'

Meanwhile my brother Claude and I sat in silence at the kitchen table, knowing better than to add our own comments. When it came to mealtimes in our household, children were seen but not heard.

'By the way, did you enquire about the new lodger?' my mother asked.

'He won't be coming until the end of May,' Papa replied. 'The university will let us know the exact date.'

My ears pricked up at this exchange. It had been three months since the last student. Papa had sent *him* packing after he stumbled back from Montpellier one night rolling drunk, or, as my father put it, 'battered like a biscuit'.

I hazarded a glance at Claude who was glowering at the news. Neither of us wanted to share a room again, though if there was a student coming, we'd have no choice. The newcomer would take over my spacious bedroom with its Juliet balcony and I'd have to move into Claude's alcove under the eaves. It just wasn't fair – I was eleven years old and too grown-up to share a room with my little brother.

'If he's Italian, I suppose it won't be so bad,' Claude chipped in. 'I liked Pietro – he played football with me.'

'I beg your pardon, Claude Dupré,' my mother said in her sternest voice, 'do I really need to remind you that children should never eavesdrop when adults are speaking? Now will you two finish your bread and fetch your satchels.'

By the time we were ready to leave for school, our father was outside checking the newly budding vines for damage. Papa had taught me there were four distinct weather conditions that a *vigneron* should fear – drought, flood, hailstorms and a late frost. From a distance I could see that the silvery frost had melted in the morning sun. Only time would tell whether it had burnt the new growth.



Claude and I were supposed to cycle to school together, but as soon as we were out of sight of the farmhouse, I picked up speed and left him behind. The news about the lodger was niggling at my insides like a bout of wind pain. That feeling of disquiet only made me ride faster, leaning forward over the handlebars and tearing along the road towards the village. I knew my parents needed the money and that our little vineyard couldn't survive without it, but I didn't like the way the foreign students ordered me around as though I was a servant. They didn't behave that way with Claude. Then again, he was a boy.

As I reached the top of the hill, I paused to take in the vista of the village lying below me like a toy town. A white church tower stood high above a collection of terracotta roofs. Here and there, a cypress pine added an exclamation mark of vivid green. I raced down the hill and only slowed my pace when I approached the edge of the village. Then I made my way sedately along the cobbled streets towards the main square. The church stood on one side and the *café-tabac* on the other. If you had asked me to nominate the heart of our village I would have found it hard to choose between the two. Nevertheless, I would have opted for the *café-tabac*, simply because it housed the only telephone for kilometres. And right next door and opposite the church was

my school. I attended the girls' primary, Claude the boys'. The buildings were side by side and shared a playground and a library.

Most days I spent playtime in the library, lost in the old volumes accumulated over the years from families who no longer wanted them. It might have seemed strange that an eleven-year-old was reading Dumas and Hugo, but to me the adventures within those covers were almost as real as my real life, and certainly more colourful.

In September I would be moving to the convent school in Montpellier. I'd be sad to be away from my family during the school week but relieved to leave the boys my age behind. They called me *le rat de bibliothèque* – the library rat, and teased me relentlessly about my curly hair and freckles. They even accused me of having a boy's name. There was no point in telling them my father had named me after the heroine of the silent film, *Camille* – that would only have made things worse.

From September, Papa would be collecting me after Saturday morning's lessons and taking me back to the convent the next evening. He'd promised we could go to the Saturday matinée at the Gaumont in Montpellier before heading home – I wasn't sure what Mama would make of that. She had always considered novels frivolous and the cinema doubly so.





Claude caught up to me and steered his bike into the wooden bicycle rack, while I wheeled mine into a slot nearby. Then we parted ways without a word – it was the same every morning. Claude didn't want to be seen wishing his big sister goodbye – his friends would have teased him ruthlessly. As for me, I had no intention of acknowledging my brother. It didn't mean we were enemies; it was simply the schoolyard etiquette. And it had become the practice at home too. He was old enough to play cards and hangman and other games involving words and numbers, but he wasn't interested. After he got home from school and finished his chores, Claude would spend the afternoon trapping rabbits with my father and our two Briard dogs, or kicking his football or climbing olive trees and hanging from the branches.

I used to wish I had a sister to play with, even a younger one, but it was too late for that. My mother wouldn't be having any more babies.



A few days before the arrival of our latest lodger, Maman gave me a stern lecture about clearing out my room. Full of silent rage, I threw my clothes into the small suitcase

she had provided for the purpose. Over the next few months that *valise* would serve as the repository of all my worldly possessions. I left the most precious things till last – my treasured copies of *Pour Vous* and *Ciné-Miroir* – movie magazines that Papa bought for me every week when he took his crates of wine to the market in Montpellier. At sixty centimes a copy, those magazines might have seemed a luxury, but my father said they were the equivalent of pocket money. Besides, he liked to read them himself.

Carefully I placed the wad of magazines into the inside pocket of the suitcase and snapped the lid shut. Then I remembered the trio of pictures taped to the wall beside my bed and gingerly began peeling them off the plaster. Charlie Chaplin, or Charlot, as we called him, came away from the wall intact, and so did Gary Cooper. But I pulled too hard on the tape securing the portrait of Clara Bow and she tore in two. Why did that have to happen to my favourite film star? On any other day I might have uttered one of my father's curse words, but this time I burst into tears. Not the silent kind either. I found myself sobbing loudly. No wonder Papa appeared at the door.

'What's wrong, Millie?' he asked, using the nickname he had given me as a baby.

Whenever he called me ‘Millie’, I reminded him I was almost grown-up and to call me Camille. But not this day. I just held up the torn portrait for him to see. ‘Clara Bow is ruined, Papa.’

‘Of course, she isn’t,’ he said, producing a handkerchief and wiping my face. ‘Now, come with me and we’ll find some cellulose tape to repair her. No-one will ever know the difference.’

‘I loved her in *Wings*. She was so beautiful,’ I said plaintively, clutching the two pieces of the picture to my chest.

‘Was that the one where she had to choose between the two American pilots?’ my father asked.

‘Yes, I wish I looked like her,’ I sniffled.

‘You look perfectly fine as you are, Millie,’ he replied, giving my curly blond hair a tousle.

When we reached the kitchen, Maman was nowhere to be seen, which was probably a good thing as she didn’t approve of Clara Bow, deeming her films too racy, her bobbed hair too extreme and her dresses far too revealing. Once, when I showed my mother a photograph of my idol in *Ciné-Miroir* and begged her to cut my hair exactly

the same way – short at the back like a boy's and angled at the sides with a kiss curl skimming each cheek – Maman was so taken aback, you would have thought I'd asked her to shave my entire head.

Papa rummaged in a drawer and found the tape and a pair of scissors. Donning his glasses, he placed the picture upside down on the kitchen table and aligned the torn edges. Then he cut small pieces of tape and painstakingly attached them along the jagged edge, pressing each one down smoothly.

'*Petit à petit, le oiseau fait son nid,*' he said with a smile. Little by little, the bird makes its nest. With a sigh of satisfaction, he turned the paper over.

'You see, *ma chérie*, Clara Bow is perfect once more.'

Unconvinced, I scrutinised the photograph. I had to admit he'd done a fine job of matching the edges but it would never be the same. One eye was slightly higher than the other, and her lips were lopsided, giving her a quizzical rather than a sultry expression. But I couldn't possibly tell my father that – it would hurt his feelings. All I could do was adopt a smile and say; 'Thank you, Papa.'

‘Charlot has a new film coming out,’ he said. ‘I saw the poster when I was in town yesterday. Why don’t we go to the Saturday matinée before we pick up the new student from the station? Claude can come too.’

‘Does *he* have to?’ I asked petulantly.

‘You can sit upfront with me, and Claude can ride in the cart. I’ll collect you both from school and we’ll go on from there.’

Mollified that I would have a seat next to my father, at least on the trip into Montpellier, I changed the subject: ‘What do you know about the new lodger, Papa?’

‘Only that he’s doing a course in French. Oh, and he comes from Munich.’

‘Munich. That’s in Germany, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, we’ve never had a German lodger before. To tell you the truth, Millie, your mother isn’t too keen on the idea. You know what she thinks of the Germans after . . . well, after losing her brother at Ypres and then what happened to me in the War.’

‘Do you feel the same way?’

He paused for a moment before saying, ‘Your mother and I agree on most things but not this. You can’t hold onto hatred or it will eat away at you. I truly believe we all need to forgive and move forward. *Tenir compte du passé, mais il ne faut pas dicter*

*l'avenir*. Heed the past but don't let it dictate the future. That's my motto. And anyway, the German soldiers had little choice – they were just following orders. And so were we. If you have to blame anyone, it would be the people on both sides who made money out of that wretched war.'

'What people?'

'Well, you could start with the companies selling arms and chemicals. And it wasn't just the Germans who used poison gas. We did our share.'

This conversation was becoming far too complex for my eleven-year-old brain. 'Papa, what is the film about?'

'A circus. The poster has a picture of Charlot in a lion's cage.'

'Oh,' I giggled with my hand to my mouth, already imagining the scene between Charlie Chaplin and a lion.

'Now, let's put Clara Bow safely in your suitcase and I'll help you carry it up to Claude's room.'

# CHAPTER 2



*Il faut ni emprunter, ni prêter.*

Never borrow nor lend.

Old proverb

December, 1942

Public Lending Library, Montpellier

A sad little fir tree decorated with paper chains is the best we could do to celebrate Christmas this year. Even the paper was difficult to come by – we had to cut up strips of old newspapers and use potato starch and water to glue them together because flour, the traditional ingredient in library paste, is in short supply. How long will it be before potatoes become a rarity too?

Ever since last month, when the English and Americans landed in North Africa and the Germans responded by marching into the ‘Free Zone’ in southern France, they haven’t wasted any time in commandeering supplies and confiscating anything they deem undesirable. Today I’m removing books from the shelves – the ones the Germans have placed on their prohibited list as part of the process of cleansing public libraries of so-called dangerous reading matter.



Last week they distributed an index of banned authors in alphabetical order from Adler to Zweig. Almost a thousand in total. According to the Nazis, if you are a Jewish author, you have no right to be on the bookshelf. Sometimes I wonder whether the same thinking applies to French Jews living under German rule? Are *they* being removed too, just like the books? Surely not. That would be unthinkable. Then I remember the notices recently plastered on walls around the city, ordering Jews to register at the town hall. That makes me decidedly uneasy.

We once had a Jewish student boarding with us. Although I can't say that I knew him well, I do remember he attended the Temple in Montpellier on Saturdays instead of going to Mass on a Sunday. And he wasn't allowed to eat pork or bacon, which meant he couldn't partake of my mother's *cassoulet*. But surely, worshipping a different religion and observing different customs are not sufficient reasons to condemn a whole group of people.

As for the banned authors who are *not* Jewish, writers like Aldous Huxley and H. G. Wells, perhaps it's because their books espouse ideas such as freedom of thought and equality for all, the kind of philosophies the Nazis consider subversive.

It's crossed my mind we could hide some of the books, our favourites perhaps, but I haven't broached the idea with Anna, the chief librarian, because I know what her response would be. She's a stickler for the rules, even when they're unjustly imposed on us by an occupying force. Anna would tell me it's too dangerous to try something like that, and she would probably be right. After all, the Nazis are meticulously organised. They have a copy of the library catalogue and would soon realise if there were missing books. We could possibly explain away a small number as non-returns or thefts but we would need to be careful.

As a librarian, I used to believe efficiency was a virtue, I prided myself on attention to detail, I was fastidious about documentation. Now, paperwork has taken on a perverse and sinister undertone. If intimidation and violence underpin Nazi power, so does record-keeping. Sometimes it seems that no-one and nothing can escape their scrutiny.



It's five degrees today, the heating has been turned off by order of the Vichy government and I'm dressed in an overcoat. I'd be wearing gloves too, but I can't sort

cards or turn the pages of a book when I'm wearing them. Instead, I keep my hands in my pockets as much as possible.

A muffled double cough from Anna alerts me to a German officer entering the library. That cough is our code. I glance towards the foyer, hoping he's not here to interrogate us about our progress in removing the banned authors from the shelves. Instead, the officer heads straight for the other side of the library. That's where the fiction books are housed. Oh dear, I've barely started on those! We only received the circular last week, after all, and I'm only up to Brecht. We don't see the officer again for quite a while, which must mean he's making an inventory. That doesn't bode well for us.

When the bells on the town hall clock toll twelve, the officer is still somewhere in the library. Anna goes to the storeroom to have her lunch, while I take over the main desk. Intent on making a list of overdue books, I don't even see him approaching until he's right in front of me, and then it's the silvery braid on his cuffs that looms into my line of vision. At least he's not wearing the lightning bolts insignia of the SS. And he doesn't begin by saying '*Heil Hitler*' either – that's become the new greeting. Instead he speaks in perfect French:

‘Excuse me, miss, could you help me, please?’

I can’t detect a German accent at all. How very odd. As I raise my eyes, I wonder whether I’m dreaming. In their field-grey capes and matching uniforms with the eagle and swastika emblem, *Wehrmacht* officers all look the same, but this one . . . he reminds me of someone I once knew. Yet it can’t possibly be that particular young man – *he* was going to be a writer. Besides, he would never wear a soldier’s uniform – he was a pacifist. No, it’s just the blond hair and the excellent French that have stirred up an old memory.

‘I’d like to borrow these, please,’ he says in his perfectly accented French.

I peruse the spines of his chosen books. Two Hemingways and a Baum. All three prohibited. Is he intending to confiscate them?

‘Do you have a library card, *monsieur*?’ I ask brusquely, fully expecting him to tell me he doesn’t need one. That he’s an officer of the Third Reich and they can do as they please.

‘A library card? I’m afraid not. Could I apply for one now, please?’

His voice is confusing me. It sounds familiar, yet that’s impossible. I hand him an application form and a pencil, but he produces a fancy fountain pen from the pocket

of his jacket. Meanwhile I make a pretence of sorting cards, but all the while I'm observing intently as he bends over to write on the form. In my job, I've become particularly adept at reading upside down. The first line asks for his family name. In block letters he prints:

**MÜLLER**

My heart begins to race at a frantic pace. Then I remind myself that *Müller* is a common German surname, as run-of-the-mill as Schmidt or Braun; there must be thousands of soldiers with that name in the German army. Probably scores of them based right here in Montpellier. The next line of the application requires his Christian names. Holding my breath, I can barely bring myself to look. Then he writes the words I've been dreading – or perhaps hoping for – I'm not clear-headed enough to know which. But there they are in bold blue ink. That's when my legs start to collapse like a wooden marionette and I have to lean against the counter to support myself. I don't even notice the other things he's writing.

As he pushes the form towards me, a voice in my head is wailing: *This can't be. This can't be!*

'We'll have your library card ready in a week.' I reply like an automaton. 'I'll give you a temporary one for the time being.' With a wobbly hand, I copy his details onto the white card he'll use in the interim.

Nom de famille:	<i>Müller</i>
Prénoms:	<i>Kurt Josef</i>
Date de naissance:	<i>le 7 avril 1910</i>
Emploi:	<i>Major</i>
Adresse:	<i>Hôtel de la Comédie</i> <i>Boulevard Victor Hugo, Montpellier</i>

As I hand him the card, I scan his face for a spark of recognition, but there's nothing except a polite '*Merci, mad'moiselle.*'

He's looking right at me but doesn't know who I am. Admittedly I'm grown-up now, no longer a child with pale corkscrew curls, a freckled face and layers of puppy fat.

Years of wearing a hat in the summer have dealt with the freckles, and my hair is darker now and styled in a sleek chignon to tame the curls. Even *I* find it hard to connect the chubby little girl in the old sepia photographs with the slender, tallish woman I've become. Nonetheless, I'm still the same person on the inside. Why can't he see me?

Impulsively I say: 'You do know those books are prohibited, don't you?'

It's the kind of thing a young Camille might have said. Surely it will jog his memory.

His pale blue eyes narrow. There are wrinkles fanning from the outer corners that weren't there in 1931, and lines etched between his brows where once there had been smooth skin. His blond hair is neatly cropped with glints of grey at the temples.

'Hemingway? Who would ban *him*?' he asks.

'Your superiors in Berlin,' I reply, daring him to recognise me.

'Well, I'll just have to check the books myself for seditious content.'

It's impossible to discern from his tone whether he's being serious or sarcastic, but one thing is obvious – he really has no idea who I am.

‘They’re due back in three weeks,’ I say primly as I copy his name onto the book cards and file them. Then I stamp the books with the due date. Thank goodness I know the process so well that I can do it without thinking.

‘*Merci, mad’moiselle,*’ he says, gathering the books from the counter and tucking them under his arm. In the moment before he takes his leave, I can hear the clicking of his metal boot heels. All the Germans do it. The sound makes me shudder. Then he walks back through the foyer and out into the grey December daylight.

As I grip the edge of the desk for fear I’ll faint, Anna appears from her lunch break.

‘What happened? You’re as pale as a ghost. Was it that German who came in earlier? What did he want? Is he still around?’ Deep furrows have formed in her alabaster forehead.

‘No, he’s gone. He borrowed three novels from the banned list.’

She gives me a perplexed look. ‘Borrowed? Don’t you mean impounded?’

‘He asked for a library card and filled in the application,’ I say, waving the paper in front of her.

‘That’s very strange indeed.’ Anna lowers her voice and examines the form. ‘I wonder what kind of game he’s playing. You can’t trust any of those *Boche* bastards.’





Anna Moreau appeared out of nowhere two and a half years ago. Well, not exactly out of *nowhere*. In the summer of 1940, Anna fled Paris with the thousands of others who locked up their houses and businesses, took what they could with them and headed south to escape the advancing German army. There were wealthy couples in fancy cars and working class families pushing carts full of belongings. Most of them didn't make it very far in the face of crowded roads and sporadic bombing by German planes, not to mention French soldiers heading towards the Germans or retreating from them.

After six weeks, almost a hundred thousand soldiers were dead, many more had been taken prisoner, and the Battle of France was over. An armistice was signed and suddenly the Germans occupied more than half the country, leaving the South in the control of the puppet Vichy government, and a small zone around the Côte d'Azur governed by the Italians. Many weary and melancholy Parisians returned to their homes, but Anna Moreau was one of those who decided to make a new life in the so-called Free Zone.

Her decision was fortunate for me. At the time the chief librarian was a woman who had been in the job for almost forty years and held the opinion that libraries should be temples of silence where it is a sin to speak aloud. Her name was Madame Martin. She didn't believe in having contemporary books on the shelves, only the classics. Anna, on the other hand, has proven to be a breath of fresh air, bringing twentieth-century authors into our collection.

But she's also a very private person and I haven't got to know her as a friend, though it's not for want of trying. I've decided she has a secret in her past, a deep dark one that has made her wary and reclusive. In my imagination I sometimes try to come up with a reason for her turning up alone in the summer of 1940, and it always seems to revolve around a disastrous romance. Perhaps she was having an affair with a married man, a liaison that had lasted many years, during which time he had promised he would leave his wife and marry her – once the children had grown up, of course. But when Paris was threatened by the Germans, the cad must have decided to escape with his family, abandoning Anna to cope on her own. That might account for the sad expression I sometimes glimpse in her brown, hooded eyes. But, whatever happened

in her past, one thing is certain – she left Paris in a hurry, carrying a single suitcase and leaving behind most of her possessions including her references and credentials.

At the end of summer that year Madame Martin announced her retirement, and advertisements for the position were placed in the city’s newspapers. I was too young to apply, having only started my library job two years earlier, straight out of convent school. There were many applicants, including some from among the influx of northerners. Madame Martin took on the job of sifting through the applications. She conducted all the interviews herself, unleashing a barrage of questions about Voltaire and Rousseau, Descartes and Pascal on the hapless applicants.

When it came to Anna’s turn, she never faltered for a moment. I know exactly what happened because I was sitting in the corner, taking notes at Madame Martin’s behest. That very day the retiring librarian gave Anna the job on the basis of her knowledge of classical literature and in spite of her missing paperwork. It was the best thing Madame Martin ever did. And even though Anna Moreau can be stern and taciturn, I can’t help but respect her.



I spend the rest of the afternoon removing dangerous books and pondering the strange reappearance of Kurt Müller as a major in the *Wehrmacht*. In fact, I can't think about anything else. Perhaps it's for the best he didn't recognise me. Apart from a couple of flashes of familiarity which might have been figments of my imagination, he's not the Kurt I used to know. And really, I don't want to have anything to do with a person who wears a Nazi uniform. If my poor mother knew, she would be horrified. She hates the Germans with the same violent passion she directs at the foxes that kill her chickens. When the *Boche* invaded in 1940 and General Pétain asked for an armistice, she was incensed:

‘To sign that accursed paper with the Germans is an affront to everything your father fought for in the Great War. For it to take place in the same railway car where they signed the armistice in 1918, that's intolerable.’

I can never tell her that Kurt Müller is back in Montpellier with the Occupation forces. In fact, I don't intend to tell anyone.

# CHAPTER 3



*Comme amour et fumée, une quinte de toux n'est pas en secret.*

Like love and smoke, a coughing fit can't be kept secret.

Old rhyming proverb

May, 1931

The three of us laughed till we cried at Charlot's antics inside a lion's cage. When he tried to escape through a trapdoor he discovered an angry tiger in the adjoining cage and darted back inside. Suddenly my father's laughter turned into a coughing fit and even though it was dark in the cinema, I could tell that everyone was craning their necks in our direction.

'I'll get some water,' my father whispered, gulping air between coughs. 'You and Claude stay here. I shan't be long.'

He stumbled out of his seat and made his way down the aisle, coughing as he went. An usherette met him halfway and directed her torch in front of him. After a few moments the exit door opened and I recognised my father's tall silhouette against the brightness of the foyer. Then the door closed, but I could still hear his cough, muted like the barking of a distant dog.

From the row behind me, someone leaned forward and hissed in my ear, ‘If your father has *tuberculose*, he shouldn’t be coming to a place that is full of people.’

As I swivelled around, I saw a middle-aged woman with grey hair pulled into a knot on top of her head.

‘It’s not TB,’ I responded defiantly. ‘His cough is from being gassed.’

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ she said, sounding flustered. ‘I didn’t realise.’

When my father hadn’t returned within a few minutes, I told Claude to stay in his seat while I went out to the foyer where I found Papa sitting on a velvet sofa, looking pale and drawn. But at least he wasn’t coughing anymore.

‘How are you feeling, Papa?’

‘Much better, Mill . . . Camille. Shall we go back and watch the end? Poor Claude is sitting in there on his own,’ he said, offering me a boiled lolly.

‘Thanks,’ I replied, popping the *bonbon* in my mouth and taking his hand. ‘But no more laughing.’



When we emerged into the bright light of the Place de la Comédie, it was only half past three so Papa bought us chocolate ice-cream cones and we strolled down to the railway

station. I had never been inside the station before – Claude always seemed to be the one who accompanied my father to meet the lodgers while I was relegated to help Maman with the preparations for supper.

‘How will he recognise us?’ I asked, trying to lick the melting ice-cream from the outside of the cone before it dripped onto my starched cotton dress.

‘That’s simple,’ Claude replied smugly. ‘Papa will hold up a sign.’

My father finished his ice-cream and wiped his hands on his handkerchief. Then he produced a crumpled sheet of paper from his waistcoat pocket, smoothed it out and held it up for me to see. The name *MÜLLER* was written in capital letters.

We made it to the station just as the train from Nîmes was pulling into the platform, ceremoniously shrieking its whistle and hissing gusts of steam. I was struck by how intimidating this steam engine was, yet I couldn’t help but be excited by something that offered the prospect of travel to distant lands beyond the Languedoc. Perhaps one day I would go to Paris and become a film star. The very thought was exhilarating. Then I remembered the reality of my unruly curls and freckled complexion. If only I had been blessed with porcelain skin and dark, bobbed hair like Clara Bow. Oh, and long, slim legs instead of short, chubby ones. But you never knew! They had called



Clara Bow ‘too fat’ when she started out in the movies – at least, that’s what the story in *Ciné-Miroir* had said – and now she was Hollywood’s ‘It Girl’!

I strained forward to watch the wealthy travellers in their smart city clothes descending from the first class carriage and imagined I was one of them, back from a sojourn in the capital. I’d be wearing a cloche hat, a long coat with a generous fur collar and two-tone shoes with very high heels.

‘Where is he?’ Claude asked our father, who was holding aloft his flimsy sign.

For a moment a cloud of steam obscured our view and then I spied a tall stranger in a felt fedora and a loose grey overcoat marching towards us, holding a leather suitcase in one hand and a smaller bag in the other. Surely this couldn’t be our lodger. If so, he didn’t look like any of the other students who had stayed with us.

‘That must be him,’ Papa announced.

I’d never seen a German in my life, not even in the movies. I wasn’t sure what I’d been expecting. Perhaps one of those vicious-looking Huns in the tattered posters still clinging to the walls of Montpellier more than a dozen years after the end of the Great War. Those Germans were more beast than human, wearing spiked helmets and baring fangs.

This stranger was altogether different with his impeccable clothes and elegant way of walking.

*‘Bonjour, Monsieur Dupré. Je suis Kurt, Kurt Müller,’* the German said, shaking my father’s hand.

Although he pronounced his name ‘courte’, as in ‘short’, he was even taller than Papa. Then my father introduced Claude and me, and we said, *‘Bonjour, monsieur’* in unison. Suddenly this newcomer did something that no other lodger had ever done. He leant down, shook each of our hands and uttered a single word, *‘Enchanté.’*

I was so flustered by this gesture and the piercing blue eyes that I couldn’t think of anything to offer in response. As for Claude, he simply said, ‘Do you play football, Monsieur Courte?’



Claude and I were relegated to the back with the luggage, while Papa and Monsieur ‘Courte’ sat up front. Intriguing snippets of their conversation reached us over the clip-clop of Bisou’s hooves and the rattle of the cart wheels on the dirt road. Kurt Müller was speaking French in an odd, formal manner that sounded as though it had come

from a nineteenth century novel, and his clipped accent made me smile. I overheard my father asking him about his train journey and I was anxious for the reply, but the answer was lost on the breeze.

‘Almost there,’ Papa said as we turned into the lane leading past the olive grove and on to our house. When we pulled up in the yard, our faithful Briard dogs, Babette and Bonaparte, one fawn, the other black, spotted the stranger sitting beside Papa and stood to attention. As herding dogs, it was in their nature to be vigilant and protective.

Claude jumped down from the cart, released Bisou from his harness and led him off to the adjoining field. Apart from a weekly trip to Montpellier and back for the market, Bisou spent most of his time nibbling on lush grass and prancing in the field, unless it was springtime when he diligently pulled the harrow, or harvest-time when he towed a cart packed with baskets of picked grapes.

Kurt Müller climbed down from his seat, smoothed his overcoat and surveyed the farmhouse in front of him, its stone walls rising sturdily from the earth, its grey-blue shutters guarding the windows and its terracotta-tiled roof encrusted with lichen. A wooden trellis around the door dripped with wisteria. Wrought-iron balconies curved out from the two bedrooms on the second floor – one of which was mine. Or should I

have said *used to be* mine. The lodger stood silent and motionless for so long I was sure there was something wrong. I could make out a few strands of hair emerging from beneath his hat and falling onto his forehead – his hair was lighter than mine, almost white. Just as I was pondering whether I'd ever seen white hair before except on old people, he turned to us and said:

*'Wunderschön!'*

I didn't need to know German to understand what that meant.

'Before we go inside, I must show you my latest project,' my father said eagerly, pointing towards a narrow timber outhouse standing on its own at the far perimeter of the courtyard.

Before I knew it, Papa was leading Kurt in the direction of the latrine. Tentatively I followed them, with the dogs at my heels.

'I had to fill in the old pit,' I heard my father saying, 'but it lasted years longer than I expected. I've located this one even further away from the well. And I dug down deeper this time, though not as far as the water table, of course.'

Kurt Müller was dutifully following my father, who was now opening the newly painted door and beckoning for him to take a closer look inside.

‘We call it a *toilette à la turque*,’ Papa said proudly. ‘A Turkish toilet.’

Papa had built a wooden frame around the hole, complete with footholds on either side. There was a shelf to store old newspapers and a gleaming new bucket brimming with water.

‘Ah,’ Kurt Müller said after a moment.

I had a feeling they didn’t have toilets like this in Germany, or at least not where our lodger lived.

‘What would you call this in German?’ I asked, speaking for the first time.

‘A *Plumpsklo*, I suppose,’ he said in his funny accent.

‘*Plomps-kloh*,’ I repeated the word after him, intrigued by the sound of it.

‘That is probably not a word a young lady should say aloud,’ he added, causing me to blush as red as the beets which grow in Maman’s *potager* in the summer.

‘So, Kurt, you are now acquainted with the WC,’ my father said, giving him a pat on the shoulder. ‘We leave a lamp at the kitchen door for night visits. Or you can always use the *pot de chambre*.’

I stole a glance at Kurt Müller’s face but if he considered a chamber pot an old-fashioned or primitive notion he was hiding it well.

Papa unloaded the bags from the cart and, as we approached the house, I could already smell garlic and red wine, which meant my mother had made my favourite dish, a beef *daube* with potato purée, but *that* would be for lunch tomorrow. Tonight there would be bread and cheese and perhaps a sugar-coated baked custard afterwards to welcome the new lodger – in spite of him being German.

# CHAPTER 4



*Le diable était beau quand il était jeune.*  
The devil was beautiful when he was young.  
Old proverb

## January, 1943

A morning mist hangs over the rows of decaying grape vines like the wedding veil of a jilted bride. Not long after my father died, an attack of powdery mildew weakened the vines and the next month a severe spring frost hit our valley, wiping them out altogether. We've left the dead vines in place. Did we really think they'd come back to life? It's been seven years now and there's not a sign of regeneration, only rotting stems. But it's our family's vineyard, tended lovingly by my father when he was a young man just back from the Great War, and the thought of pulling out the vines and making a bonfire of them is too much to bear.

It's half-past seven and Claude is in the barn, milking our little herd of Aubrac cows while my mother, wrapped in a woollen shawl, is feeding the chickens. Beside her, an elderly Babette is observing the morning chores through locks of tawny fur that fall across her eyes. Although it may appear as though her view of the world is obscured, she sees everything and watches over us all.



Claude has taken on most of the jobs that Papa used to do. I don't know how we'd cope without him. He and I don't have much in common apart from our mutual love for Maman and Babette, but nowadays I've realised I'm actually fond of my brother. Admittedly, he's brusque and tight-lipped, yet he's also steadfast and kind. I suspect he's been like that all along; I just didn't take the time to look.

With the vineyard ruined, the farm doesn't earn the money it used to and we're finding it hard to make ends meet. But at least we own the place outright, acquired by my paternal grandfather last century when his good looks won him a pretty girl from Narbonne, who just happened to come with a generous dowry from her wealthy father. After generations of being tenant farmers, the Dupré *vignerons* suddenly became landowners, and our vineyard acquired its own name: Domaine St-Jean-de-Rivière.

There are still boxes of Muscat in the cellar from the period when the vineyard was thriving. Maman considers those bottles of sweet fortified wine her insurance policy. If a time comes when she can't pay the bills, she will sell them on the black market.

But it isn't only the wine that is concealed in the cellar. Claude's hunting rifle is there too, alongside my father's. Claude continues to hunt for hares and rabbits because they've become the staples of our diet now that the butcher's shops are empty. If the

Germans ever found those guns, there would be deadly consequences. Around the village and in Montpellier itself they've posted notices.

## **ORDINANCE**

### **Concerning the keeping of firearms and radio transmitters in the Occupied Territories**

1. All firearms, ammunition and explosives are to be relinquished immediately. These items should be surrendered within 24 hours to the nearest German command post.
2. Any person in possession of a radio transmitter is required to deliver it to the office of the German military authorities nearest to his place of domicile.
3. Anyone who contravenes this order will be put to death.

**By Order of the Commander in Chief of the Army**

As for our radio, Claude has hidden it in his attic room where he tunes in to the prohibited Radio-Londres every night. Sometimes I join him to listen to Général de Gaulle exhorting us from London to resist the German conquerors. The glint in Claude's eyes suggests a zealotry I have never witnessed in him before. Certainly not at Mass, anyway.

But what worries me most is that he uses the radio as a transmitter to send and receive messages. I've caught him at it, tapping his messages late into the night. He's told me he's just communicating with his friends but I don't believe him. I suspect he's fallen in with the Resistance. Perhaps not as a diehard member, not yet anyway. Even though I'm sympathetic to their cause, I don't want my little brother involved. If anything happened to him, it would destroy my mother.

Yet, whether my brother is a resister or not, we're all facing the death penalty by keeping that radio in our house. I've heard talk that the Germans have direction-finding devices that can pick up errant radio transmissions and pinpoint the exact location. When I told Claude, he laughed and said we're too far from civilisation for the Boche to detect the signals. Nevertheless, the thought of soldiers raiding our house and finding that radio keeps me awake at night.

I'm sure Maman knows about it – she can probably hear the broadcast from her room directly below, but she never says a word. If only she'd speak to Claude – he might listen to *her*. It won't happen though. In my mother's eyes, her son is the man of the house and he can do no wrong.



I wave goodbye to Maman and set off on my bicycle for Montpellier, breathing plumes of vapour into the icy air. On a good day I can complete the journey in twenty minutes. Today it takes longer because I find myself with a puncture halfway to the city. While I'm repairing it, a *Kübelwagen* full of *Boche* soldiers comes along and stops just ahead of me.

‘Hey, *mad'moiselle*, do you need a lift?’ the driver calls to me in bad French.

As if I'd climb into that jeep. He must think I'm crazy. Using my most imperious voice, I reply in his own language, ‘*Nein, danke*. I can manage on my own.’

The German shrugs and the *Kübelwagen* continues on its way.

When I reach the outskirts of the city I peel off the main road just as I approach the wide boulevards that herald the entrance into the town itself. People say that

Montpellier reminds them of Paris. Perhaps it's the triumphal arch or the towering statue of Louis XIV on his horse. Maybe it's the parade of plane trees in the park or the elegant eighteenth century buildings. I really can't say, I've never been to the capital. Actually, I've never travelled beyond Arles.

Within the old city I follow a network of ancient lanes to avoid the German convoys that constantly rumble through the wider streets. If I keep to the old roads, I can even imagine that the German soldiers are just a bad dream. It is only when I emerge from the mediaeval laneways into the Place de la Canourgue that I'm confronted by the reality of the German Occupation. Hanging from the stately balcony of the town hall, a massive swastika reminds me that things may never be the same again.

I arrive at the library just before the doors open at nine. For some reason this building missed out on the grandiose architectural features of its eighteenth-century neighbours. No cast iron balconies, no ornamental pediments, just Plain Jane practicality. I park my bike in the usual spot, enter through the back door and try to make it to the service desk before Anna spots me. But nothing escapes her scrutiny.

'Mademoiselle Dupré,' she says in her most commanding voice, 'Is your watch still on French time?'

If only I could use that as an excuse, but I've been on German time for two months now, ever since the local commandant published an edict ordering us to alter our clocks and watches, or face imprisonment. My mother absolutely refuses to obey this order – it's one of the few acts of protest left to her. The long-case clock in our *salon* remains steadfastly on French time. Heaven knows what will happen in summer though, when we will have to lose yet another hour.

'I'm sorry, *madame*,' I say demurely, not daring to call her Anna when she's in her Madame Martin mood. 'I had a puncture. I'll stay longer this afternoon.'

She gives me a scathing look and returns to her little office. Even though the day hasn't started well, I soon settle into my morning chores – returning books to the shelves and cataloguing new acquisitions – not that there are many of those lately, apart from a copy of *Mein Kampf* provided free of charge by the military administration. Oh, and the 'Index of Harmful and Undesirable Literature', courtesy of the German Department of Propaganda, or its Vichy equivalent run by Philippe Henriot, France's very own Goebbels.

As usual Anna takes her lunch break first while I supervise the main desk. The library is almost empty so I perch on a wooden stool behind the counter, reading a

copy of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* – another banned book. Heaven knows why. Unless it's because the author is Russian. But whatever the reason, at least I will have read the book before it disappears.

I'm engrossed in the scene where Anna Karenina and Count Vronsky meet on the train to Moscow when I catch a glimpse of field-grey gabardine and silver buttons. Casually I slip the book under the desk and look up.

'Good day, *mad'moiselle*, I am here to return your books.'

For the last two weeks I've been wondering whether he'd come back. If I were to be honest, I'd have to admit I was hoping he would. And now he's here a week early and I feel as flustered as the ducks on our pond when they spot a fox.

'Unless you want me to keep them,' he continues, 'seeing that their authors are on the prohibited index.' A smile is playing at the corners of his mouth. . . or is it a smirk?

'No, I'll have them back, thank you,' I manage to say. 'And I'll give you your library card while you're here.'

I rummage through a box until I find it, all neatly typed, just the way the Germans do it.

'I see you're reading Tolstoy,' he says.

*Merde*, he must have spotted the cover before I could hide it.

‘Isn’t *he* one of the undesirables?’ he asks in a tone that suggests he thinks the contrary, or perhaps I’m just desperately seeking something in his manner that is part of the ‘old’ Kurt. When I don’t answer he continues speaking as though we’re having a conversation.

‘Have you ever read *War and Peace*?’

‘I’m afraid not.’

‘It’s quite intimidating on account of its length, but you should give it a chance nonetheless.’

‘Are you encouraging me to read a banned author, Herr Major?’ I pronounce the ‘j’ as a ‘y’ in the German manner.

‘You’re already reading *Anna Karenina*. You might as well read Tolstoy’s greatest work.’

I catch my breath. Is he seriously suggesting I read Tolstoy, or is this some kind of trick? Before I can decide either way, he says:

‘So, *mad’moiselle*, what do you suggest I borrow this time? Perhaps something by a Frenchman?’



It seems like a genuine request. All the same, I struggle to come up with a safe answer, feeling as though I'm back at the convent, undertaking an oral exam for the *baccalauréate*. All at once, the perfect choice comes to me – a book I studied at school.

‘Have you read *Le Grand Meaulnes*, Herr Major?’

‘I’ve never heard of it.’

‘The author died on the Western Front not long after it came out. It was his only novel.’

‘How very sad. Is it a story about the Great War?’

‘No, it’s about a man searching for a girl he met when he was young.’ I hazard a glance at his face, seeking a change of expression, a dawning realisation, a flash of recognition in the cornflower-blue eyes, but if a single memory has been stirred up, there is no indication in his demeanour.

‘And does he find her again?’ he asks casually.

‘I can’t tell you. That would spoil the story.’

‘Well, *mad’moiselle*, on your recommendation, I shall borrow this book.’

‘I’ll just check that it’s not out on loan,’ As I speak, my hands are trembling so much I can barely work through the cards. After what seems like an inordinately long time,

I add, 'It's not here, which means it must be on the shelves. Would you like me to find it for you?'

'No need, I can do it myself. What is the author's name?'

'I'd better write it down for you.' My hand is still shaking as I jot down *Alain-Fournier*, but he doesn't seem to notice. Clasping the piece of paper, he makes for the fiction shelves just as Anna emerges from the storeroom. With a dour expression on her face, she hurries over to the main desk.

'I was hoping we'd seen the last of him. Was he questioning you about our progress in "cleansing" the library?'

'No, nothing like that. He came to return those books he borrowed and asked me to recommend another one.'

The furrows are back in Anna's forehead. 'And don't tell me you did?'

'What was I supposed to do? I couldn't very well refuse. Book recommendations are part of a librarian's job.'

'What did you recommend, then?'

'*Le grand Meaulnes*.'

‘Well, at least that’s not on the black list.’ She peers at me over her glasses. ‘Be careful, Camille. I think I’ve worked out what he’s up to.’

‘He’s not SS or Gestapo; he’s *Wehrmacht*, the ordinary army.’

‘They’re all connected whether they wear the lightning bolts insignia and black leather coats or not.’

‘But couldn’t he be someone who just enjoys reading?’

She sighs deeply. ‘If only it were that simple.’ She adjusts her glasses and gives me a stern look. ‘Can’t you see he’s taken a fancy to you?’

‘Me? That’s ridiculous.’

‘Not so ridiculous, my dear. He’s a man, and you’re young and pretty.’

The whole idea of him liking me makes me angry. How dare he take a fancy to the junior librarian when he’s forgotten Camille Dupré!

‘You wouldn’t want anyone to think you were fraternising with a German,’ Anna continues.

‘But I’m not. I resent them as much as you do.’

‘You and I know that, but if he keeps coming here and engaging you in conversation, some people might wonder.’ When she says ‘some people’, she inclines her head

momentarily towards the office of Léo, the caretaker. ‘Nowadays citizens are very quick to place labels on each other. You don’t want to find yourself with a label, Camille. Particularly not the one that says “collaborator”.’

‘But—’

‘Keep your conversations with him brief and businesslike. He’ll get the message.’

By the time he returns with a copy of *Le grand Meaulnes*, I have been consigned to the storeroom, covering books, and Anna has taken over the main desk.



As I cycle home, the Mistral is blowing from the north-east, its icy breath so strong that my eyes are watering and my cheeks burning hotter than a blush. All the while, Anna’s warning is playing in my mind like the words of the Mother Superior, cautioning us not to speak to the boys at the adjoining school or face the prospect of being labelled loose women.

Has Major Müller really taken a shine to me? If so, I’m deeply disappointed in him – and not just for failing to recognise the girl he once knew. It’s far worse than that; as an officer in Hitler’s *Wehrmacht*, he has betrayed all the ideals he once held. One

of my father's sayings is running through my mind: The devil was beautiful when he was young. Does that describe Kurt?

I grip the handlebars firmly, relieved I didn't tell him who I was when he first came to the library. What's more, I can never confide in anyone about finding Kurt Müller after all these years. Not Claude. Not even Maman.

Especially not my mother.



When I steer my bike into the courtyard in front of our house, I can't believe my eyes. There are tyre tracks in the pebbled surface, deep, wide ruts that couldn't possibly belong to a car – not that many people around here have enough money to own one, except for Doctor Giroux, and his car is a necessity. Have the Germans been here in their *Kübelwagen*? Was the vehicle I saw this morning on its way to our farmhouse? For a moment I'm frozen to the spot, unable to dismount. Please God, I pray, don't let them have found the guns or the radio. Please don't let them have hurt Maman or Claude. The wording of the ordinance is running through my head:

*Anyone found in possession of these items will be put to death.*

In a flash I hop off my bike, rush towards the house and fling open the door. My mother is slumped at the kitchen table with her head in her hands. Babette is sitting beside her, alert and still like a sentinel.

‘Maman?’ I say softly, trying to quell the rising fear in my heart.

She raises her head and looks in my direction with eyes that are swollen and red. Heavens above! Has she been crying? This is the woman who didn’t shed a tear when my father died, at least not in public. And not in front of her children either. She has always been the epitome of stoicism.

‘Maman, where’s Claude?’ I ask, my stomach twisted with dread and my heart pounding in my ears. Please, dear God, let him be all right. My imagination is running riot with images of the Gestapo dragging him away and locking him in the notorious prison next to Montpellier’s Palais de Justice.

‘He’s been at Lucien’s all day, helping him dig a new toilet pit,’ my mother replies in a monotone.

Well, thank goodness for that.

‘What’s happened, Maman? Was it the *Boche*?’

‘They came this morning. They want to take my cows.’

A sigh of relief escapes my mouth. They were here to commandeer livestock, not to search for prohibited items. All the same, my mother's little herd of Aubrac cows are like children to her. Who could resist their big brown eyes ringed with white? And what are the Germans going to do with them? Probably slaughter the lot for their meat even though they're excellent dairy cows. My mother uses their milk to make her renowned *tommes de St-Jean*, which she ripens for months in the cheese cellar beside the barn.

'They gave me this notice,' Maman says, unclasping her fist to reveal a crumpled piece of paper. 'They said I had to deliver them to some place in Montpellier, but I told them we don't have a truck so they're coming back here instead.'

Gently I take the paper from my mother's hand and smooth it out.

## Occupied Territories Requisition Order

*29<sup>th</sup> January, 1943*

The owner, *Mme Dupré of Domaine St-Jean-de-Rivière*  
is requested to relinquish the following items within 48 hours ~~to the nearest~~  
~~German command post~~:

*6 cows*

*To be collected from Domaine St-Jean-de-Rivière on Saturday*  
*31<sup>st</sup> January, 1943 at 15.00*

Payment: *600 francs*

*Captain K. Bauer*

By Order of the Commander in Chief of the Army



‘Six cows! That’s half your herd!’ I say. ‘And six hundred francs. It might sound reasonable if you didn’t know the exchange rate is twenty francs to a *Reichsmark*.’

‘Even if they offered me a handsome price,’ my mother says, ‘I wouldn’t part with my cows.’

Then a thought strikes me. ‘Maman, did you tell them about the cheese?’

‘Of course not, I didn’t want them to take the cheeses too.’

Trust the *Boche* to have everything meticulously recorded, even the precise time they’ll come to collect the cows. Saturday at 15.00. I have no doubt they’ll be here at three on the dot. That’s the advantage we have over the Germans – with their regimentation and record-keeping, they’re highly predictable. If I can get away from the library as soon as it closes, I’ll be home in plenty of time.

‘*Du courage*, Maman. I think I have a plan.’

# CHAPTER 5



*C'est en forgeant qu'on devient forgeron.*

It is by working at the forge that you become a blacksmith.

(Practice makes perfect.)

Old proverb

May, 1931

When we showed Kurt Müller into the kitchen, Maman was busy setting the table – we ate all our meals there, except for Sunday lunch when we used the dining room. Papa made the introductions and my mother seemed as surprised as I had been at the sight of this urbane stranger, the complete opposite of the pale, spotty, studious types and carousing rascals who had preceded him.

What did he make of our kitchen, I wondered. Apart from my own room, it was my favourite place in the whole house with its cheery collection of copper pots and porcelain moulds hanging from the wall.

‘Why don’t you show Herr Müller to his room, Camille,’ my mother said in her most refined tones, acquired long ago at the convent school that I would be attending next semester.

I started to help him with his bags but he told me politely that he could manage on his own. So I led the way upstairs to the bedroom which used to be mine. As I opened the door for him, he peered inside and exclaimed:

*‘C’est charmante. Vraiment charmante.’*

Charming? Hardly. Not now. It seemed empty and forlorn without my movie star pictures and bric-à-brac. As my eyes swept around the room, I noticed that I’d left something behind when I’d cleaned up. Tucked in the corner of the otherwise empty bookshelves there was a tiny Eiffel Tower that Sophie, our neighbour’s grown-up daughter, had brought back for me from a trip to Paris. Kurt spotted the souvenir, picked it up and examined it as though it was the most precious thing in the world.

Then he said, ‘This is *your* room, isn’t it?’

‘It’s not my room anymore. Now that you’re here I have to sleep in the attic with my little brother.’

All at once, I realised I was pouting and so I made an effort to rearrange my lips into a smile. If he told my mother I’d been rude, I would be in trouble.

‘I’m sorry to have turned your life upside down,’ he said.

*Pardon?* Had he actually said that? Was he making fun of me? I couldn't detect anything unpleasant in his tone so I flicked a glance at his face, but there was no sign of mockery or scorn in his expression. I was so used to boys making fun of me, and lodgers treating me like a servant, that I couldn't recognise a sincere remark when I heard it.

Placing his bags on the floor and depositing his coat and hat on the bed, he walked over to the glass doors, pushed them open and stepped out onto the little balcony. After a moment I heard him say almost to himself: '*Ein echtes Paradies.*' He turned towards me and repeated it in French '*C'est un véritable paradis, mad'moiselle.*'

'You should see it when the grapes are hanging from the vines,' I said. 'They look like jewels.' Then it dawned on me that if he was staying until the beginning of September he would be here to see the grapes and perhaps even the harvest. Only a short time ago, the prospect of having a lodger stay for almost four months seemed unbearable; now I was starting to think otherwise.

'Maman is serving supper at six, *monsieur*. Would you care to unpack now or later?'

'I shall leave it till after supper, I think. We have a saying in Germany: "I'm hungry like a bear." That's the way I'm feeling after my train trip.'

‘In French we say: “*On a une faim de loup*”,’ I replied shyly. ‘Hungry as a wolf.’

He repeated the sentence after me. ‘Those kind of idiomatic expressions are exactly what I need to learn, *mad’moiselle*. I’m afraid my French must sound rather stilted.’

‘Your grammar is perfect, *monsieur*, and your accent is very good,’ I said truthfully. It was just that he spoke in a strangely formal way.

‘We spent a lot of time at university reading French literature, writing compositions and practising our pronunciation, but very little time actually speaking French.’

‘It is by working at the forge that you become a blacksmith,’ I replied.

He considered my words for a moment and began to smile. ‘Would you teach me some more sayings like that? When you have time, of course.’

I didn’t need to ponder my reply. ‘*Mais oui, monsieur.*’

‘Naturally I would pay you.’

Suddenly I was offended. ‘I couldn’t take your money, sir. But perhaps you could help me learn some German.’

‘A reciprocal arrangement. Excellent,’ he said, offering his hand. It took me a second to realise that he wanted to shake hands. How very odd that he was treating an eleven-year-old as an equal.

‘I’ll see you at dinner, *monsieur*,’ I said and made my way downstairs to my father’s study where I took the dictionary from the shelf and looked up ‘reciprocal’.



While Kurt was unpacking, I picked spring flowers from the garden and filled a vase for the kitchen table. As I surveyed the room, it struck me that our living conditions might be considered quite primitive. And not just the *toilette à la turque* either.

I’d never given much consideration to what the previous lodgers had thought of our arrangements. To tell you the truth, I didn’t care. Yet this evening I was viewing my world through the eyes of Kurt Müller. What would he make of the lack of electricity? Or the fact there was no running water and that he would have to draw it from the well? And heaven knows how he would feel about having to heat a cauldron of water on the wood stove in order to enjoy a warm bath.

Our usual dinner lay on the table – cheese, bread, ham and salad leaves from the garden drizzled with my mother’s special *vinaigrette* – her secret ingredient was roasted pomegranate seeds ground with a mortar and pestle and added to the mix at the last moment.

Before the clock had finished tolling six times, Kurt appeared in the kitchen, and Maman offered him a chair at the far end of the table opposite Papa. Once we are all seated, my father placed his palms together ready to say grace and we lowered our heads. As I did so, I ventured a look at Kurt Müller. Was he used to saying a prayer before a meal, I wondered? It seemed so, because his eyes were closed and his head inclined. His hair was long enough at the front to fall over his forehead like Gary Cooper's.

During dinner my father and Kurt had a conversation about *rapprochement* politics – whatever that was – while Claude and I devoured our food. We hadn't eaten anything since the chocolate ice-creams in the afternoon. Much to my embarrassment, Maman berated us both for eating like *cochons*. Claude, on the other hand, was quite nonchalant about being labelled a pig. And as soon as dinner was over, he asked Kurt to kick a ball with him in the courtyard.

'Would you mind, *madame*?' Kurt asked my mother.

'Of course not, *monsieur*,' she replied. 'But what about your shoes?'

'He can borrow my boots,' Papa said.



In my heart I'd been hoping we might have begun the French lessons this evening, but it seemed I would have to share Kurt Müller with my brother.



On Sunday morning my mother was in the kitchen, preparing to broach the subject of church attendance with the new lodger. When she had interrogated Pietro, the Italian, he had told her he attended Mass in Montpellier every Saturday evening. As there hadn't been any way of verifying his claim, my mother had found herself with no choice but to believe him. One of the lodgers, being Jewish, had worshipped in the Temple on the Square Planchon in the city. To Maman's chagrin, all the others had made a practice of sleeping in on a Sunday morning, at least until after we'd left for Mass.

At seven-thirty sharp, Kurt appeared, freshly shaven and dressed in the suit he had been wearing the day before. Beneath the jacket I caught a glimpse of a clean white shirt, a burgundy tie and a waistcoat, but not the rustic *gilet* of wool or leather favoured by the local men. This one was immaculately tailored in the same grey fabric as his pin-striped suit. I couldn't help looking at him – he was so beautiful with his

blond hair and dazzling blue eyes. But I also knew it was rude to stare; Maman had told me often enough and I certainly didn't want to be reminded of the fact in Kurt Müller's presence. After last night's admonition about my table manners, another humiliation would have been too much to bear. So I forced myself to focus on the flowers decorating the table and stole surreptitious glances whenever I thought it was safe.

'Good morning, *monsieur*,' Maman said. 'Did you sleep well?'

'Like a marmot, *madame*,' he said, looking in my direction for confirmation.

'A dormouse,' I corrected softly.

I could sense my mother giving me a puzzled look, unsure whether to reprimand me for contradicting an adult.

'*Merci, mad'moiselle*,' Kurt said and repeated the phrase slowly. 'Like a dormouse. How very apt.'

'Are you helping Monsieur Müller with his French, Camille?' my mother demanded.

I nodded silently and continued to count petals on the flowers.

'We have made an arrangement, *madame*,' Kurt explained. 'If Camille helps me with my French conversation, I will teach her a little German. I hope that's acceptable.'

My mother was looking grim. The thought of me speaking German didn't sit well with her.

Papa, who had just come into the kitchen after milking the cows, caught the end of the conversation and said, 'What a fine idea, Kurt. In this modern world a second language is a big advantage. And why shouldn't Camille learn the language of France's largest neighbour?'

'I don't suppose it would hurt,' my mother conceded. 'Anyway, it's only for the summer and after that she'll be studying Latin at the college in Montpellier.'

'A dead language,' Papa said.

'The language of the Catholic liturgy,' my mother responded. 'Speaking of which, are you coming to Mass with us this morning, Herr Müller?'

'I'm a Bavarian, *madame*. I attend Mass every Sunday. And please call me Kurt.'

My mother's expression softened considerably. 'Now, Kurt, would you care for a pastry with some jam made from our very own peaches?'



My mother left a *gigot d'agneau* simmering gently on the top of the stove when we set off for St-Jean-de-Rivière. Maman, Papa and Kurt were seated up front while Claude and I crouched in the cart which my mother had lined with an old blanket to protect our Sunday clothes. I had a feeling that arriving at Mass with this handsome young man would earn me kudos I'd never possessed before. The boys might even stop teasing me for fear I'd set this 'big brother' figure on them, while the girls would no doubt envy me for having such an Adonis living in my house.

Our arrival at the church caused something of a hubbub. Word had spread that the Duprés had a new boarder, but it appeared from the enthusiastic reaction, that nobody had expected anyone so glamorous. Heads were turning and it wasn't just the eligible girls. I spied a few matrons giving him the onceover too. They wouldn't be encouraging their daughters to pursue him though, not so much because he was German, but because he was only here for the summer. A summer romance which didn't end in a marriage could spell disaster for a girl's reputation. At least, that's what I'd heard my mother whispering to my father.

There was another surprise too. Our neighbour's daughter, Sophie Bernard, was home for the weekend from her job as a secretary in Marseille. That didn't often

happen, in fact, only at Easter and Christmas. I did wonder why she was back so soon after her last visit, but whatever the reason, I was always thrilled to see her.

Ever since I was a little girl, I'd adored Sophie, not that the feelings had been returned in equal measure, but I'd never cared. After all, she was eight years older than me. Why would she have wanted to be friends with a child? Sometimes though, she would pat me on the head like a puppy or arrange my hair in bows as if I were a doll. Whenever she focused her attention on me, even fleetingly, I felt that I was special.

For the past four years Sophie had lived in Marseille, having left the convent school in Montpellier after her intermediate exams to attend secretarial college. It had been a coup for our village when she graduated top of her class and was offered a job at a shipping company in France's largest port. She shared an apartment with two other young women and I'd heard talk among the mothers that there had been several sweethearts but she had dumped them all. I couldn't help thinking how sophisticated that was. Of course, if you looked like Sophie with her shiny black hair arranged in Marcel waves and her bright red lipstick, the world would be at your feet and you could do as you pleased.

After Mass, Sophie was surrounded by young women from her schooldays, anxious to hear the latest about life in the big city, and I didn't have a chance to get near her. But fortuitously the Dupré household had been invited for lunch at the Bernards – even our new lodger.

# CHAPTER 6



*Fromage et pain est médecine au sain.*  
Cheese and bread will bring good health.

Old rhyming proverb

February, 1943

We can hear the rumble of the German truck long before it pulls into the courtyard. In the *salon* the long-case clock is chiming three. Thank goodness Claude is still working on the new latrine at Lucien's. Heaven knows what he would do if he knew the Germans were here.

'They've brought a truck,' my mother whispers urgently in my ear. 'They're going to take the cows.'

'Stay calm, Maman. And let *me* do the talking.'

The Captain jumps down from the passenger side of the cab and greets us with a raised arm and a *Heil Hitler*, while we nod perfunctorily in reply. Although the new laws require us to respond in the same way, the Germans seem to have caught on that enforcing that particular edict is a step too far.



‘Good afternoon, *Herr Hauptmann*,’ I say in German, before he can even utter a word. ‘I know that you are here to take six of our cows, but I have an alternative proposition that will work out more profitably for you.’

Being able to speak German gives me an authority that would be lacking in my native French. I have caught the Germans unawares and it shows on their faces. Beside me, my mother is frowning in disapproval, even though I forewarned her the negotiations would take place in their language.

‘You speak excellent German, *Fräulein*,’ the Captain says. ‘Where did you learn it?’

‘From a German friend,’ I reply.

‘You have friends who are German?’

‘We have hosted German students while they were studying at the university.’ My use of the plural is inaccurate – there was only ever one.

‘Be that as it may, *Fräulein*, I have a copy of the requisition order.’ He waves it in the breeze. ‘We will pay you the agreed amount and my soldiers will load the cows. Then we will be on our way.’

‘I would like you to at least consider my proposition, *Herr Hauptmann*, before you proceed any further.’

‘And what might that proposition be, *gnädiges Fräulein?*’ he asks with a lascivious smile.

*Merde!* He thinks I’m offering myself instead of the cows. *Ein sexuelles Angebot!* That is not what I intended at all. I need to steer this transaction back onto a businesslike footing as quickly as possible. Thank goodness my mother’s eyes are on me and not the Captain. His men, however, have heard my words and seen his reaction and are sniggering as a consequence.

Drawing a deep breath, I continue in a calm, disciplined manner as though the suggestiveness and snigger have never happened.

‘These aren’t ordinary cows, *Herr Hauptmann*. They’re Aubracs, a special breed. Not just ordinary beef cattle or dairy cows. If they’re slaughtered for their meat, you will receive a single payment and nothing more. If you sell them as milking cows, it will be the same. But what you may not realise is that these particular cows could continue to make money for you right here on this farm. That’s because our cows produce the best cheese you have ever tasted. Award-winning cheese. Cheese that commands a big price.’ I find myself smiling as I speak. Perhaps that’s because I know how much Germans love their cheese – they even eat it for breakfast.

‘What are you suggesting, *Fräulein*?’

‘Standing right here in front of you, *Herr Hauptmann*, is one of the best cheesemakers in all of Languedoc.’ I turn towards my mother, who is looking puzzled and perturbed by this indecipherable conversation, and force myself to smile cordially in the hope she will follow suit. ‘But don’t just take my word for it. Why don’t you taste some of her cheese? If it’s not the best you’ve ever had, then go ahead and take the cows.’

‘But we’ve only requisitioned six of your cows, *Fräulein*. My notes indicate you have another six we have allowed you to keep. Why couldn’t *they* be used to produce the cheese?’

I’m ready for this question. ‘*Herr Hauptmann*, to make a kilo of cheese we need at least four litres of milk. That’s because only the curds are used, not the whey. Six cows will not produce enough milk for viable cheese-making. Here, I’ve done the calculations for you.’

At this point I hand him a sheet of lined paper divided into columns with fancy headings and rows of numbers. Ostensibly it looks impressive. I just hope he doesn’t examine it too closely because the numbers don’t really make sense.

After he peruses the document, I say, ‘We would require at least a dozen cows to make sufficient cheeses to guarantee you a regular supply.’

The Captain is at least listening, his hands clasped behind his back, but I wonder whether he’s weakening. If what I’m offering next doesn’t work, nothing will.

‘We have some food prepared for you and your men to taste,’ I say, indicating the barn. ‘There is an old French saying: “Cheese and bread will bring good health.” It can’t hurt to sample the product. And then you can make your decision.’

I can see that the two soldiers are interested – in fact, they are salivating at the prospect.

‘All right, *Fräulein*,’ the Captain says warily, ‘let us taste this cheese of yours.’

My mother has set up a table in the barn with a bright floral table cloth, a basket of her best bread, a platter holding wedges of cheese and an open jar of olive *tapenade*. We have also rigged up a shelf to hold a small number of *tommes* in various stages of ripening. We don’t want them to think we have a bounteous supply and they can take as many as they like, but the truth is there are many more wheels of cheese hidden in the wine cellar.

The Captain goes first, biting into the rind which has formed on the cheese and discovering the rich, creamy centre.

‘It’s even better with some bread and a little *tapenade*,’ I tell him. ‘And I imagine it would go down well with a glass of ale. Not that we have any, I’m afraid.’

‘It is excellent, *madame*,’ he says in the direction of my mother.

‘He likes your cheese,’ I whisper to her.

In the local dialect she replies, ‘I should have injected some arsenic through the rind. They would never have tasted it.’

Did my mother actually say that? Imagine the reprisals if we actually poisoned a captain and two of his soldiers.

Oblivious to the exchange which has just taken place between Maman and me, Captain Bauer indicates to his men that they should try some cheese too. Then all three go back for a second serving and a third. While they are eating, I explain the intricate process of making, moulding and ripening the cheese.

Eventually the captain says, ‘This proposition of yours is most irregular, *Fräulein*. Besides, I have already lodged the third copy of the requisition order with the authorities in Montpellier.’

Damn, I've dealt often enough with their orders and edicts – I should have known they would work in triplicate. Thinking on my feet, I say, 'I feel certain your bureaucratic system would allow for some flexibility, *Herr Hauptmann*, particularly if a more advantageous offer happened to come along. Surely a new requisition order could be lodged and the old one nullified.'

After a moment he says, 'I suppose that could be arranged, *Fräulein*. We would have to reconsider the payment, however. How many cheese wheels could you supply to us each month?'

'As you can see, *Herr Hauptmann*, our cheeses are delicacies. We don't make a lot of them.' I lower my voice so that only *he* can hear. 'What if we gave you three *tommes* every month, two for your superiors and one for you to keep for your own use?'

'Two cheeses, yes, that would be acceptable,' he says loudly, giving me a little wink. 'What about forty francs?'

'That's only two *Reichsmark!*' Then I realise that if I argue too much he might change his mind. To my surprise, he replies:

'I could offer you sixty francs but you would need to provide some additional produce.'

‘What about some duck eggs? A dozen each month.’

I’m glad my mother doesn’t understand German. Her ducks and their eggs are almost as precious to her as the Aubracs.

Shaking his head, he says, ‘Not enough, *Fräulein*.’

So I rack my brain for something else that we could part with. In the wine cellar there are jars of jam – cherry, peach, apple, apricot. Enough to last us for years. But the cellar is our secret and I can’t possibly access it while the Germans are here. Then I remember there are several unopened jars in the kitchen. I could use two of those today.

‘Well, *Herr Hauptmann*, I could throw in a couple of jars of my mother’s fruit jam. A different flavour every month.’

In a low voice he says, ‘And what about putting aside a jar of that delicious olive paste to go with my cheese?’

‘*Abgemacht!*’ I reply. It’s a deal.

He removes a booklet from his pocket and begins to write. With my heart pounding, I peer down at the words emerging from his fountain pen. It’s a new requisition order. The cows no longer appear on the list, only two wheels of cheese, a dozen duck eggs

and two jars of jam. The extra *tomme* and the *tapenade* are missing – for obvious reasons.

‘You’ll cancel the old order?’ I ask warily.

‘Yes, *Fräulein*, but we’ll need to reassess this arrangement in four months.’

Four months is a long time. If my prayers are answered, the Americans will have landed in southern France by then. For now, we have a reprieve, and Maman’s herd is safe.

While my mother is busy clearing the table in the barn, I assemble the agreed items, pack them in a box and cover everything with cheesecloth which I secure with string – just in case my mother decides to take a parting look at the contents. And I hope she doesn’t notice that a dozen duck eggs are missing from the larder.

After the Germans have departed with their booty, I experience a brief moment of triumph before the implications hit me. By entering into this arrangement, I fear I have crossed the demarcation line between compromise and collusion. But whatever I’ve done, I had no choice. Not after seeing my mother in tears at the prospect of losing her beloved cows.





The next day, Father Patric delivers a searing sermon on Premier Laval's latest law, announced the day before. Not once does the priest mention the words *Service du Travail Obligatoire* – the Compulsory Work Programme – but everyone knows that his homily about the Israelite slaves toiling for the Egyptians is an indictment of this frightening new edict whereby anyone born in 1920, '21 and '22 – man or woman – can be sent to Germany as a forced labourer unless they can provide grounds for exemption. It's like having the blade of a guillotine suspended above our heads, ready to fall.

After the Mass, the elderly men go off to play *les trois pas* on the *boulodrome*. The old-timers prefer this game to *pétanque* and you can sometimes hear them complaining in *Oc*, the local dialect, about the new-fangled game that's been forced upon them by the young ones. Meanwhile everyone else gathers in small groups outside the church. I hover on the edge of a cluster of indignant women, mostly of middle age.

‘Thank God for Father Patric,’ someone says.

‘We are blessed to have him,’ says the baker’s wife. ‘Pity he’s not running the government.’

Everyone nods enthusiastically.

‘That puppet Laval can’t be trusted. He and Pétain have handed over our rights to the *Boche*, little by little.’ The speaker is my mother. ‘We might as well be slaves. Next thing they will be demanding our first-born sons.’

‘At least there is an exemption for agricultural labourers,’ someone else says.

‘Small mercies,’ Maman replies. ‘But for how long? The *Boche* have quotas to meet. Do you really think they can fill them without taking farm workers? It’s only a matter of time.’

‘Well, I can’t see how they will be able to enforce this law,’ the baker’s wife says.

‘They will hand it over to the *gendarmérie*,’ my mother replies. ‘They always give the dirty jobs to the local police.’

‘Who would want to be a *gendarme* these days?’ whispers Madame Giroux, the doctor’s wife, glancing around to make sure neither the policeman nor his wife is within earshot.

As I listen to the remarks flying back and forth, I'm reminded of something I heard last night on the prohibited Radio-Londres. It was Général de Gaulle, calling on us to unite with him in action, in sacrifice and in hope. But how can we summon hope for the future when our lives are being torn apart, edict by edict?



On Monday morning Anna holds a staff meeting – it's just the caretaker, the cleaner and me. We constitute the entire staff of the municipal lending library. Before the summer of 1940 we had a trainee librarian, but he enlisted after the Germans invaded Belgium and found himself a prisoner of war during the Battle of France. Now he's somewhere in Germany, probably in a work camp.

'I want to discuss the new compulsory work law with you,' Anna begins, 'because I know it must be making you uneasy. Last Friday afternoon, after the library closed, I went to a meeting with the municipal authorities at the Préfecture. They assure me that all municipal office staff will be exempt. I hope that puts your minds at rest.'

Fleurette, the cleaner asks, 'Am I included?'

‘Yes, the exemption covers anyone who works inside. They’ll look at the outside occupations, job by job.’

Léo, the caretaker, gives a snort and returns to the storeroom. Fleurette goes off to dust books, and Anna and I are left alone.

‘Do you think they’ll actually go ahead with this?’ I ask her.

‘Of course they will. The *Boche* are fighting the Allies in North Africa and the Russians on the Eastern Front. They need to call up every able-bodied man. And who is going to fill the places on the home front? Foreign workers rounded up from the Occupied Territories, of course. The Germans make a practice of commandeering human beings in the same way they requisition livestock and produce. Then they turn them into slaves or make them disappear. Darkness and death.’

Her expressive brown eyes always look liquid, but just now they seem even more so. She lowers her voice to a whisper, ‘It’s already here, Camille.’

Before I can ask her what she means, she glances at the wall clock.

‘Opening time,’ she says briskly, ‘Could you attend to the front doors, please?’

# CHAPTER 7



*Heureux au jeu, malheureux en amour.*

Happy in games, unhappy in love.

Old proverb

May, 1931

With Sophie back for the weekend, the Bernards had invited us to their vineyard for Sunday lunch. Apparently her arrival had been as much a surprise to them as it was to the rest of us, which accounted for the lateness of the invitation. Maman was relieved that she had already made a roast leg of lamb, which would be a perfect dish to take for an alfresco meal.

Sophie's mother, Marguerite, was my mother's childhood friend – we'd always called her Tatie Margot. Our real aunt, Maman's sister, Jeanne, lived in Arles with her husband, a notary. They had a big house in the centre of town but no children.

Tatie Margot had set up a long table at the edge of the terrace beside an old apple tree, its broad canopy of bright, new leaves providing dappled shade. On the table there were bottles of Lucien's Merlot and my father's Muscat, gleaming ruby red and tourmaline pink in the midday sun.

Lucien was my father's oldest and dearest friend. They had gone to the village school together and St Dominic's college after that, and had been side by side when they enlisted in 1914. 'Like two drops of water', they described themselves. By then Lucien was already married with a two-year-old daughter. My papa became engaged to my mother the day before he and Lucien left for training camp. Both men survived the War, though not unscathed: Papa had his chest problems and Lucien a bad leg from a shrapnel wound.

The Bernards were better off than the Dupré family – it had always been so. Their vineyard was larger than ours, and they grew Merlot grapes which produced more expensive wine than our Muscats. But we were never jealous of their spacious limestone house or the car they had bought at a time when the only other person in the village who owned one was the doctor. The Bernards' relative wealth was a *fait reconnu*, an accepted fact. Besides, it wasn't as though the Dupré family was poor; we had always made ends meet.

Apart from Sophie, the Bernards had another daughter, fifteen-year-old Denise, who had followed in her sister's footsteps and gone away to secretarial college, and a ten-year-old son, Marius, who was in the year below me at school and a little monster

– I was glad he wasn't *my* brother. Claude might not have played cards or word games, but at least he wasn't a devil.

Today Tatie Margot had the foresight to separate the boys, placing each one next to his own father at opposite ends of the rectangular table. I found myself with Sophie on one side of me and Lucien's parents on the other. Directly opposite us was the new lodger. Once everyone was seated, Lucien offered a prayer of thanks. Then glasses were filled and platters of food passed around the table.

'So you're the new student at the Dupré house,' Sophie said, aiming a confident smile at Kurt. 'I'm Sophie Bernard.'

'Kurt Müller,' he replied. '*Enchanté.*'

'Likewise,' she said. 'Where do you come from, Kurt?'

I couldn't believe Sophie had just called him by his first name. But he wasn't offended in the least. In fact, he was actually smiling.

'I come from Munich, Sophie, but I've been in Heidelberg since '28.'

Oh my goodness! They're acting as though they've known each other for years.

'What a coincidence,' Sophie continued. 'I've been away too. I've spent the last few years in Marseille.'



‘Really? What do you do there?’

As the conversation continued unabated, my eyes darted back and forth between the two of them. In my imagination I pictured them falling in love. What a perfect couple they would be, each as beautiful as movie stars. But a tiny pang of jealousy niggled at my heart – I was already sharing Kurt with Claude. Did I have to share him with Sophie too?

Suddenly I heard Lucien tapping his wine glass with a fork. When the chatter subsided, he stood up, straightened his leather waistcoat and cleared his throat.

‘I’d like to make a toast to someone very special – my beautiful daughter. Last night she shared some wonderful news with her mother and me. And we want to share it with all of you today.’

When he paused for a moment, my mind began to race. Had Sophie finally decided to marry one of her suitors? Would there be a big wedding here at the Bernards’ vineyard? And would she invite me to be one of her attendants?

Then I heard Lucien say, ‘Sophie has been offered a promotion. The company has made her secretary to the managing director.’

‘The managing director?’ my mother said excitedly. ‘In Marseille?’

‘No, at their head office in Paris.’

There was a brief silence as the guests took in the news. After a while my father said, ‘Bravo, Sophie.’ Almost everyone responded in the same manner. Except for me. I didn’t know how to react.

‘I’d like you to raise your glasses,’ Lucien said, ‘and wish Sophie every success in her new appointment.’

The sound of clinking crystal and cries of ‘*Santé*’ and ‘*A la tienne, Sophie!*’ echoed across the terrace. As Sophie was bombarded with questions, I noticed Kurt’s gaze resting on her lovely face.

‘When do you start, Sophie?’ her grandfather asked.

‘In three weeks, Papi,’ Sophie replied. ‘It has all happened so quickly. The director’s secretary was retiring and my boss here in Marseille put my name forward to replace her. Last week I had an interview over the telephone, and a day later I received a telegram saying I’d been accepted.’

‘Surely you don’t have to leave right away,’ her grandmother said.

‘Sophie is going to have a week or two here with us,’ Tatie Margot explained, ‘and then I’ll accompany her to Marseille to help her pack. Lucien is hoping to join me there

so that we can both see her off on the train.’ The last few words were punctuated by a sob. ‘Paris so far away, Sophie.’

‘I’ll still be home for Christmas and Easter, Maman, and you can always come and visit me.’



In May the weather in south-western France, and particularly in the hills of Languedoc, is noted for its variability. After the perfect Sunday at the Bernards, we had all assumed that summer had arrived, but the next day it turned cold and started raining ropes, as we are fond of saying in the local dialect, and it hadn’t stopped for five days. Now the roads were flooded and impassable. Every few hours my father checked the rain gauge – if the downpour continued at this rate, the tiny, short-lived grape flowers would fall too soon and the soil would become so sodden the vine roots would start to rot. A double catastrophe – no fruit and ruined vines. But there was nothing he could do except to watch, wait and pray. He didn’t need to remind me of the four weather conditions that could ruin a crop – I knew the list by heart. The vines had already been hit by a late frost, from which they appeared to have recovered. But

nobody knew whether they had been weakened just enough to succumb to another malady.

As long as the roads were cut, there was no school for Claude and me, and no university classes for Kurt, who had only been able to attend two days of lectures since his arrival last Saturday. It also meant that Sophie and Kurt couldn't continue the flirtation that had begun on Sunday.

We were all gathered at the table, having breakfast, when there was a knock at the door.

'Who could be out and about in this weather?' Papa asked as he opened the kitchen door, only to see a dripping Marius Bernard, clad in hooded raincoat and galoshes. It seemed he had made his way down to our place, taking a circuitous route that avoided the low-lying land. He had turned up, he said, to help Papa and Claude with a project they had discussed on Sunday – the building of a new kennel for Babette and Bonaparte to replace the old one which was falling to pieces. Or so he said. Marius almost always had an ulterior motive.

Papa ushered him inside, hung up his raincoat and placed his damp galoshes next to the woodstove while my mother made him a mug of hot chocolate.

‘Have you had breakfast?’ Maman asked.

He shook his head like a wet dog.

‘Take a seat next to Kurt then and help yourself to some bread and jam.’

In the process of sitting down, Marius removed a folded pink envelope from his pocket and passed it to Kurt. As the significance of the envelope dawned on our lodger, a little smile appeared on his lips.

Seamlessly Kurt placed the envelope in his own pocket and continued to eat his breakfast as if the letter had never existed. From the other side of the table I had witnessed this silent exchange but nobody else had – they were all too busy eating. I wondered what they would make of Marius Bernard playing Cupid. No doubt there had been a payment from his sister involved. He certainly hadn’t done it out of the goodness of his heart.

Once breakfast was over, Papa and the two boys adjourned to the barn to work on the kennel. In the kitchen Maman was preparing cauliflower soup for lunch. The aroma of garlic and herbs made my mouth water even though I’d only just had breakfast.

With the pink envelope untouched in his pocket, Kurt and I were sitting at the table where I was teaching him weather expressions. It seemed appropriate, considering the circumstances. Phrases such as ‘it’s cold enough to curdle milk’, and ‘it’s raining like a cow pissing’. But I whispered the latter so that my mother wouldn’t hear it.

Kurt’s blue eyes widened and he stifled a laugh. ‘I must remember that one!’

‘Sssh,’ I replied, looking anxiously in Maman’s direction.

Babette and Bonaparte were asleep under the table, one of them snoring gently. Although they were normally wary of strangers, they had taken a liking to Kurt.

‘What do you do on a rainy day in Munich?’ I asked him.

‘Read a book, go to the cinema, play cards, do some study.’

Since there was no possibility of getting into Montpellier to see a film, I pounced on the word ‘cards’.

‘What kind of card games?’

‘*Schafkopf*. I don’t know whether you have it in France. It’s a tactical game and quite complicated.’

‘Could you teach me?’ I asked.

‘Only if you have a Bavarian pack of cards.’

‘Aren’t they all the same?’

He gave a melodious laugh. ‘Bavarians don’t do things the same way as other people. Instead of diamonds, clubs and spades, we have acorns, bells and grass.’

‘But what about hearts?’

‘Of course, we have hearts. Otherwise how could a Bavarian fall in love?’ he said with a grin.

I was about to ask him whether he’d fallen in love with Sophie but thought better of it. Instead I said: ‘Surely you have kings and queens and aces and jacks?’

‘More or less. But we only use a 32 card pack. Seven and up.’

‘That’s like *piquet*. It’s a very old French card game but still popular.’

‘Well, let’s play this *piquet* game of yours,’ he said enthusiastically.

‘I’ll have to explain the rules first.’

‘Why don’t we just play the game and I’ll learn as I go?’

My mother had left the soup to simmer and was at the far end of the table, rolling the dough she had made the night before into small loaves. She must have been listening to our conversation because she interrupted, ‘What does playing cards have to do with learning French?’

I tried in vain to come up with an answer. Then Kurt said, 'It's a way of using the language in context, *madame*.'

Maman considered his reply for a moment before saying, 'Hmmpf, it's not the way we learnt Latin in my day.'

Taking that remark to indicate her assent, I rushed into my father's study and grabbed a pack of cards from his desk drawer. Every *Languedocien* had a pack or two close at hand. Along with *les trois pas*, it was one of the favourite pastimes. When I returned to the kitchen, I wondered whether Kurt had taken the opportunity to peek at his *billet doux*, but if he had done so, he looked remarkably unruffled.

'Here,' I said, I handing him the cards, which he then shuffled with surprising dexterity. 'You can deal first. Twelve each and the remainder for the pack.'

I'd played *piquet* for so long it seemed simple to me, but I soon realised it was quite the opposite when you approached the game from a novice's perspective. There were points for the highest suit and the longest sequence and bonuses along the way. So many things to remember that you needed a pencil and paper to keep score.

At the end of the round neither of us had reached the hundred points needed to win. In fact, Kurt had only thirty.



‘Let’s consider that as a test run,’ I said. ‘After all, it was only your first game of *piquet*.’

When we started over, he seemed to have picked up the rules. In fact, before long he was ahead of me. As the tutor, I felt rather miffed.

‘Where did you learn to play cards so well?’ I asked with a pout.

‘Three years of university,’ he replied. ‘And it turns out *piquet* is not unlike *Schafkopf*,’ he added with a smile.

My mother had just put the bread in the oven and we had almost finished our second game – Kurt had ninety points to my forty – when Claude appeared at the door, wet as a duck.

‘Maman, come quickly!’ he said in a frightened voice. ‘Papa is coughing blood.’

# CHAPTER 8



*L'habit ne fait le moine.*  
Robes don't make the monk.  
Old proverb

## March, 1943

Although it's only March, spring has come early to our little corner of Languedoc. The sky is glowing a cloudless azure-blue, the sun is warming the earth and our apple trees are about to burst into blossom. Claude is at our neighbour's vineyard where he's helping Lucien Bernard weed around the vines, dig the soil and chip away at the overgrown roots in preparation for the new growth. I can't imagine how sad it must be for Claude having to work on someone else's vineyard when our own vines have rotted away. But at least, Lucien was a friend of my father's and he understands Claude's situation better than anyone.

'What a beautiful day,' I say to my mother, who is at the stove, stirring a *condiment* she is making from the remainder of last year's pumpkins.

'In March the sun may be bright but the wind has a bite,' Maman warns me, pointing to my coat hanging by the door. When my mother sprouts these old-fashioned sayings,

she sounds so much like my father that I have to conceal a smile and sometimes a tear. By default, Maman has become keeper of the family proverbs.

‘Taste this before you go,’ she says, passing me a ladle holding tiny cubes of pumpkin and plump raisins lying like jewels in a glossy syrup.

‘*Miam!*’ I exclaim, realising I’ll never be able to cook as well as my mother – she has a gift for combining disparate ingredients and creating something magical. Still, I do have a gift for eating.

As I make for the door, I stop and kiss my mother firmly on both cheeks.

‘Don’t forget that the *Boche* are coming this afternoon for their second instalment,’ she says. ‘I hate the thought of them being on our land, let alone taking our produce.’

‘I know, Maman, but it could have been worse.’

She gives me a weary nod.

‘Don’t worry,’ I continue, ‘I’ll be home from work in plenty of time. And I’ve already packed the box. It’s wrapped and ready to go.’

‘You be careful on the road with all these Germans around requisitioning things. They’re in a plundering mood.’

‘I can look after myself.’

‘Will you be speaking to them in German this time?’

‘It’s necessary, Maman. It gives us an advantage.’

‘Your brother wouldn’t like it. He wouldn’t like any of it.’

‘He’ll be at Lucien’s. And you mustn’t tell him about this, or anyone else either. He’d make a terrible scene and you would probably end up losing all your cows.’

At the door Babette is observing me thoughtfully. ‘Don’t worry, Baba,’ I whisper as I pat her curly coat, now dappled with grey. ‘The Aubracs will be safe from those bastards.’

In my head a little voice is asking: *But at what cost?*



This morning, as I cycle towards Montpellier, I try to imagine a world without German rule. It’s almost three years ago since they occupied Paris and four months since they annexed the free zone, yet it seems like forever. Is this the way we will have to lead our lives from now on, tithing our produce, following their ordinances and living in fear?

If we thought the Americans would come and save us after they landed in North Africa, it’s looking less likely – for a while the Allies seemed to be getting the upper

hand but then Rommel launched a successful counterattack. To make things worse, the Americans are fighting the Japanese on the other side of the world. As for the English, they have their own country to protect.

In the evenings, after Maman goes to bed, Claude and I listen to the Allied radio stations playing ‘decadent’ American Swing and banned jazz music. On Radio-Londres, Général de Gaulle continues to urge us to resist, but *he’s* in London and *we* have to live here. All the same, the broadcasts seem to have had their effect on my brother, who disappears late at night and sneaks back in the early hours. Maman caught him one night after she was woken by Babette barking – she thinks Claude is sneaking out to meet a sweetheart. I haven’t told her my own suspicions. My mother doesn’t ask questions, and neither do I. Claude is not one to indulge in conversation at the best of times. And although he still laughs at my concerns about the radio, he has built a niche in the attic wall, where he hides the prohibited device when it’s not in use. Although it’s a makeshift solution, at least it has given me some peace of mind.



I like Saturdays – it’s a short day at work, which means I can go to the cinema afterwards and still be home before dark. Today, however, I have to be home by three. At lunchtime, Anna gives me some ration tickets and sends me out to buy a bag of coffee – not the real thing, of course – coffee beans were one of the first items to disappear from the grocers’ shelves. Now we’re all drinking a miserable coffee substitute made with chicory and roasted barley.

‘Take your lunch with you and have it in the sunshine,’ Anna says with unusual generosity, ‘as long as you’re back by one.’

Of course I’ll be back by then. I’ll need to have my work finished so that I can leave promptly at closing time. Otherwise I’ll be late for the visit from ‘*Herr Hauptmann*’ collecting his monthly supply of cheese. As long as we keep him satisfied, the cows should be fine.

The grocery shop isn’t far – only a few streets away, but I discover a queue there, snaking out into the cobbled laneway. So I decide to find a quiet place to have my lunch and come back later. I don’t want to eat standing in a queue. Besides, queues didn’t even exist before the Germans began commandeering French produce and causing food shortages.

I head down the hill towards the Place de la Comédie which is large enough to hold a multitude of people without it ever looking full. In the centre of the square there is an oasis of calm, the Fountain of the Three Graces, with its trio of pale marble maidens perched on a rocky mound festooned with real ferns and stone cherubs and set in a large circular pool. Clad only in scanty veils, the maidens are facing inwards and embracing each other with their naked backs to the burghers of Montpellier.

I perch on the marble edge of the pool, place my basket on the ground and remove the bread and cheese my mother has wrapped in a checked dish cloth. Arranging the cloth on my lap, I gaze idly out into the square. Behind me the trickling water provides a comforting soundtrack. People are going about their business as they always have, yet there are subtle hints that indicate things are different. Women in headscarves cross the square, carrying baskets which are probably empty, yet they carry them anyway, just because they've always done so. A couple ambles past, arm in arm. Wearing bright red lipstick and a perky little hat, the woman is around my age; her companion, however, is a German officer a few years older.

When I start to examine the composition of the crowd, I spot any number of local girls with German partners. It almost seems . . . normal. But it's not, of course. It's



wrong. So many of our young men have been lost to the War – either killed fighting the Germans during the invasion or locked away as prisoners of war in Germany. But that doesn't mean French women should take up with their conquerors. Anna's words are ringing in my ears: 'Collaborator'. And, no matter how smitten these girls might be with the blond hair and dashing uniforms, don't they realise that if the day ever comes when the Germans retreat, they will face consequences from their own people?

I've just taken a bite of bread when I become aware that someone is sitting down beside me. How dare they choose this spot when there's plenty of room elsewhere around the fountain.

Then I hear a voice I recognise, speaking French with barely a hint of a German accent:

'The Three Graces – they're the daughters of Zeus.'

I fix my eyes on the basket at my feet.

'Representing beauty, elegance and mirth,' the voice continues.

Please go away and leave me alone, I say to myself. I can't be seen with you. Not right here in the main square of Montpellier. Not anywhere.

‘I was on my way to have lunch when I spotted you sitting here on your own,’ he says. ‘I just wanted to come over and tell you how much I enjoyed *Le grand Meaulnes*. I’d hoped to do so when I returned the book last week but you weren’t there.’

I hazard a sideways glance and then steer my eyes to the front.

‘Well, I’m sorry to have disturbed you.’ He stands and makes to walk away.

‘Please wait,’ I whisper.

As he pauses for a moment like one of the statues on top of the fountain, my eyes dart up and meet his, only for a second. In the bright light of the Place de la Comédie, they are a startling shade of blue, just as I’d always remembered them. He takes a seat on the rim of the fountain, a little further away this time, and inclines his body in the other direction as though we are complete strangers.

Then he lowers his voice. ‘Is that better?’

‘Mmm.’ I concentrate on the wedge of cheese lying in my lap as if it’s the most fascinating thing on earth.

‘I didn’t like to ask for you the day I returned the book. I thought it might get you into trouble.’

‘It would have,’ I reply in a barely audible voice.

‘And I don’t even know your name so I’m not sure what I would have said. Perhaps I could have asked for Yvonne de Galais.’

Yvonne is the girl from Augustin Meaulnes’ past, the one he has never forgotten. For a brief second I wonder whether Kurt has remembered me and is letting me know by using this literary allusion? I turn towards him and search for a sign in his face. But all he says is:

‘You know everything about me, *mad’moiselle* – even the date I was born. And I know nothing about you. Couldn’t you at least tell me your name?’

The disappointment rips at my heart like a shard of glass. How could he simply discard a friendship which has been the most significant of my life? How could he forget the alliance we formed – the three of us – *un pour tous, tous pour un* – one for all and all for one? If he hasn’t worked out who I am, I’m certainly not going to tell him. But what can I offer instead? Of course! The nickname my father conferred on me as a small child.

‘*Je m’appelle Millie,*’ I say, my eyes fixed on the ground. ‘Millie Du . . . bois.’ Why not choose one of the most common surnames in France? The French equivalent of Müller.

‘I’m very pleased to meet you, Mad’moiselle Millie Dubois. I don’t suppose you’re going to tell me where you live, are you? But I’m assuming it’s here in Montpellier.’

Then he seems to think of something he’s forgotten. ‘By the way, what time does the library close on a Saturday?’

‘Two o’clock,’ I reply, assuming he intends to visit it before closing time. If that’s the case, as soon as Anna spots him, she’ll spirit me away to the storeroom.

‘The matinee at the *Comédie* doesn’t start until half past two,’ he says. ‘They’re showing Gance’s *Vénus Aveugle*. I’ve heard it’s very good. Would you like to go?’

‘With *you*?’

‘Would that be so distasteful?’

I draw a long breath. ‘I’m sorry, Herr Major, I can’t. We have guests coming this afternoon.’ That’s the absolute truth – it’s just that they’re not the welcome kind.

‘*We*? Are you married? I do apologise. I just assumed you were . . .’

Although I’m looking straight ahead, I can sense he’s checking for a wedding band.

‘I’m not married, but I simply can’t spend Saturday afternoon at the cinema. Not with you.’

‘Is it because you’re concerned about what people might think?’

As I try to fashion an answer, I find myself folding and refolding my mother's checked napkin. Meanwhile he takes my silence to indicate assent.

'If I were a Frenchman, would you accept my invitation?'

'But you're not French. Although you might speak the language fluently, the truth is you are part of the Occupying Force.'

'I work in an office, I translate documents and stamp papers.'

'You wear a uniform bearing the eagle and the swastika.'

After a moment he says something so familiar that my heart misses a beat. 'Robes don't make the monk.'

That was one of my father's favourite sayings. Kurt must have learnt it from Papa back in the summer of 1931! The realisation pushes me off balance like a violent gust from the *Mistral*. I can't even find the words to reply, I just sit there, forcing back tears.

'I'm sorry if I've upset you,' he says. 'I can appreciate your situation. I will leave you to finish your meal in peace. *Adieu*, Millie Dubois.'

With a click of metal heels, he's gone. Shading my eyes from the midday sun, I search the square for his retreating figure. There are grey-green uniforms scattered

among the crowd, so many, in fact, that I have no chance of picking out one in particular. Slowly it dawns on me that I only have myself to blame for this. I wasn't drawn here today by the prospect of seeing the calming marble fountain and its Three Graces. That was just a pretext I concocted in my own mind. The real motive is now blindingly obvious: I wanted to run into Kurt Müller. That's why I came to the precinct where the administrative officers are headquartered.

I gather up the remnants of my lunch and pack them in the basket. In the distance the town hall clock chimes a single time. There will be no chicory coffee today. I'll have to think of an excuse to provide to Anna – the long queue perhaps, followed by a promise to come into town early on Monday morning and buy the ersatz coffee before work. That should satisfy her.

Turning towards the fountain, I take a final look at the Three Graces – beauty, elegance and mirth. The beauty and elegance of our city remain intact. But where is the mirth? The answer is simple – it disappeared last November.

It was foolish of me to come here today. Foolish, dangerous and naïve. Tears are rolling down my cheeks; I brush them aside before anyone can see. I'm not sure why

I'm crying. Could it be because he said '*adieu*' instead of '*au revoir*'? Could it be that I've just realised I may never see Kurt Müller again?

# CHAPTER 9



*Une toux sèche fent le sapin.*  
A dry cough will cut through a fir tree.  
Old proverb



May, 1931

Papa was lying on his side on the straw-strewn floor, still coughing. Dark blood, the colour of Merlot, stained the front of his shirt. Marius was beside him, looking helpless and scared.

‘Jean-Paul,’ my mother said soothingly, ‘can you manage to swallow some of your syrup?’ She placed the spoon against his lips and coaxed him like a baby. ‘Just take a little sip, *chérie*.’

Kurt propped up Papa’s head as he tried to swallow the golden liquid. Meanwhile I looked away. I couldn’t bear to see my father like this.

‘Could you help us move him inside?’ Maman asked Kurt. ‘He can’t stay out here. It’s too cold.’

‘He’ll get soaked unless we cover him with something,’ Kurt warned.

My father tried to speak, but the only sound that emerged was a rasp.

Having gently wrapped Papa in a blanket, we waited in vain for the rain to ease and when it didn't, Maman and Kurt draped a raincoat over him. Then, supporting him under each arm, they helped him inside, through the kitchen to the long sofa in the *salon* where Marius lit the fire while Claude and I covered Papa in dry blankets and placed pillows behind his head. Then my mother brought a pudding basin and positioned it discreetly on the floor to be used in the event he coughed up more blood.

There was no point trying to fetch Dr Giroux from the village – he wouldn't have been able to reach us in his car. And what would the doctor have done, anyway? Just prescribe more cough syrup, the way he always did, and recommend bed rest and remind my father to keep out of draughts. And as soon as Papa could travel, the doctor would probably send him to the hospital in Montpellier for yet another X-ray. It would show even more dark spots on his lungs. Until one day the dark spots would join together and . . . I shuddered as I thought of it.



The next day my prayers were answered when I checked the clock in the *salon* and Papa hadn't coughed in more than two hours. Which meant he was getting better. For the time being, at any rate.

That morning the rain had stopped and sunlight was filtering through my mother's Rouen lace curtains, making delicate patterns on the tiled floor. My father was lying on the sofa where he'd been since yesterday, and I was reading aloud to him from our favourite book, *Notre Dame de Paris*, skipping all the boring bits about the construction of the cathedral and rushing towards the scene where Quasimodo scooped up Esmeralda, who was on her way to the executioner's block, and carried her to the safety of the ramparts, crying, 'Sanctuary! Sanctuary!'

Kurt, who was reading a French newspaper, placed it on the side table, leant back and closed his eyes. I could tell he wasn't asleep because every time I spoke in the deep, growly voice I had created for the Hunchback, a smile crossed his lips.

'You should be an actress, Camille,' he said softly when I put the book aside for a moment to rearrange Papa's blankets. My father was snoring softly and the wheezy rasp had disappeared.

'Do you really mean that?' I asked, unsure whether Kurt was making fun of me.

‘I do,’ he replied. ‘You have an expressive way of reading and a talent for mimicry.’

I repeated his sentence silently to myself, attempting to commit those words of praise to my memory so that they could be retrieved whenever I began to doubt my dream of becoming a film star.

‘I don’t look like an actress, though,’ I said forlornly. ‘I’m not pretty enough and I have freckles and frizzy hair and fat legs.’

Kurt leant forward in his chair. ‘You’re going to be beautiful one day, Camille. Just like the duckling that grew up to be a swan. And you will have so many suitors you won’t know which one to choose.’

‘Like Sophie?’ I asked.

‘Has Sophie had a number of suitors?’

‘That’s what I’ve heard, but she dumps them all.’

‘Oh,’ he said softly.

I found myself blushing scarlet as I realised what I’d said. ‘Not you, of course. I’m sure she wouldn’t dump *you*.’

After a moment he asked defensively, ‘What makes you think I’m one of Sophie’s suitors?’

I decided to own up about the pink envelope. ‘I saw the letter Marius gave you.’

‘Oh,’ he said once more.

‘Do you like her?’

‘Who wouldn’t?’

He was right. Everyone loved Sophie. She was irresistible.



By Saturday the roads were open and Papa was feeling better.

‘Why don’t we go to the cinema?’ he said at breakfast. ‘They’re showing the new Gary Cooper film. That German actress, Marlene Dietrich is in it. I suppose you know of her, Kurt?’

‘I saw her in *Blue Angel*. Not a film that’s suitable for little ones though,’ he said, eyeing me.

My face flushed hot with indignation. How dare Kurt call me a ‘little one’? Didn’t he realise I’d been in double figures for some time now, and in a few months I’d be a convent school girl?

‘What about you, Louise? Would you care to come?’ my father asked.

‘You know what I think of those silly American films. And anyway, someone will need to be here when Claude gets home from school.’

‘But I can go, can’t I, Papa? You could pick me up from school and go on to the city,’ I pleaded, avoiding my mother’s gaze. ‘*S’il te plait, Papa.*’

‘Of course you can,’ my father said. Then he turned towards Kurt, ‘Camille adores Gary Cooper. He used to be on the wall in her room.’

For a second time I blushed brightly. Perhaps it was because of the resemblance between Kurt Müller and Gary Cooper. Hadn’t anyone else noticed?

‘Would you mind if I ask Sophie?’ Kurt said. ‘I could stop at the Bernards on my way to the university this morning.’ He had been using Papa’s old bicycle which had been set aside for lodgers.

My father exchanged a smile with my mother. ‘By all means. Will you come back here after your lecture or stay in town and meet us there? We could bring Sophie with us.’

‘No, thank you, I’ll come back.’

He must really be taken with her, I thought to myself. To cycle all the way back here just to have the pleasure of her company on the trip to Montpellier. I wondered if

anyone would ever like me enough to do that. Then again, Sophie was leaving for Marseille on Sunday. They didn't have much time remaining.

'You won't mind sitting in the cart, will you, Camille?' Papa said, the tone of his voice suggesting it was a *fait accompli* rather than a question.

Of course I minded, but I also yearned to go to a Gary Cooper movie with Kurt –even if Sophie was coming too.

# CHAPTER 10



*Il vaut mieux être vieille fille que mal marier.*

It's better to be an old maid than unhappily married.

Old proverb



April, 1943

Newcomers are a curiosity in our village. Their arrival breaks the predictable pattern of everyday life. In 1931 it was Kurt Müller. These days, of course, there are other Germans rattling through the streets on their motorbikes or in a *Kübelwagen*, but they aren't the welcome kind of strangers who bring a buzz of anticipation to our village such as a new school teacher or a new priest . . . or a new doctor.

In my lifetime our village has only ever had one doctor – the man who delivered both Claude and me. But Dr Giroux is almost eighty and in failing health. His long-suffering wife has been begging him to retire for a long time. About six months ago, he had a heart attack and found himself in the hospital in Montpellier. The specialists there told him if he continued working, he wouldn't survive the year. So he closed the surgery, directed patients to the village doctor in St-Pierre-du-Lac ten kilometres away, and began his search for the perfect replacement. Being Dr Giroux, he wasn't

going to leave the selection process to anyone else. In that respect, he reminds me of Madame Martin.

Rumour has it he interviewed more than a dozen candidates in the narrow village house he and Madame Giroux call home. Apparently one applicant stood out above the others and the good doctor anointed him as his successor. All we know is that the heir apparent is called Dr Lebrun, he's in his forties and a widower. But that's all the mothers of eligible daughters need to know. In my imagination I can picture them at today's Mass, pushing their daughters in the direction of the new doctor. I pray that my own mother will show more restraint.

Maman has given up on me ever finding a husband among the young men in the village. I'm afraid I've earned a reputation for being snobbish because I'm not interested in any of them. They're too immature, too crass, too callow. When I was a pupil at the village school, they teased me relentlessly, and I was always relieved when recess was over and I could return to the safety of my all-girl classroom. I could never be interested in young men like that. *They* might have forgotten, but *I* haven't.

Today, as we don our Sunday best, my mother warns, 'If you're not careful, Camille Dupré, you'll end up an old maid.' She enunciates the words 'old maid' in such a

disparaging manner that anyone would think being a spinster is the worst fate which could befall me.

‘Better to be an old maid than unhappily married,’ I reply defiantly.

She gives me an exasperated look. ‘I just want you to give someone a chance. Don’t dismiss him before you get to know him. Promise me you’ll try.’ She rearranges my hat, tilting it slightly before securing it with a pearl hatpin.

‘All right, I’ll try. But you’re assuming that *someone* is going to be interested in *me*.’



The pallid April sun is barely filtering through thick layers of grey cloud. A mist clings to the valleys and there is ice on the road. This morning poor old Bisou can scarcely raise a canter.

‘Slow down,’ I tell Claude, who is holding the reins. ‘If we’re late for Mass, so be it.’

I catch Maman’s glare. She’s concerned that the other mothers will be there ahead of us, making conversation with the new doctor and inviting him to Sunday lunch.

At last we reach the village square, its perimeter lined with horses and carts. Normally there is a crowd gathered outside the church, even on the coldest day. This

morning the empty grounds and tolling church bells indicate that everyone is inside and the Mass is about to start.

Claude ties up Bisou and we rush into the church, barely stopping to genuflect. Our family pew is on the left, fourth from the front. As we proceed down the aisle I survey the congregation for the newcomer, but he doesn't seem to be here. Idly I wonder whether he's a Protestant or even a Jew. That would account for his absence. Or perhaps he's an atheist. What would the villagers make of that?

As usual, Claude is garnering some longing looks from the teenage girls in the congregation. I've seen photographs of Papa in his teens, and Claude looks just like him – broad shoulders and dark, curly hair, whereas I take after my mother who had pale blond hair which turned darker in her teens.

After kneeling and crossing ourselves, Maman and I slide into the pew while Claude takes the seat nearest to the aisle. Suddenly there's a hum of excitement behind us. Father Patric is taking his place at the altar, but the attention isn't directed at him. I can sense that heads are turning, even though I don't turn my own. Not at first, but then I can't resist any longer.

An unprepossessing man of medium height dressed in a grey overcoat is coming down the aisle, looking rather embarrassed at the attention he's receiving. It's hard to see his face because he's staring intently at the terrazzo tiles on the floor. When he's level with us, Claude takes pity on him, and says, 'Sit here.'

'*Merci*,' he murmurs, obviously relieved to be out of the spotlight.

Maman and I slide further along the pew to make room for the doctor. No sooner has he sat down than he's standing again, along with the rest of us, for the commencement of the Mass. In the process I manage to take a surreptitious glance at our new physician. He looks ordinary in a Jean Gabin kind of way. Not handsome by any means, but not ugly either. I can tell that my mother is looking too – she can do a sideways glance without turning her head better than anyone.

It seems to me that the whole congregation is so intrigued by the doctor that only the most devout are following the Latin liturgy. When it's time for Holy Communion, our row joins the line in the aisle and I find myself directly behind the newcomer. He's not much taller than I, but then I *am* wearing heels, at my mother's behest. And old rayon stockings with darned holes because new hosiery is impossible to come by these days. Standing so close to the doctor, I find my gaze lingering on his hair, which is

brown but streaked with grey. It has been recently cut – there’s a band of pale skin where his hair meets his neck.

All of a sudden he turns around, perhaps to check the length of the queue behind him, and his eyes fall on my face. I can’t help blushing at being caught in the act of examining the back of his neck. The fact that he can’t possibly have known doesn’t help in the least. Then he gives me the hint of a smile and turns towards the altar. Meanwhile I make a study of the floor tiles and wait for the blush to subside. From behind me, I know my mother has witnessed this silent exchange and is already fantasising about wedding bells.

When we return to our seats, the doctor and Claude remain standing while Maman and I resume our places. I don’t really recall the rest of the Mass except that I suspect all eyes are on the aisle end of our pew. Then I hear: ‘*Benedicam tibi Deus omnia*’ and the Mass is over.

Outside, the sun is still struggling to penetrate the cloud cover. The men quickly disperse to the patch of ground they have grandly dubbed the *boulodrome* where they start a game of *pétanque*. Other than Père Patric, Doctor Lebrun is the only man left standing outside the church and a queue is forming to speak with him, composed

mainly of mothers with their daughters in tow. Somehow Maman and I find ourselves at the end of the line.

‘No doubt they are offering invitations to lunch,’ my mother grumbles in a low voice.

‘The poor man,’ I whisper back, ‘he doesn’t enjoy being the centre of attention.’

She gives me a curious look and begins to smile. ‘You like him, don’t you?’

‘I haven’t even been introduced to him, Maman. It’s far too early for liking or otherwise.’

‘He likes you too,’ she says. ‘I saw that smile he gave you.’

I start to laugh. ‘He was just being polite. Now, let’s leave him to his lunch invitations. He’ll need to be a diplomat to deal with those.’

My mother looks thoughtfully at the queue. ‘Yes, perhaps it’s better to hold back. We don’t want to seem overly enthusiastic, not like the others.’

‘And there’s always next Sunday,’ I add tongue-in-cheek.

Before I turn to go, I take a final look at the ordinary-looking man in the overcoat. For a moment he glances in my direction and gives me a helpless smile.

In return, I shrug my shoulders, open my hands in an Al Jolson gesture and mouth the words, ‘*Bonne chance.*’ Good luck.

Only after I've done so, do I realise how bad-mannered, even brazen that must have seemed.

My mother, who has observed this mime, chides me, 'When I asked you to give him a chance, I didn't mean making an exhibition of yourself in public. Thank goodness we're at the end of the queue, Camille Dupré, and nobody saw you.'

'Nobody but the good doctor,' I reply with a grin.



# CHAPTER 11



*Qui écoute aux portes, entend souvent sa propre honte.*  
Those who eavesdrop often hear things that embarrass them.

Old proverb

June, 1931

Papa tied up the horse and cart not far from the Place de la Comédie and the four of us made our way past the fountain towards the cinema. My father and I walked hand-in-hand while Kurt and Sophie trailed behind. When I glanced back, they were in animated conversation, strolling close together but not touching. Although I found it fascinating to observe these rites of courtship, I could hear my mother's voice in my head, reminding me it was rude to stare, so I turned towards my father and posed a question.

‘Papa, how old were you when you met Maman?’

He smiled down at me and gave my hand a squeeze. As he did so, it struck me how handsome he looked in his black felt hat, matching waistcoat and string tie.

‘We were children. About seven, I suppose. Younger than you and Claude. Your mother attended the girls’ primary school in the village. I remember seeing her in the playground.’

‘Was that when you took a shine to her?’

He gave a little laugh which ended in a cough.

‘Are you all right, Papa?’ I asked. ‘Did you bring your *pastilles*?’

He took a small packet from his coat pocket, removed a lozenge and placed it in his mouth. The conversation about my father taking a shine to my mother was forgotten as he sucked on the lolly. In front of us the cinema loomed like an oriental palace with its domed copper roof, high arched windows and massive entrance.

‘Can we sit in one of the boxes upstairs, Papa?’ I asked.

‘Far too expensive, Camille. But seeing as we have a guest today, we’ll buy tickets in the dress circle.’



I’d never sat in the dress circle before, although I’d sometimes turned around from the stalls to peer up at the people sitting there – mostly ladies with fancy hats and gentlemen in American-style suits. The seats were so plush and comfortable you could fall asleep in them. Not that I planned to do that in a Gary Cooper movie. Along the side walls were the boxes or *loges*, which jugged out like little balconies, running in two

tiers, each one framed by velvet curtains and decorated with gold plasterwork. That was where the really rich people sat, fanning themselves in the summer and wearing furs in the winter. One day I wanted to sit in the uppermost box and pretend I was a princess surveying her subjects.

Kurt was seated on the aisle with Sophie beside him, then Papa and me. On the other side there was a little boy, monopolising the arm rest and dropping lolly wrappers on the carpet. His mother focused studiously on the advertising slides flashing past on the screen and ignored his presence. I wasn't sure why she had brought him – *Morocco* wasn't suitable for a child. That's why we had left Claude behind. He was far too young for Gary Cooper films. I, on the other hand, would be twelve next February, almost a grown-up, 'on the verge of womanhood', as they said in the movies.

The first half of the programme consisted of *dessins animés*. Although I usually enjoyed the cartoons, this afternoon they featured a flapper by the name of Betty Boop and her dog, Bimbo. Betty looked like Clara Bow with her urchin hairstyle and pouty lips, except that her large, balloon-shaped head was out of proportion with her body. Worse still, she sang in a breathy, little voice, ending each song with *poo-poo-pee-doo*.

I didn't like her much at all, but Papa, Kurt and Sophie laughed a lot, which meant grown-ups must have found her amusing. Betty was followed by Micky Mouse, who was trying to save Minnie from a gorilla. Now that was funny.

At intermission we made our way down to the foyer where ice-creams were being sold at the kiosk. Kurt bought four *glaces chocolats*.

'*Merci*,' I said as he passed me a cone. 'How did you know that chocolate is my favourite flavour?'

'Everyone likes chocolate,' he said, smiling over at Sophie, and not at me. At that moment I wanted to be in Sophie's place. Not just in her place, I wanted to *be* Sophie, but *she* was nineteen. By the time I reached that age . . . Kurt would be twenty-nine! Oh my goodness! By then he would be very old and probably married. I was so lost in thought that I barely heard Papa excuse himself to go to the toilet. Meanwhile Kurt and Sophie had wandered over to an empty *chaise longue* and were sitting close together. The crowd in the foyer was thinning as people returned to their seats. I leant against an elaborate marble column, waiting for my father to return and pressed my cheek against the smooth, cool stone. The column blocked my view of the sweethearts on the sofa and theirs of me. Suddenly I heard Sophie's voice:

‘You don’t seem like an only child, Kurt.’

‘You make it sound like a leper.’

Sophie uttered a high-pitched giggle. ‘It’s just that *enfants uniques* are usually spoiled.’

‘You’re probably right,’ he replied with a laugh.

‘Do you like living with the Dupré family?’

‘They’ve made me feel most welcome.’

There was a pause in which I imagined the two of them eating their ice-creams and staring dreamily into each other’s eyes.

‘Camille is a real character, isn’t she?’ Sophie said.

‘Ten going on forty,’ he replied. ‘She’s such a smart little thing. Funny too.’

Thank goodness for the cold surface of the marble column because my face had turned a fiery red. Ten! How dare he! And ‘little thing’! ‘Smart’ wasn’t so bad, but I would find it hard to forgive Sophie for calling me a ‘character’. Betty Boop was a character. Bimbo was a character. Micky and Minnie too. I was a real person.

Suddenly I heard Papa’s voice behind me. ‘Ready for *Morocco*?’



I was so used to seeing Gary Cooper in a cowboy hat that it took me a while to adjust to him wearing the distinctive *képi* hat of the French Foreign Legion. But whatever uniform he wore, he was the most handsome man I'd ever seen. Apart from Kurt Müller, who had the same piercing blue eyes and distinctive lock of hair falling over his forehead.

I tried hard to concentrate on the film but I was still upset about the conversation I'd heard in the foyer. In fact, the words they used to describe me were buzzing in my head like a swarm of angry bees.

'Funny.'

'A real character.'

'Little thing.'

Is that what they thought of me? Well, people had said much the same about Clara Bow when she was young, and look what happened to her! She lost weight, smoothed her frizzy hair and grew up to be a movie star.



That night I was in a deep sleep when something woke me, a rumbling sound. I lifted my head from the pillow and realised it was the sound of Bonaparte barking. Then Babette joined in. It had to be a fox – the tone was too deep and serious for it to be a rabbit. Whenever the dogs barked at rabbits, they made a high-pitched yelping sound. A fox with any sense wouldn't be lingering long in our garden with those menacing sheepdogs around. I lay in bed, waiting for the dogs to settle, but they kept at it. After a while I dragged myself out of bed and almost bumped my head on the eaves. Still half-asleep, I tiptoed to the window, trying not to wake Claude. Then again, if he hadn't been woken by the barking, nothing would have disturbed him. I pushed the window open and peered out. A gibbous moon glinted in the night sky, casting its rays over the garden. I could see the two Briards running back and forth, creating a cacophony.

'*Chut!*' I whispered, '*Tassez-vous!*' But they didn't even turn their heads in my direction.

Then I spotted the source of the brouhaha. Kurt was on the other side of the courtyard, waving and gesticulating at the dogs to be quiet. He was too busy trying to calm them to notice me at the attic window. All at once they realised who it was and gave him their welcoming bark. Downstairs in the *salon* the clock began to chime. As



I watched the dogs lope towards Kurt, I counted the strokes. Twelve of them. He gave each dog a perfunctory rub on the head and led them to their kennels. Bonaparte went inside immediately but Babette lingered for more stroking before joining her mate. Everything was silent, so silent that I heard the kitchen door creak open and then close with a click.

It had been five o'clock in the afternoon when Papa and I had said goodbye to Kurt and Sophie outside the Gaumont in Montpellier. That was seven hours ago. What had they been doing in the meantime?



After Mass on Sunday everyone gathered outside the church to wish Sophie well before her parents took her to the station. Heaven knows when she would be back again. It might not be until Christmas and that was six months away.

In spite of her having called me 'a character', I still adored her. She was everything I wanted to be when I grew up. A woman living her own life in the city of her dreams. All the same, there was a part of me which was glad she was leaving, the part that resented her monopolising Kurt this past week. He had been too busy for his French lessons. Too busy to play *piquet*. Too busy to listen to me read aloud. And far too busy

to spend time with a little girl when he could be with someone grown-up and sophisticated.

# CHAPTER 12



*C'est la fin des haricots.*

It's the end of the beans.

(It's the end of the world.)

Old saying

June, 1943

Every evening, on the way home from work, I would stop at the entrance to our laneway and check the letter box. Today there is a white letter poking out the front, looking alarmingly official – nowadays ordinary envelopes are made out of old newspaper, owing to paper shortages. At first I assume it's an order from the military administration, reassessing the arrangements about the cheeses and demanding our cows as well. Well, at least I tried, I say to myself bitterly. Then I look at the name and realise it's addressed to Claude, and not my mother. My heart is thudding against my chest wall as I drop it in the basket and cycle down the lane past the olive grove and into the courtyard.

The smell of bacon is wafting into the yard from the open kitchen window. How did my mother manage to get hold of something so scarce and desirable? I leave the bike in the yard, grab the basket and make for the door.

‘What are you making, Maman?’ I ask, unable to bring myself to raise the subject of the letter. Not yet.

‘A pork *cassoulet*,’ she replies cheerfully.

Peering into the pot, I can make out pork belly, chopped sausages and crispy pink morsels of bacon. My goodness, I haven’t seen any of those ingredients in months. The aroma is tantalising.

‘Where did you get the meat?’ I ask her.

‘Lucien brought me a side of pork and some rashers of bacon. Sausages too – he made them himself. He had two pigs hidden away in the far paddock beyond the vineyard and decided it would be better to kill them now and eat the meat rather than be forced to hand them over to the Germans.’

‘Which would be likely to happen sooner or later,’ I interrupt.

‘So I offered to pay him but he said he would take a couple of jars of *tapenade* in return. And an invitation to lunch tomorrow.’

‘Mmm,’ I say tactfully. For quite a while I’ve had the feeling our widower neighbour might be interested in my mother. Maman and Tatie Margot were best friends, and Papa and Lucien. There’s a certain symmetry.

Maman dips a ladle into the mixture and tastes it. ‘Not bad, although I used to add a couple of duck breasts for the richness and flavour, but that’s not possible now. Unless . . .’

‘You wouldn’t!’ I gasp.

‘No, of course not,’ she says with a little laugh, ‘those ducks are like my cows. I was making a little joke.’

I can’t recall seeing my mother in such a carefree mood. Not since the Germans came, not since Papa died. Come to think of it, not ever. I watch her add a generous handful of haricot beans to the mix. At least we have plenty of *haricots*, stored in jars in the wine cellar with the jams. Our hidey hole for all things rare, precious and prohibited. Apart from the radio, of course – it still resides upstairs.

Meanwhile the letter is lying untouched in my basket as though it’s the poisoned apple from *Snow White*. How can I show it to my mother when she’s feeling so carefree? This will certainly put an end to her good mood. Eventually I build enough courage to take the envelope out of the basket.

‘Maman, this letter was in the post box. It’s addressed to Claude.’

It takes a few moments for her to register what I'm saying. She washes her hands, dries them on a hand towel and takes the envelope. After staring at it for a very long time, she points with a shaking hand to the top left corner where there are three small initials: OPA.

'*Office de Placement Allemand,*' my mother says hoarsely. 'The Office of German Placements – they're in charge of the forced labour program.'

'But it can't be from them, Maman. Agricultural workers are exempt. It must be a mistake.'

We both stand silently, eyeing the intimidating envelope. After a moment I say, 'I'll make some chicory coffee. That will calm your nerves.'

Not long after we finish the coffee, the kitchen door opens – it's Claude, home for supper. Behind him are Lucien and Marius. They remove their hats and hang them on the coat stand. Nobody says a word. At last Lucien steps forward and clears his throat.

'Why don't you take a seat, Louise. You too, Camille.' His voice is usually deep and sonorous but this evening it's cracking.

When we are all sitting around the kitchen table, Lucien draws a deep breath. 'I'm afraid I have bad news.'

‘It’s about the forced labour, isn’t it?’ my mother says.

‘Yes, that bastard Laval has changed the rules. They’ve removed the exemption for farm labourers. And they’re calling up all the boys born in 1922.’

It’s a double blow. I take a peek at my mother, only to see that her complexion has turned ashen. She prophesied Laval would do exactly this, and now it is coming to pass. Slowly she removes the unopened letter from her apron pocket and places it on the table.

‘Marius has received a summons too,’ Lucien says huskily. ‘I’ve been into Montpellier to find out what we can do. The only grounds for exemption would be medical. But these two are healthy as bulls.’

‘We could always go underground,’ Marius says defiantly.

‘You mean join the *Maquis* and get killed,’ my mother responds.

‘It’s all right, Maman,’ I say, patting her hand. ‘We’ll find a way around this.’

‘We’re talking about human lives, Camille,’ she says fiercely. ‘You can’t just make a deal like you did to save the cows.’ Then she realises she’s given away our secret and mouths the word, ‘Sorry’ in my direction.



Being the strong, silent type, Claude is a good listener and he's heard what Maman has just said. 'What's this deal you're talking about?' he asks gruffly.

'It doesn't matter,' my mother says.

But he persists. 'Tell me what you did, Camille?'

I can feel my face burning. Nervously I say, 'A couple of months ago the *Boche* turned up and issued Maman with a requisition order for six cows. So when they came back to take the cows, I suggested a substitution.'

'What kind of substitution?'

'Two cheeses and two jars of jam every month.' Then I lower my voice to a whisper. 'Plus some duck eggs.'

My mother opens her mouth in horror. 'You didn't tell me about any duck eggs!'

'Sorry, Maman, but it saved your Aubracs.'

'I'm surprised they accepted the substitution,' Lucien says. 'Not that I don't appreciate your mother's *tommes*.'

If I were to be completely truthful I would tell him about the extra cheese and the jar of *tapenade* but that information would only make me look worse – negotiating a private deal with a German officer is crossing the line.

‘They nullified the original order and made out a new one. I can show you,’ I say, going to the dresser and opening the sugar canister, which is empty because we can’t get sugar anymore and have to use our own honey instead. As I remove the requisition order and hold it aloft, I say, ‘See, it’s there in black and white.’

‘You should have told me, Camille. I’m the man of the house,’ Claude says resentfully. ‘I should have been there to deal with it, not you.’

‘We didn’t want to worry you,’ I say, shooting my mother a warning glance. I don’t dare mention the fact that I can speak to them in their own language, and Claude can’t.

‘That’s right,’ Maman says, taking my cue. ‘You have so much to do, Claude, managing this place and helping Lucien. We thought we could handle it ourselves and save you the trouble.’

Claude flashes a furious look in my direction, but before he can utter a word, Lucien says, ‘You are fortunate, Claude, to have two such fine women supporting you in your role as the head of the household. Now let us attend to the matter at hand.’

‘I’m not going to be slave labour for the Germans,’ Marius says. ‘I won’t be registering.’

‘But you have to. They know where you live,’ I say. ‘They’ll send the *gendarmes* to arrest you.’

In a defiant voice Marius replies, ‘They’ll never catch me. I’m going to disappear.’

Claude says nothing but his steely expression indicates he’s thinking the same thing.

‘Now, just a moment,’ Lucien says. ‘Before you two consider anything so drastic, let’s work through the alternatives.’

Thanks goodness for Lucien’s calming presence in the midst of this storm. A long and meandering conversation follows in which all possible grounds for exemption are canvassed. In the end it is decided that Claude could make the case that he is the family breadwinner, running the farm now that Papa is dead. As for Marius, he had asthma as a child and perhaps old Doctor Giroux might be convinced to write a certificate attesting to the fact that he is unfit to work as a labourer.

Lucien suggests my mother write her own letter to the Office of German Placements, explaining that she lost her husband after years of chest problems caused by mustard gas and now, as a widow, she only has her son to manage the property.

‘Why would Germans be sympathetic to Jean-Paul’s war injuries?’ Maman asks.

‘Most of the people who administer the OPA are French,’ Lucien explains. ‘It’s worth trying. And you need to write it tonight so that Camille can deliver it tomorrow when she goes to work. The boys have to register by Monday of next week and after that, they have three days before . . .’

‘Before what?’ I ask.

‘Before they’re sent to Germany.’

‘How can the OPA possibly process the exemptions in such a short space of time?’ I ask uneasily.

‘That’s the point,’ Lucien says. ‘It’s unlikely they can. The Germans don’t want to exempt anyone.’

‘What can we do?’ my mother asks despairingly.

‘Only our best,’ Lucien replies. ‘Now, Marius and I shall leave you to compose your letters and we will do the same.’

‘Do you want me to deliver yours as well?’ I ask.

‘No, thank you. I’ll go and see André Giroux tomorrow morning and then I’ll make a visit to the OPA in the afternoon. Not that I expect to be able to speak to anyone. I imagine there will be hordes of angry parents.’

‘Do you know what’s happening about girls born in those years?’ I ask. The answer is important to me, having been born in 1920.

‘They haven’t pursued that. I think they realise there would be such an uproar, they would have a revolt on their hands.’

‘Well, at least that’s a relief,’ my mother says. ‘If I lost both my children, I think I ...’

Lucien gives her hand a pat. ‘I will have to miss lunch tomorrow. Louise. But I’ll drop by after I’ve been to the OPA. Perhaps I’ll have some encouraging news by then.’

As he makes to go, my mother says, ‘Since you can’t come for lunch tomorrow, stay for some supper this evening. I used most of your sausages in the *cassoulet* but there are still a few left. We can have them with my potato starch bread. It’s really quite delicious when you get used to it. And there’s plenty to go around.’

Lucien and Marius don’t need any convincing. So Maman and I set to work frying the sausages, slicing onions and chopping herbs. Soon the dish is ready – simple, peasant food but it smells delicious.

Although we are all worried about the summons, we seek comfort in eating a hearty meal, and for a few minutes the atmosphere is more relaxed. After Lucien and Marius leave for home, my mother pens a draft of her letter on the back of the envelope from

the OPA and then we alter a few things. Claude leaves the writing to us. His detached attitude worries me. Has he already made up his mind to disappear with Marius? When my mother is ready to begin the final version, I fetch a couple of sheets of old carbon paper from the drawer in Papa's desk, as well as a leaf of precious writing paper. 'Let's do it in triplicate, just in case.'

An idea is forming in my mind, the genesis of a plan which might involve crossing into no man's land, but I would do almost anything to get hold of an exemption for my brother.

# CHAPTER 13



*Loin des yeux, loin du coeur.*  
Far from the eyes, far from the heart.

Old proverb

## Summer, 1931

School was over for the year and summer had arrived in Languedoc. The air was alive with birdsong and scented with lavender and thyme, while the earth was sprouting feathery grasses and glorious wildflowers in yellow and purple. In our olive grove the twisted, grey-leaved trees were forming fruit, which we would harvest at the end of the season to make *tapenade*. As for Papa, he had grown stronger since that terrible day in the barn. Even so, most mornings we could hear him coughing, the rib-cracking kind of cough that reverberated through the house. Whenever I asked him how he was, he would answer enigmatically, ‘There’s no happiness without clouds.’

Every day my father inspected his vines, smiling over the little rose-gold-coloured jewels forming in bunches on the stems and thanking God the fruit had survived this year’s twin disasters – frost and flood.

Now that Claude and I were on holidays, we could help Papa with the thankless job of rubbing off the unwanted buds shooting from every stem. For days we worked vine



by vine, row by row. By the time we had finished, the stems were smooth and straight, and all of the goodness from the water and the soil was finding its way up to the crown of the vine rather than being wasted in the stray shoots that my father called *gourmands*.

After the bud-rubbing, there was weeding to be done. We cleared the gaps between the vines by hand so as not to damage the stems, but my father used a horse-drawn plough to weed the wide *sillons* between the rows. Each afternoon, when Kurt returned from the university, he helped Papa to steer the lethal-looking machine with its double blades while a patient Bisou moved forward at a slow and steady pace. Our father wouldn't let Claude or me anywhere near the horse-drawn *décavailloneuse* because he said it was too dangerous for children.

Afterwards my father would open his leather satchel and remove a bottle of Merlot which he would invite Kurt to share with him. I was always offered an enamel mug of watered-down wine, but Claude sulked because he was only allowed to drink water. Most afternoons he would disappear into the woods to hunt rabbits. He liked to use the old method of blocking all their holes except for two. Then he would send his pet ferret down one hole and race to the other to wait for the escaping rabbit. From the

vineyard we would hear the echoing shots which indicated a dead *lapin*. Finally, the poor ferret would have to be coaxed out with an egg or some morsels of meat and taken home to its hutch.

In Claude's absence, Papa and Kurt drank their wine and discussed world events while I sat beside them, hanging on every word, even though I didn't understand very much of it at all.

One sunny afternoon I heard the name 'Hitler' for the first time.

'What do you make of this Hitler fellow?' my father asked Kurt.

'Nobody seems to consider him a real political threat, Monsieur Dupré, but they should – he runs the second biggest political party in Germany and he's a dangerous man. A thug really, but a clever one. Last year he had his Brownshirts burn down a dance hall in Berlin. He chose that particular location because it was popular with Communists and Social Democrats – his arch-enemies. Three people were killed and many more injured. Hitler was called to testify at the trial that followed and was cross-examined for three hours about his role in the attack, but he wriggled his way out of it and got off.'

My father took a slurp of Merlot and passed the bottle to Kurt.

‘If he’s such a thug, what do you think people see in him?’ Papa asked.

‘He’s a compelling speaker – he could convince people of anything. When he tells them that he can solve their money problems and give them jobs, they believe him. He blames the Jews for everything, says they’ve stolen German jobs and he’ll put them on a register and deport them. And he promises he’ll make Germany great again.’

‘And you don’t agree?’

Kurt smiled, though not in a happy way. ‘I’m a Social Democrat, *monsieur*, I find his policies abhorrent. Heaven help Germany if he ever becomes leader.’

I made a note in my head to look up ‘abhorrent’ in my father’s dictionary.

‘What are you going to do, Kurt, when you return to Germany?’ Papa asked.

‘I’m starting work in September as a cadet journalist.’

‘Here in Languedoc, sons tend to follow in their father’s footsteps. Is your father a newspaper man?’

Kurt laughed so hard I was afraid he was going to have a coughing fit like one of Papa’s.

'No, *monsieur*, he's in the army. A colonel. All the Müller men had been in the military, harking back to my grandfather who served with Hindenburg in the Franco-Prussian War.'

'Hindenburg! You mean the current President of Germany?' my father asked.

'That's right. My family moves in high circles, and by choosing another path I've let them down.'

'So they're not pleased about your job at the newspaper?'

'You can say that again. As an only son, it was always assumed I would go to Officers' Academy. Instead, I went off to Heidelberg to do a degree in French and History. Everyone expected me to come to my senses and return home, ready to follow in the family tradition.'

'But you chose otherwise.' My father paused for some time before continuing, 'Well, Kurt, I can't speak for your father, but if you were my son, I'd be very proud of you.'



After supper there was a whole hour before I had to go to bed. Usually I listened to the radio with my parents, while Claude played with his lead soldiers. As we had no

electricity, my father had ingeniously built a crystal radio and we could each listen via earpieces. A rather bulky device, the radio had found its home in the middle of my mother's *table de salon* on top of a crocheted doily and we all sat around it, attached by wires and staring at the magical box that emitted sounds from the station in Montpellier and even as far away as Nîmes.

That evening, however, I decided to take Kurt up on his offer to teach me German. So far, our reciprocal agreement had been working heavily in his favour, apart from a quick lesson when he had taught me German numbers. Afterwards we had written them down and, to my delight, I discovered that German was much easier to spell than French.

Kurt was at the kitchen table, writing something mysterious. Babette and Bonaparte were lying at his feet while I hovered nearby, trying to take a look at what he was writing. All at once I spied two pink envelopes tucked under the blotter. I wondered when they had arrived. Then I heard:

‘If you really want to know what I’m doing, Miss *Schnüffelnase*, I’m writing to Sophie.’

‘What’s a shnoofelnarzer?’ I asked cheekily.

‘Someone who sticks their cute little nose in other people’s business,’ he replied, giving my nose a gentle tweak.

‘Two letters from Sophie. She must think you’re rather special. She hasn’t written to me yet.’

‘I’m sure she will. She’s just been busy moving into her apartment and settling in to her job.’

‘Are you going to visit her?’

He gave me a broad smile. ‘I might stop over in Paris on the way back to Munich.’

‘Are you two going to get married?’ I asked impulsively.

‘Camille!’ It was my mother who had come into the kitchen to make coffee.

‘I don’t mind, *madame*,’ he said. ‘I imagine this is the way little sisters behave with their big brothers. And as for your question, Mademoiselle Dupré, I’m far too young to get married, and so is Sophie.’

I had no idea how to reply to that. Instead I took a seat beside him and told him I would wait until he finished his letter and then he could teach me some more German.



‘Since you’re so interested in everyone else’s correspondence, Camille, I’m putting you in charge of collecting the letters,’ my mother announced the next day, ‘but you mustn’t forget.’

After that, I would check the box religiously each day, impatiently awaiting another pink envelope for Kurt, but none arrived. Sophie hadn’t written to me either. There were frequent letters for Kurt from his mother and his father, the colonel. They lived in a place called *Bogenhausen*, a suburb of Munich. The return address was on the back of the envelope: *Isarparadies, Maria-Theresia-Straße*.

After a second week passed and there was still no word from Sophie, I decided we mustn’t mention her name – it would have been too upsetting for Kurt. I just couldn’t understand how she could treat him this way. If I was in Sophie’s place, I’d write to him every single day.



Following Mass on Sunday, Tatie Margot took my mother aside. I just happened to be standing nearby, idly picking catkins from a chestnut tree. Their perfume was so sweet it was almost cloying. Neither woman noticed me – I might as well have been invisible.

‘How is Sophie?’ my mother asked. ‘She must have settled into her new job by now.’  
Tatie Margot looked around furtively and lowered her voice. ‘They’ve given Sophie her own apartment.’

‘Given? Do you mean the firm is paying her rent? That’s very generous. They must think highly of her.’

‘It wasn’t part of the original arrangement. She was supposed to be living with two other girls and sharing the rent. But her new boss has organised this.’

‘So she’s getting an entire Paris apartment rent-free?’ my mother asked.

‘It doesn’t seem right to me, Louise,’ Margot whispered. ‘She’s only nineteen.’

‘Hmmm. What do you know about the boss?’

‘Sophie hasn’t said much, only that he’s very nice. And obviously, if he owns a shipping company, he must be wealthy.’

‘I assume he’s married,’ my mother said.

‘I haven’t asked her. You know Sophie. She’s always been . . . flirtatious, and men find her attractive. I think there may have been something going on with her boss in Marseille. Sophie didn’t tell me, not in so many words, but I suspect the wife found out and that was why Sophie was moved to Paris.’



*‘Mon Dieu, Margot! Does Lucien know any of this?’*

*‘Heavens no. If he knew, he’d be on the first train to Paris to protect his daughter’s honour.’ Her eyes darted around nervously, checking no-one was within earshot. I continued to pick catkins as if it was the most absorbing activity in the world.*

*‘But, Louise, the truth is Sophie lost her honour a long time ago.’*

# CHAPTER 14



*Il ne faut pas réveiller le chat qui dort.*

Don't wake a sleeping cat.

Old proverb

June, 1943

Normally I would be rejoicing in the warmth of a summer's morning and the fragrance of the flowering herbs lining the roadside, but today, as I cycle into Montpellier my heart is as heavy as a block of lead. When I reach the Boulevard Henri V, I notice two Gypsies – or '*nomades*', as the authorities call them – standing on the corner, selling little bunches of wild purple heather they've collected from the hills. The Gypsies used to be all over the city, dressed in colourful clothes and peddling their tokens of good luck, but recently they seem to be disappearing. Are the Nazis removing the *Tziganes* in the same way they removed the books? In the same way they're now taking twenty-year-old boys and sending them to Germany?

When I arrive at work, there is still half an hour before opening time and Anna is working in her office. I can see her through the glass panel, head down, furiously writing. In my handbag I have two hand-written letters, the original destined for the

OPA and a carbon copy. As I tap on the door, she looks up like a startled rabbit. Then she composes herself and beckons for me to enter.

‘What can I do for you, Camille?’

‘It’s about the new order from the Office of German Placements.’

‘Yes, I received a copy. Don’t worry, they’re not taking women. And anyway, the exemption for municipal office staff still applies.’

‘It’s not about me,’ I say softly.

‘Shut the door and take a seat,’ Anna says, indicating the wooden chair in front of her desk. ‘Tell me what has happened?’

Steadying my voice, I say, ‘They’ve called up my brother – he was born in December of ’22. A month later and he would have missed out.’

‘The randomness of it all is frightening, isn’t it?’ Anna says. ‘Apparently they chose that period because of the high birth rate after the end of the Great War.’

‘Trust the Germans to use statistics.’

‘If they can reduce people to numbers and categories,’ Anna says, ‘then they can dispose of them as though they’re not human beings.’ Her tone is so passionate I begin

to wonder whether she has a relative affected by this. But I don't dare ask – Anna has an invisible wall around her and nobody can get past it.

‘So, what can I do to help you, Camille? I'm afraid I don't know anyone at the OPA.’

‘All I need is some time off today to go to the office and make a case for Claude.’

‘Take as much time as you need. If it requires a whole day, so be it. I'll tell the others I've given you errands to run.’

Her generosity is so unexpected that I feel tears welling in my eyes.

‘No tears today, Camille,’ she says brusquely. ‘You need your emotions under control and your wits about you.’

‘Thank you, Anna. If there's ever anything I can do for you, just ask.’

‘Never fear, Camille, I will.’

As I make to leave, Anna says, ‘I suppose you've heard the other news. About the Germans and Italians in North Africa.’

‘No, I didn't listen to the radio last night. What's happened?’

‘They've surrendered to the Allies.’

For the first time since Claude's letter arrived, I feel a wisp of hope. ‘Do you think that means the Allies are about to invade across the Mediterranean?’

‘The mills of war grind slowly, Camille, but it might be a turning point.’



At the Office of German Placements, a nondescript two-storey building that resembles the library, there are people queuing along the street and it's not even nine o'clock. Middle-aged women in headscarves, ready to beg for the lives of their sons. Men in wide felt hats and leather waistcoats, who look just like Lucien, preparing to present grounds for their sons' exemptions. And dozens of fresh-faced young men, shoulders slumped and heads down, shuffling along in the queue as though they've already lost their freedom.

Joining the line, I'm grateful for the shade of the plane trees which line the street. By ten o'clock I'm inside the building but only the foyer. Eventually, as the queue moves forward I enter an open space resembling a school assembly hall. A dozen desks are arranged in rows as if we're about to do an examination. Behind each one there's an official. On the opposite side, with their backs to the waiting line, mothers, fathers and young men are putting forward their arguments. I can't say that my hopes are buoyed by the faces of those who have had their session with the officials and are now

leaving, making their way dolefully past the incoming queue. Mothers are in tears, fathers look glum and the young men have glazed eyes and a stunned expression on their faces. I wonder if anyone has been exempted or given the slimmest hope of it.

After two hours inside the building I'm at the head of the queue, surveying the officials and trying to decide which one would be the most sympathetic, if, indeed, I have a choice.

'Next!' I hear and find myself opposite a youngish man with greasy, thinning hair combed over his scalp, and wearing a crooked bow tie and a suit that looks too tight. He doesn't say hello or offer his name. There are no polite formalities, just straight to business.

'Name of the draftee?'

'Claude Dupré, born 28<sup>th</sup> December, 1922.'

He flips through a folder containing foolscap pages of names, dates and addresses until he comes to 'D' and runs his finger down the list till he finds Claude. I try to estimate how many names are on these pages – hundreds, possibly thousands.

'And your relationship to the draftee?'

I'm inclined to remind him the 'draftee' has a name but instead I say: 'I'm his sister.'

‘Your name?’

I provide it, willing myself to stay calm.

‘The draftee will need to report for a medical examination next Tuesday at ten am.’ As he speaks, he is filling out a form in what looks like a receipt book. ‘Your brother should bring any pertinent medical records with him. If he is not granted a medical exemption, he will need to report to the Montpellier-Saint-Roch railway station at one pm next Thursday. Here is the relevant form with his number at the top.’

He removes a flimsy sheet and hands it to me. I have enough presence of mind to spot a carbon copy remaining in the booklet. And there’s probably another one lying underneath.

‘Next!’

Did he just say ‘Next!’? But we haven’t finished yet. I haven’t even made a case for Claude’s exemption or given him my mother’s letter.

I can barely contain the anger which has been building slowly but inexorably inside me. Instead of standing, I remain seated. ‘May I just say a few words on behalf of my brother?’



‘You may, but unless he has a serious illness or is working in a reserved occupation, it won’t make any difference.’

As I look him right in the eye, he averts his gaze.

‘Do you have a brother, *monsieur*?’

He stares at the desk and fiddles with his fountain pen.

‘How would you feel if *he* was summarily sent away to work in another country under who knows what kind of conditions? How would your mother cope? And the other members of your family? And what if you yourself were one of these boys, whom you so casually refer to as draftees? Put yourself in their position. How would you feel having your life ripped out from under you?’

I watch his face for a change of expression but he remains as deadpan as Buster Keaton. So I go on to explain about my father’s death and the indispensable role Claude has played in maintaining the farm ever since, and how my mother would be devastated if her only son were to be sent to Germany.

‘*Mad’moiselle*,’ he says, addressing me by a title for the first time, ‘do you know how many mothers, sisters and aunts have made the same argument this morning? There are rules to be followed and quotas to be reached. I can’t make any exceptions.’

As he snaps the folder closed, his face takes on an implacable expression that indicates the meeting is over. I place the form he has given me in my basket and hand him the original copy of my mother's letter.

'Next!'

Slowly I rise from the chair, feeling as helpless and deflated as the day my father died. When I pass those waiting in the queue, I avert my eyes. I don't want them to see my disappointment, nor do I wish to see the hope and expectation on their faces because I know it will soon be extinguished. Outside in the street I feel like weeping until there are no more tears, but I remember Anna's words: 'No tears today.'

I gaze up through the newly minted canopy of plane trees to the dazzling blue sky. I had expected it to be grey and leaden because that's the way I'm feeling. Still squinting at the sky, I turn to walk back up the street and almost collide with a man walking in the other direction.

'*Pardon, monsieur,*' I say.

'My fault, *mad'moiselle,*' he responds, even though it wasn't his fault at all. Then he says, 'Didn't I see you at Mass in St-Jean-de-Rivière?'

Oh my goodness, this isn't a stranger. It's the new doctor.

He tips his hat. ‘I’m Jean Lebrun. And you are . . .?’

‘Camille Dupré.’

‘Very pleased to meet you, Mad’moiselle Dupré.’

‘Likewise, Doctor Lebrun. What brings you into the city?’

‘I came to pick up some medical supplies. And you, *mad’moiselle*, if it’s not a rude question?’

‘Not at all. I work here in Montpellier. I’m a librarian.’ For a moment I consider mentioning Claude being drafted and my visit to the OPA but decide against it. Far too much information to give to someone I don’t really know, notwithstanding the fact he’s a doctor.

He glances at his watch. ‘I don’t suppose you’d have time for some lunch, *mad’moiselle*?’

He seems a nice enough man, and it might even bring a smile to my mother’s face when I told her I’d dined with the doctor, but this is not an ordinary day, and certainly not one for socialising.

‘I’m sorry, Doctor, but I have some urgent business to attend to.’

‘Is everything all right, *mad’moiselle*? You looked a little distracted.’

‘Everything is fine, thank you. It’s just that I have a lot to do.’

‘Well, perhaps another time then,’ he says.

‘That would be lovely.’

‘In the meantime, I’ll see you at Mass next Sunday.’

We shake hands and head in opposite directions. At the corner I glance back and he’s already disappeared. Now I have to concentrate on helping Claude.



By the time I make it to the cinema in the Place de la Comédie, the cathedral clock is tolling one o’clock and the ticket office has just opened for the Friday matinée. They’re showing *Le Comte de Monte Christo*. What a coincidence! When I was a child, I loved Dumas’ Count and his Three Musketeers almost as much as Hugo’s hunchback. *Un pour tous, tous pour un* – one for all, and all for one – it was the motto, Kurt, Claude and I adopted for ourselves.

‘I’d like to book a *loge* box for tomorrow’s matinée, please,’ I say to the woman in the ticket office. She has dark red hair like Greer Garson, although judging by the strident hue, it has probably come from a bottle.

‘I’m sorry, we’re only taking bookings for today’s sessions.’

*Merde!* I say to myself. I can’t possibly buy the tickets tomorrow. I couldn’t be sure the envelope would be opened in time. After a sharp intake of breath, I try to find a way around this unexpected obstacle.

‘It’s for a special occasion, *madame*.’ My mind is racing, searching for a suitable event. ‘Tomorrow is my grandmother’s birthday. She loves the movies.’ My dear departed grandmothers will be turning in their graves at the lie I’ve just told.

‘How many people?’ the redhead asks.

‘Two. My grandma and me.’

‘Will your grandmother be able to manage all those stairs?’ she asks.

‘She’s very sprightly,’ I reply.

‘Well, I suppose I could allow you to book the box now and collect the tickets tomorrow.’

Oh dear, how am I going to respond to this one? The next lie is so flimsy I’m sure she’ll see through it. ‘I’d like to give my *mamie* her present first thing in the morning. It’s a family tradition.’

‘All right,’ she sighs wearily. Then she shows me a floor plan and points to a series of little squares at the top. ‘Those small boxes aren’t booked much these days. Nobody can afford them, except the Germans. They like to take their floozies up there for a bit of hanky-panky.’

‘How much is a box for two?’ I ask, changing the subject.

When she tells me the price, I do a quick calculation – it’s half a week’s salary, but there’s no other way, not that I can think of anyhow. I pass her the money and receive a few coins in exchange.

She takes two tickets from a roll and writes Saturday’s date in the corner of each one, together with the session time. ‘Don’t worry,’ she says, ‘I’ll be in the ticket office tomorrow afternoon – there’s no chance your box will be sold again.’

‘Thank you,’ I say, relieved that this first stage is over.

‘If you get a chance,’ the redhead says, ‘bring your grandmother over so that I can wish her a happy birthday.’



Stage one is completed. Now for stage two. I take a seat on the edge of the fountain and remove an envelope from my purse. White envelopes are as scarce as hen's teeth but there's a stack tucked away in the storeroom at the library. I place a cinema ticket inside the envelope and lick the edge of the flap before pressing it down firmly. On the front I write:

*Major Kurt Müller*

Stage three should be the easy one, yet it's the part that frightens me most. All I have to do is go around the corner to Hôtel de la Comédie, walk into the foyer, give the envelope to the *concierge* and wait until I see it placed safely in its pigeonhole. In preparation, I wrap a scarf around my head, covering every scrap of my dark blond hair, and don an old pair of my father's glasses. The world looks fuzzy through the lenses, but the last thing I need is to be recognised entering one of the hotels where the German officers are housed. Then I take a couple of long, deep breaths and proceed towards the Boulevard Victor Hugo.

# CHAPTER 15



*Un jour sans vin est comme un jour sans soleil.*

A day without wine is like a day without sun.

Old proverb



## Summer, 1931

In the growing season a *vigneron's* work never ends. That's what Papa used to remind us every morning. It just so happened that the growing season coincided with our long vacation, but neither Claude nor I minded the work as long as we could be with our father. The warm weather had done wonders for his lungs. If only it was like this all year round.

For the past few days we'd been removing the excess leaves around the newly formed bunches of grapes in order to make the air flow better and to avoid the winemaker's nightmare: mildew – powdery or downy, they were equally nasty. And if that wasn't bad enough, there was also the threat of a woolly grey mould called *botrytis*. Who in their right mind would grow grapes, my father liked to ask with a cheeky smile.

De-leafing, as Papa called it, had another advantage – the bunches were more accessible for picking at harvest time. But there was one unbreakable rule – only

remove those leaves facing the gentle, rising sun; otherwise the grapes could fall victim to sunburn. Being a person with vulnerable skin myself, I had something in common with the grapes.

Today when Kurt arrived home from his lectures at the university and came down to the vineyard, he was still wearing his suit. Normally he would change into his work clothes first, so it was obvious something was amiss.

‘What’s happened, Kurt?’ Papa asked him.

Kurt held up a copy of *Le Temps* with a headline reading:

## **BRÜNING WARNS GERMAN BANKS LIKELY TO COLLAPSE**

‘Come and sit down, my boy, and we’ll have some wine to soothe your nerves,’ my father said.

I took this invitation to include me, while Claude interpreted it as an opportunity to grab the shotgun and go hunting for rabbits, followed enthusiastically by Babette and Bonaparte.

My father produced enamel mugs from his leather satchel and filled them with red wine, before realising he hadn't diluted mine.

'Don't tell your mother,' he said, 'and sip it slowly. Now, Kurt, is this likely to be scaremongering, or is it actually going to happen?'

'Well, sir, the Austrian banks went bust last week so it could easily be a game of dominoes. That's why the Chancellor has gone to England to see Ramsay MacDonald.'

'If the German banks do collapse, how will this affect your family?'

'My father has been anticipating this for some time now and has taken precautions.'

'Will the French banks collapse, Papa?' I asked, imagining those solid-looking buildings in Montpellier collapsing stone by stone.

'No, my angel, things are different here,' my father said. 'You don't need to worry.'

'Who is this?' I asked Kurt, pointing to a newspaper photograph of a stern-looking man with a bald head and wire-rimmed glasses.

'That's Chancellor Brüning, the head of the German government.'

'Is he a hero or a villain?' I asked.

Kurt laughed. 'If only we could divide the real world into heroes and villains, Camille, but it's not like a Gary Cooper movie. However, to answer your question, I

think Heinrich Brüning has good intentions but he's made some bad decisions, which means people are angry with him. And I doubt that he's a strong enough leader for these difficult times. The Depression has hit Germany hard. Much harder than France, and I know things have been bad here, particularly in the cities. But we were already struggling to pay the reparations from the Great War, and now our money is worth almost nothing.' Then he turned to my father, 'My fear, sir, is that Germany's fragile democracy will collapse into chaos and the void will be filled by thugs like Hitler. Heaven help us all then.'

I had no idea what a 'democracy' was, or a 'void', for that matter, but I could tell by the tone of his voice that he was worried for his country.

'You don't think there'll be another war, do you?' I asked.

'Of course not,' my father intervened. 'This conversation is getting far too serious. We don't want you having nightmares, *ma petite chérie*,' he said, ruffling my curls. 'Now let us talk of light-hearted things like Gary Cooper and Lupé Velez. I read in your *Ciné-Miroir*, Camille, that they're getting married.'

'I hope not. He should be marrying Clara Bow – they're made for each other.'



After supper Kurt had his French lesson at the kitchen table. It was much easier for me to teach him than the reverse. He already spoke French fluently whereas my German was so basic I could barely put a sentence together. As for the grammar, I didn't think I would ever be able to cope. How could 'girl' be neuter? Or 'horse', for that matter, unless he was a gelding. And why were there three words for 'you'?

French lessons were much more enjoyable. We were able to have a conversation instead of grammar drills. I'd written topics on cards – family, school, home, friends, hobbies, movies, pets – and Kurt had to draw a card out of a box and speak about the topic for as long as he could. Afterwards I asked him to write it down and I would correct his work with my father's fountain pen which he had lent me for the purpose. But Kurt rarely made a mistake. All I could do was to add an idiom or two in the margin.

'You're such a character, Camille,' Kurt said, as he removed another card from the box.

If there was one way of annoying me, it was to call me a 'character', but I didn't let on. Conversation class was an excellent way of learning about Kurt Müller. This was what I had discovered so far:

He had a black and white spaniel dog called Kaiser.

His best friend at school was called Horst.

He liked to play football and handball.

He couldn't swim.

He had lived in four different cities because of his father's job.

His family currently lived in Munich in his grandparents' house.

His favourite movie stars were Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich.

His favourite books were *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Christo*.

# CHAPTER 16



*Le diable n'est pas toujours aussi noir qu'il en a l'air.*

The devil is not always as dark as he looks.

Old proverb

June, 1943

The library is always busy on Saturdays and I'm thankful for the activity, At least it diverts my thoughts from what lies ahead. At lunchtime I unwrap a wedge of cheese and a small loaf of bread that my mother has made from potato starch, herbs, water and butter. She's included some salad greens from her spring *potager* and a little jar of vinaigrette, I manage a few mouthfuls of bread but no more. After lunch the clock ticks at an agonisingly slow pace until I finally hear Anna announce:

'*Mesdames, messieurs*, the library will be closing in five minutes. Please make your way to the front doors.'

After that, we return any loose books to the shelves and complete our paperwork. At ten past two I can dally no longer and tell Anna I have an appointment.

'I'll finish up,' she says agreeably. 'If it's to do with your brother, I wish you luck.'

She knows that my visit to the OPA didn't go well and that I am 'pursuing other avenues'.



By running down the Rue de la Loge I make it to the cinema in five minutes, which is record time. Perhaps the name of the street is a good omen, I tell myself. Desperately I pray that he's not already there. For some reason I picture myself sitting in the *loge*, waiting for him, rather than the other way around.

Before I run up the steps leading to the entrance, I grab the headscarf from my basket and tie it firmly under my chin. At first I can't find the eye-glasses and begin to panic, before remembering I had put them in the inside pocket of my jacket yesterday for safekeeping. After a quick wipe with a clean handkerchief, I don the glasses and head up to the foyer. It turns out it's so busy I can easily sneak by the ticket lady without her seeing me, though I do catch a glimpse of her vibrant red hair as I pass. Then, pushing the eye-glasses down to the tip of my nose – so that I can see over the top of them – I climb several flights of steep, burgundy-carpeted stairs. Little Camille would have loved the large gilt mirrors, the flaring wall sconces and the gold plaster cherubs cavorting in niches along the wall. On each landing, an usherette in a crisp white uniform checks my ticket and send me higher until I come to the top floor where another woman tears my ticket in half and hands me the stub.

‘Your seat is in the far box on the top level, *madame*,’ she says, pointing to a short flight of stairs. I like the way she has referred to me as *madame* – it must be the disguise.

‘Is it full up there this afternoon?’ I ask, trying to ascertain if he’s already in his seat.

‘You’re the first,’ she says.

‘*Merci*,’ I reply and take a quick look behind me. No sign of him. Perhaps he’s not coming. In the fervour of concocting a strategy, it never crossed my mind that he wouldn’t turn up, yet when I consider it logically, it seems the most likely possibility. That day at the fountain I rejected him in no uncertain terms and he wished me *adieu*. Why, in heaven’s name, would he come back? And then there’s the other possibility – that he hasn’t checked his pigeonhole. Part of me is hoping he won’t come – churning up the past can be a very untidy business. Yet, if he doesn’t turn up, the last chance of keeping Claude free will have disappeared.

The entry to the furthest box is framed with velvet curtains hanging loosely on either side of the opening. I have to push them back to enter the box and rearrange them once I’m inside. As I expected, it’s empty except for two Louis XV chairs upholstered in burgundy velvet. The first thing I do is to pull off the scarf and glasses and place

them in my basket. Nervously I peer down at the rows of seats filling with people. It's difficult to make out the faces, which means it's unlikely anyone would recognise me up here, even with the theatre lights blazing, as they are now. Next to the stage a pianist is playing jazz music in defiance of the edict proclaiming it decadent and subversive.

I sit down, place the basket beside the seat and try to catch my breath. It's half past two and they've started to show advertising slides. The lights are still glowing, and the theatre is abuzz with chatter rising towards the vaulted ceiling like a swarm of cicadas. On any other day I would relax and enjoy this experience of being up in the air looking down on the rest of the world, but I've never been so nervous. Not even when I sat for my final exams at school or when I was interviewed by Madame Martin. Or yesterday at the OPA, for that matter. I look down at the big clock on the opposite wall. It's twenty to three. He's not coming, I know it.

All of a sudden I hear his voice in the corridor, thanking the usherette. She must have walked him to the top, even though the lights are aglow and he could have managed on his own. I turn around just as he's opening the curtain.

'Bonjour, Mademoiselle Dubois,' he says with a smile.

He is holding his cap under his arm and wearing the white summer jacket of the *Wehrmacht*. If he wanted to stand out, he's certainly done so.

'Sit down!' I whisper. 'You're shining like a lighthouse on a dark night.'

'Ah, we're still incognito,' he says with a laugh. 'I should have known.'

This isn't unfolding the way I expected. Not at all.

'So, *mad'moiselle*, what brought about this change of heart? Only a few weeks ago you told me you couldn't spend the afternoon with someone of my ilk,' he says, taking the seat beside me and placing his cap on his lap.

I can barely look at him in the white uniform – he's impossibly handsome. No wonder the usherette escorted him up the stairs. As for myself, I'm so flustered by his presence I can't compose my thoughts. How dare he make me feel this way!

'You haven't answered my question, Millie. May I call you Millie? *Mad'moiselle* seems so formal in the circumstances.'

All at once I come out of the trance. I really should own up. He's just given me the perfect opportunity, but I can't do it, not without offering him a final chance to work out who I am.

‘Yes, you may call me Millie. My father gave me that nickname. As for what brought about my change of heart, isn’t a lady entitled to have second thoughts?’ Before he can pursue it, I switch the subject. ‘By the way, you speak excellent French. Where did you learn it?’

‘At university. And then after I graduated, I spent a few months here in Montpellier doing a summer course. I lived with a family on their farm and spoke French the entire time.’

‘Ah, that explains it,’ I say. ‘Did you enjoy living there? It must have been rather dull for a young man just out of university.’

‘Not at all. Actually, it was the happiest time of my life.’

I’m taken aback by his reply. ‘Really?’ I ask tremulously.

‘I loved being part of their family and working in the vineyard. It was like living in paradise.’

‘Have you been in touch with them since you came back?’

‘It was a long time ago. Everything has changed. I wouldn’t be welcome there now.’

‘No, I suppose not.’

‘We did exchange letters after I returned to Germany, but I found myself immersed in my job as a journalist – if I recall correctly, it was around the time of the supposed suicide of Hitler’s half-niece, the biggest story of the year, and, well, I just stopped writing to them. It was funny though. The little girl – she must have been about ten – kept writing to me for a long time and I always intended to reply. I should have answered her letters. I still feel bad about it. She was quite a character.’

‘What was her name?’ I ask huskily.

‘Camille. She would be about your age, perhaps a little younger, but I don’t suppose she lives around here anymore. She was desperate to go to Paris and become an actress.’

Gathering my composure, I say, ‘But things got in the way. Her father died and then the war thwarted any chance of following her dream. So she stayed in the Languedoc and became a librarian instead.’ I hold my breath, waiting for his response.

Suddenly he’s looking right into my eyes. ‘Camille?’ he whispers. ‘*Gott im Himmel*, you’re Camille Dupré. Why, in heaven’s name, didn’t you tell me?’

‘Why, for the love of God, didn’t *you* remember me?’ I respond, my voice trembling.

Neither of us speaks for a long time. Then he says, ‘I’m very sorry about your father.’

‘Thank you. It was 1936, but it seems like yesterday.’

‘Was it his lungs?’

‘Yes, he caught pneumonia that winter and couldn’t fight it off.’

All at once, the lights in the theatre are lowered and the newsreel begins. My eyes are so full of tears I can’t even see the screen. It’s one of those horrible newsreels made by the Germans and narrated in strident French. Then I feel a hand placed over mine. Although the heat from his fingers sears my skin, I can’t bring myself to remove my hand from his grip.

‘Come outside,’ he says, ‘we need to talk.’

He lets go of my hand, but my skin continues to burn. Then he pulls back the curtain covering the archway, and light floods into the box. It’s as though a spotlight is being directed at us.

‘Close the curtain, Kurt, and sit down,’ I whisper. ‘We can talk at intermission.’

The newsreel is trumpeting German victories but I’m not listening. My head is replaying what just happened like a needle stuck on a record track. My pulse is racing, my heart thudding and every cell of my body is tingling. I can’t ever recall feeling like

this before, not even when I've swooned over Gary Cooper or Clark Gable. But I have to pull myself together. This man isn't the pacifist student I once idolised.

A dozen years and a Nazi uniform have seen to that.



At interval, when the house lights come on, we both blink at each other as though we've woken from a long sleep. He speaks first, as if there's been no break in time between our earlier conversation and now.

'How could I possibly have recognised you? You were ten when I last knew you.'

'Eleven,' I correct him.

'Ten or eleven, you were just a little girl with curly hair and a face covered in freckles.'

'I'm still the same person, you didn't look below the surface.'

'Neither did you. All you saw was the uniform.'

'I'd always imagined you as a writer defending the truth and fighting oppression,' I retort, 'and there you were wearing a swastika on your jacket. What was I supposed to do? Welcome you back with open arms?'



His face is flushed. ‘The world isn’t black and white like a movie, Camille. Sometimes people have to compromise – they have no choice. But that doesn’t mean they turn into the devil incarnate. One day I’ll tell you why I decided to follow in my father’s footsteps. But not this afternoon.’

In the silence that follows, he reaches across and runs his hand down my cheek, barely grazing the skin, yet searing it anyway. I’ve never felt so confused. My head is warning me to be careful, yet my emotions are running out of control.

‘There’s another reason why I was angry,’ I say, almost in a whisper. ‘I was jealous.’  
‘Jealous? I don’t understand.’

‘You were flirting with the junior librarian. I was jealous for little Camille’s sake. She had a crush on you. You must have known.’

He smiles at me and suddenly he’s Gary Cooper, older but still beautiful. ‘Does the grown-up Camille feel the same way?’

‘You and I don’t know each other well enough. Not anymore. Too much water has flowed under the bridge since then.’

‘Yes, but the tide has carried us back to where we started.’

‘I don’t know anything about you now, Kurt. You might be married with children, for all I know.’

‘I’m not married. I never have been.’

‘You must have had lady friends?’

‘I’m thirty-three. It would be odd if I hadn’t. And what about you, Camille? I imagine you’ve had your fair share of suitors.’

‘Not anyone I’ve been interested in.’ I don’t add that my heart has always belonged to him – or the idealised image I created of him. Instead I say lightly, ‘My mother tells me I’m too choosy and I’ll end up as an old maid. She wants me to marry the new doctor. But I’d rather be a spinster than marry someone I don’t love.’

He starts to laugh. ‘Now that’s something I remember about you – you always called a cat a cat. Isn’t that the French phrase for not mincing your words?’

I can’t help smiling. ‘I think I taught you that expression.’

His eyes are dancing. ‘So where do we go from here, Camille Dupré?’

Just as I’m building the courage to ask him about Claude, the curtain covering the doorway is pushed back and a cigarette girl appears with a tray. It won’t contain cigarettes though – ever since the Occupation they’ve become as hard to get as coffee,

unless, of course. you pay a fortune on the black market . . . or you keep company with a German.

*‘Bonbons, confiseries, monsieur?’*

*Non merci, mad’moiselle,* Kurt says, dismissing her. Once she’s gone, he reaches inside his jacket and produces a slim green box labelled Eckstein. ‘Would you care for a cigarette?’

‘I don’t smoke, thank you.’ And even if I did, I couldn’t accept a German cigarette.

‘Do you mind if I do?’

‘Go ahead.’

From his pocket he removes a silver lighter with an eagle embossed on the front.

‘A gift from my father,’ he says when he sees me looking at it. ‘He gave it to me the day I graduated from the Officers’ Academy. It belonged to my grandfather.’

‘The one who fought with Hindenburg in the Franco-Prussian War?’

‘How do you know that?’

‘You and Papa were talking one afternoon, and I was listening.’

‘What else do you remember?’ he asks with an exasperated laugh.

‘Everything.’

Just then, the lights grow dim and the title appears:

*Le comte de Monte Christo*

*Première partie: Edmond Dantès*

‘Alexandre Dumas!’ he says, clasping my hand. ‘We’ve come full circle.’

# CHAPTER 17



*L'argent ne tombe pas du ciel.*  
Money doesn't fall from the sky.

Old saying

## Summer, 1931

July was so hot that the only the creatures awake in the midday heat were the cicadas whose high-pitched chirping formed the background to summertime. The hotter the day, the louder they sang, but after a while you became so accustomed to the noise you barely noticed it.

We had finished my mother's generous Sunday lunch and everyone was having *un petit somme*, a little siesta. Well, not everyone. I was tossing and turning on my narrow bed in the attic. The heat was stifling up there, but Claude, bless his heart, was dead to the world. I climbed out of bed and padded downstairs, careful not to wake Kurt or my parents. I'd left my copy of Dumas' *Three Musketeers* in the *salon*. I couldn't remember how many times I'd read it. As I wandered into the room, I stopped dead. Kurt was lying on the sofa, reading *my* book.

'You couldn't sleep either,' he said, looking up. 'Sorry, have I taken your book?'  
'I don't mind,' I found myself saying.

‘I haven’t read this since I was in my teens – it really isn’t suitable for children,’ he said. ‘I thought it was all about the adventures of swashbuckling soldiers but there’s far more to it than that.’

‘I know,’ I replied.

He laughed. ‘Are you sure you’re ten?’

‘Eleven,’ I corrected him.

‘Sometimes I think you’re smarter than I am.’

‘I read a lot.’

‘In that case, would you read the book aloud to me? I’m up to the scene where d’Artagnon upsets all three of the Musketeers and each of them challenges him to a duel.’ He passed me the book and I perched on an armchair while he reclined on the sofa with his eyes closed.

Clearing my throat, I began to read, trying to create a different voice for each character. It wasn’t easy and I got the voices confused from time to time, but then I settled into the story, reaching the part where the guards arrived and tried to arrest all four for duelling illegally. This was where it became exciting – there was a struggle

and the three musketeers plus d'Artagnon managed to overcome the guards, in spite of being outnumbered.

*'Un pour tous, tous pour un,'* they cried. One for all, and all for one.

I must have raised my voice a little too enthusiastically because Kurt opened his eyes and started laughing.

'You will make an excellent actress, Camille. There's no doubt about that.'



## Black Monday, 13 July, 1931

Each afternoon, except for Sundays when everyone rested, I kept an eye out for Kurt as I helped my father in the vineyard. He had taken to bringing the daily newspaper with him and discussing it with Papa as they shared a bottle of wine. Whenever a political discussion began, it was Claude's signal to disappear into the woods with the dogs, but I remained behind, fascinated by this adult talk about loans drying up and a run on the banks. Even though I'd begun to realise that I shouldn't take these terms



literally, I was not exactly sure what they meant, except that they all had something to do with money, or the lack of it.

Today Kurt brought the news he had been dreading for the past month – the German government had closed all the banks. On the front page of the paper there was a picture of policemen nervously watching from the sidelines as a crowd jostled outside a banking chamber with its heavy oak doors locked.

‘Just imagine if all your savings were in that bank and you couldn’t get your money out,’ my father said. ‘No wonder they look so upset. That’s why I’ve never believed in banks.’

Like many country people, Papa kept his cash in a metal box hidden under the floorboards, but I wasn’t allowed to tell a soul, not even Père Patric.

‘Do you think the closures are temporary, Kurt?’ he asked. ‘Perhaps the government is just waiting for things to calm down.’

‘They’re calling it a “bank holiday”. But unless the government can address the causes, I can’t see Brüning lasting much longer. And if he does go, who would replace him?’

‘Not that Hitler person?’ I ventured, before realising this was a conversation for grown-ups and I should have been seen but not heard.

‘It’s possible,’ Kurt said, addressing me as if I was an adult. ‘Hitler and the Nazis thrive on crisis and instability. If they see a gap, they’ll try to work their way into it like woodworms.’

The thought of worms made me shudder.

‘You don’t need to worry about them, Camille,’ my father consoled me. ‘We live in France. There are no Nazis here.’ Changing the subject, he said, ‘Tell me about this newspaper you’re going to work for, Kurt.’

‘It’s been one of the few papers willing to take on the Nazis and expose their criminal behaviour, going right back to the Beer Hall Putsch. I really didn’t expect to get a cadetship there. So many fledgling journalists want to work for the *Munich Post*.’

‘They must have been impressed with you.’

‘I don’t know about that, sir, but I know I’m going to give it my all.’

‘Does your father read the *Post*?’ Papa asked.

‘No, it’s not his type of newspaper. Too left-wing. He’s always steered a middle course. It’s part of being a military man. He has to serve under whatever government is in power and follow the orders he’s given.’

‘But that’s not the way you see the world?’

‘Although I respect my father’s viewpoint, I don’t intend to live my life that way. I want to be true to myself and the things that are important to me.’

‘I admire you for wanting to be your own man, Kurt,’ Papa said, ‘but you haven’t chosen an easy path.’

‘I know that, *monsieur*, but I have to try.’

# CHAPTER 18



*Le feu plus couvert est le plus ardent.*

The fire that's concealed is the most ardent.

Old proverb

June, 1943

Neither of us is really watching the film. We both know the story so well we don't need to concentrate. I can sense that Kurt is deep in thought. His presence so close to me is unsettling, and even more so when he reaches across and takes my hand again. It's not just my fingers that are tingling, my whole body is ablaze.

This new aspect of our relationship has taken me by surprise. The yearning I used to feel for him had an innocent, pre-adolescent quality to it, the adoration of a young girl for a movie star. These new feelings are so raw and powerful I don't know how to deal with them. Does he feel them too? If these emotions are shared, it seems to me it could easily become a conflagration.

In my head I run through the words he used:

'We've come full circle.'

'The tide has carried us back to where we started.'

Is he implying that destiny has brought us back together? For what purpose, I wonder. Unless it's to save Claude? In my head I rehearse the words I'm going to say to put my brother's case, polishing them like a playwright penning a monologue. The problem is I don't know how Kurt is going to respond.



On the screen Edmond Dantès returns to Marseille in triumph, having escaped from imprisonment and discovered the hidden treasure of Monte Christo island. As the picture fades to black and the word '*Fin*' appears, the audience applauds Edmond's victory over tyranny and oppression. There are cries of '*Bravo!*' and '*Vive la liberté*'. Then the lights are raised, and the pianist begins to play Charles Trenet's *Boum*, which was originally a sweet little song from the Thirties about the joy of living but has been given anti-Nazi lyrics that everyone knows, but nobody would dare to sing in public.

Slowly the theatre empties, the pianist stops playing, but the song remains in my head and I can't help humming it. Meanwhile Kurt and I remain seated, our hands still interlinked. Even if someone peered up at us, they would need opera glasses to make out our faces.

‘That’s a pretty song,’ he says.

‘It’s about the way life used to be.’ No need to mention its new connotations.

‘How is your mother?’ he asks. ‘These past few years can’t have been easy for her.’

‘She didn’t cope very well at first – none of us did – but she’s much better now.’

‘And Claude?’

‘He’s as tall as you and as strong as a Turk. And he has a mop of dark curly hair, just like my father.’

From my wallet I remove a creased photo taken by a street photographer when we visited our aunt in Arles a few years ago.

As Kurt examines the picture, he says, ‘He *does* look like your father, doesn’t he? Such a handsome fellow.’

‘The girls in the village seem to think so. He’s grown into a fine young man, Kurt. We couldn’t manage without him.’ I pause for a moment, summoning the nerve to ask him for help but not knowing how to begin. The monologue I wrote in my head seems stilted now that I have to say the words.

‘Have you heard of the forced labour programme?’ I ask, abandoning my script.

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Claude has received a summons from the Office of German Placements.’

‘Surely he’s too young.’

‘He was twenty last December. Born in 1922. That’s the year they’ve singled out for the first group of conscripts.’ I can hear my voice quavering, but I can’t steady it, no matter how hard I try. ‘If he’d been born a few weeks later he’d be safe.’

He observes me with his piercing blue eyes. ‘And you want me to intervene on Claude’s behalf?’ His voice has dropped to a whisper. ‘So *this* is the reason for inviting me to the cinema,’ he says, withdrawing his hand.

‘I need your help, Kurt. Claude doesn’t know about me doing this. He doesn’t even know you’re back.’

‘So you orchestrated this elaborate plot just to get me here,’ he says, shaking his head. ‘I really don’t know what to say, Camille. Three months ago, when I asked you to the cinema, you turned me down in no uncertain terms. But now that you need something from me, it’s a different story altogether.’

‘I’m just trying to help my brother.’ I can’t bring myself to meet his eyes.

‘By flirting and leading me on.’



‘You’re the one who’s been flirting with *me* ever since that first time you came to the library,’ I say indignantly, picking up my basket and rising from the seat. ‘I’m sorry to have wasted your time, Kurt Müller. And if you feel that you’ve been deceived or manipulated, I’m sorry for that too. But you’re not the one living under an oppressive foreign régime. Nor do you have a brother who’s about to be transported to a foreign country to work as a slave labourer.’

I’m so angry I almost pull the velvet curtains off their hooks as I drag them open.

‘*Ach du lieber Himmel*, Camille! Sit down and let’s talk about this calmly.’

Then he grabs my wrist so tightly it hurts. ‘Of course I’m going to help you. For Claude’s sake. It’s just that when I opened the envelope and saw the ticket, I began to think you actually liked me. Now, of course I realise I was wrong and it was simply a ploy.’

I can feel my face flushing. ‘I do like you,’ I whisper, ‘that’s the problem.’

His grip loosens a little. I don’t dare look at him. Neither of us speaks for a long time but I can feel his eyes on me, even though I’m staring down at the burgundy carpet.

After a long silence I take a peek at his face. I’m relieved to see his expression has softened.

‘Let’s deal with Claude’s problem first,’ he says with a wry look in my direction. ‘Now, tell me exactly what’s happened with the OPA?’

I draw a deep breath. ‘Well, the summons arrived on Thursday and yesterday I went to their office to make a case for exemption on the grounds that Claude has been running the farm ever since my father died.’

‘Claude didn’t go with you?’

‘No, he didn’t show any interest. He was happy for me to go on his behalf.’

‘Did they give you any indication of what their decision might be?’

‘The official told me that unless Claude has a serious medical condition, he can’t be exempted. That he has to attend a medical examination next Tuesday, which, of course, he’ll pass with flying colours. And then he has to report to the railway station on Thursday to be transported to Germany.’

Determinedly I blink away the tears building in my eyes. I don’t want Kurt to think I’m crying to garner his sympathy. Then I remember the copy of my mother’s letter.

‘This might help,’ I say, handing it to him. ‘I gave a copy to the official but he didn’t seem interested. He told me they had quotas to meet and jobs to fill.’

Kurt unfolds the paper and reads my mother’s words.

‘I’m assuming that you didn’t tell your mother about this little scheme of yours. Or Claude, for that matter. I can’t imagine either of them approving of it.’

‘It was entirely my idea – I haven’t told anyone.’

‘Good, you should keep it that way. No-one can know about this, except the two of us.’

‘So you think you can help?’ I ask tentatively.

‘Well, I work as a translator in the military administration. I don’t know anyone at the OPA, I’m afraid.’

For a moment my heart sinks.

Then he adds, ‘But I’ll find someone who does. And I’ll make sure the OPA receives your mother’s letter first thing Monday morning, together with a recommendation from the translation office that Claude be granted an exemption. I’ll offer the pretext that I may call him on from time to time when I need an interpreter who knows the local dialect – it won’t seem suspicious; I use a number of locals as interpreters particularly those who speak Oc. I’ll mark the document as urgent. I can’t guarantee anything though.’

‘I understand that. Thank you, Kurt.’ Impulsively I lean over and kiss him on the cheek. A chaste kiss lasting a little longer than necessary.

For a moment he looks surprised.

‘Is there anything else you need to tell me to clear the air?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Good. I don’t want us to keep secrets from each other, Camille. We might have to lie to other people but this won’t work if we don’t trust each other enough to be honest.’

‘*This?*’ I ask tentatively.

‘Whatever is happening between the two of us. I know you can feel it too.’

He cups his hands under my chin, his face so close it swims in front of mine. I’m certain he’s about to kiss me but as he leans forward, the curtains behind us are pulled open.

‘*Pardon, monsieur, madame,*’ says an embarrassed female voice.

It’s a cleaner with a dustpan and brush. No sooner has she spoken than she backs out, closing the curtains firmly. Voices are rising from below. We peer over the top and realise the theatre is filling again. Kurt checks his pocket watch.

‘The six o’clock session will be starting soon. It’s too risky to stay here. We should say goodbye now and leave separately.’ He hesitates for a moment, before adding, ‘Unless you’d like to come to my hotel for a meal.’

‘I’m sorry, Kurt, I can’t. I’m already late for supper and my mother will be worried. Whenever I’m late, she panics that I’ve been abducted by the B---

‘Don’t censor yourself when you’re with me, Camille. I know all the names – *Boche*, *Huns*, *Krauts*. I won’t take it personally.’

‘You do realise that we French can be arrested for using any of those words, don’t you?’

‘But you use them all the same,’ he says with a smile.

‘When will we know about Claude, do you think?’

‘I’ll follow up on Tuesday to make sure they’re dealing with it. If I have any news about Claude, how can I get in touch with you?’

‘I don’t have a telephone at work. The only phone is in the chief librarian’s office.’

‘What about at home?’

I shake my head. ‘No phone, but we do have a generator now.’

He gives me a wide smile. ‘Your home might not have had all the modern conveniences but it was always filled with love. I might not remember “everything” but I do remember that.’

‘I’m glad you do,’ I say, looking into his eyes a little too long.

‘Perhaps we can meet somewhere after you finish work on Tuesday. What about the Jardin des Plantes?’

‘All right, but I won’t be able to stay long.’

‘I know. Your mother will be expecting you for supper,’ he says with a smile. ‘I’ll meet you at half past five in the sunken garden at the bottom of the Montagne de Richer. Do you know it?’

‘Yes, I used to go there when I was at convent school.’

The buzz of voices from below us is getting louder.

‘I’ll leave first,’ he says. ‘Wait a few minutes before you go downstairs.’

Then he kisses me gently on the forehead as though I’m little Camille. Perhaps it’s best for now that we contain the feelings which have been simmering all afternoon.

‘Till Tuesday, *ma chérie*,’ he says.

And like the Scarlet Pimpernel, he's gone, leaving me feeling as though it was all a figment of my overactive imagination. After waiting the obligatory few minutes, I don the disguise and make my way down endless flights of stairs. When I reach the halfway point I spot someone standing at the bottom, partly concealed by a marble column. A tall man with dark curly hair. It couldn't be Claude, could it? Surely not, but the posture is familiar.

If it really *is* Claude, how long has he been there? Did he spot Kurt? Then again, how could you miss him? He stood out like a marble statue in that summer uniform. Would Claude recognise him after all these years? And would he realise the girl in the glasses and scarf was his sister? I'm frozen to the spot, my heart thudding at the implications. If this man really is Claude, it wouldn't be hard for him to put two and two together? He may not be very literate but he's smart.

In the blink of an eye the tall figure slips behind the column. I wait a few seconds and he doesn't reappear. There are a lot of tall men with hair like that, I reassure myself. Besides, Claude rarely goes to the cinema. It's just that my senses are on alert and I'm overly suspicious.

Once I reach the foyer I scan the crowd. No sign of Claude. I'm starting to feel calmer. Fortuitously the ticket lady is fully occupied and I can safely make my exit. As the bells of the cathedral are tolling six, I rush up the Avenue de la Loge towards the library, adrenaline pushing me to go faster. When I reach my bicycle parked at the back, I undo the padlock and attach my basket to the handlebars. Just as I'm about to hop on the seat I hear a familiar voice that makes my heart stop.

'Camille, what are you doing here so late?'

Quickly I compose myself. 'Oh, hello, Anna. I've been to see *The Count of Monte Cristo*.'

'If I'd known, we could have gone together.'

'I decided at the last minute, I'm afraid.'

'Well, if truth be told, I couldn't have afforded the time. I had a mountain of paperwork to complete, thanks to the *Boche*. How was the film, anyway?'

Now I wish I'd paid more attention. Thankfully I remember the audience's reaction.

'The director interpreted it as a parable about overcoming tyranny. You should have heard the applause at the end.'

'I must make the time to see it. Didn't the matinée finish an hour or two ago?'



‘I went to the Jardin des Plantes afterwards,’ I lie.

‘It’s so serene there, isn’t it? I love to take a book on a Sunday afternoon, find a quiet seat amongst the plants and read to my heart’s content.’

‘Yes,’ I agree, thinking how voluble she is this evening.

‘Would you like to come back to my apartment for a coffee before you go home? It’s not real coffee, of course, but I’m getting used to the substitute.’

Anna has never invited me to her apartment before, even though it’s just around the corner. If I had the time, I would accept her invitation. I’m curious about the secrets of Anna’s life. Lately I feel as though she’s been sharing snippets with me, like loose pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

‘I’d love to, Anna, but I’m already late for supper.’

‘Perhaps another time then.’

‘I’ll look forward to it,’ I say brightly. ‘And I shall see you on Monday morning.’



It’s after seven when I arrive home and my mother is pacing the courtyard with Babette at her side.

‘Where were you? I’ve been worried sick. I thought a band of *Boche* thugs had made off with you. In fact, I was just about to cycle up to Lucien’s and ask him to go looking for you.’

‘I’m sorry, Maman. I had to stay back at work and there was no way of letting you know.’

‘You need to tell Anna not to keep you back so late.’

‘Yes, Maman,’ I say meekly. ‘Where’s Claude?’

‘He went to the cinema with some girl from the village. He said it might be his last chance for a long time.’ As she starts to weep, I wrap my arms around her while Babette watches us with knowing, brown eyes. Meanwhile my stomach is heaving at the possibility that it really was Claude in the foyer.



The next day we attend Mass in the village, all three of us. If Claude has worked things out, he doesn’t let on. Then again, he’s so inscrutable it would be hard to know. And he does have a lot on his mind; we all do.

It might seem a sacrilegious thing to say, but I find the Sunday service a welcome distraction from the events of the past few days. Sitting inside this simple granite building with its soaring ceilings, solid stone columns and luminous windows, my head feels clearer than it has in a long time. Idly I glance around at the congregation – the doctor is seated with the baker’s family a few rows back on the other side of the main aisle. He’s wearing a brown suit which matches his name. I smile at my little joke and suddenly he’s smiling back at me. Was he reading my mind? I hope not. As I face the front again, I can sense his eyes are still on me. My mother, who has observed this little charade, gives my arm a squeeze as if to say, ‘That’s more like it’.

This morning Père Patric’s homily is based on Galatians 5:1: ‘Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.’ Although his sermon is bristling with words like ‘freedom’ and ‘liberty’ and their antonyms ‘slavery’ and ‘bondage’, nobody could accuse him of criticising the Third Reich. Not when he’s discussing the Galatians and the Romans in the second century.

Afterwards the ladies of the village gather under the chestnut trees, condemning the forced labour law. Several of them have sons born in the designated year.

‘Do you think Père Patric was encouraging our boys to go underground?’ asks the baker’s wife, ‘or am I reading too much into it?’

‘Better than being a German slave,’ someone replies.

‘But how will the Resistance cope if all these boys join their ranks?’ I ask. ‘How will they feed them, let alone train them to be fighters?’

‘They’re not like city boys,’ the mayor’s wife says. ‘They know how to use a gun and can fend for themselves.’

My mother is unusually quiet, her brow furrowed and her eyes lowered. ‘I don’t want to hear any more of this talk,’ she whispers to me. ‘Let’s go home.’

At that moment she spots Dr Lebrun talking to Père Patric at the church door.

‘I’ve made a rabbit casserole for lunch. There’s plenty to go around. Why don’t I invite the doctor?’

‘You can’t just interrupt him when he’s talking to Père Patric,’ I reply in a low voice.

‘Didn’t I leave my jacket in the church?’ my mother says.

‘You weren’t wearing a—’

But she’s already excused herself and is making her way to the door. How is she going to invite the doctor without asking the priest as well? I really hope that both of

them are otherwise engaged. It might take my mother's mind off her problems but I'm not in the mood for socialising.

'It's a wonder he's not the size of a house,' she says when she tells me the news.

Afterwards we make our weekly visit to Papa's grave in the neighbouring cemetery where we lay a bunch of lavender and herbs from the garden.

'Seven years,' my mother says, 'but it feels like yesterday.'



In spite of her apparent concerns about the doctor being overfed, Maman sets to work after lunch, making a honey cake. She's using walnut meal instead of flour - we have an abundant supply of walnuts from last year's bumper harvest, hidden, like everything else, in the secret cellar. Although the Vichy government exhorts the populace not to hoard food, most country people have chosen to do just the opposite.

At three o'clock the doorbell rings. I don't remember the last time anyone used the front door – it hasn't been opened in years.

Claude manages to pull the huge oak door open, and my mother is her most gracious self as she invites the doctor inside. Through the opening I spy his old black Peugeot *coupé* parked in the gravelled front courtyard.

‘What a lovely home, *madame*,’ he says in his quiet way.

‘Why, thank you, Doctor. Do come through to the *salon*. We’re so pleased you could make the time to drop in.’

‘Quite the contrary. I was delighted to be invited.’

Maman excuses herself and goes out to the kitchen to make coffee. Claude sits silently in an armchair and I’m left to entertain the doctor.

‘Did you manage to get your medical supplies, Doctor?’ I ask.

Claude, who appeared to be lost in thought, turns towards me, looking surprised at my question.

‘Your sister and I ran into each other in Montpellier the other day,’ the doctor says in Claude’s direction. ‘I had trouble getting what I needed, I’m afraid. They’re out of Sulfa drugs and a lot of basic equipment. The *Boche* are diverting medical supplies to their troops and we have to make do with what’s left.’

‘It’s the same with food,’ I say. ‘Everything goes to Germany, especially the delicacies. I’ve almost forgotten what chocolate tastes like.’

The doctor smiles. ‘Ah, chocolate. I remember going to Blois as a young man and the whole town smelt of it. Inhaling the air was tantalising. I suppose the Germans are controlling the chocolate factory there now.’

‘But the air is still free.’

He gives me a smile and says, ‘The smell of freedom.’

My goodness, is this a conversation about chocolate or something else altogether? Before I can decide, my mother returns with a tray holding her silver coffee pot and best china. As she pours the coffee, I fetch the cake, which has been drizzled with honey and topped with chopped walnuts.

‘It’s not chocolate, I’m afraid, Doctor,’ I say, when I place it on the *table de salon*. ‘But it’s made by my mother from ingredients grown and produced on this farm. Even the honey.’

I cut slices of cake for everyone, and then my mother produces a bowl of cream and dollops it over each portion.

Oh no, I say to myself. She's so intent on impressing the doctor, she's gone too far. It's all very well to dazzle him with her ersatz ingredients – that's a sign of ingenuity in a time of austerity, but cream is the equivalent of chocolate – the epitome of luxury.

Then my mother says, 'It's only mock cream but better than nothing,' and I breathe a sigh of relief.

When it's time for the doctor to leave, my mother and I go into the kitchen to wrap a piece of cake for him to take home.

'Do you think he'd like some rabbit stew as well?' my mother asks. 'I could tell him you made it.'

'Maman!' I exclaim. 'All I did was collect the wild *cèpes* and chop the herbs. That's hardly making the stew. Besides, I'm a hopeless cook.'

'Then I'll pray that by the time he discovers your lack of cooking skills, he'll already be ensnared.'

I don't dignify her remark with an answer. Instead, I pick up the slice of cake, now swathed in a muslin cloth, and take it into the *salon* where I find Claude and the doctor



in earnest conversation. It's obviously not something I'm supposed to hear because they break off their exchange as soon as they see me in the doorway.

'We thought you might like some cake to take home,' I say, handing the doctor the muslin parcel.

'That's very kind, *mad'moiselle*.'

'It was my mother's idea.'

I'm not sure why I said that – it was ungracious. All the same, I have no intention of encouraging Jean Lebrun. Not in a romantic sense. And not after what happened yesterday at the cinema. Yes, I concede that he would make a good husband, but not for me. There are no sparks, not even a flicker.

# CHAPTER 19



*Qui bon vin boit, Dieu voit.*  
He who drinks good wine will see God.

Old rhyming proverb

July, 1931

There was something magical about muscat grapes. From one vintage to the next, we never knew exactly what colour the fruit would be – golden topaz, peridot green, orange beryl, pink tourmaline or permutations of those translucent hues. Now and then, more than one colour could appear in a single bunch. Whenever that happened, Papa prophesied that it would produce an exceptionally fine vintage. In the summer of 1931 there were multi-coloured bunches galore, and my father was overjoyed. ‘*Qui bon vin boit, Dieu voit,*’ he said.

It wasn’t vintage time yet, but already Papa and Lucien were examining the ripeness of the fruit, discussing their harvest dates and working out how to stagger them so that they could help each other with the grape-picking. My father always went first because muscats ripen faster than merlots. But Papa didn’t like to harvest too early on account of his grapes needing time to develop their sweetness. So it usually turned out that one harvest followed directly on from the other.

We'd even had a few days of light rain, just when my father had been considering the possibility of pumping water from the stream. Grapes might be small, but they are thirsty fruit. Even so, they much prefer a gentle shower to a deluge like the one we'd had in May.

Every day that summer Claude and I followed Papa around the vineyard as he checked the vines for grape worms, snails and any number of conditions that might blight the harvest. If he found a hint of powdery mildew, he repaired to the barn to fetch a small cylinder containing sulphur spray which he donned like a rucksack. From the cylinder a handheld spray allowed him to attack the affected areas without spraying the entire row. Whenever he was spraying we were sent out of the vineyard to the safety of the courtyard. Even so, the smell of rotten egg gas sometimes wafted our way on the breeze. Although my mother had warned him to wrap a scarf over his mouth, he rarely did it. And when he returned from spraying, his clothes smelled horrid and there was always a wheeze in his chest.

'You'll make your lungs even worse by using that spray,' Maman scolded him.

'If I don't use the spray, the fungus will spread and we'll end up with shrivelled grapes.'

Sometimes Kurt would accompany us on the daily tour of the vines – all the summer students were having their mid-course break. It would have been the perfect time to visit Sophie in Paris, but there hadn't been a pink envelope since June, and anyway, Kurt seemed content to stay at the farm.

His exams were only a few weeks away, which meant we were studying every evening – complex issues such as when to use the subjunctive and how to conjugate it. I have to confess that I really didn't understand the subjunctive myself. Fortunately, Kurt had bought an excellent textbook that became the final arbiter in matters of grammar and syntax and supplemented the bulky German-French dictionary he had brought with him.

Our German lessons continued too, whenever there was time. Kurt told me I was clever, but I didn't take that as a compliment. As far as I was concerned, intelligence wasn't an asset in a girl; it was a millstone. Boys didn't like smart girls. I would have much preferred to be pretty, but he never used that word about me. And if he had, it would have been a lie.

Every evening after language lessons, we joined my parents in the *salon* to listen to the crystal radio. Since we didn't have to go to school the next day, Claude and I were

allowed to stay up. My brother played on the floor with his lead soldiers, and I listened intently to the news broadcast, my earpiece transmitting the sounds of Radio-Montpellier. The German banks had reopened, but ordinary families couldn't get hold of their savings, only shopkeepers and businesses. Perhaps Papa was right about keeping his money in a box under the floor.

The other news was that there had been a big meeting in London to solve Germany's money problems. The Seven Powers Conference. The politicians, including our own Laval and Germany's Brüning, had been talking for days, but nobody could come up with a way of fixing things. Back in Germany there were protests in the streets. Hitler's cronies were shouting: *Heil Hitler, and Brüning can go to the devil.*

'This is the situation the Nazis wanted,' Kurt said, removing his earpiece when the news broadcast was over. 'Chaos and disorder. Meanwhile they're becoming more popular every day with their promises of *Arbeit und Brot* – jobs and bread. Hitler wants the people to think of him as the saviour of the *Vaterland*. He might seem like a brash, blustering buffoon who could never possibly reach the top, but he's a clever strategist. As cunning as a rat. And he's someone for whom the truth is irrelevant. That makes him doubly dangerous.'

'You'll be able to help spread that message when you start work at the newspaper,' my father said. '*La vérité finit toujours par se savoir*. The truth will always prevail.'  
'I certainly hope so, sir. The alternative is too horrible to contemplate.'

# CHAPTER 20



*Lorsque les pins disparaîtront, la cité périra.*  
When the pines disappear, the city will perish.

Nostradamus about Montpellier



June, 1943

It's one of those humid summer afternoons in Montpellier when you long for a sea breeze to relieve the heat. Mopping my brow with a handkerchief and flustered that my smooth hairstyle has turned curly in the sticky weather, I rush up the Rue Montel past the Tour des Pins, one of the last vestiges of the city's mediaeval ramparts. Whenever I pass the tower, I glance up to the top where a couple of pine trees have taken root, forming a leafy pinnacle. Pines have been there since the days of Nostradamus who proclaimed: 'If the pines die, Montpellier will perish.' Lately I've been keeping a close eye on those pine trees.

At the corner I cross the Rue Henry V and enter the Jardin des Plantes through the main gates. Once I'm inside the botanic gardens, I have a sense of being in another land, far away from the exigencies of everyday life under the Nazi Occupation. This isn't an orderly place with plants arranged in neat rows; it's wild and unkempt. There's

a sense of peace and freedom which doesn't exist outside its walls. And this afternoon there's not a soul around, not even a gardener.

As I climb down the stone steps leading to our meeting place, I can feel the temperature dropping. Palm trees and ferns fill the sunken garden like a rainforest glade, and an overgrown pathway runs around the perimeter.

'It's another world, isn't it?' says a familiar voice from behind me.

'If only it was,' I reply, turning to see him looking impossibly dashing in the white jacket and knife-pleated black trousers.

I long to rush into his arms, but this is a meeting to discuss Claude's fate so I offer my hand instead. He follows my cue. His skin is cool and dry, while my own is clammy from the heat.

'I have some good news for you,' he says. 'Let's find a seat and I'll tell you about it.'

At the end of the path we spot a stone bench overhung by giant fern fronds. Barely able to contain my excitement, I sit down facing him, my hands clasped in my lap.

'I won't keep you in suspense,' Kurt says. 'I heard back from the OPA this afternoon. They've sent Claude a letter, exempting him under Clause 457. It should arrive tomorrow.'

‘*Dieu merci,*’ I say, my heart soaring. Then I remember that I should be thanking Kurt as well as God. ‘Thank you, Kurt, for keeping our little family intact.’

He leans across and covers my hand with his. ‘I don’t often have the chance to make someone happy. It’s a good feeling.’

He’s staring into my eyes in such a disconcerting way that my heart begins to palpitate wildly.

‘Can you stay for a while?’ he asks.

‘Yes, I told Maman I’d be late for supper. But I shouldn’t stay too long – I need to give them the good news. By the way, what is that clause you mentioned?’

‘457. Other grounds. It covers just about everything, apart from medical reasons and reserved occupations.’

‘I wish I could tell my mother and Claude that you’re the one who’s organised the exemption.’

‘We’ve already discussed this, Camille. You can’t tell them.’

‘I know.’

‘Besides, they don’t even know I’m here in Montpellier.’

‘They couldn’t cope with you being part of the Occupation Force, Kurt.’

‘And *you* can?’

‘Yes, when I’m here alone with you in this garden.’

He smiles at me so tenderly that I want to freeze the moment in time and live in it forever.

‘One day the war will be over and things will be different,’ he says.

‘Do you really believe that?’

‘Of course I do. There will be an unconditional surrender.’

‘So Germany will rule forever,’ I say grimly.

‘No, Camille. The Allies will win – it’s only a matter of time.’

‘Are you actually saying you expect Germany to lose the war?’ I ask incredulously.

‘Do you listen to Radio-Londres?’ he retorts.

I’m about to deny it, but we’ve promised to be honest with each other so I nod my head.

‘In that case, you will know about the Axis forces surrendering in North Africa. And then there’s the catastrophic defeat at Stalingrad.’ He’s speaking in a whisper now, even though there’s nobody else apart from me to hear him.

‘But you’re German. How can you talk about losing?’

‘It’s not something I would say outside this garden, but it’s inevitable now. Not this year, but perhaps the next or the year after.’

‘Do you really think Hitler would surrender?’

‘It’s not in his character to do so. He blamed the General Staff for surrendering in 1918, but eventually he’ll have no other choice, unless the partisans get to him first, or he takes his own life.’

‘What will happen to your father? Will he be safe?’

‘I certainly hope so. I pray that the surrender will take place before Germany is destroyed. First and foremost, my father is a soldier who has made an oath to serve his country. He’s not a Nazi.’

‘And you?’

‘I told you, I’m a translator. I work in an office. I’ve never joined the Party.’

‘But surely there are moral dilemmas in the work that you do. What if you were ordered to translate one of those ordinances which say people will be put to death if they don’t obey the rules, you wouldn’t just go along with it, would you? You used to talk about being true to yourself and your beliefs. You said it wouldn’t be an easy path but you had to try.’

‘Do *you* remember *everything*?’ he says with a frustrated sigh. ‘I don’t need you to act as my conscience, Camille. I have one myself. And to answer your question, yes, I’d have to translate that document into French or I’d be court-martialled or worse. And can you imagine the repercussions for my father?’

I peep up at his face, realising my words have hit a nerve. ‘I’m not criticising you, Kurt. I have no doubt that you’re a good man caught up in a bad situation.’

‘If only it were that simple, Camille.’

‘Tell me about it then.’

‘You’re expected home for dinner.’

‘Not for a while yet.’

His eyes fix on mine. The creases at the corners look deeper; then again, it might be a trick of the light.

After a while he says, ‘In spite of everything, you still see me as a cowboy in a white hat, don’t you? Or a knight in shining armour. A hero who’s come to save the day.’

‘But you did save the day. You saved Claude.’

‘But I couldn’t save the others,’ Kurt says almost to himself.

‘What others?’ I ask.

He looks startled at my question, as though he's forgotten for a moment that I'm sitting right beside him. 'It was a long time ago, Camille – more than ten years – but the memory is always with me. Nothing was the same afterwards.'

As I consider his words, I grasp his hand, turning it over and running my fingers over the lines on his palm as though they might reveal his past.

'If we are to be friends, Kurt,' I begin, 'or *more* than friends, one day you'll need to confide in me about what happened. Right now you're like a book with a crucial chapter missing.'

'Ever the librarian,' he says with a wan smile. 'To tell you the truth, I don't know where to begin. I've never told anyone before. Not even my parents. They knew the basics but not . . . It's a harrowing story, Camille. And I don't come out of it very well at all.'

'Let me be the judge of that.'

He draws a deep breath. 'Well, after I left Montpellier that September, I went back to Munich and began my cadetship at the *Münchener Post*. As you'll no doubt remember from my conversations with your father, the paper was renowned for its opposition to Hitler. Not long after I started work there, something really dramatic

happened – Hitler’s twenty-three-year-old half-niece was found dead from a gunshot wound to the chest. There was a gun in her hand – a pistol that belonged to Hitler. The niece was living in his fancy flat in Munich and their relationship was ambiguous, to say the least. Her death was ruled a suicide, but the *Post* revealed there had been a series of arguments between Hitler and his niece, triggered by her desire to move back to Vienna and marry a suitor there. The paper asked its readers: if she shot herself, why was her nose broken? As you can imagine, Hitler was incensed by our story. For a while it looked as though his political career was over. But he’s always been a Lazarus re-emerging just when you thought he was gone for good. He and his Nazi Party threatened legal action which ended our investigation.

‘Then, in December of ’31 the *Post* published leaked documents about Hitler’s plans for the Jewish population of Germany – removing Jews from the civil service and other professions, prohibiting marriage with Christians, and even expelling them from the country. It was such a huge story it was picked up by the *New York Times*. But people just couldn’t believe that something so appalling could ever happen and the story disappeared into obscurity.



‘At the beginning of ’33, Hitler became Chancellor in a deal none of us saw coming, and that was the beginning of the end for all those who opposed his policies – the trade unions, the Socialists, the Communists and the free press, especially the *Post*. At the start of March, Hitler issued an order banning publications that he considered “a threat to public order”, but we continued to operate in defiance of the decree. A few days later – it was Thursday March 9 – my boss sent me out to do an interview with a local official and when I came back . . .’

As his voice breaks off, I squeeze his hand. ‘You don’t have to tell me, not if it’s too difficult.’

‘It’s just that I’ve never told anyone before . . . It was the worst day of my life.’

Gently I stroke his hand and begin to wonder whether I really want to hear what’s coming next. He swallows hard and continues.

‘When I came back to our street, I could see policemen milling around and I was overcome by a feeling of dread. Then I saw broken glass and upturned desks and chairs on the street. There were broken typewriters and papers strewn everywhere. Stormtroopers were running in and out of the building, carrying folders and paperwork and dumping them on the pavement. Meanwhile the police just stood there

and watched. A shopkeeper I knew from across the street took me aside. “Don’t go in there,” he said. I just ignored him and started across the road, but he and another man pulled me back. “There’s no-one left from the newspaper. They dragged everyone away,” he said. So I went over to one of the policemen and asked where the journalists had been taken and he said, ‘Why do you want to know? Are you one of them?’ And like Peter denying Christ, I said ‘Of course not.’ Then the Brownshirts started setting the building alight. “Get out of here,” the shopkeeper said, “before they take you away too.”

‘And do you know what I did, Camille? I started to run and didn’t stop until I crossed the Isar River.’ His face is deathly pale.

‘There was nothing else you could do, Kurt. If you’d tried to go into the building they would have taken you too. What good would that have done anyone?’

‘At least I would have been with my colleagues.’

‘What happened to them?’ I ask tremulously.

‘We heard they were taken to prison – editors, journalists, photographers. Nobody knew where. They simply disappeared, never to be seen again.’

‘Darkness and death,’ I whisper, remembering Anna’s words.

‘Yes, that’s exactly what it was,’ he says. ‘And families left to grieve, not even knowing what had happened to their loved ones.’

‘If you hadn’t been away doing that interview, they might have made you disappear too,’ I say, my chest aching at the thought. ‘But you survived for a reason, Kurt Müller. You weren’t meant to be in the office that day.’

‘I should have been with them.’

‘Listen to me,’ I reply, gripping the white cotton fabric of his jacket and feeling the strong shoulders beneath, ‘you’re alive for a purpose. Someone needs to record what happened. Someone has to write the story of the *Munich Post*, how they opposed the Nazis, and broke important stories and fought for the truth. One day, when this war is over, you’ll be the one to memorialise the newspaper and the people who worked there.’

A long silence follows, broken only by the chirping of a sparrow among the ferns. Finally, he speaks, ‘Perhaps you’re right. I’ve never thought about it that way. I was too lost in my own guilt and grief.’ Tears shimmer in his eyes. ‘But I’ll never stop feeling guilty that I survived.’

He puts his arm around me and I rest my head against his shoulder and we sit still and silent for a long time, so long that I hear the cathedral bells chiming seven.

‘You should go,’ Kurt says. ‘Where’s your bicycle?’

‘At the library.’

‘I’ll walk you back there.’

I smile at him. ‘You know I can’t be seen with you.’

‘Will you meet me here tomorrow afternoon then?’

‘Yes.’

‘Good.’ He reaches forward and pushes a stray curl behind my ear. ‘Your hair is pretty like this. So much more becoming than the bun.’

‘*Chignon*,’ I correct him.

He smiles and repeats the word. ‘I don’t know much about ladies’ hairstyles, only what I like.’ He winds a strand of my hair around his fingers. ‘At least let me walk you to the gate. There’s no-one around.’

Hand in hand we follow the path through the sunken garden and up the steps, leaving the cool rainforest behind. The air is hot and muggy; it feels like a summer storm is brewing. Just before the main gates we stop to say goodbye. I know he’s only

told me part of the story and that there's more to come. I can't fathom how a man whose colleagues were murdered by the Nazis could possibly have chosen to join the *Wehrmacht*. Not under Hitler. But for now I need to put those thoughts aside. I have happy news for my family, thanks to Kurt.

Above us the moon is rising in the twilight sky.

May I kiss you?' he asks in a whisper.

'You may,' I reply huskily.

As his lips graze mine, I tremble not out of fear, but from a sense of anticipation that has been building for what seems like forever. Then his mouth is over mine, gently at first and then more insistent. All at once, my head is empty of everything – doubts, scruples, even common sense, are swept away by the rush of reckless pleasure that is taking possession of me. Suddenly he pulls away and cups my face in his hands the way he did in the cinema.

'Go home now, Camille, while I have the strength to let you leave.'

We kiss gently one more time, then I walk through the gates and cross the street. At the other side I turn to wave to him. He's standing motionless under the archway that marks the entrance. A sad and solitary figure. In many ways, the man I thought I knew

so well, the one who has monopolised my daydreams for so long, has turned out to be an enigma.



It's almost eight when I arrive home, but still light. A perfect summer evening in the hills, refreshingly removed from the humidity of Montpellier. When Babette runs to greet me, I ruffle her curly coat in return.

'I have good news, Babette,' I tell her. 'We won't be losing Claude after all. He'll be able to stay.'

She follows me through the door into the kitchen. Where's my mother, I wonder. The table is empty, there are no plates stacked next to the sink. No indications that a meal has been made, let alone consumed. I feel a momentary twinge of fear. Then I peer into the hallway, only to see a light glowing in the *salon*.

'Maman!' I call, 'I'm home.'

No reply. With Babette trailing behind me, I enter the room. My mother is lying on the sofa with her head buried in a cushion. Her best velvet cushion, the one we're never

allowed to touch. Babette's ears prick up. There's a sound I can only describe as keening.

'Maman,' I say, rushing over to her, kneeling on the floor and putting my hand on her shoulder. 'Are you ill?'

Her head shakes ever so slightly but her face remains hidden.

'Where's Claude?' I ask, assuming he's out setting traps, which is something he often does at twilight. But why isn't Babette with him? He never goes alone.

'Please tell me what's wrong, Maman. You're making me scared. It wasn't the Germans, was it?'

'No,' she mumbles into the cushion.

'Maman, please don't cry. I've brought you good news about Claude. I've heard from the OPA. They're exempting him. We'll receive an official letter tomorrow.'

Then she raises her head a little. 'But he's gone.'

'What do you mean he's gone?'

'I went to the village to buy some bread with my ration stamps and when I came back, he wasn't here. Then I found the note on the kitchen table.'

'Note?'

She unclasps her hand, revealing a damp, crumpled piece of paper.

As I smooth out the note, I can see it's definitely Claude's handwriting – the letters are big and uneven like a child's. The ink has blurred from my mother's tears but I can still read it.

*Chère Maman,*

*Marius and I have decided to go underground. I can't tell you where we'll be, except that it's not as far away as you would think. If you ever need me, tell the Doctor. Please say goodbye to Camille for me and tell her to be careful.*

*Don't worry about us.*

*All my love,*

*Claude*

*P.S. Burn this letter.*

My heart is pumping so fast I'm afraid it will break through my chest wall. I can't quite believe it's true. I drop the note on the sofa and run upstairs to the attic where I push the chest of drawers aside and open the door into the roof alcove. I have to get down



on my knees to look inside. Yes, the radio is gone. That means Claude has too. I put everything back in place, go downstairs and check my mother. She's sitting up and staring at the sheet of paper.

'We need to burn it, Maman. It implicates the doctor.'

Wordlessly she hands me the note and I place it in my pocket.

'I'll make you a cup of coffee. That will calm your nerves.'

As I fill a kettle and put it on the wood stove to boil, I'm aware of the letter in my pocket. For a short note it's full of subtext. Who would have thought the mild-mannered doctor would be a messenger for the *Maquis*? And why would Claude want me to be careful, unless he suspects something between Kurt and me?

I make my mother's coffee extra strong – two teaspoons of the chicory and roasted barley mix, plus a generous spoon of honey, and deliver it to her. Then I take an oil lamp and go to the entrance of the old wine cellar where I move the vines away so that I can open the door. It's obvious someone else has been there before me, doing the same thing – the honeysuckle looks as though it's been trodden on, the crushed flowers giving off a pungent perfume that fills the twilight air. I climb the steps to the bottom and go straight to the back where it's so dark I can barely see. Holding the oil

lamp aloft, I check the hiding place. Both shotguns are gone – Papa’s and Claude’s. If only he’d waited, I could have told him he was exempt and there was no need to go into hiding. Sighing loudly with frustration, I climb the cellar stairs, secure the door and rearrange the vines carefully.

Taking a match and holding the note by one corner, I set it alight and watch the paper twist and curl as it turns to ash. If I’d arrived home a little earlier, perhaps I could have caught Claude before he left. But a voice inside myself is saying:

*Don’t fool yourself, Camille. He wasn’t interested in an exemption. He was intending to join the Resistance anyway. It was only a matter of time.*

# CHAPTER 21



*La vie est remplie de petits bonheurs.*

Life is full of little joys.

Old saying

## End of summer, 1931

It was finally harvest time. But that meant Kurt would be leaving soon. I found the prospect almost too unbearable to contemplate so I comforted myself with daydreams of us meeting again in the future.

*The setting is Paris. I am eighteen and an actress; he is a reporter working as the Paris correspondent for an important German newspaper. I'm not sure how we'll meet, but it has to be by chance. Chance meetings are so romantic. Perhaps he'll come to see the play I'm appearing in and fall for the leading actress, not realising she's actually Camille Dupré until he looks in the programme. Or we'll each attend a glamorous soirée and our eyes will meet across a grand salon. He'll be dressed in a white tuxedo, his blond hair combed back except for a single lock falling over his forehead.*

*'Who is that beautiful girl standing by the fireplace?' he'll ask the host.*

*‘That’s the actress, Camille Dupré. She’s the toast of Paris.’*

*‘Really? I used to know a Camille Dupré, but she was short and fat with freckles and frizzy hair.’*

Cut! That doesn’t work at all. The good thing about daydreams is that you can edit them like movies. So I try again:

*‘Really? I used to know a Camille Dupré – I’ve never forgotten her. Would you introduce me?’*

*Meanwhile I pretend not to have seen the tall figure in the white suit, but all the while I’m observing him from under my eyelashes. My slinky lamé gown is shimmering in the candlelight, my hair is falling in smooth golden waves to my shoulders, and my skin is as smooth and pale as bisque porcelain – not a single freckle, even on my arms.*

*He’s coming closer now; I can barely breathe.*

*‘Mademoiselle Dupré, may I introduce Monsieur Kurt Müller.’*

*I extend my gloved hand languidly.*

*‘We are already acquainted,’ I say in a low, breathy voice, locking eyes with him.*



There was plenty of time for daydreaming when you were harvesting grapes by hand. It was monotonous work. Papa had brought in labourers from surrounding farms and, along with Lucien, Marius and Kurt, we were all picking the fruit and filling baskets, which were then tipped into large wicker *comportes* and loaded onto a cart. Each time it was full, Bisou would haul the cart back to the barn where Papa was supervising the wine press. It was a very old contraption, dating back to my great grandfather's day, but my father claimed it worked better than the newfangled motorised models. Besides, we had no electricity to run one of those.

At noon each day, everyone stopped to eat lunch at a long table my mother and Tatie Margot had set up under the walnut trees. Marius took delight in shaking the branches vigorously, causing the nuts to fall on the assembled diners. He and Claude thought it was a great joke until the day Maman ordered the boys to pick up every single one.

'Waste not, want not,' she reminded a chastened Marius. 'I need them to make my pickled walnuts.'

I could barely conceal a giggle at the sight of Marius and Claude scrambling around on the ground, trying to collect the fallen nuts.



One afternoon during the grape-picking, Maman appeared among the vines with a couple of letters for Kurt – a large white envelope, and a small blue one. Even from a metre away I could recognise the writing on the latter – it was from his father, the colonel.

‘This one looks official,’ my mother said, pointing to the name *Université de Montpellier* on the white envelope and handing it to Kurt.

‘*Merci, madame.* It’s probably my exam results.’

‘Aren’t you going to open it?’ I demanded.

‘Later,’ he replied casually.

‘But I can’t bear the suspense,’ I said.

‘*Tout vient à point à qui sait attendre.*’ Everything comes to those who wait.

‘That’s not fair – I taught you that phrase.’

Kurt started to laugh. ‘All right, *Fräulein Schnüffelnase*, you open the letter. But only if your hands are cleaner than mine.’ He held up his palms, stained brown with grape juice.

I examined my own hands – they were as dirty as his.

‘Maman,’ I said, ‘could you open it?’

‘Do you mind?’ she asked Kurt.

‘Not at all, *madame*. But if the results are bad, please break the news gently.’

‘What would happen if they’re bad?’ I asked.

‘I would have to stay behind for a week and do supplementary exams. Otherwise I wouldn’t receive my diploma and my father would be extremely disappointed.’

For a moment the thought crossed my mind that if he failed, we would have him for an extra week. Instantly I chided myself for being selfish and mean-spirited. I wanted him to succeed, even if it meant I would lose those extra seven days with him.

My mother was opening the envelope carefully so as not to tear it but it seemed as though she was working in slow motion. Finally, she removed a sheet of parchment and began to read aloud.



UNIVERSITY OF MONTPELLIER

This is to certify that

*Kurt Josef Müller*  
*of Munich, Bavaria*

has completed the

Diploma in French for Foreigners

with High Distinction

28<sup>th</sup> August, 1931

‘There’s a seal too,’ my mother said, turning the certificate around for us all to see the embossed circle of wax. For some reason it was the seal that attracted the most attention – everyone wanted to examine it up close, as though it had come from royalty.

‘Congratulations, Kurt,’ my father said, shaking his hand vigorously. ‘You’re the very first of our lodgers to earn a High Distinction. To tell you the truth, a few of them didn’t even receive a diploma.’

‘I have Camille to thank for that, sir. She helped me with my French idioms. That made the difference in the essay-writing,’ he said.

I couldn’t stop smiling. Maybe it wasn’t so bad being smart, after all.



At the end of the day there was a picnic supper of cheese, bread and wine. Everyone stretched out on the grass. Even Marius seemed tired. Kurt opened the letter from his father and read it slowly. Afterwards he was silent for a long time.

‘Is anything wrong at home?’ I asked, hoping he wouldn’t think I was a *Schnüffelnase*.

‘No, everyone is fine, thank you, including Kaiser. My mother enclosed this article from the *Munich Post*,’ he said, passing it to my father.

‘Your mother reads the *Munich Post*?’ my father asked in surprise.

‘Yes, she’s a bit of rebel.’

Papa donned his glasses and proceeded to read the newspaper clipping. He seemed lost in the text, shaking his head vigorously from time to time. After a while he said, ‘*Mon Dieu*, a secret death squad within the Nazi Party! What are they up to? Culling their own membership as though they’re rabbits? How can these kind of things happen in a modern democracy?’

‘Hitler flaunts the law and lies about it,’ Kurt replied. ‘He thinks he can get away with anything. And the more he succeeds, the more it encourages him to commit even worse offences.’

I placed my hands over my ears – all their talk about Hitler was making me scared.

‘We shouldn’t talk about these things in front of Camille,’ my father said in Kurt’s direction. ‘She takes it all in.’

‘I’m sorry, Camille,’ Kurt said. ‘I didn’t mean to frighten you.’

‘I’m not afraid of that bogeyman, Hitler,’ I lied.

‘Enough talk about bogeymen,’ my father said. ‘There are so many good things in the world to celebrate. What are your favourite things, Camille?’

I pondered the question for a long time before answering: ‘Books, dogs, movies, lavender, pink grapes, chocolate ice-cream, church bells, butterflies, barn owls . . .’

As my voice trailed off, Papa said, ‘You see, Camille, life is full of little joys. Always remember that.’

# CHAPTER 22



*Pour garder un secret, il faut ne rien dire.*  
The only way to keep a secret is to say nothing.

Old proverb

June, 1943

On Wednesday morning I'm reluctant to leave my mother alone but I really have to go to work. I am about to hop on my bicycle, when Lucien rides into the courtyard on his old brown mare. Just the sight of him is a comfort – he reminds me so much of my father.

As he climbs off his horse, gingerly stretching his bad leg, I rush over to him and press myself against his chest. His *gilet* smells of leather and pipe smoke, just like Papa's.

'I can't believe they've gone,' I whisper.

'I know. How is your mother? Did she have a chance to say goodbye to him?'

'No, he left while she was away shopping in the village.'

'Oh dear.'

'She's in the kitchen. I just made her a pot of coffee.'

‘You go off to work, Camille. I’ll look after Louise.’

‘Thank you, Lucien. I’ve done most of the morning chores – milked the cows and fed the chickens, but Babette won’t eat her breakfast.’

‘I’ll try to coax her to eat. Animals can sense these things.’

‘Have you told Sophie and Denise?’

‘Not yet. I’ll telephone them from the village, but not today. I’m not up to it yet.’

‘I heard from the OPA yesterday afternoon. They’ve granted Claude an exemption. The official letter will be here today.’

‘Did Claude know?’

‘He’d already left when I arrived home with the news.’

‘You did all you could, Camille, but nothing would have changed his mind. Those boys made their decision the day those draft letters arrived, perhaps even earlier. To tell you the truth, if I were a young single man, I might have done the same.’

‘Do you think they’ll be all right?’

‘They’ve grown up in the countryside, they know how to look after themselves, they’re both fine shooters. The odds are in their favour. Now, off you go, or you’ll be in trouble with that dragon of a librarian your mother tells me about.’

‘She isn’t really a dragon – she’s just expects everyone to work as hard as she does. By the way, could you remind Maman that I have to stay back for an hour today? I don’t want her to worry.’

‘Of course,’ he says. ‘She has enough to worry about, without thinking you’ve been snatched by the *Boche*.’



Not long before opening time, Anna calls me into her office.

‘Shut the door behind you, Camille, and take a seat.’ Whenever Anna says ‘Shut the door’, I know it’s going to be serious.

‘I’ve been wondering about the situation with your brother?’ she says. ‘Isn’t tomorrow the day he’s supposed to report to the authorities?’

I hesitate for a moment before answering but have no reason not to tell the truth. ‘He’s gone underground. He left yesterday with his best friend.’

‘No! Your mother must be distraught.’

‘She hasn’t stopped crying, and my mother rarely cries.’

‘I’m sorry, Camille.’



‘It was inevitable, I suppose. I just hope he makes it through the War. I couldn’t bear for anything to happen to him.’

‘All we can do is pray for his safety.’ She rearranges her glasses. ‘I realise this isn’t a good time, but I need to ask a favour.’

‘Anything.’

‘You may regret saying that when I explain what I need you to do. But first, I have to ask you to keep everything I tell you to yourself.’

‘Of course.’

‘That’s for your sake as well as mine, Camille. I don’t want anything happening to you on my account.’

At this point I’m completely confused and not a little worried.

‘Did you think it was odd when I turned up in Montpellier and applied for Madame Martin’s job?’

‘Not really. I knew you’d had to leave Paris in a hurry, like everyone else who was heading south to escape the Germans.’ I’m not sure where this is leading.

‘And did you ever wonder why I didn’t have written qualifications?’

‘No, people left things behind in the panic. Besides, I was present at the interviews. You were undoubtedly the best candidate and you’ve always been outstanding at your job. Are you telling me that you’re not actually qualified to be a librarian?’

‘No, I do have qualifications. I destroyed the certificates when I left Paris.’

‘But why?’

‘They were in my real name.’

‘Your *real* name?’ I ask uneasily.

‘I’m not Anna Moreau. My name is Anna Abraham.’

As I repeat the surname in my head, it starts to dawn on me. ‘Are you Jewish?’

She nods slowly and fixes her brown eyes on me.

‘It’s just that you don’t look . . .’ I stop myself.

‘I don’t look Jewish? Because I don’t have a hooked nose?’

‘I didn’t mean . . . I don’t know many Jewish people. We did have a Jewish student staying with us once.’

‘I’m not offended, Camille. I know you’re a fair-thinking person and that you hate the Nazi policies as much as I do.’

Anna’s revelations have left me feeling painfully naïve or just ill-informed.

‘I can’t believe that I never considered you might be Jewish,’ I tell her. ‘How stupid of me.’

‘You’re not stupid, Camille. Quite the contrary. You’re a smart young woman. That’s why I’ve felt reassured by the very fact that *you* didn’t seem to have worked it out. To my knowledge, nobody else has either. Not even that canny old Léo.’

‘So, how did Anna Abraham become Anna Moreau?’

‘Forged papers. I had to choose a family name and at the time I was reading *The Island of Doctor Moreau* – you know, the H. G. Wells novel.’

‘A banned author,’ I say with a smile, ‘that’s ironic.’

Anna smiles too, but it’s a nervous, forced kind of smile.

‘How did you get the false papers organised in all the chaos of people leaving?’ I ask.

‘I didn’t. I had it all done a month or two before the invasion. Just in case. I never believed in the power of the Maginot Line to protect us. And I suspected that once the Germans conquered France – and that seemed the mostly likely outcome, considering their *Blitzkrieg* in Poland – the French Jews would fall victim to their anti-Semitism. I have a cousin who used to live in Germany. She would write to me about what was happening there in the ’30s. It was frightening. The Nuremberg Laws. *Krystallnacht*.

. . I probably should have left Paris sooner, but I had a job I loved and didn't want to lose it. Then again, if I'd stayed much longer, I might have been rounded up like so many Jews in Paris and sent to a camp somewhere. So I've been hiding here in plain sight for three years.'

'Can't you just remain that way? I won't tell anyone.'

'I know. But the problem is that I've heard the SS and their new toadies, the *Milice*, are searching for Jews who aren't accounted for. I went missing in June 1940. They have my first name, my age, my profession. How hard would it be for them to track me down? I've gotten away with forged papers so far, but those documents wouldn't stand scrutiny from the SS.' She lowers her voice to a whisper.

'What happened to your cousin?' I ask, dreading the answer.

'She and her family left Germany in '38. Her husband was in the film industry in Berlin but things became difficult for him, so they went to America. Now they live in Los Angeles and he works in Hollywood. It's full of Jewish exiles.'

'And you're going to try to get to America?'

'You think I'm crazy, don't you?'

‘Not in the least. You can’t stay here if they’re checking the records – I know how meticulous they are about things like that. But how do you plan to get out of France? Nobody can go anywhere these days without a travel permit. If you applied for one, wouldn’t you be drawing attention to yourself?’

‘I’m not going to apply, Camille. I have contacts – Jewish *résistants*. Yes, they do exist – in fact, there’s a whole band of them. Some have lived here all their lives but most are exiles who’ve come from other parts of the country, shocked by the Vel d’Hiv roundup last year and hoping that they’d be safe in the South. Then, of course, last November the Germans moved in, and there was nowhere to go.’

A Jewish Resistance? Is it part of the Maquis, or a separate entity altogether? And how did Anna make contact with them? There’s so much I’d like to ask her but this isn’t the time.

‘They can get me out through Spain,’ she continues, ‘and then I’ll travel on to Lisbon and try to obtain a passage to America. Montpellier really isn’t far from the Spanish border – even if I have to walk part of the way. But I’ll need a head start. Nobody can know I’ve gone, not for a few days. Will you help me with that? I’ll understand if you

think it's too dangerous. Or if you feel you have too much to deal with already with your brother and the OPA.'

'Don't worry about my brother,' I say, attempting to sound positive. 'Of course, I'll help you. When will this happen?'

'Tomorrow afternoon.'

'That soon!' I say, trying in vain to control the panic in my voice.

'Yes, I'm packed and ready to go. I'll come to work as usual tomorrow but at two o'clock there will be a phone call. I'll gather the three of you together and tell you I've just heard from my mother's doctor that she's been taken ill and I need to go to Lyon immediately to be with her. I'll say I'm hoping to be back for work some time on Monday, once I organise for my sister to come and take over. Then I'll write the phone number in Lyon on a piece of paper and give it you – in front of the other two.'

'But you're not going to Lyon.'

'That's right. And the number doesn't exist – an operator wouldn't be able to connect to it. That's why you mustn't let the others have it, not until Monday afternoon. At that point I want you to call Léo and Fleurette into the office and, in their presence, make a phone call to the municipal authorities, telling them I went to Lyon

on Thursday to look after my sick mother and that I said I would be back on Monday, all being well. Say you're worried that you can't get through to me on the telephone number I gave you. If they ask for the address in Lyon, tell them I only gave you the phone number and that you don't know the address. They may ask you to ring them in the morning if I still haven't turned up and then they might refer it to the police. But God willing, I'll be in Barcelona by then. And you won't be in any trouble because you did the right thing by letting them know the situation as soon as I didn't report for work. Furthermore, Léo and Fleurette can corroborate your story.'

'I could delay the phone call till Tuesday if you need the extra time.'

'No, I don't want you to do anything that might draw suspicion to yourself. The world we live in nowadays is full of *mouches*, informing on their neighbours and denouncing their colleagues.' She lowers her voice. 'They're everywhere, writing their poison pen letters. If anyone even suspected you had helped me, you'd be in serious trouble. Don't give them any basis for thinking that. Promise me you'll phone Monday afternoon.'

'I promise. By the way, does your mother really live in Lyon?'

'My mother died years ago.'

‘And your sister?’

‘I don’t have one. My cousin and her family are all I have left.’

‘And they’re in America,’ I say. ‘It’s a clever plan, Anna.’

‘I hope so. The police will probably turn up here at some stage and question the three of you. Just stick to the story.’

‘Don’t worry. When I was younger I wanted to be an actress. I’ll be convincing.’

She gives me a smile. ‘I didn’t know that about you, Camille.’

‘I don’t suppose it was ever a realistic prospect, just a dream.’

‘It is our dreams that sustain us, particularly in times like these,’ she says with a sigh. ‘There’s one slight complication. I have a cat. Her name is George Sand. George for short.’

‘Named after Chopin’s mistress?’

‘That’s right. I can’t take her with me. Would *you* be prepared to adopt her?’ There is a glint in Anna’s eyes, a hint of tears.

‘Of course I would. I’ll take good care of George. She’ll be part of our family.’

‘Would your mother mind?’

‘We have a menagerie already. One more won’t make a difference.’



‘You mustn’t tell her the cat is mine.’

‘I’ll just say I found a stray and brought it home. My mother loves animals – she would never turn a cat away. Would you like me to take George back to the farm after work tomorrow?’

‘Yes, I’ll be gone by then and she’s used to company at night. I wouldn’t want her to be on her own. I’ll leave the cat basket in the kitchen.’

‘Good. I’ll cycle home slowly so as not to scare her. Is there anything in particular she likes to eat?’

‘Whatever you can spare. Ever since rationing she’s become used to scraps.’

‘I’ll keep her inside. At least until she gets to know us. Having been an indoor cat, she might be afraid of the outdoors.’

‘I’m so glad you’re going to take her, Camille. To tell you the truth, her fate has been my biggest worry. I’d better give you the address. It’s number 1, 40 Rue du Platane.’

I repeat it after her, consigning it to memory. Then she hands me a set of keys.

‘It’s the only garden apartment in the block,’ she continues. ‘The entry is via the lane at the side. Allée de la Friperie. There’s a stone wall with a locked gate that opens into my courtyard garden. It’s painted green – you can’t miss it. That’s what the little key

is for. My apartment is the only one with access from the lane. The other tenants enter the building through the front so it's unlikely you'll run into anyone.'

'What about people in the upper floors being able to see into your garden?'

'There aren't any windows on that side – it's completely private.'

As she pauses for a moment to catch her breath I wonder if the enormity of this decision is starting to hit home.

'Don't let anyone know you have the keys – it involves you more than is necessary. If the police eventually want to check the apartment, they can get a key from the landlord – he lives in the building.'

The thought of the police going through her apartment makes me shiver.

'By the way, I've paid the next month's rent on the apartment – I didn't want to raise any suspicions. And one more thing, Camille, if I was in a position to recommend to the municipal authorities that you take over permanently as chief librarian, I'd do it. But, of course, to all intents and purposes, I'll be back next Monday. However, I do hope that when the position is advertised, you will apply for it.'

'That's very kind of you, Anna, but for now my job prospects are the last thing on my mind. All I can think about is you escaping the country safely.'

She smiles at me. ‘I suppose I’ve been rather strict with you at times, but it was for your own good. I wish we had got to know each other better.’

‘Me too.’

‘Oh, and since I won’t be here to fob off that German major if he turns up again, just remember what I told you. He definitely had his eye on you. You should have seen the look on his face the day he came to return *Le grand Meaulnes* and you weren’t at the desk. Utter disappointment. If he realises I’m not around, he might try again. Promise me you won’t be tempted by the smart uniform and good looks.’

‘I promise,’ I say, hating myself for lying to her. ‘Is there anything else you need me to do?’

‘No, you’re doing more than enough already, I can’t tell you how grateful I am. Now you’d better get back to work. We need to open the doors. Oh, and remember, just act normally.’

Normally? What’s normal nowadays? Nothing is normal; the world is eerie and off-centre as if it’s been knocked from its orbit. Claude and Marius are gone. Anna is leaving. And then there are the secret meetings with Kurt – exhilarating, yet imbued

with guilt and foreboding. Suddenly it all becomes overwhelming, and tears are spilling down my cheeks.

‘Don’t cry,’ Anna says firmly. ‘Here.’ She offers me her linen handkerchief. ‘Now dry your eyes and let’s get back to work.’

‘Write to me when you’re safely in America,’ I say, trying to sound confident that she’ll make it, when I’m feeling just the opposite. ‘And thank you for placing your trust in me. I won’t let you down.’

Act normally, I tell myself as I walk to the front of the library and unlock the doors. A few blocks away the cathedral bells are tolling nine o’clock.

# CHAPTER 23



*Tout se découvre avec le temps.*  
Everything is revealed with time.

Old proverb

## End of summer, 1931

Every year, the end of the grape harvest at Domaine St-Jean-de-Rivière was marked by a celebration. While Papa and Lucien were finishing the task of transferring the wine into oak barrels, Maman and Tatie Margot were transforming our olive grove into a fairyland with paper lanterns hanging from the trees and a huge trestle table loaded with food and wine. I had never seen such a feast – they must have been cooking for days. There was a pork terrine decorated with cornichons, rabbit *rillettes*, roast chicken strewn with herbs, confit of duck with wild mushrooms, potatoes cooked in duck fat, a caramelised apple tart, honey and walnut cakes and – I’m sure Maman had made this last item just for me – a *gâteau au chocolat* topped with raspberries and cream.

Everyone had scrubbed their hands clean of grape juice stains and donned their best clothes. I changed into the new cotton dress Tatie Margot had made for me to wear for special occasions. She’d copied the design from a photograph of one worn by

Lilibet, the English princess. With its little puff sleeves, high waist and knee-length hem, it was perfect for a five-year-old but not for someone who would be twelve in six months' time. I had made a point of thanking my *tatie* most graciously but I felt as though I was wearing something I had grown out of.

As the moon rose over the olive grove, my eyes scanned the gathering for Kurt. Where was he? After a while I spotted him coming out of the farmhouse, wearing a crisp white shirt and black trousers, with a red *bavoir foulard* around his neck and a new black leather *gilet* he must have bought in Montpellier. If he'd been wearing a white cowboy hat, he would have been a double for Gary Cooper in *The Virginian*. My heart was aflutter as he strode towards me.

'*Bonsoir*, little one,' he said, patting me on the head.

Being called a 'little one' was more deflating than being dubbed a 'character'.

'*Bonsoir*,' I replied grumpily.

'What's wrong with my little Camille?' he asked jovially.

'Will you stop calling me "little"! I said and marched off in a huff towards my mother. As I did so, I replayed his words in my head – he had referred to me as *his* Camille. Is that how he saw me? In my daydreams he was definitely *my* Kurt. Perhaps

I had overreacted, though it was too late now to go back and smooth things over. Besides, it would have seemed like grovelling and I refused to grovel to anyone, even Kurt Müller.

In the background Claude and Marius were tossing olives at each other and hitting guests in the process, until Papa made them stop.

‘You’ll put someone’s eye out if you’re not careful,’ my father scolded. ‘And don’t you dare smirk when you’re being reprimanded, Marius Bernard. You’re lucky your father has gone back home to collect the surprise he’s promised us or you would be in serious trouble.’

‘I bet he’s bringing fireworks like the ones we had on Bastille Day,’ Claude said.

But Papa was certain his friend had gone home to fetch his guitar. After a glass or two of wine Lucien could be quite the balladeer. In the Middle Ages he would have made a fine troubadour, touring the south and singing about knights and fair damsels, chivalry and courtly love.

I had just finished eating a plate of food when I noticed everyone rushing towards the laneway. As I followed in their wake, I could make out a horse and cart approaching at a slow trot. Even if the moon hadn’t been shining, I would have



recognised the driver instantly. Beside Lucien there was a woman with wavy hair. All at once, the nature of the surprise dawned on me. It was neither fireworks nor music, but the unexpected homecoming of Sophie Bernard – Lucien must have collected her from the railway station.

I suppose I should have been excited to see Sophie, but instead I felt desperately disappointed and just a little angry. The timing couldn't have been worse. I only had a few days left with Kurt, and now *she* had turned up to monopolise him. I searched the crowd gathered around the cart for a figure in a white shirt but at least he hadn't rushed to greet her. He was still in the olive grove, not far from me. Please God, let him remember how she treated him. Don't let him fall for her charms all over again.

Like Cinderella arriving at the ball, Sophie alighted daintily from the cart. Her mother rushed forward to envelope her in an embrace. Slowly she made her way through the throng of well-wishers, arm in arm with Tatie Margot, pausing now and then to speak to a friend, grasp a hand or plant kisses on cheeks. She might have been a princess greeting her courtiers. All at once, she spotted Marius, rushed over to him and gave him a hug from which he quickly extricated himself. Although I held back in the shadows, she noticed me anyway.

‘Darling little Camille, how sweet you look!’ she said, kissing my cheeks, one by one. ‘Welcome back, Sophie,’ I said politely.

She seemed oblivious to my coolness. Perhaps it was because she had other things on her mind, having just caught sight of Kurt, leaning against the gnarled trunk of an olive tree. Was he waiting for her to come to him, or was he pretending not to care? Either way, she couldn’t possibly have missed him in that white shirt.

‘Excuse me,’ she said to nobody in particular and meandered over to Kurt, who seemed engrossed in scraping loose bark from the trunk. I watched him look up as she came close. There was no embrace, no touching at all. I was too far away to hear their conversation but I hoped he was berating her for not bothering to write. After a few minutes they walked towards the buffet table. Then I saw him pour her a glass of wine and my heart sank.

Sophie Bernard could have had any man she wanted, even her rich boss in Paris. Why couldn’t she just leave Kurt Müller alone?



Having waited till last to ensure that everyone else had helped themselves to a full plate, my mother and Tatie Margot were now seated on metal garden chairs, eating their supper, while I curled up on the grass beside them, trying to forget that Kurt and Sophie had disappeared into the olive grove. As usual, when Maman and Margot were engrossed in conversation, they were oblivious to my presence, or if they noticed, they simply assumed that adult discussions would pass right over my childish head.

‘What a lovely surprise to have Sophie home,’ my mother said.

‘I couldn’t believe my eyes, Louise. I didn’t expect to see her till Christmas. But apparently she sent her father a letter and made him promise not to say anything.’

‘How long is she staying?’

‘Just a few days.’

‘It’s a long way for such a short visit.’

‘Yes, it is.’ Margot lowered her voice. ‘We only spoke for a few minutes, but I know there’s something wrong.’

‘She doesn’t seem ill. Quite the opposite. She’s put on a little weight but it suits —’  
My mother stopped abruptly.

‘I noticed that too,’ Tatie Margot said in a strained voice.

‘It’s probably all that rich Parisian food, Margot.’

‘You don’t think she could be . . .?’

‘*Un lardon dans le tiroir?*’ my mother said in a whisper.

Bacon in the drawer? What were they talking about? This conversation was becoming as puzzling as those cryptic crosswords Papa liked to tackle in the newspaper.

‘Perhaps we’re jumping to conclusions,’ Maman continued.

‘I don’t think so,’ Margot replied. ‘I noticed the loose dress the minute I saw her. Sophie always wears tight skirts.’

What do loose dresses and tight skirts have to do with anything, I asked myself.

Then Tatie added, ‘If that new boss of hers is responsible, Lucien will kill him.’

What connection was there between Sophie’s clothes and her boss? I could barely contain my urge to ask the question aloud.

‘If she did happen to be in the family way,’ my mother whispered tentatively. ‘She couldn’t be very far along.’

Family way! I knew what that meant. But Sophie wasn’t married, not even engaged.

‘She left for Paris at the end of May,’ Tatie Margot said, her voice trembling. ‘So it would be three months at the most.’

‘Do you think that’s the reason she’s come home, Margot? To tell you?’

‘I’m sure of it. What am I going to do?’

‘Do you think he might leave his wife, this boss of hers?’

‘Men like that never do.’

Maman nodded in agreement and both women sighed loudly. Meanwhile the full meaning of their conversation was dawning on me. Poor Sophie. And what a cad her boss had turned out to be.

After a moment my mother said, ‘The other reason for Sophie’s homecoming might be to tell Kurt.’

‘You don’t think the German boy could be the father, do you?’

Had I just heard Tatie Margot suggest that Kurt Müller, *my* Kurt, could be the father? Please, dear God, no! Not Kurt!

‘They seemed quite taken with each other,’ my mother said.

‘But he’s only a boy. She’s always been interested in older men.’

‘He’s twenty-one. And she’s nineteen.’

‘Oh my God, Louise, it’s a nightmare.’

As I listened to this exchange, part of me didn’t want to believe it. Having grown up on a farm, I was intimately acquainted with the biology of animals. And unlike some of the girls in my class at the village school, I understood that both the male and the female of the species were needed in order to make a puppy or calf or a foal, and presumably a human baby. I even knew how it happened in the first place, assuming it worked the same way with humans as animals. Was that what Sophie and Kurt had been doing the night he came home late after the cinema? The thought of it made me squeamish.

‘Don’t put the horse before the cart, dearest Margot,’ my mother said. ‘We might have it all wrong. Sophie was probably feeling homesick and needed a few days back home to get over it.’

‘Or she wanted to tell Kurt the news before he left for Munich,’ Tatie Margot said. ‘He’d have to marry her – Lucien would insist on it.’

My stomach was churning so violently I thought I was going to be sick. ‘Excuse me,’ I mumbled, struggling to my feet, ‘I’m not feeling very well.’

‘Camille!’ my mother said as though she’d only just realised I was there.

On wobbly legs I dashed towards the house, only to make it as far as the courtyard where I vomited over my new dress and even my shoes. In an instant my mother was beside me.

‘Oh dear,’ Maman said as she wiped my face with her handkerchief, ‘you must have eaten too much chocolate cake. Eyes bigger than your stomach, eh?’

‘*Ma pauvre* Camille,’ Papa said, rushing from the other direction and gasping for breath. Pressing his hand against my forehead, he said, ‘I think she’s running a temperature.’

‘I’ll take her inside and get her to bed,’ my mother said. ‘It’s been a big week for her. She can sleep on the little daybed in our room. It’s cooler there than the attic.’

As Maman took my hand and helped me to the house, I glanced back towards the olive grove, but Kurt and Sophie were nowhere to be seen. Thank goodness *he* hadn’t witnessed me throwing up my entire supper. As for the matter of Kurt Müller being the possible father of Sophie’s baby, the prospect was too awful to contemplate.

# CHAPTER 24



*Mieux vaut plier que rompre.*

Better to bend than to break.

Old proverb



June, 1943

My mind is so full of anxiety about Anna and Claude that I can barely think about today's rendezvous with Kurt. I do my best to 'act normally' during the day, but I find it hard to concentrate, knowing that Claude is off in the hills with his fellow *maquisards* waging guerrilla warfare, and Anna is about to embark on a perilous flight to freedom across the Pyrénées to Spain.

On the dot of five Anna closes the library. At quarter past the hour, I rush out the door. Once I'm around the corner, I remove a well-used tube of lipstick from my bag, put a tiny amount on my fingertip and apply it to my lips. Like coffee and chocolate, lipstick is *une perle rare*, a rare pearl, and that tube will have to have to last till the end of the War. As for my hair, I simply unwind the *chignon*, drop the bobby pins in my purse and allow the curls to fall onto my shoulders.

When I reach the sunken garden he's already there, wearing that immaculately white tunic. How does he keep it so clean? The practical side of me wonders whether he has two of them.

He meets me halfway along the path, takes my hand in his and raises it to his lips. His mouth skims across the skin from the wrist to the fingers, barely touching the surface yet making me shiver in anticipation.

'I couldn't wait to see you,' he says. 'Was Claude pleased? And your mother?'

I know I promised not to lie to him, but he went to so much trouble I can't tell him the truth about Claude. Not today. So I obfuscate instead: 'You did us a great favour.'

'I would do anything to help your family, Camille.'

'I know.'

He leans toward me and suddenly we're in each other's arms, our mouths meeting, our breaths mingling, our bodies moulded together as though they were preordained to be that way. Nothing in little Camille's daydreams could compare to the reality of being in Kurt Müller's arms. The recklessness I experienced on Saturday is back with a vengeance. Right at this moment I could easily toss all my responsibilities to the wind.

Somewhere close by a thrush begins to warble loudly and Kurt pulls away with a start.

‘What was that?’

‘Only a bird,’ I reassure him.

‘I promised myself I wouldn’t kiss you until we had talked,’ he says. ‘And then I broke that promise within seconds of seeing you.’

‘Didn’t you enjoy breaking the promise?’ I ask mischievously.

‘Of course, I did,’ he says with a smile. ‘But there are things I need to tell you and we don’t have much time.’

We take a seat on the bench among the ferns. His hand strokes mine but absently as though he has a lot on his mind.

‘I’m not sure where to start,’ he says.

‘You could tell me how you ended up at the Officers’ Academy?’

‘Yes, you deserve to know that,’ he says with a deep sigh.

As I wait patiently for him to speak, he seems lost in thought.

‘Kurt,’ I say softly, ‘You don’t have to tell me today.’

‘No, I don’t want us to have any secrets. It’s just . . . You have to remember I was only twenty-one when the horrific events at the *Post* occurred. Until then I’d led a charmed life, never had to confront anything difficult. Suddenly I found myself in a scene from hell. I couldn’t get it out of my head. I became depressed, lost all faith in humanity and all hope for the future. My parents tried to organise a job at another paper – to “keep my mind busy”, they said. But there weren’t any independent papers left in Germany. All of them had met the same fate within a few weeks of each other. The remaining papers were controlled by the Nazi Party. It’s hard to imagine, Camille, but all of a sudden there was no free press at all.’

‘So what did you do?’

‘For a few months I drank a lot. It helped numb the pain.’ He lowers his voice to a whisper. ‘And there were women. Quite a number of them.’

His words shock me, but I force myself not to let my feelings show.

‘I’m not proud of the way I behaved, but I would have done anything to forget.’

‘And being with those women helped you do that?’

‘Temporarily.’

‘Did you love any of them?’ I can hear the tremor in my voice as I speak.

‘It wasn’t a matter of love. It was the other ‘L’ word – *Liebeslust*.’

‘And you just went from one woman to the next?’

‘I’m ashamed of myself, Camille. I don’t like telling you this, but I promised I would never lie to you. And I won’t.’

‘Were those women prostitutes?’ I ask in a low voice.

‘Some of them. It was easier that way. They didn’t want anything from me except my money, and that suited me fine. I had no purpose in life anymore. My existence consisted of getting drunk and sleeping with women. But no matter how hard I sought solace I couldn’t find it.’

I shudder before I can stop myself. I just can’t imagine this version of Kurt, a drunkard and a womaniser. It’s just not consistent with the man I know.

‘You despise me for being so weak, don’t you?’ he asks, letting go of my hand.

‘No, I could never despise you. You lost yourself for a while but then you came back. That would have taken a great deal of strength.’

‘It was my father who helped me. He told me I needed a sense of order in my life, a set of rules to live by. For my part, I desperately wanted the chaos to end, I just didn’t know how to bring that about. My father reminded me that there was still one

institution in Germany which remained relatively independent of the Nazis, a powerful entity Hitler couldn't control – the defence forces. And if I wanted to make a difference, my father told me, the army might be the place to do it. And at least it was a hundredfold better than Hitler's Brownshirts.

'At first I wasn't convinced about joining up and I even considered emigrating to America and starting over, but my English was far from fluent and I had my parents to consider. Being an only child brings responsibilities. I couldn't just decamp to the other side of the world.'

'What about Paris – you spoke excellent French?'

'I did consider it but I really needed structure in my life and Paris would have been the complete opposite. So I applied to the Munich *Kriegsschule* – the officers' academy – but I didn't tell my father, I wanted to gain a place on my own merits. Anyway, I was accepted and suddenly I was a cadet. The curriculum was surprisingly free of Nazi fanaticism, probably because it was taught by Prussian officers from the old school, like my father. For ten months we studied the traditional subjects: tactics, military history, mathematics, weaponry, equipment, leadership, and I actually found myself enjoying it. So much so that I graduated in the top five of my class.'

‘Your parents must have been very proud of you.’

‘It was the career my father had always wanted for me, and it transpired that I was well suited to military life. An exquisite irony, I suppose you’d call it.’

‘*Tel père, tel fils,*’ I reply. Like father, like son.

‘It turned out that way. I left the *Kriegsschule* as a lieutenant and within months I was working for the General Staff in Berlin.’

‘What I don’t understand, though, Kurt, is how you could possibly swear allegiance to Hitler, the man you despised?’

‘I didn’t. Not then. The Hitler oath wasn’t introduced until August of 1934. I swore to uphold the *Volk und Vaterland*, not Hitler. Later, of course, after Blomberg and Fritsch were forced to resign, Hitler appointed himself Supreme Commander and things were different..’

‘The people and the fatherland. So that’s the oath you continue to adhere to.’

‘In my heart, yes.’

Neither of us speaks for a long time. I realise I’ve held on to my childlike view of Kurt for too long – the dashing movie star look-alike, the urbane foreigner, the knight

of the Holy Grail. I've never thought of him as someone with vulnerabilities like the rest of us.

Then I break the silence, 'My father had a saying: *L'olivier se brise, le roseau plie*. The olive tree breaks, the reed bends.' I give his hand a squeeze. 'I should go. My mother is expecting me.'

'Could we meet tomorrow evening?'

'I can't, Kurt. Not three evenings in a row.' Besides, I say to myself, I'll be at Anna's apartment, adopting George. I don't even want to think about how sad that will be.

'What about Saturday afternoon?' Kurt asks. 'We could meet at the Gaumont. I'll buy the tickets. I'm afraid I don't even know what's showing this week.'

'Does it matter?' I reply light-heartedly.

'Not to me,' he says, 'I just want to spend the afternoon with you. I suppose it will have to be *en secret*.'

I give him a smile. 'Of course.'

'Will I leave your ticket at the box office?'

'No,' I say, remembering the woman with Greer Garson hair.

'I could put it in an envelope marked "Yvonne de Galais",' he says with a grin.



‘I can’t go near the box office, Kurt. The woman there will remember me. She thinks I booked the *loge* last Saturday for my grandmother’s birthday. If you buy the tickets and leave one for me, she’s likely to put two and two together when I collect it.’

‘Does that matter? She won’t know your name.’

After a moment I say, ‘All right. But don’t wear the white tunic. She’d remember that.’

‘Don’t you like it?’ he asks playfully, echoing the question I asked him earlier.

‘Of course, I like it. But you shouldn’t stand out. Just wear your field grey.’

He plants a gentle kiss on my forehead. ‘Would you have supper with me after the film?’

‘I can’t. I need to be home before curfew.’

‘I don’t suppose you could stay?’

‘Stay in Montpellier? I couldn’t. What would I tell my mother?’

He gives a gentle laugh. ‘Some things never change, do they? Your mother was always the disciplinarian. I suppose she had to be. Your father spoilt you.’

The cathedral bells are tolling once again, a relentless reminder of my responsibilities.

‘We should leave separately,’ I say. ‘I’ll go first.’

As we say goodbye, he kisses me so tenderly I want to cry. Then he gives me his Gary Cooper smile – languid, knowing, irresistible. But today I have to resist it. I’m already running late.



Lucien is in the kitchen when I come home, finishing a glass of his own Merlot.

‘Your mother’s gone to bed. This has taken a lot out of her.’ As he speaks, he adjusts his bad leg. I’ve noticed he can never sit in the same position for too long.

I unlace my shoes, toss them in the corner and flop down at the table, suddenly feeling exhausted.

‘Would you like a glass?’ Lucien asks. ‘You look as though you could do with one.’

‘Yes, please, but only a half.’

‘*Santé*,’ he says as we clink glasses.

He offers me some bread and cheese. I can’t believe how hungry I am – in the rush this morning I forgot to make my lunch and went without.

‘Did Babette eat anything today?’ I ask, reaching down and patting her head as she lies under the table, sound asleep.

‘This morning I gave her some crusts dipped in egg. My dogs can’t resist them. And neither could Babette. Your mother fed her tonight and she ate most of her dinner.’

‘That’s a relief. If anything happened to Babette, it would be more than we could bear.’ I take a bite of cheese. ‘Do you think Claude and Marius will have enough to eat?’

‘Those boys won’t be going hungry. They know how to shoot rabbits and they’re both good fishermen. They’re probably feasting on a trout at this very moment, cooked over a campfire,’ he says, trying to boost my spirits.

‘What will happen when Marius doesn’t turn up at the railway station tomorrow afternoon?’

The mood become sombre. ‘He’ll be labelled a *réfractaire*, the police will issue warrants for his arrest and they’ll probably come knocking on my door. Thank goodness Claude has been exempted. Your mother is upset enough about the monthly visits from the *Boche*, without having the police turning up at the house.’

‘But won’t the authorities work it out eventually? People will notice Claude is missing. Someone might denounce him to the police.’

‘Not necessarily. This is a close-knit community. It’s not like the city. People look after each other here. I wouldn’t worry – not yet. We have enough to deal with as it is, what with the *Boche* coming this Saturday.’

*Mon Dieu*, I’d forgotten that it was this week. I’ve arranged to meet Kurt on Saturday afternoon. What am I going to do?

As if he can read my mind, Lucien says, ‘By the way, I promised your mother I would be here when they come to collect their plunder. I hope you don’t mind. But she doesn’t like you speaking German with them. In fact, she doesn’t like you having anything to do with them. She told me the captain is *un vieux vicelard*.’

‘I didn’t think she realised he was a bit of a lecher.’

‘Your mother doesn’t miss much, Camille.’

Suddenly I remember the secret deal with the captain – I’ll have to tell Lucien, though I’m certain he won’t approve of what I’ve done.

‘Lucien, there’s something you need to know – Captain Bauer was reluctant to agree to the deal so I offered him a couple of extras for himself. I suppose you could call it a bribe.’

‘What kind of bribe?’ he asks in a low voice.

‘An extra *tomme* and a jar of *tapenade*.’

‘Does your mother know about this?’

‘Of course not. I always pack the box the night before they come and wrap it securely with cheesecloth. She doesn’t know what’s inside.’

Lucien shakes his head despairingly. ‘Bribing a German officer is an offence, Camille.’

‘I realise it was a dubious thing to do, Lucien, but I was desperate to save Maman’s Aubracs.’

Lucien begins to laugh despite himself. ‘Camille, you are definitely your father’s daughter. You wouldn’t believe the things he used to get up to as a teenager, and he always managed to embroil me in his schemes. But making secret deals with the enemy, that’s something different. Promise me you won’t do it again.’

‘I promise,’ I say in a low voice.

‘Good. So we’re agreed that *I* will be handling things from now on.’

‘Yes, but I’d better pack the box. I know where everything is.’

He starts to argue and then stops. ‘All right, but that’s your only involvement. By the way, where did you learn German? They don’t teach it at the convent school.’

‘I started learning it when our German lodger was here,’ I say, trying to sound calm.

‘Oh yes, I remember. A good-looking boy. One of Sophie’s suitors. He didn’t last long though. None of them did. What was his name?’

I’m feeling unbearably anxious. ‘Müller.’

‘That’s right. There were so many students staying here in those days, one after the other. No foreign students in Montpellier nowadays, of course. Not with the world at war. I wonder what happened to the German fellow? Probably died on the Eastern Front like hundreds of thousands of them. I never rejoice in those deaths though, Camille. Every single one of those boys was someone’s son.’

When he says things like that, Lucien reminds me of my father.

‘By the way,’ he says, refilling his glass, ‘before the *Boche* come on Saturday, we need to harvest some of your mother’s fruit and vegetables and hide them in the cellar. Not all of them, of course, or it would look suspicious. And we’ll leave the Jerusalem

artichokes – the Germans think they’re weeds or fodder for the animals. The same with the pumpkins and parsnips. But they love potatoes – they took my entire potato crop last week and paid me a pittance. I don’t know who came up with that wretched exchange rate but if I could get hold of him I’d wring his neck.’

‘I’d help you,’ I say, emptying my glass.

‘Another?’ Lucien asks.

‘*Non merci*. I have a big day at work tomorrow.’

‘I suppose I should stop too. Doctor Lebrun told me to drink less wine when I ran into him at the *tabac* yesterday. How could he say something like that to a *vigneron*? Oh, and he also mentioned he’d been here for coffee, and he remarked on what a fine young lady you are.’

‘Me?’ I say, attempting to sound guileless.

‘Yes, he asked if you were spoken for.’

‘And what did you reply?’ I ask, my face burning.

‘My exact words were: “Not to my knowledge”.’

I sip my wine thoughtfully. After a moment I say, ‘Actually, Lucien, there is someone. He lives in Montpellier. But Maman doesn’t know about him.’ Part of me wants to tell him everything, to let go of all the secrets, to seek his advice.

‘Why doesn’t your mother know about this suitor of yours?’ Then something dawns on him. ‘*Mon Dieu*, he’s married, isn’t he?’ He shakes his head woefully. ‘I suppose you know about the problems your auntie and I had with Sophie. Sometimes I wonder whether all those worries drove Margot to an early grave.’

There’s a long pause while we both remember dear Margot and her long, debilitating illness.

After a while I say, ‘The situation is complicated, Lucien. Please don’t tell my mother.’

‘Of course I won’t. Hasn’t she been through enough already?’ He takes a sip of wine and swirls it in his mouth before swallowing. ‘I’m assuming he’s older, this paramour of yours. There aren’t many young men left. We lost them to the Battle of France or the prisoner of war camps. And now, of course, to the work camps here and in Germany.’

‘And to the *Maquis*,’ I add.



‘He’s not *Maquis*, is he?’

‘No,’ I reply. ‘Definitely not.’

Lucien sits up straight in the chair and rearranges his leg. ‘I’m not your father, Camille, but I do look upon you as my youngest daughter. That’s why I’m going to offer you some advice. You’ve just told me this liaison of yours is complicated. Well, my advice to you is straightforward. You should break it off with this man as soon as possible. It can’t end well.’

‘But I love him, Lucien. We’re meant to be together.’

He shakes his head sadly. ‘It might seem that way, but you need to be with someone you don’t have to meet in secret. A man who can come here and have coffee with your mother.’

I cast him a sideways look, ‘Are you referring to Jean Lebrun?’

‘He’s a good man, Camille. And he likes you.’

‘I like him too, but not romantically. It wouldn’t be fair to encourage him when I could never love him.’

‘Love can grow from friendship. Sometimes that’s the best kind.’

‘I agree. But I don’t feel any sparks when I’m with him, not even tiny ones.’

‘Sparks!’ His rumbling laughter fills the kitchen. Then he says quietly, ‘Well, at least I’ve had my say. Like most young people, you’ll probably go ahead and do whatever you like. But just remember this. Don’t you dare break your mother’s heart – she’s already been hurt enough.’

# CHAPTER 25



*C'est du chinois pour moi.*

It's Chinese to me.

(It's all double Dutch to me.)

Old saying

## End of summer, 1931

It was the morning after our harvest *fête*. Before I opened my eyes I could hear the cicadas screeching so loudly they might have been living inside my head. I blinked at the sunshine flooding through the window of my parents' bedroom and falling onto the half-tester bed that dated back to my grandparents' time. This morning, with its coverlet in place and cushions fastidiously arranged, it looked as though nobody had slept in it; then again, my mother had always been a stickler for order. *Chaque chose à sa place* was her motto – everything in its place. At that moment I heard her voice at the door.

‘How are you feeling, sleepyhead?’

‘Better, Maman,’ I replied.

She sat down on the edge of the daybed. ‘Do you feel well enough to eat some breakfast?’

‘Yes, I think so,’ I said, pushing back the covers and sitting up. ‘I’m sorry about the Lilibet dress.’

‘Don’t worry. I washed it before I went to bed. It looks like new.’

‘*Merci, Maman,*’ Although I might not have liked the dress, I certainly didn’t want my auntie’s work ruined.

As my mother turned to go, I asked casually, ‘Is Kurt around?’

‘No, he went up to the Bernards to see Sophie.’

‘Do you think they’re in love?’ I enquired in my most innocent voice.

‘I imagine we’ll find out soon enough,’ my mother said. ‘You weren’t listening to what your auntie and I were saying last night, were you?’

‘No,’ I replied as resolutely as I could. ‘Most of the time I can’t understand what adults are talking about – *c’est du chinois pour moi.*’

I would never have got away with a lie like that if my father had been present.



After breakfast Papa set off for the Bernards to help Lucien prepare for his harvest, while Claude and Marius went rabbit-hunting, taking Bonaparte and the Bernards’

dog, Samson, with them. Meanwhile I started the novel Kurt had borrowed for me from the lending library in Montpellier – he'd told me it was a story he had loved when he was a child and that it was far more suitable for someone my age than Dumas.

While my mother did her mending at one end of the kitchen table I sat at the other, reading Jules Verne's *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours*. In truth, I wasn't really concentrating on the story – I was consumed with thoughts about Kurt and Sophie. Had they really *done* it? Somehow that possibility tarnished my image of him as the chivalric knight, the gentlemanly cowboy. As for Sophie, I wasn't sure what to make of her conduct – there had been a series of beaux including the boss in Marseille, the new boss in Paris, and Kurt in between the two. Just a few months ago, I'd considered Sophie's life glamorous, yet last night Tatie Margot had described it as a nightmare – I just wished Kurt hadn't been involved.

What were the two of them doing at this very moment? Was she telling him she was going to have a baby and that he had to marry her to make things respectable? I tried to imagine their conversation, but it was beyond me, so I returned to the story of Phileas Fogg and his journey around the world in eighty days. I didn't quite know what

to make of him – his penchant for order seemed rather extreme, far worse than my mother’s. All of a sudden there was a tap at the door and a woman’s voice calling:

‘Are you home, Louise?’

‘Come in, Margot,’ my mother called back.

Tatie Margot looked as though she hadn’t slept at all. There were shadows under her eyes and vertical lines etched into her cheeks that I hadn’t noticed before.

‘I’ll make you a coffee,’ Maman said. ‘I could do with one too.’

‘*Bonjour*, Camille. Are you feeling better now?’ my auntie said, trying to sound bright.

‘Yes, thank you, Tatie,’ I replied, raising my head from Monsieur Verne’s book. ‘I’m sorry about what I did to your dress, but Maman washed it and got all the stains out.’

She leant over and patted me on the head as though I was Babette. ‘I wasn’t worried about the dress, Camille. I’m just glad you’re feeling better.’

While they drank their coffee at one end of the table, I continued to read at the other, staring at the pages rather than absorbing the words. All the time I expected my mother to send me to the *salon* to do my reading, but instead she seemed to have taken

me at my word that adult conversation was like a foreign language to me. Even so, they were using low voices.

‘Have you spoken with Sophie?’ my mother asked.

‘We talked for hours. It’s all such a mess.’

I was certain I’d just heard a sob but forced myself not to look up.

‘It can’t be that bad, Margot.’

‘Oh yes, it is.’

‘So she’s definitely . . .?’

‘She’s missed two periods.’

‘Oh dear!’ Maman said.

Then neither of them spoke for a while. In the end the silence was broken by my mother saying, ‘Do you think Kurt is the father?’

‘No, she told me they’d never . . .’

As a sense of relief washed over me, I peered attentively into the book.

When Margot continued, it was in a whisper: ‘It’s her boss. He’s given her money for an . . . an *avortement*.’

‘No!’ my mother cried. ‘That’s a mortal sin.’



‘And he told her she could take a week off work.’

‘*Salaud!*’ Maman whispered.

I had never in my life heard my mother use a curse word, but I resisted the impulse to put my hand over my mouth in astonishment. Instead, I turned a page and feigned intense interest in the book.

‘So she came home instead,’ my mother said after a moment.

‘She wants Kurt to marry her. Apparently his family has a lot of money.’

‘I can’t imagine that happening, Margot. Why would he take on someone’s else’s child?’ Then she stopped dead. ‘*Grands dieux non!* Perhaps he doesn’t know she’s pregnant. She wouldn’t try to trick him, would she?’

‘I hope not, but they’re going on a picnic down by the stream.’

‘Surely he’s too smart to fall for that. Even if something happened today, it would be weeks before she could give him the so-called news, and by then she’d be well and truly showing. It wouldn’t add up.’

‘I know. And it’s just not right.’

Slowly I closed my book and stood up from the table. ‘Excuse me, Maman, Tatie. I’m going to take Babette for a walk. She must be lonely out there on her own.’

‘Make sure you wear your hat, then,’ my mother said absently, ‘and watch out for snakes.’

‘*Oui, Maman,*’ I replied meekly, making for the kitchen door where I grabbed my straw hat from the coat stand and pulled it onto my head. There was only one thing on my mind – somehow I had to warn Kurt that he was about to be played for a fool.

# CHAPTER 26



*Un malheur n'arrive jamais seul.*

Misfortune never comes singly.

Old proverb

June, 1943

On Thursday I feel like an actor standing in the wings, awaiting her cue. Listlessly I stamp library cards, sort files and return books to shelves, resisting the urge to check the clock on the wall every few minutes; the waiting is unbearable. Just before two o'clock the telephone rings in Anna's office. She waits until the fifth ring before answering it. All of us have heard the phone, even though I'm probably the only one who has paid any attention. A few minutes later she appears at the door.

'Camille, could you ask Fleurette and Léo to come into my office, please.'

'Of course,' I say.

As I usher the other two into the small space, Anna is standing behind her desk. Then she proceeds to tell us she's had a phone call, her mother had been taken ill and she needs to go to Lyon urgently. Although I knew it was coming, she's so convincing it almost seems like a legitimate story. And if her voice sounds a little strained, it's understandable – who wouldn't be anxious if they received news like that?

‘I’m hoping to organise for my sister to take over on Monday, so I should be back here that afternoon.’ She looks in my direction. ‘I’ll write down the phone number in Lyon, just in case you need to call me.’

She jots it down on a sheet of paper and hands it to me.

‘Does the doctor know what’s wrong?’ Fleurette asks.

‘He thinks it’s pneumonia.’

‘Oh dear,’ she responds. ‘I’ll light a candle for your mother in the cathedral this evening.’

‘Thank you. I know she would appreciate your prayers.’

‘Don’t worry,’ I say. ‘We’ll take care of things till you get back, won’t we?’

‘Of course we will,’ Fleurette says enthusiastically.

Léo offers one of his trademark grunts which seems to indicate the affirmative.

‘Thank you,’ Anna responds. ‘It’s reassuring to know I can depend on the three of you in a crisis.’ She picks up her handbag. ‘I’d better go if I’m to get home and pack some things in time to catch the train and make it there tonight.’

‘I hope your mother is all right,’ I respond. ‘Have a safe trip.’ Then I offer up a silent prayer that Anna will make it to Spain and then Lisbon. Her God is also mine – I hope He’s listening.

‘*A bientôt,*’ she says. See you soon.

But it won’t be soon. No matter what happens, we will never see Anna again.



That afternoon, I turn into the lane leading to Anna’s apartment and breathe a sigh of relief when I discover it’s empty. On the left there is a stone wall at least twice my height, and right in the middle a wooden door painted green. My hand is shaking as I place the little key in the lock. The gate opens to reveal a tiny walled garden massed with cottage flowers. On closer inspection I discover vegetables growing beneath the perennials – tomatoes, aubergines, capsicums, leeks, and beans climbing a wooden trellis intermingled with sweet peas. I’d never thought of Anna as a gardener. In fact, I’d never really thought much about her at all, other than my silly theory about her affair with the married man.

A paved path with violets growing in the cracks leads to the door. This time I use the larger key and as I turn it, I'm greeted by a piercing miaow. I look down to see George, a tabby cat with puzzled amber eyes.

'I'm sorry to disappoint you, George,' I say, rubbing her head and closing the door behind me in case she escapes outside, 'but I'll be looking after you from now on. It won't be the same, but I'll do my best.'

It seems odd to be inside Anna's apartment for the first time without her being here. I can't help feeling like an intruder, notwithstanding the fact she's sent me to collect her cat. I'm shocked by what I see. I suppose I was expecting a spartan interior resembling a monk's cell, but this place is quite the opposite. Although it's compact and more like a bedsitter than an apartment, it's full of colour and warmth. Chagall prints on the walls, brightly patterned rugs on the floor and floral needlepoint cushions on the sofa. Is this a reflection of the real Anna, the woman I didn't actually know? Three years ago she would have begun her new life with the few keepsakes she could fit in a suitcase. From virtually nothing, she has created an oasis right in the middle of the city. On a side table there's even a vase of flowers from her garden. It feels as though she's just gone away at short notice and will really be coming back on

Monday. But I know that's not true. Tears are streaming down my face at the awfulness of her having to leave this haven because she happens to be Jewish and the Nazis have made the Jews the targets of their hateful wrath.

After a while I compose myself and focus on the reason I've come – George. Anna has left the cat basket on the floor in the kitchen. Scooping up an unwilling tabby cat, I place her in the basket, tucking in her tail, before I close the lid and secure it firmly. Then I put all her belongings in a calico bag and take one last look around the apartment.

From the basket comes a plaintive howl.

'I know, George,' I whisper, 'it's just so sad.'



Saturday is our second day without Anna. I'm using her office but feel like an interloper. Fleurette asks me if I've heard how Anna's mother is faring and I reply that no news is good news.

I hadn't realised how much work Anna actually does . . . or did. I had to stay back yesterday afternoon for two hours just to finish the weekly paperwork. Today I'll be



lucky to leave in time to meet Kurt at half past two. I've told my mother I'm staying at a girlfriend's place tonight – it was the only excuse I could think of to allow me to have dinner with Kurt after the movie. It did cross my mind that I could go back to Anna's afterwards and sleep on the sofa, but I'd have to be there before the nine o'clock curfew. And I'm uncomfortable with exploiting the situation created by her having to leave so suddenly. I really don't know what I'm going to do.

I make it to the cinema just as the bells are tolling the half hour. Beside the grand entrance a poster bears the words *Zwei in einer grossen Stadt – Two in a Big City* – with a picture of a dashing German soldier and a nurse. Underneath are the words 'romantic comedy'. A German romantic comedy? I can't imagine it being anything but ponderous, but, as Kurt said, it doesn't matter what the film is.

A few stragglers are waiting in the queue to buy their tickets from the Greer Garson lookalike. There hasn't been time to don the scarf or glasses but that might be an advantage in that she's less likely to remember me. I join the end of the line, mentally practising what I have to say. By the time I reach the window, I have it pitch perfect, but before I can utter a word, she says, '*I remember you. Did your grandmother enjoy her birthday present?*'

So much for the disguise. Forcing a smile, I tell her that my *mamie* enjoyed the film immensely.

‘What can I do for you today, *madame*?’

‘A friend has left a ticket for me – my name is Yvonne de Galais. G-A-L-A-I-S.’

‘I don’t remember seeing that name. Just let me check the drawer. . . No, there’s nothing here. I’m afraid. Would you like to buy a ticket anyway?’

My mind is racing. It isn’t like Kurt to be late. He’s arrived early at both our rendezvous in the Jardin des Plantes. And he was right on time last Saturday.

‘My friend might be delayed. I think I’ll wait in the square.’

‘You’re welcome to sit here in the foyer, *madame*.’

‘Thanks, but it’s such a lovely day I’d rather be in the open air.’

‘That’s up to you. Just remember the main feature starts at three o’clock. You can still buy a ticket at intermission.’

After thanking her, I make my way outside. On a Saturday afternoon the Place de la Comédie is full of field-grey uniforms sparkling with silver braid. I find a café only a few doors away, choose an outdoor table within sight of the entrance to the Gaumont and order *un café*, knowing it will be chicory and roasted barley, at an exorbitant price

involving at least a row of ration stamps. There won't be any sugar cubes either. Only last year it was still customary to dip a cube in the cup and eat it like a *bonbon*. What an extravagance that seems now.

Ever since I sat down, I haven't taken my eyes off the entrance to the cinema. There's a feeling of unease nagging at my stomach – I wish it was hunger pains but it's not. Why hasn't he turned up? If he couldn't come, why didn't he leave a note for me at the cinema? It's only just around the corner from his hotel. What has happened to him?

When the bells toll three, there's no question of me going to the film on my own – I need to watch for him, and I can't do that if I'm inside a dark cinema. But what if he doesn't come at all? What if he doesn't want to see me again? I can't make sense of it. It doesn't fit with the Kurt I know. Didn't he tell me that destiny had brought us full circle? Wasn't the implication that we were meant to be together? And didn't he confess to me about the darkest time of his life? Why would he do that and then stand me up this afternoon?

By now, I've finished the coffee. When the waiter comes around again, I order a glass of water. Someone has left a newspaper on the adjoining table. I leaf through it, glancing up every few seconds to check the entrance to the Gaumont. The news is

heavily censored, of course, which means there are no stories about Allied victories, only the glorious achievements of the Germans. Now that Claude has gone, together with the contraband radio, I have resorted to our old crystal set and an earpiece. On a still night I can pick up Radio-Londres but more often, the only station I can hear clearly is Radio Montpellier.

The waiter returns, asking if I'd like to order some food. Although I'm not really hungry I feel obliged to order the only thing on today's menu – a bowl of noodles – and pay for it with the rest of my precious ration stamps. When they arrive, the noodles are lying pale and limp in a watery sauce made with chopped leeks, but I eat the entire bowl because it would be a waste not to. Two officers, both lieutenants, seated at the table next to me, drinking cognac, try to engage me in conversation. The more I ignore them, the more they persist. Eventually I turn towards them and say in German,

'I'm waiting for a major. *Lassen Sie mich in Ruhe* – leave me alone.' They hastily finish their drinks and go elsewhere.

Suddenly people are spilling out of the cinema into the square, chattering and laughing as they go. Nowadays it's such a strange sight to witness people looking happy that I find it unnerving. They're still experiencing the afterglow of the movie,

those brief moments when you're still part of the story. The magic won't last though. As soon as they see the eagle and the swastika on the banner hanging from the Opera House at the end of the Place de la Comédie, they'll be transported back to reality with a bump.

As late afternoon becomes twilight, I have to make a decision. There's no point in sitting here anymore. I'll only find myself accosted by German soldiers, offering to buy me drinks and hoping for favours of one sort or another.

Do I try to find out what has happened to Kurt, or should I go back to the library, collect my bike and ride home? My mother would have milked the cows by now. Soon she will be feeding Babette and our newest addition to the menagerie, George Sand. Then she will make herself a plate of cheese, potato bread, ripe tomatoes and salad greens. This evening she'll be having supper on her own for the first time in years. Her son is gone, her daughter in Montpellier. And then it strikes me – what if she won't be dining on her own? What if she's invited Lucien in my absence? And what if he's staying the night? If that's the case, the decision is made for me – I can't go home. Instead, I resolve to go to Kurt's hotel and find out what has happened to him. I need to know why he didn't turn up or I'll go crazy.



Being Saturday evening, the foyer of the Hôtel de la Comédie is crowded with German officers in dress uniform and French women in evening gowns. It's all very glamorous and rather disquieting. The air is heavy with cigarette smoke as I make my way through the throng towards the reception desk, looking for Kurt as I go. With their cropped blond hair and crisp white tunics, the officers look much the same, except for those with lightning bolts on their collars – they're SS. The purveyors of darkness and death.

At the desk a Frenchman with a long face resembling Fernandel's and a red carnation pinned to his lapel is dealing with requests for champagne and boxes of cigars to be sent to various rooms. I stand back waiting for a lull in the orders so that I can catch his attention. Eventually I give up and thrust myself forward in a very unladylike manner.

*'Pardon, monsieur, I'm looking for a Major Müller, Kurt Müller.'*

He turns towards me with a forced smile. 'You have an assignation with this gentleman, *mad'moiselle?*'

I'm not sure that I would describe it that way, but it's not worth arguing about the semantics.

'Yes, *monsieur*, I was wondering if you would kindly phone his room and let him know I'm down here waiting.'

'*Désolé, mad'moiselle*. As you can see, I am very busy this evening. I don't have time to make phone calls on behalf of young ladies. I shall look up his number and then you can phone him yourself.'

'Thank you.'

'Müller?'

'That's right. Major Kurt Josef Müller.'

After examining a register, he scribbles the number on the back of a hotel card. 'There are *cabines téléphoniques* around the corner to the left.'

'*Merci, monsieur*,' I reply, but he's already attending to another request.

Even in the smoke-filled foyer I can smell the meals being prepared in the adjoining restaurant. If all you've eaten since breakfast is a bowl of noodles, it's difficult not to inhale deeply and salivate at the aromas wafting from the kitchen. What a different world this is – a world of privilege and plunder. Nobody goes hungry here. No-one is

wearing clothes with patches or shoes with cardboard soles. The women are doused in real perfume rather than vanilla essence from their mother's pantry, their stockings are silk and hole-free, and they are wearing face powder and mascara, items which are impossible to obtain unless you are German or consort with one.

I head back across the foyer, excusing myself in French, until I see an annexe with a row of phone booths. Along the opposite wall are chairs for those waiting to make a call. At the far end is a staircase. I take a seat on one of the chairs, together with several young ladies in evening attire, who seem to be waiting for a telephone to become available. Beside me is a woman around my age, wearing a tight-fitting satin dress and dangling diamante ear-rings. I feel very much out of place in my dowdy jacket and skirt.

'Are you looking for an officer, *mon chou?*' she says, blowing circles of cigarette smoke into the air.

Nobody has called me sweetie pie since I was a child, and even then it was only my father.

'Yes,' I reply, not sure what else to say.

'There are plenty of them here,' she says.



‘I’m trying to find one in particular. I have his telephone number.’

‘Why don’t you go straight to his room?’

‘I don’t know the room number.’

The day I delivered the cinema ticket, I couldn’t see which pigeonhole the concierge had placed it in – his body was blocking my view.

‘That’s easily solved, *chérie*. It’s the last four numerals of the phone number.’

Just at that moment, an officer emerges from the booth opposite us.

‘You’re next, *mad’moiselle*,’ I say to the young woman in the satin dress.

‘I’m not waiting for a telephone, *mon ange*, I’m on the lookout for a customer. All the working girls wait in here – the management doesn’t like us toting for business in the reception area.’

Oh! I’ve never spoken to a prostitute before. This one seems surprisingly engaging and well-spoken. She might even be convent-educated, for all I know. I wonder how she ended up plying her trade in the Hôtel de la Comédie. I don’t suppose it was the future she foresaw for herself when she was at school. Then again, I never imagined I would become a librarian. I’m dying to ask her about her life, but this isn’t the time. Instead I say,

‘Thank you for your help, *mad’moiselle*.’

‘My pleasure. If your officer has any friends who’d like a good time, I’m available.’

I give her a smile. ‘I’ll remember that. What’s your name, by the way?’

‘Delphine.’

‘Such a pretty name. I’m Camille.’

‘Pleased to meet you, Camille,’ she says, offering her hand.

‘You too, Delphine,’ I reply, shaking her hand firmly.



As I make for the stairs, I begin to doubt the wisdom of my plan. If he’d wanted to see me he would have kept our date at the cinema. If something important had come up, he would have left a note with the cashier. The fact that he did neither doesn’t bode well.

I check the room number on the card: 1014 – thank goodness for Delphine. The ‘one’ must indicate the first floor. At the top of the stairs there’s a sign indicating rooms one to ten are to the left and eleven to twenty to the right. The corridor is empty, thank goodness. At room 1014 I pause for a moment, summoning the courage to knock. I

haven't even planned what I will say to him. Gently I tap on the door. No answer. So I repeat the process a little more loudly. Still nothing. Then I pound on the door until my knuckles hurt. He's not there. He must have gone out. I can't countenance the thought that he might be with another woman.

'May I help you?' asks a voice in heavily accented French.

I turn to see Hauptmann Bauer. No, on closer inspection it's not him at all, but someone who looks very much like him. This fellow bears the epaulettes of a colonel.

'I was looking for Major Müller,' I reply in French.

'I think he's gone on leave,' comes the reply. 'I heard it might be quite a while. However, I would be delighted to substitute for him, *mad'moiselle*. And I'd be prepared to pay whatever you charge him.'

I'm so shocked I can't speak.

'Perhaps even a little bonus,' he adds in response to my silence. 'And I'll take you to dinner first. You look like you could do with a good meal. It might put some meat on your bones.'

All at once the emotions of the day become so overwhelming I unleash them on the colonel – in German:

‘How dare you make an assumption like that, Herr Kolonel! And isn’t that a wedding band you’re wearing on your finger? You should be ashamed of yourself.’

Now it’s his turn to be taken aback.

‘My apologies, *gnädiges Fräulein*. I assumed you were a . . .’

‘Whatever you assumed, Herr Kolonel, it doesn’t change anything. You are a married man behaving improperly. I pity your poor wife back in the *Vaterland*.’

Decisively I turn on my heels and stride back along the corridor and down the stairs. As I pass through the annexe I look for Delphine but she’s not there – she must have found a customer. As for Kurt, he’s gone on extended leave without even the courtesy of letting me know. If that doesn’t tell me where I stand, I don’t know what does. For now, I’m disappointed and angry; the despair will come later.

# CHAPTER 27



*Petits enfants, petits tourments.  
Grands enfants, grands tourments.*

Small children, small agonies,  
Grown-up children, big agonies.

Old proverb

## End of summer, 1931

When I stepped outside, the warm air enveloped me like a cloak. Babette was waiting patiently in her kennel for Bonaparte to return. I filled her bowl with fresh water from the well, which she lapped up greedily.

‘Do you feel like a walk?’ I asked her. Instantly she tilted her head at an angle – she couldn’t actually prick up her ears because Briards have floppy ears covered in heavy, tousled hair.

Standing there in the open air, I realised I hadn’t thought things through at all, I’d just reacted blindly to what I perceived as a dastardly plot being hatched by Sophie to entrap Kurt. What was I going to do? Go to the stream and then what? Catch them kissing and cuddling and tell Kurt about the boss in Paris and the one before him? I’m eleven years old. He’d think I was crazy and shoo me away. He might even tell me to grow up. And Sophie would never speak to me again, not that I cared about that. There had been a time when I idolised her; now I didn’t know what to think.

While I was procrastinating, Babette was getting restless. Like all Briards, she had a long memory. She expected promises to be kept and if you made her an offer, she would insist you delivered on it as soon as possible. In fact, she was already nudging me to hurry along.

‘All right, *ma chouchoute*,’ I said, ‘let’s go down to the stream.’ As I turned around, a cyclist came tearing into the courtyard and crunched to a standstill on the gravel. Heavens above! It was Kurt.

Although Babette barked a greeting and ran to him, he ignored her.

‘Is Madame Bernard here?’ he asked brusquely.

‘She’s in the kitchen with Maman.’ I could be equally gruff when someone dispensed with civilities.

In an instant he had dismounted, laid the bicycle against the wall and was making for the back door. A lock of blond hair was stuck to his glistening forehead – I had never seen him perspire, even on the hottest day.

‘Has something happened?’ I asked, struggling to keep up with him.

‘Monsieur Bernard sent me to fetch Sophie’s mother.’

‘But why?’

‘Sophie has been taken ill.’

‘Were you on your picnic?’

‘No, we were still at the house. Sophie was preparing a picnic basket when she started to . . .’

‘Started to what?’ I asked.

‘I don’t have time for your questions, Camille,’ he replied tersely.

After a perfunctory knock on the door, he strode into the kitchen with me following close behind. As soon as my mother saw his dishevelled hair and face shiny with sweat, she pushed her chair back and stood up.

‘What’s wrong, Kurt?’ Then her tone changed from puzzled to panicked. ‘Has something happened to Jean-Paul?’

‘No, *madame*, your husband is fine.’ Then he turned towards my auntie, who was rising from her seat, her eyes wide with fear.

‘Sophie has been taken ill, Madame Bernard,’ Kurt said quietly. ‘Your husband is looking after her, and Monsieur Dupré has gone to fetch the doctor.’

Something unspoken passed between my mother and Tatie Margot.



'Kurt,' my mother said, taking command, 'please get Bisou harnessed to the cart. Come on, Margot, we'll take you home.'

'What about me?' I asked plaintively from the doorway.

'You'd better come with us, Camille. I can't very well leave you here on your own.'



When we pulled up in front of the Bernards' massive limestone house, Dr Giroux's Renault *coupé* was already parked outside and my father was waiting anxiously at the top of the row of steps leading into the entrance hall.

'Come in,' he said. 'Dr Giroux is upstairs with Sophie. Lucien is there too.'

Tatie Margot dashed up the stairs, turning briefly to indicate that Maman should accompany her. Meanwhile Papa led us into the kitchen.

'Take a seat, you two,' he said to Kurt and me. 'I'll make a pot of coffee although I think I need something stronger.'

After a moment, Lucien joined us. Apparently the doctor had asked him to leave the room while he undertook an examination. The four of us sat silently at the walnut table, drinking coffee. Normally we would have been offered a slice of almond cake or

an orange-scented *biscotin*. But not today. Meanwhile the hands of the half-case wall clock were moving inexorably towards noon. Finally, we heard my aunt farewelling the doctor in the hallway and a couple of minutes later, the spluttering of the Renault as it started up. After a while, my mother and Tatie Margot took a seat at the table.

‘The doctor says there’s nothing to worry about. It’s just *un problème féminin*,’ my auntie said. ‘Sophie will be fine after a few days’ rest.’

‘That’s a relief,’ Lucien replied, but even though it seemed to be good news, he was frowning.

Nobody mentioned the baby. Had I misinterpreted what was said this morning?

‘May I go up and see Sophie?’ Kurt asked.

‘Sorry, Kurt,’ Tatie replied, ‘the doctor said no visitors. Not for the next few days.’

‘We should go now, Jean-Paul,’ my mother said firmly. She kissed Margot on both cheeks and whispered something in her ear. Kurt rose from the table, and Papa and I followed suit. It had been a puzzling visit, at least as far as I was concerned. Lucien saw us to the door, passing the sepia portraits of his parents and grandparents hanging in the hallway.

Outside, Bisou was waiting resignedly, still attached to the cart. Even so, he'd been able to manoeuvre himself to the nearby water trough. Maman, Papa and Kurt climbed up front and, as usual, and I took my place in the cart. Then we all turned to wave at Lucien and Margot, standing in the doorway. It might have been the light, but their faces looked grey.

'Walk on, Bisou!' my father commanded, flicking the reins, and we set off for home.



That evening Claude returned proudly from his hunting trip with not one but two rabbits. While Papa and Claude set about skinning them outside, Maman and I prepared a platter of bread, cheese and cold meats for supper. Kurt had disappeared to his room as soon as we arrived home and didn't appear again until supper time. Afterwards we all adjourned to the *salon* to listen to the radio while Claude played with his soldiers on the floor. For once there was no mention of Herr Hitler on the news broadcast. In fact, the only item about Germany was the successful flight of the airship *Graf Zeppelin* from Friedrichshafen to Brazil.

When the news was over, we all removed our earpieces.

‘I don’t trust those airships,’ my father said. ‘Look at what happened to that British dirigible that crashed in France last year. It burst into flames and killed most of the passengers.’

‘Yes, and remember the *Dixmude*, Jean-Paul,’ my mother joined in. ‘We saw it fly overhead on its way from Bordeaux to Lyons. Camille was only a baby then.’

‘I’ll never forget the shadow it cast over the fields,’ Papa said. ‘Gave me the creeps. A few months later it exploded over the Mediterranean.’

‘But that airship wasn’t really French,’ Maman added. ‘The Germans built it in the first place and had to hand it over as part of the rep—’

Although she stopped abruptly, Kurt finished the sentence for her: ‘Reparations.’ He uttered the word in such a neutral way it was hard to tell whether he was upset.

After a while Kurt stood up and said, ‘Would you excuse me, please, it’s been a long day.’

‘Of course,’ my father said. ‘Sleep well, *mon ami*.’

After Kurt went upstairs, my parents returned their earpieces to the box and sat down on the sofa. Soon they were talking earnestly while I remained seated in front of the radio, listening to music. Then I let the earpiece slip out but the mass of curly hair

covering my ears concealed the fact. Suddenly I could hear what my parents were saying, even though they were speaking in low voices. All the same, I continued to stare fixedly at the radio, as we all did during our evening sessions.

‘Poor Kurt,’ Papa was saying. ‘He was helping her pack a basket for their picnic and she started bleeding right there in the kitchen. He came rushing out to the wine cellar to summon help. The minute I saw her, standing there, staring down at the blood, I knew what had happened. I remembered what you went through all those years ago.’

As I listened to my father’s words, I too was recalling the day I heard that my mother had lost her baby. I couldn’t have been more than five and had interpreted the words literally. Now I knew differently. To lose a baby had nothing to do with misplacing it or the angels taking it away. And if Sophie’s incident was anything like the time our mare foaled two months early, it must have been raw and bloody.

‘How did Lucien react?’ my mother asked.

‘At first he seemed to be in shock. So I went to the linen closet and fetched a towel for Sophie to put between her legs. Then I sat her on a chair with her head in her lap – I was afraid she was going to faint. Suddenly Lucien grabbed Kurt by the shoulders and shouted, “Was it you who made my daughter pregnant?”’

‘Oh dear. What did the boy say?’

‘He said he wasn’t the father and that they’d never even . . .’

‘Did Lucien believe him?’

‘Not at first. He kept shaking Kurt. That was when Sophie said, “It’s true. It wasn’t Kurt.” “Then who was it?” Lucien demanded. At that point I reminded him his daughter might well be bleeding to death, and explanations could wait. Fortunately, that seemed to bring him to his senses. We helped Sophie up to her bed and Lucien stayed with her while I cycled to the village to fetch Dr Giroux, and Kurt rode to our place. I cleaned up the kitchen floor before you arrived. I didn’t want you to see it. And you know the rest.’

My mother nodded ruefully.

‘What about Margot?’ my father asked. ‘Did she know Sophie was pregnant?’

‘She found out last night. That’s why she came to our place this morning – she needed someone to talk to.’

‘Did she say who the father was?’

‘Yes,’ my mother said hesitantly. ‘It was Sophie’s new boss. But promise me you won’t tell Lucien.’

‘Of course I won’t, but he’ll persist until he gets it out of Margot or Sophie – if he hasn’t done so already. And that means Sophie won’t be returning to her job. Lucien wouldn’t allow it.’

‘I just hope he doesn’t decide to take the train to Paris and confront the boss,’ my mother said.

‘If it was my daughter,’ Papa hissed, ‘I’d kill him, *le connard*.’

‘Jean-Paul!’ Maman exclaimed, looking in my direction. ‘She’ll hear you.’

‘She’s engrossed in the radio show, Louise. She can’t hear anything with that music blaring in her ear.’

‘Well, it’s a terrible situation, but the miscarriage is a blessing. Thank God nobody will ever know, save for the doctor, her parents and us.’

‘*And Kurt*,’ my father added. ‘But he won’t say anything. Besides, he’s leaving on Saturday. He was quite smitten with her, I think. If she hadn’t gone to Paris to work, there might have been wedding bells for the two of them.’

‘But he’s a German!’

‘The war has been over for thirteen years, Louise. And he’s a fine young man. If our Camille was Sophie’s age, I’d be happy to have him as my son-in-law. Unless, of course, he wanted to take her back to Munich. Now, that would be a different story.’

‘Well, *mon cher*,’ my mother said with a laugh, ‘Camille is eleven years old and she’ll never see him again. So that’s one thing we don’t need to worry about.’



# CHAPTER 28



*Un menteur doit avoir une bonne mémoire.*

**A liar should have a good memory.**

Old proverb

June, 1943

After I leave the Hôtel de la Comédie, I find myself lingering by the fountain in the square rather than going straight to the library to collect my bicycle. I'm remembering the day I was having lunch and Kurt sat down beside me. There was a *frisson* between us so strong I could have cut it like a string. Have I misinterpreted everything that has happened between us? Was I so caught up in my own fantasy that I couldn't see the truth? Did he perceive it as a short-lived flirtation meaning nothing? Without warning, tears begin to stream down my face. I just don't understand why he left without a word.

In the distance the town hall clock is chiming nine, marking the start of the nightly curfew. Anyone caught in the streets between now and five in the morning will face arrest. I take a deep breath and wipe my face with a handkerchief. This is not the time for self-pity. Somehow I will have to put my thoughts about Kurt aside, at least for now.

The shortest route back to the library is via the Rue de la Loge, a main thoroughfare which is regularly patrolled by the police. But it's not dark yet, thanks to the German system of daylight saving which chops another hour off the time in summer. That means I could easily be spotted. So I decide to take my chances on the labyrinth of narrow mediaeval laneways running through the heart of the city. I've always found them difficult to navigate as they all look the same, but tonight there's no other choice.

It's after ten o'clock and almost dark when I find myself in a street I recognise – the Allée de la Friperie. I can just decipher the name on the enamel street sign. Hugging the buildings on the left-hand side, I work my way to the gate recessed into the stone wall at the end of the lane. Should I go inside or continue on to the library? Although I would probably make it there without encountering a police patrol, I'd never make it out of the city. There's nowhere to hide when you're cycling along the wide boulevards that lead out of town towards the hills.

Rummaging in my handbag, I find Anna's keys. It takes me a while to locate the lock and insert the little key. As I push the gate open, I look around furtively, expecting a torch to be shone on me at any moment by a pair of patrolling *gendarmes*. The gate creaks a little as I open it – I didn't notice that in the daytime. Nor did I anticipate that

the garden would be such an eerie place at night, its shadowy tendrils brushing against my skin like ghostly fingers. My heart thumping, I creep along the path to the front door, unlock it and enter the safe haven that is Anna's apartment. In the dark I feel around for the light cord. As the light comes on, I realise the curtains are partly open. Like a mad woman, I rush around closing the drapes. Then I take a moment to catch my breath before going into the kitchenette where I fill the kettle, light the stove and make myself a cup of coffee from the substitute powder in the enamel canister marked 'Café'. There's even a packet of powdered milk. I drink my coffee, seated on Anna's sofa among her needlepoint cushions and crocheted throw rugs. Please God, let her be safe.

In my imagination I picture Claude and Marius working in concert with the Jewish *résistants* and leading Anna on foot across the mountains and into Spain where other partisans will guide her into Portugal. Once there, she will be safe until she can buy her passage to America. It's comforting to think of Anna in the care of my brother and his best friend, even though the rational part of me is saying it's highly unlikely. But whoever is helping her, there's still plenty of time before the authorities are alerted – all of tomorrow and most of Monday – I'll leave the phone call till as late as possible.

Suddenly I feel exhausted. So I use the little bathroom and then lay out a crocheted rug on the couch. I have no intention of sleeping in Anna's bedroom – that's private. I remove my shoes, stockings and garter belt, take off my blouse and skirt and drape everything over an armchair. Then I turn off the lights and curl up on the sofa, dressed only in my cotton slip and panties. Although the pain of Kurt's disappearance is nagging at me like a thorn in the sole of my foot, I still manage to fall asleep quickly, but my slumber is scattered with dreams. One, in particular, is so vivid it might be a scene from a Technicolor movie. Anna is arriving by taxi at her cousin's house in Los Angeles. It's a low-slung bungalow set against a rocky, wooded hillside dominated by a wooden sign bearing gigantic white letters: 'Hollywoodland'.



In the morning I dress quickly, arrange the curtains exactly as they were last night and check that everything looks the way Anna left it. Then I lock up and head north to the Cathedral of St-Pierre. I haven't been inside the church before, only marvelled at its grand exterior – a combination of fortress and palace, except that it's neither. Our village church is miniscule by comparison. There's a queue for Confession but I don't

mind because I can spend the time deciphering the stories in the nearest stained glass window. When my turn comes, I find I have a lot to confess and it's easier to reveal my sins to a priest I've never met than to Père Patric, who's known me all my life. I tell the anonymous priest I have lied repeatedly to my mother and that I've consorted with a man – a German officer. After I say the last two words, I hear a sharp intake of breath from the other side of the screen.

'You must keep away from this man, my daughter, because he is of the devil.'

'I won't be seeing him again, Father,' I reply wistfully.

He absolves me of my sins and gives me my penance. Afterwards I attend Mass and take Communion. It feels odd to do so in a congregation of strangers. Then I collect my bicycle from the library and ride out of the city. It doesn't take long to reach the hills – they're just on the perimeter of Montpellier, but it's a different world there, wild and empty. The air is scented with thyme growing wild beside the road and the slopes are clad in the pink and purple of tiny *Origan* flowers.

When I arrive home, Maman is back from Mass, putting the finishing touches to a rabbit stew and singing to herself. The only time my mother ever sings is in church and even then, it's more like a mournful chant than actual singing.

‘You missed Mass,’ she chides.

‘I went to nine o’clock in Montpellier.’

‘Getting too fancy for our little church, eh?’ There’s a playful tone to her voice.

I just smile in response, confused by this odd behaviour.

‘Where’s George?’ I ask.

‘She’s asleep on my bed. I don’t know why you gave a female cat a boy’s name?’

‘She’s called after Chopin’s mistress, the writer, George Sand.’

‘Well, whatever the reason, she seems to like her name. She answers to it as though she’s had it her entire life. How’s Anna? That’s who you were staying with, wasn’t it?’

My mother can’t possibly know that George is Anna’s cat, I remind myself. It’s just a coincidence she has mentioned both names in such close proximity.

‘Yes,’ I reply, steady my voice. ‘I stayed at Anna’s. It’s a lovely apartment with a little garden.’ There, I didn’t tell a lie, it was just an evasion. Anxious to move the conversation in another direction, I lift the lid of the casserole and peek inside. ‘Did Lucien give you a rabbit?’

‘No,’ she says with a broad smile. ‘It was hanging outside the door when I went to milk the cows this morning. Skinned and all.’

It takes a moment for the import to sink in. Then I cry, 'Claude!'

'Yes, he must have left it last night while I was asleep. Remember he said he wouldn't be far away. It's his way of telling us he's all right.'

No wonder my mother is so light-hearted. 'I wish he could be here for lunch today,' I say. 'And Marius too.'

'So do I.' My mother's eyes are glistening.

'Would you like me to set the dining room table, Maman?'

'I've already done it. I invited Lucien and the doctor. Why don't you go and get changed? You look as though you've slept in your clothes.'

'I slept on Anna's couch.'

'Did you two enjoy the film?'

'It was a German musical,' I say, dodging the question.

'Enough said,' she replies. 'They've even taken over the cinema.'

'Do you need any help with lunch?'

'I'll be fine. Now, you go and put on that pretty cotton dress I made for you a couple of years ago. The one with the Rouen lace. And wear your hair out. You can borrow my pearls too.'



‘I’m not going to a ball, Maman.’

She shoots me one of her warning looks indicating I should do as I’m told.



Lucien arrives first, still dressed in his Sunday best and bearing a basket of apples and pears.

‘Rabbit stew. I could smell it from the courtyard. I’ll be eating rabbit too,’ he says with a wink. ‘Some kind person left one already skinned outside my door this morning.’

He kisses Maman and me on both cheeks but I notice that he also squeezes my mother’s hand. Nothing more is said about the boys, but there’s an unspoken understanding that all is well, at least for the time being.

‘How was yesterday’s visit from the *Boche*?’ I ask Lucien while Maman is outside picking fresh herbs to garnish the stew.

‘That Bauer is a tough character. I think he was disappointed he had to deal with a gimpy-legged Frenchman instead of an attractive young woman. They took away a lot of fruit and vegetables but I’d already hidden basket-loads in the cellar.’

‘Did he want to change the arrangement?’

‘No, except that he asked for an extra jar of *tapenade* and I gave it to him. Your father used to say: *Donne au chien l’os pour qu’il ne convoite pas ta viande*. Give the dog a bone and he won’t covet your meat.’

At that moment my mother shepherds Doctor Lebrun through the back door.

‘In the country we always use *la porte en arrière*,’ she tells him. ‘Front doors are rarely opened, even for doctors.’

‘I’m learning that, *madame*,’ he says with a shy smile.

Dressed in a grey suit and a black bowtie, he stands in the opening, holding a posy of flowers. If only my heart would jump just a little at the sight of him.

After the preliminary greetings, he remembers the flowers he’s clutching. ‘For you, *madame*,’ he says to my mother.

‘How lovely,’ Maman responds. ‘Did you grow them yourself?’

‘Not really. They come from my garden, but the housekeeper tends it for me. Madame Perrault.’

‘Ah, yes, I went to school with her. She’s a fine cook.’

‘You’re right about that, *madame*.’

‘Do come and sit in the *salon* with Monsieur Bernard while we prepare lunch. Would you care for an *apéro*, Doctor? A white Dubonnet perhaps?’

‘*S’il vous plaît, madame,*’ he replies.

Although we are *vignerons*, I can’t ever recall my mother offering anyone an *apéritif*. I notice a wry smile on Lucien’s lips – he knows she’s trying to impress the doctor. While the gentlemen make themselves comfortable in the sitting room, my mother pours three glasses of Dubonnet and places them on a tray together with a bowl of olives and three linen napkins.

‘Three?’ I ask her.

‘Yes, you should go and join them. I can manage on my own.’

All at once, she’s plumping the folds of my dress and rearranging my hair. There’s nothing I can do but stand there and be fussed over like a doll. Having woken from a nap under the kitchen table, George Sand is rubbing against my leg.

‘There, that’s better,’ Maman says at last. ‘And don’t forget to ask him about his work. Men like a girl who is interested in what they do for a living.’

Stifling a chuckle, I carry the tray into the *salon*, place it on the low table beside the sofa and hand out the drinks. George follows and makes himself at home on the

window seat. As I give the doctor his glass, our hands touch fleetingly and I wait for the tingle. But there's nothing. No sparks, no fumes, not even the tiniest thrill. I take a seat on the sofa beside Lucien and opposite Jean Lebrun.

After a moment Lucien says, 'By the way, Jean, I found a rabbit hanging outside my door this morning. Madame Dupré received one too.'

'Ah,' the doctor replies and helps himself to an olive.

'Here,' I say, offering him a linen napkin and waiting for him to elucidate. After all, Claude did nominate him as the go-between.

'*Merci*, Camille,' he replies, leaning back in the armchair and sipping his Dubonnet.

'Jean, do you know where they are?' I ask impatiently.

'Do *you*?' he responds.

'No, of course not, but if I wanted a good hideout not too far from Montpellier I'd choose the mountains around Cazevieille. Papa took us hiking there once. It's like a fortress with those steep cliffs and deep gorges.'

'A mouse with only one hole is soon captured,' the doctor replies.

'So they move from one spot to another?' I ask in a whisper.

‘How would I know, Camille? I’m just a humble doctor. I have enough to do looking after my patients without getting involved in anything else.’

Although I’m not convinced, I’ve said too much already. After that, I ask him about his work, just in case my mother is listening from the kitchen. Then we all eat lunch in the dining room where Lucien regales us with happy tales about how he and my father used to go canoeing on the Hérault. It must have been an idyllic time, but so was my own childhood – until Papa died.

As he’s leaving, the doctor asks me if I would like to accompany him to the cinema next Saturday afternoon.

‘I’m sorry, Jean. I have to work on Saturday afternoons.’

‘What about lunch in Montpellier next week? I have to pick up some more supplies.’

‘I’m afraid I can’t take lunch breaks. I’m doing my boss’s job while she’s looking after her sick mother in Lyon.’ As soon as the words leave my lips, I realise that if I’d stayed with Anna in Montpellier last night, she couldn’t possibly be in Lyon, caring for her mother. How could I have made such a blunder? I’ll need to be more careful.

‘Are you quite all right, Camille?’ the doctor asks ‘You’ve gone rather pale.’

‘It’s just that time of the month,’ I whisper. Luckily my mother and Lucien are out of earshot.

‘I’ll see you at Mass on Sunday then?’ he says.

‘Yes, of course.’

Just then my mother appears in the doorway. She must have overheard the end of this exchange because she says, ‘You’ll come for lunch after Mass next Sunday, Doctor?’

‘I’d like that, *madame*. And, please call me Jean.’

‘In that case, Jean, you must call me Louise.’

# CHAPTER 29



*Petit chaudron, grandes oreilles.*

**Little pot, big handles.**

**(Little child, big ears.)**

Old proverb

September, 1931

When I overheard Papa saying that I would never see Kurt again, the words, coming from someone whose opinion I trusted more than anyone else in the world, hit me like a punch in the stomach. All at once, I realised that those daydreams about us meeting again in Paris were just that – fantasies, wishful thinking, make-believe. It was never going to happen; I had been a fool to think so. But at least he wouldn't be meeting up with Sophie in the future either – her involvement with another man had put an end to that.

Only one thing stopped me from feeling desperately sad about Kurt's imminent departure and that was the prospect of starting at my new school in a week's time. A bubble of excitement was building inside me, alternating with moments of apprehension whenever I thought about only having a day and a half at home each week.



But on the positive side, there were tantalising new possibilities opening up for me – subjects with mysterious names such as Domestic Science, Cultural Studies, *Théologie* and *Civilitéé*, not to mention my mother’s beloved Latin. Then there was the convent itself, hidden behind a high stone wall like a castle. My mother had told me about the internal quadrangle flanked by cloisters and the physic garden in the centre, planted geometrically with fragrant herbs. I couldn’t wait to wander through those cloisters and imagine I was Hugo’s Esmeralda, or explore the library with its shelves that reached to the ceiling and required sliding ladders to access them. As for the nuns, I had only seen them from a distance but I could picture their Botticelli faces, so beautiful they needed no adornment, their hair shaven and bare scalps hidden beneath a wimple, and their bodies concealed by sweeping black robes. They were women who had renounced the outside world with all its temptations in order to be brides of Christ. It couldn’t have been more intriguing.

While I was daydreaming about the romantic aspects of my schooling, my mother was working on the practical matters. Some months earlier the nuns had sent us patterns for making the pleated school tunic and blouses.

‘The uniform hasn’t changed since I was at school,’ Maman had said wistfully when she opened the packet.

Papa had taken us to Montpellier to purchase the requisite metres of navy-blue gabardine and white poplin from the biggest *draperie-mercerie* in Montpellier. Ever since then, whenever she had a spare moment, my mother would be working on my uniform, either stitching by hand or using her trusty treadle sewing machine. From time to time she would call me up to her bedroom for a fitting. I would have to stand perfectly still on a footstool while she checked the length, pinned up the hem and adjusted the darts. As she stood there with pins in her mouth, I was terrified she’d swallow one, but fortunately she never did. Apart from that, the worst part for me was taking off the garment afterwards without being pricked by the pins.

The convent had also provided us with an inventory of ‘miscellaneous garments’, which I found so fascinating I would read it over and over again. Six pairs of white bloomers, three white cotton vests, two woollen nighties, two cotton nighties . . . the list went on and on, but what struck me was that every item was designated ‘plain’. No colours, no patterns. No lace or trims. No hair ribbons either. Rubber bands and

hairpins only. And no jewellery allowed, save for a wristwatch with a plain black band, and a cross on a chain.

Having an alumna of the convent in my own house, I bombarded my mother with questions about the list. Why was everything plain? Why no hair ribbon? And what was wrong with lace-trimmed underwear, or silver watchbands, for that matter?

‘Convent girls are expected to be humble, unadorned and pure of heart,’ my mother replied. ‘Because those three virtues pave the path to godliness.’

‘Like the Three Graces in Montpellier?’ I asked her. ‘Beauty, elegance and mirth.’

‘Those naked women on the fountain? Absolutely not!’



On his third last day Kurt appeared at breakfast, looking brighter. Perhaps he had decided to put Sophie in the past. I have to admit I was relieved that visiting the patient had been prohibited.

For breakfast Maman served us home-made bread, creamy butter and an assortment of berry jams. We were almost finished when Kurt gave a little cough as if to attract our collective attention.

‘*Madame et monsieur,*’ he said, addressing my parents, ‘seeing that I will be leaving on Saturday, would you kindly give me permission to take Camille and Claude on an outing tomorrow?’

Claude and I swivelled our heads in Kurt’s direction.

‘What kind of outing, Kurt?’ my mother asked doubtfully.

‘When I was on the train from Paris coming here to the Languedoc, I saw a railway poster for a place called Carcassonne. A fortified city from the Middle Ages. I thought we might go there tomorrow.’

‘You’d have to get a bus from Montpellier to Sète,’ my father interjected, ever-practical, ‘and then the Bordeaux train. But it would be a very long journey. I don’t think you could go there and back and have time to look around, all in the one day.’

‘I have considered that, sir. If I drove there it would take us about three hours.’

‘Drive?’ I said. ‘But we don’t have a motorcar.’

‘I have made some enquiries in Montpellier,’ Kurt replied. ‘It’s possible to hire a car for the day. In fact, I could rent it this evening and return it tomorrow night.’

While my father considered this plan, he rubbed his chin. ‘I have never heard of anyone hiring a motorcar before, but what an excellent idea.’

‘You could both come with us, if you like,’ Kurt said to my parents.

‘That’s kind of you, *mon fils*,’ my father answered, ‘but there’s too much to do here. I’m helping Lucien with the grape-picking and Louise has Camille’s school clothes to finish.’

‘Have you ever been to Carcassonne, sir?’

‘Once when we were in our teens, Lucien and I caught the train to the new town and walked up to the fortress. I’ll never forget it.’

‘Please can we go, Papa?’ I plead.

Claude joined in, ‘*S’il te plait, Maman.*’

‘Can you actually drive?’ my mother asked Kurt.

‘Yes, *madame*. I passed my licence test four years ago. In Munich I use my father’s motor car.’

‘What kind is it?’ Claude asked.

‘A Mercedes-Benz tourer.’

‘Your family has a Mercedes-Benz! *Formidable!*’ Claude exclaimed.

After a moment Kurt turned towards my parents and asked, ‘Do I have your permission to take the children to Carcassonne?’

‘I don’t see why not,’ my father said, casting a glance at my mother. ‘You’ll drive carefully, won’t you, Kurt?’

‘Of course, I will, sir.’

‘I suppose they can go,’ Maman said, though the reluctance in her voice was obvious.

‘We’ll set off at seven,’ Kurt said to Claude and me. ‘Can you be ready in time?’

‘*Mais oui!*’ Claude responded.



That night it took me a long time to fall asleep because my head was aglow with Technicolor images of towers and ramparts, tournaments and jousting. And most of all, I was overwhelmed by the thought that my knight in shining armour had chosen to spend his last full day in the Languedoc with me.

When Maman woke us next morning it was barely dawn.

‘There’s a surprise outside,’ she said.

Claude was still rubbing his eyes but I jumped out of bed and rushed to the attic window.

‘Oh my goodness!’ I exclaimed at the sight of the shining black motorcar in the eerie grey light. ‘It’s beautiful.’

‘It’s a Citroën. Two years old,’ my mother said, sounding like an expert. I wondered how she knew that.

‘Heaven knows how much this motorcar cost to hire,’ my mother mused. ‘Those Müllers must be rolling in money.’

Claude stood on tiptoe to peer out the window. ‘It’s a C4! *Incroyable!*’

‘Where’s Papa?’ I asked.

‘He and Kurt are having breakfast. They just took me for a spin.’

‘So you weren’t milking the cows?’

‘No, I’ll do it in a while. They’ll just have to be patient.’

I could imagine the Aubracs with their taut, aching udders, yet I didn’t blame her for choosing the Citroën over the cows.

‘Now, hurry up and get dressed, the two of you,’ she said. ‘Your breakfast is on the table.’



I could hardly believe that I was sitting in a motor car next to Kurt on our way to visit a mediaeval citadel. Admittedly, Claude was in the back seat, but it was still the most exciting thing I'd ever done.

On my father's recommendation, we took the back road, passing endless vineyards, interspersed with villages much like our own. Now and then, a ruined fortress would rise from a hilltop and Kurt would tell us it had belonged to the Cathars. Who were the Cathars, I asked myself but didn't like to enquire of Kurt, for fear he'd think me stupid. Meanwhile Claude was hanging out the back window, his dark hair streaming away from his face. I'd never seen him so happy or talkative, remarking enthusiastically on the speed of the car and the size of its engine, things that didn't interest me in the least. Instead, I was lost in a day-dream, imagining I was grown-up and Kurt was taking me to the castle at Carcassonne to propose to me.

At the halfway mark Kurt stopped the Citroën on the edge of the road and the three of us sat on the running board, drinking milky coffee from a vacuum flask and gazing at the fields of smiling sunflowers and the blue-tinged mountains lining the horizon.

'I could run away and live there and nobody would ever find me,' Claude said.

It was the longest statement I had ever heard him make.



Back in the car, we headed north-west, our route lined by plane trees, standing to attention as we passed. Kurt started a game of ‘spot the castle’. I, in turn, made up a game where one of us would name a book and another would have to supply the author. Claude didn’t like that one and created his own game of counting cars and trucks. It didn’t last long. Being on the back road, we saw plenty of horses and carts but very few motor vehicles.

All at once, Kurt slowed down and pointed to the north. Atop a plateau stood a fortified city, its turrets topped with witch’s hats like something out of a fairy tale. I had to rub my eyes to check it wasn’t a mirage. None of us spoke; we just stared in awe at this marvel from the Middle Ages. Then we drove across the plain and into the lower town, following the signs saying ‘Cité’. A narrow arched gateway marked the entrance to the fortress. Kurt was about to park outside when a man beckoned us to drive in.

‘We’ll never fit through the gate,’ I exclaimed, but the man continued to gesticulate and Claude said,

‘Of course, we’ll fit. Go ahead, Kurt.’

After pausing for a moment to assess the clearance, Kurt edged forward while I held my breath. Somehow we drove through without scraping the beautiful rented Citroën.

The cobbled road led up a hill to a small square where Kurt parked the car. The man from the gate appeared breathless and holding his hand out for a tip. Kurt gave him twenty-five centimes, and he went away frowning and mumbling to himself. No sooner had Kurt turned off the engine than Claude jumped out of the car, bursting to explore the fortress. We followed him, barely able to keep up as he careered along the ancient alleyways and climbed onto the ramparts.

After a while he was calm enough to sit on the edge and eat one of the baguettes my mother had prepared for us. Kurt told us how this fortress-citadel had once been at the junction of trade routes running from east to west and north to south, which meant that kings and princes and dukes had fought over it for three centuries. Horrible things had happened here, Kurt told us, particularly to the Cathars.

‘What kind of things?’ Claude asked enthusiastically.

‘Boiling in oil, for example,’ Kurt said as I grimaced in response.

We continued to wander around the streets until Claude found a little tourist shop, selling wooden swords and shields and suits of armour from miniature versions to life-size. He soon had a sword in his hand and was thrusting it in the air.

‘Would you like it?’ Kurt asked. ‘It could be a farewell present. I should get one for Marius too. So that you’ll have someone to joust with.’

‘What do you say, Claude?’ I whispered, giving him a nudge.

‘Thank you, Kurt,’ he replied meekly.

‘And Camille, what would you like?’ Kurt asked.

‘I couldn’t accept a present,’ I responded demurely ‘This trip is more than enough.’

‘I can’t very well give Claude and Marius a gift and leave you out.’

‘Well, in that case, I might just look around,’ I replied casually, even though I was already enchanted by a row of little knights in shining armour lined up on one of the shelves.

‘Maybe one of these,’ I said, picking up a figure and surreptitiously checking the price. *Mon Dieu*, it was double the cost of the sword.

‘Which one would you like?’ Kurt asked.

Good heavens. Each one was different. Some were on horseback, others standing with a sword and shield. Some even had plaques bearing their name engraved in tiny letters. How could I possibly choose between them?

I dithered for so long Kurt asked, ‘Of all the knights of the Round Table, who is your favourite?’

‘That’s easy. Sir Lancelot of the Lake.’

‘My favourite is D’Artagnan,’ Claude chipped in.

‘But he’s not a kni—,’ I shot back, before Kurt caught my eye.

‘A fine swordsman, Claude,’ Kurt said. ‘D’Artagnan could win any duel.’

‘Well, who’s *your* favourite?’ I asked Kurt.

‘A German knight called Lohengrin. He was the son of Parzifal and went about the countryside doing good deeds.’

‘Is he here?’ I asked.

Kurt ran his eyes over the row of knights until a smile crossed his face. ‘Yes, there he is. See him standing in a boat pulled by a swan. They called him the Swan Knight.’

‘Then he’s the one I’d like to have . . . please.’

‘Are you certain you don’t want Lancelot? I’m sure he’d be here somewhere.’

‘No thank you, I’d like to have the German one.’

Afterwards Kurt and Claude staged a sword fight atop the ramparts. Afraid one of them might fall, I begged them to stop. Eventually they did, declaring it a draw. Then

Kurt had us stand in a circle and cry; '*Un pour tous, tous pour un*' at the top of our voices so that the sacred oath echoed through the battlements and ricocheted off the stone walls, startling a couple of tourists who were wandering past.

The afternoon light was fading as we made our way back to the car. We passed a street photographer who took a picture of the three of us and Kurt ordered a copy. On the trip back I taught Kurt to sing '*Ah! Mon beau château*' and even Claude joined in. Now and then I stole sideways glances at Kurt as I held the little knight tightly against my chest, resolving to cherish this day as the best one of my life.

# CHAPTER 30



*'Femme bonne vaut une couronne.*

A good wife is the crown of life.

Old rhyming proverb

June, 1943

After a fitful night's sleep, I wake early on Monday morning, my heart pounding. During the night a new thought has entered my mind and I can't seem to erase it. What if the Gestapo have found out about Kurt helping Claude? And what if they know about Claude joining the Maquis? Might they be thinking that Kurt is involved? Is it possible that they're interrogating him right now in the prison in Montpellier? Could that explain why Kurt disappeared so soon after Claude? Then reality takes over. None of that makes sense. It's only been a few days since the exemption – the Gestapo couldn't possibly know those things. They might want the world to believe they are all-seeing and all-knowing, but they're not – the fact that Anna was able to hide in plain sight for three years proves it. Pull yourself together, Camille Dupré, I tell myself. You have to be calm today for Anna's sake.

Once I'm dressed, I tiptoe past my mother's room – she's still sound asleep with George Sand pressed against her back, purring loudly. As I glance at the photograph

of Papa on the bedside table, I wonder if he's sent George to keep my mother company.

In the kitchen, I butter some of yesterday's bread and eat it with a generous smear of raspberry jam before making my lunch and leaving a note for my mother, saying I've gone to work early and might be home late. As I cycle down the lane, I gaze up towards the grey-blue mountains, looming to the west. That's where Claude, Marius and their compatriots will be hiding – I'm sure of it. And if they really do have multiple hideouts, as Jean Lebrun inferred, they'll be moving from one bolthole to another like clever mice.

This morning a warm wind is blowing from the coast, and rain clouds are scudding across the sky. Sometimes I think that the Languedoc must be the windiest place in France, although I've never been anywhere else so I really don't know. At least today it's not the *Tramontane*, which can sweep in from the north, frazzling our nerves and wreaking havoc. Whenever the wind blows from the Mediterranean and the air is damp, it's likely to be the *Marin*.

I make it work just as the rain begins to fall in big, fat drops. Normally Anna would be ensconced in her office by now, working through the pile of forms required by the



Germans, but today I'm the first one to arrive. The place feels strange and frightening but I reassure myself that it's just my own anxiety producing these feelings. Libraries have always been a safe haven for me; I don't want that to change. After unlocking the door to Anna's office, I take a seat at the desk, remove the piece of paper with the fake Lyon phone number from my handbag and place it under the blotter, ready for this afternoon.

'You look tired, Camille, and it's only Monday morning,' Fleurette says, appearing at the doorway with a feather duster. 'Do you mind if I dust Madame Moreau's office? I didn't get a chance on Friday. I'd like it to be perfect for when she returns this afternoon.'

'Please do. Would you like me to go outside?'

No, no, I'll work around you. I bet you'll be relieved to see her,' she says.

'I can't wait,' I reply.



I had expected the day to pass with agonising slowness, but it's quite the opposite. Juggling Anna's workload with my own is keeping me so busy I barely glance at the

clock. At half past three I remove the paper from beneath the blotter, dial the operator and give her the number in Lyon.

‘Just a moment, please,’ she says.

When the operator comes back on the line, she says, ‘That number is disconnected. Are you sure it’s correct?’

‘That’s what I was given.’

‘In that case, please check the number and call again.’

‘Thank you,’ I say, putting down the receiver.

For a while I just sit there, contemplating the next stage. Then I take the stairs to the basement where Léo is having a cigarette.

‘Is Madame Moreau back?’ he asks, looking guilty at being caught taking *un pause-cigarette*.

‘No, she hasn’t turned up. The train from Lyon would have arrived at two and she should have been here by now. That’s why I just tried to phone her, but the operator said the number must be wrong.’

‘That’s odd,’ he says, blowing circles of smoke into the air.

‘She was in such a rush to catch the train she must have made a mistake when she wrote down the telephone number. Now we have no way of contacting her.’

‘You don’t know her mother’s address in Lyon, do you?’

‘No, I only have the mother’s number and it’s wrong. I think I should telephone the municipal authorities and tell them Anna is away and that I can’t contact her.’

‘Why don’t you wait till tomorrow? She might arrive on the morning train.’

‘I hope so, but in the meantime I should let them know she’s not here. Just in case she’s forgotten to contact them herself. Either way, they might have the correct number and then we can telephone her to find out what’s happening. Why don’t you come up to the office with me and we’ll call them now?’

‘All right,’ he says, stubbing out his cigarette.

So far, so good. On the way I spot Fleurette on a stepladder, dusting the shelves.

‘Would you have a moment, Fleurette?’ I whisper.

‘Is something wrong?’

‘Probably not. Let’s discuss it in the office.’

At the reception desk there’s a queue of schoolgirls waiting to borrow books. Damn! While Léo and Fleurette wait for me outside the office, I stamp books and file cards

with frightening speed. Then the three of us go into Anna's office under the watchful eye of Marshall Pétain, and I telephone the municipal authorities, who tell me to contact them again if I don't hear from Madame Moreau by closing time tomorrow. And no, they don't have a contact number in Lyon, only the phone number of her apartment in Montpellier.

'Well,' Léo says, 'there's probably a simple explanation.'

'I'm sure there is,' I respond. 'Let's get back to work. There's another queue forming at the reception desk.'



I'm glad I warned my mother that I would be late. It turns out that by tomorrow the Germans require the documentation to prove we've removed all the 'harmful' books from our shelves – there are several we couldn't trace so I've marked them as 'Stolen'. Cursing the *Boche*, I finally leave the library at six. The rain has passed and the *Marin* has transformed itself into a light breeze that ruffles my hair and cools my skin. The sun is still blazing in the sky, courtesy of the Germans' extended *Sommerzeit*.

When I pull up in our courtyard I spot a second horse in the paddock – Lucien’s mare, Cosette, a pretty bay, who seems to have caught the attention of the elderly Bisou. In the kitchen the table is laid with salads, rabbit terrine and the ubiquitous cheese, all untouched, and Maman and Lucien are sitting side by side, drinking Merlot.

‘Sorry I’m late,’ I say, dropping my handbag in the corner.

‘We waited for you,’ my mother says with a hint of a giggle. Maman is not a giggler. How much has she been drinking?

My eyes move to Lucien, who has a silly smile on his face. Has he been overdoing the Merlot too? The atmosphere is decidedly peculiar.

‘I have something to ask you, Camille,’ he says.

I pray that it’s not about ‘the married man’. No, he would never mention that in my mother’s presence.

‘I need to ask your consent,’ he continues.

‘Consent?’ I respond, utterly confused.

‘You see, Camille, I would like to seek permission to marry your mother,’ he says, throwing a lingering look in her direction which she returns in kind.

I suppose I should have seen this coming. I've known they were fond of each other for a long time now.

'I'm sorry if we've caught you off guard,' my mother says. 'And I know how much you loved your father and still do. I'll never stop loving him either. But I also love Lucien. We want to be married.'

'Will you give us your blessing, Camille?' Lucien asks.

'Of course,' I say, my eyes brimming with tears. 'Does Denise know? Or Sophie?'

'Not yet. You're the first to hear the news,' Lucien says. 'We will telephone the girls in the morning.'

'And we'll let the doctor know too,' my mother says with a wink. 'I hope the boys will be pleased.'

'I'm sure they will be,' I reply. 'They've always been like brothers to each other. Now it will be official. Have you decided on a date?'

'In September after the harvest,' Lucien says. 'Three months seems like a long time but it will be here before we know it.'

'Where will you live?' I ask, knowing what the answer will be.

'At the Domaine Bernard,' Lucien replies. 'But we'll work the two properties as one.'

‘You and Claude will still inherit this house,’ my mother chips in. ‘We’re going to see the notary in the village to have it put in writing.’

‘We’d like you to come and live with us once we’re married, Camille,’ Lucien says.

‘That’s a very kind offer, Lucien, but this is my home. And you two should begin your married life unencumbered by adult children.’

‘Just think about it,’ Maman says. ‘It’s a big house – we wouldn’t get in each other’s way. And there’s an inside toilet and hot water on tap.’

‘And electricity all day long instead of a generator running for a few hours,’ Lucien adds.

‘It sounds tempting. But who would milk the cows?’

‘I’m taking them with me, and the chickens too,’ my mother says. ‘We’ll have to move the cheeses and the cheese-making equipment as well.’

‘What about the boxes of Muscat?’ I ask. They’re one of the last links to my father’s winemaking.

‘The Muscat should stay,’ Lucien replies. ‘Those boxes are well hidden in the cellar. But we’ll need to look at selling them over the next year or so. I know neither of you

wants to part with them, but they have a life of about ten years and those bottles are from the '35 vintage.'

While I sit silently, remembering the year before my father's death when he struggled to care for his grape vines, Lucien talks about how to sell the Muscat, deciding that releasing it in small amounts to the black market would be better than a big sale which might attract the attention of the Germans. Although I know this discussion has to take place and my father would no doubt agree that the wine should be sold rather than allowed to go sour, I wish I didn't have to hear it. Then the conversation returns to me.

'I don't like the idea of you being in this house on your own, Camille,' Maman says. 'Not with the *Boche* roaming the countryside. It would be different if Claude was around.'

'I'd have Babette to protect me until Claude comes home.'

'I'm not happy about it, but let's not argue tonight,' she says. 'We have a wedding to plan.'





The week after the harvest, Lucien Bernard and Louise Dupré are married in the village church. My mother carries a bunch of wildflowers left on the doorstep during the night. Not just any wildflowers, but blue gentians which only grow in the mountains and should have finished flowering long ago.

It is a small ceremony for family and close friends. My aunt and her husband have come from Arles for the occasion. Denise, her husband and baby are visiting from Aix-en-Provence, and Sophie has returned from Paris, having secured the various travel permits with apparent ease.

She certainly turns heads at the Nuptial Mass in the village. Although she isn't wearing a wedding ring like most of the girls her age, she does sport a dazzling pearl necklace and a diamond bracelet. And there's a fur coat too. Afterwards, as the congregation pours outside and the women of the village gather together, I hear snatches of conversation, most of it concerning Sophie Bernard. How did she acquire such luxury items? Does she have a fancy man? Is she a *courtesane*? *Une demi-mondaine*? I'm not sure myself. All I know is that Sophie returned to Paris after the miscarriage, but not to the job with the shipping company – her father forbade it. What happened next was always discussed in whispers, but as a child I overheard

enough to grasp that Sophie had received a large payout from the company, which meant she could look for another position at her leisure. Whenever she visited at Christmas and Easter, she would be wearing haute couture and furs, so I always assumed she had secured a high-paid position. And perhaps she did, but not in the way I thought.

I stopped being angry at Sophie a long time ago. After all, it was only a dalliance between Kurt and Sophie, and they went their separate ways. Now, of course, I'm grown up, and she's my step-sister.

I've resigned myself to the fact that Kurt won't be coming back. For his own reasons, he has decided our romance wasn't right for him. What really hurts is the fact that he didn't tell me he was leaving. And now that he's gone, our time together lingers in my memory like an unfinished story and I'm overwhelmed by the sadness of it. I can never tell anyone how I'm feeling though, not even the anonymous priest in Montpellier.

Following the ceremony, the newlyweds travel back to the Bernard house in a carriage festooned with roses and ivy, organised by Sophie. The wedding celebration is held on the candle-lit terrace and runs late into the evening at which time Lucien takes his guitar and serenades my mother like a troubadour of old. I watch them both

with tears in my eyes – I’m certain my father would approve of their union, and so would Tatie Margot.

Jean Lebrun is present at the celebration. He’s like a member of the family now, a steadfast presence in our lives, a loyal friend. Despite my lack of encouragement, it’s obvious he still has feelings for me. I suspect he’s decided that if he’s patient enough, eventually I’ll respond. My mother, however, is losing *her* patience.

‘That man is not going to hang around forever, Camille Dupré,’ she reminded me this past week. ‘One day he’ll decide he’s had enough, and there won’t be any shortage of interested young ladies waiting to take your place.’

As I contemplate my mother’s words, I spot Jean making his way towards me, carrying two glasses of Merlot. I blush at the fact I’ve just been thinking about him, even though it wasn’t in a romantic way.

‘They make a handsome couple, don’t they?’ he remarks as he hands me the glass and we watch Lucien singing to my mother.

‘It was meant to be,’ I reply.

‘Will your mother be living here now?’

‘Yes, they’re going to combine the two properties into one estate.’

‘Are you intending to move up here too?’

‘They’ve invited me to come, but I don’t think it’s right. They might be old, but they’re still newlyweds . . . and newlyweds deserve their privacy.’

‘Old!’ he responds with mock indignation. ‘Your mother is *my* age. And Lucien can’t be more than fifty.’

‘Fifty-one.’

I can feel his gaze on me. Then he says, ‘So you think I’m old. Is that why you—?’

‘Oh, look,’ I interrupt, pointing towards the table, ‘they’re about to cut the cake.’

That puts an end to a conversation which is heading in a dangerous direction. After the cake-cutting Lucien makes a speech about how God has blessed him twice in the matrimony department.

‘*Femme bonne vaut une couronne,*’ he says.

# CHAPTER 31



*Dire adieu, c'est mourir un peu.*

To say goodbye is to die a little.

Old rhyming proverb

September, 1931

On Friday I put Kurt's imminent departure to the back of my mind, even as the last hours passed one by one. But that morning it finally hit home when I came upon his leather suitcase at the bottom of the stairs. Folded carefully over the case was his cashmere overcoat with the fedora perched on top. Would we ever meet again or was this the final farewell? Desperately I tried to summon up the scene starring me as a famous actress based in Paris and Kurt a foreign correspondent for a German newspaper, but the sensible part of me realised that no amount of imagining could make that story come true.

From behind me I heard a little cough – not Papa's wheezy rasp but a genteel *ahem*. I turned to see Kurt holding a large squarish parcel wrapped in butcher's paper.

'I have a farewell gift for you, *ma petite*,' he said.

'But you bought us gifts in Carcassonne.'

'This is something special.'

‘May I open it now?’

‘Of course,’ he said with a radiant smile. ‘Be careful, it’s heavy.’

I sat on the bottom step and unceremoniously ripped the paper away, only to find his German-French dictionary inside. I lifted the book to my chest and held it against me as though it was a baby.

‘Thank you,’ I said, my eyes blurred with tears, ‘this is the best present anyone has ever given me.’

‘It’s a little *eselsohrig*— is that the word?’

‘Not *donkey*-eared,’ I replied with a giggle. ‘The expression is *dog*-eared.’ Then I spotted the grin on his face and realised he was joking.

‘Promise me you’ll keep practising your German,’ he said.

‘I promise.’

My mother’s voice rumbled from the kitchen. ‘Breakfast is ready!’

‘Coming, *madame*,’ he called back.

‘I have a present for you too,’ I lied. ‘I’ll give it you later.’ I had no idea what I was going to give him. Clutching the heavy tome and the pieces of wrapping paper, I followed him into the kitchen. We all ate breakfast together as though it was a normal

day, but it wasn't any such thing; it was the end of the world as I knew it. Only the prospect of my new school kept me from feeling utterly wretched.

Kurt had caught me off guard with the dictionary. I'd been so busy denying the fact that he was leaving I hadn't thought about a farewell gift, and now it was too late. Or was it? I gulped down my breakfast, excused myself and dashed outside. I would need one of my mother's empty 'Le Parfait' jars – the kind she used for her pickled walnuts and *tapenade*. There was a wooden box full of them in the barn. I chose a small one and went about the garden choosing things to fill it – sprigs of rosemary, sage and thyme, and lavender flowers for good measure. On the perimeter of the garden a thicket of juniper provided me with spicy berries. But a souvenir of Languedoc wouldn't be complete without limestone. I searched the ground around the house and finally found the perfect little rock. Into the jar it went, together with the herbs and berries. Putting my nose to the opening, I inhaled deeply. Yes, it was definitely Languedoc in a jar. I sealed the lid, held it aloft and admired my handiwork.

When I returned to the kitchen, breakfast was finished, the dishes were done and the room was empty. Hastily I placed the jar in a brown paper bag and tied it with string. Just as I finished, Kurt appeared with his bags, followed by my parents.



‘I’ll go and hitch Bisou to the cart,’ my father said.

‘You’d better hurry up, or Kurt will miss his train,’ Maman replied.

Outside, purple wisteria blossoms, heavy with spicy perfume, hung from the arbour. It crossed my mind I should have included a few wisteria petals in Kurt’s jar but it was too late now – Papa was stroking Bisou’s neck and puffing on his pipe, and Claude was already seated in the cart.

‘Are you coming, Maman?’ I asked.

‘No, I’ll say goodbye here.’

‘Thank you for your hospitality, *madame*,’ Kurt said. ‘You’ve been most kind.’

‘My pleasure,’ she replied politely but I could tell she was relieved to see the last of her German guest, not because he had been drunken or oafish but simply on account of his nationality.

After bending down to ruffle Babette’s ears and stroke Bonaparte’s back, Kurt climbed onto the seat next to Papa, I hopped up beside him and Claude found himself consigned to the cart. Kurt turned and waved to my mother.

‘Goodbye, *madame*.’

‘*Adieu*, Kurt,’ she replied.

Then Papa gave the reins a flip.

‘Walk on, Bisou.’

As we headed towards the road, the dogs were running behind us, barking loudly, even though Papa turned and shouted at them to go back. They seemed to know Kurt was leaving for good. Meanwhile I had to hold on to the hope that one day we would meet again.

‘Open this on the train,’ I whispered, handing Kurt the unprepossessing little parcel. ‘It will remind you of the Languedoc.’

‘Thank you, Camille,’ he said, placing it his coat pocket. ‘*Dans les petits pots, les meilleurs onguent.*’ Good things come in small jars.



On Sunday afternoon Papa delivered me to the convent. The main gate was set into a high stone wall with a button to push and a sign below it saying:

**Convent business only.**  
**Strictly no hawkers.**

When my father pressed the button, a nun appeared at the iron grille. Her expression was dour, and there appeared to be a moustache sprouting from above her top lip. So much for my expectations of a Botticelli face.

‘Name?’ she demanded, without bothering to preface the question with a greeting.

‘Dupré, Camille,’ my father replied, equally businesslike. ‘Her mother was a pupil here back in the war years, Sister.’

The nun opened the gate and beckoned us inside.

‘What was her name, the mother?’

‘Louise Belmont,’ my father replied.

‘I don’t remember her. But we do expect a great deal from the daughters of our old girls,’ she said, eyeing me through wire-rimmed spectacles. Meanwhile I couldn’t take my own eyes off the flourishing moustache.

‘You can say goodbye here,’ she told my father.

‘Here?’ he asked, sounding surprised.

She shot him a stern look. ‘Best to get it over and done with as quickly as possible. Like pulling a tooth.’

‘Couldn’t I just carry her suitcase to her room?’ Papa asked.

‘I’m afraid not. She’s big enough to carry her own case.’

Although it had been a weekend of goodbyes, practice didn’t make it any easier. And it wouldn’t be the touching farewell I had imagined – a lingering scene set in the cloisters with the fragrance of the physic garden filling the air.

‘Be brave, *chérie*. I’ll see you next Saturday.’ His eyes were glistening.

All of a sudden it hit me that we’d never been apart before. Tears began to slide down my cheeks and drop onto my bodice, but I didn’t dare draw attention to them by fishing in my pocket for a handkerchief. While I clung to him, my father bent over and kissed me on the forehead.

‘Papa, I love you,’ I whispered.

‘I love you too, Camille,’ he said in a faltering voice. Gently he disengaged my arms.

‘Please take care of her for me, Sister,’ he said. Then he turned and walked out the gate, pulling it closed behind him. I rushed to the metal grille, pressing my face against it, but the thick stone wall prevented me from seeing anything apart from a section of the building across the road.

‘My name is Sister Agathe,’ the nun said. ‘Now hurry up, girl. It’s almost time for afternoon prayers.’

With a sniffle and a sob, I picked up my suitcase and followed her.

# CHAPTER 32



*Coeur qui soupire n'a pas ce qu'il désire.*  
The heart that sighs doesn't have what it desires.  
Old rhyming proverb

September, 1943

On Monday morning I set off early for work, just as I've done for the past three months. There has been no word from Anna. Surely she must be in America by now. Unless she didn't make it across the border. What if she was taken prisoner by a German patrol? What if something happened to her while she was travelling across Spain? What if she's still in Lisbon waiting for a passage to New York? Stop, I tell myself. Instead of visualising the negatives, why don't you try to picture her sitting in her cousin's garden in Los Angeles, basking in the Californian sunshine?

The municipal authorities have yet to advertise Anna's position. In the meantime, I've been allocated a secretary from the mayor's office, who has been quick to learn the basics of library practice. I did ask the authorities if they would promote Fleurette – she's clever, hardworking and familiar with every single book in the library from dusting them each week. But the powers-that-be quickly informed me that cleaners cannot become librarians. I still don't see why not.

This morning there's a primary school group touring the library. I teach them about the Dewey Decimal system, give each child a classification number and send him or her to find the subject to which it refers. There is considerable commotion associated with this activity and, if Madame Martin was still chief librarian, she wouldn't tolerate the noise and disruption to her temple of silence. Anna, however, would have loved their enthusiasm. After the pupils have left, I take over the reception desk while Marianne, the secretary, goes to the storeroom to have her lunch.

As I sort through cards, searching for overdue books, I happen to look up and see an officer coming through the double doors at the front of the library. Please God, don't let him be from the SS. Over the past three months, the only officials, apart from the municipal authorities, who've had any interest in Anna have been the local police, who ended up classifying her as a missing person. But the hiatus couldn't last forever and it looks as though they've worked it out. My hands start to shake and I stare fixedly at the cards in front of me. Act normally, I say to myself, remembering Anna's advice.

A grey-green uniform looms in front of me. I'm certain it will bear the lightning bolt emblems of the *Schutzstaffel* on the collar. As I force myself to glance up, my heart goes haywire.



‘Kurt!’ I squeal before I can stop myself. Furtively I look around. Thankfully, neither Fleurette nor Léo is in sight, and Marianne is still in the storeroom. An elderly lady, who is something of a library regular, is busy selecting her weekly book from the romance section, and a couple of university students are working silently at a table.

Clutching his cap, Kurt Müller is smiling at me as though we only saw each other yesterday. Does he think he can just walk back into my life as though nothing has happened?

‘Where have you been for the past three months?’ I demand in a low voice.

His blue eyes look perplexed. ‘What do you mean? I left you a note and sent you letters.’

‘Well, I didn’t receive them.’

‘Is there somewhere private we can talk?’ he whispers, fixing his eyes on mine.

I scan the library again. If anyone asks why he’s here I’ll say he’s confirming the removal of ‘harmful’ books. ‘Come to my office,’ I say gruffly.

‘Your office?’

I don’t bother to explain.

As I head towards the back of the library, my whole body is trembling. Anna's name is still on a plaque attached to the office door. I open it and make for the desk. It's a relief to sit down – I doubt my legs would have carried me any further.

'Take a seat,' I say brusquely. Does he think I'm an idiot? There *was* no note. And certainly no letters.

He perches on the chair, holding his cap on his lap like a schoolboy.

'So that's why you're so cross with me. For a moment I thought you'd changed your mind and married that doctor of yours.'

'I don't love the doctor,' I say firmly.

'I'm pleased to hear that,' he replies with the cheekiest of smiles.

'If you think you can walk in and charm me with your smile, you're mistaken,' I say primly. 'I deserve an explanation. I checked at the box office that Saturday in June. There was *no* note.'

'That's because I knew you were concerned about the woman with the red hair, so I thought the hotel would be a safer place. Particularly as *you* had left a note for *me* there.'

Oh dear, I didn't even consider that possibility. Swallowing my pride, I say:

‘I just assumed you’d stood me up.’

‘You know I’d never do that,’ he responds reproachfully.

‘It did seem completely out of character. So I waited outside the cinema until the film finished, hoping you’d turn up. Then I went to the hotel and told the concierge I was supposed to be meeting you.’

‘Didn’t he tell you about the note?’

‘There were so many people vying for his attention that night, he might have forgotten about it. And I didn’t actually mention the name “Yvonne de Galais”.’ I’m starting to feel embarrassed. How could I have been so stupid?

‘So what happened after that? Did you just go home?’

‘No, the concierge gave me your phone number and a . . . a young lady explained about the room number. So I went upstairs and knocked on the door. But while I was there, a colonel came along and mistook me for a prostitute.’

‘You poor girl,’ he says, trying to conceal a smile but not succeeding.

‘He told me you were on extended leave. Oh, and he offered me the same amount that you paid me, plus a bonus *and* dinner, for the pleasure of my company.’

‘I’m assuming you declined.’

‘I’d only had a bowl of noodles since breakfast and I was hungry. But not *that* hungry. So I put him in his place.’

‘In German, I suppose.’

‘Of course. Then he apologised.’

‘I’m sorry you had to go through all of that. But you obviously dealt summarily with the colonel – I wonder who he was.’

‘He was blond with blue eyes . . .’ I reply, ending with a laugh, when I realise my description is no help at all.

‘You must have hated me.’

‘No, I didn’t hate you. I was just disappointed and very sad. Why did you leave so suddenly?’

‘My father phoned that morning from Berlin and told me my mother had just had an operation for breast cancer – she didn’t want me to know about it – but there were complications following the surgery and things didn’t look good. The doctors said I should come home on the next train. So I gave the concierge a note and told him you would come to the hotel at some stage that afternoon. By you, I mean Yvonne de Galais.’ He gives me the tiniest smile. ‘In the note I explained that my mother was ill

and that I would write via the Poste Restante when I had a chance. I couldn't very well send a letter with a German stamp and postmark to your letterbox at home.'

'No, of course not. How is your mother now? Is she all right?'

'She's getting stronger every day, but the doctors can't guarantee the cancer won't come back. It's hit my father hard.'

'I'll pray for her. And your father too.'

'Thank you, they need your prayers. And what about your mother and Claude? How are they?'

'Claude is fine, thank you.' It's better to keep it short and avoid a lie. 'And my mother was married on Saturday.'

'Good heavens! I didn't even realise she had a suitor.'

'I didn't either until a few months ago. She married Lucien Bernard. He's been a widower for several years.'

'Sophie's father.'

'Yes, Sophie came home for the wedding and went back to Paris this morning,' I say, observing his face for a reaction.

'Ah, Sophie,' he says with a sigh.

Whether he's feeling wistful for lost opportunities I can't determine.

'I used to think the two of you might elope.'

He laughs. 'Hardly. She went off to Paris and dropped me like an old sock. And then, when she came back, well, there were complications.'

'I do know about her being pregnant. And the miscarriage. I knew at the time.'

'I wondered if you did. You were always such a . . .'

*'Schnüffelnase?'*

'That's rather a rude way to describe it.'

'You taught me the word in the first place. And if children should be seen and not heard, adults should be more careful about what they say in front of them.'

'You're probably right. Sophie told me about the baby the night she came back. We were in the olive grove and she asked me what she should do. Apparently the father had given her money for an abortion. But then nature took care of things for her.'

'Were you in love with her?'

'I was twenty-one, Camille. It had been an infatuation, a gentle holiday romance. But there was no real bond between us. I think I bored her with my talk of books and films. Not to mention politics. She wanted someone exciting.'

‘But you *are* exciting.’

His laughter rings out like church bells. I’m glad the door is closed – heaven knows what the staff would make of a German officer chortling in my office.

‘That’s the kind of thing my mother would say about me. I’m the apple of her eye.’

‘Your mother must have been sad to see you go.’

‘To tell you the truth, she wanted me to stay in Berlin. My father could have lined up a permanent job at the High Command but I told her there was someone special I’d met in Montpellier and I had to go back and resolve it, one way or the other. And do you know what she told me?’

I shake my head, shocked that he considered me significant enough to discuss with his mother.

‘She said I should follow my heart.’

‘Your mother must be an exceptional woman to give you such selfless advice. I expect most German mothers would want their son to find a nice German girl.’

He starts to laugh. ‘Are you suggesting I do that?’

‘Absolutely not!’ I reply. ‘Did you tell your mother about the “someone” being the daughter of the family you stayed with?’

‘No, perhaps I should have, but oddly enough, I feel as though I met you for the first time in this library.’

The September sun is falling through the window onto his hair, accentuating the threads of silver at his temples. I can’t help staring at him. ‘I’m not dreaming all of this, am I?’ I ask.

‘No, it’s real, I’m real. You can kiss me if you want proof.’

‘Don’t tempt me. But I can’t, not here. Could we meet this afternoon?’

‘The usual place?’

‘Yes, about half past five.’ For a moment I just sit there, gazing into his eyes. How could I possibly have thought he’d abandon me? Just at that moment there’s a knock on the door.

‘Come in,’ I say, trying to sound authoritative and grabbing the manila folder marked *Index of Harmful Books*.

Fleurette enters the room, looking flustered. ‘Cam— I mean Mad’moiselle Dupré, there are some policemen to see you. They asked for you by name. Not ordinary police, though. These two are in blue uniforms with brown shirts. They’re at the reception desk.’



My heart starts to race but I steady my voice. ‘Thank you, Fleurette. Actually the major and I have just finished perusing the list of harmful books and I have reassured him that we’ve removed them all. Would you kindly escort him to the rear door while I attend to the policemen.’

‘Of course, Mad’moiselle Dupré.’

Avoiding eye contact with Kurt, I rise from my seat, while he does the same.

‘Thank you, *mad’moiselle*. You have been most helpful.’

Then he raises his right hand and says, ‘Heil Hitler’. Hearing those words coming from Kurt’s mouth makes me cringe. With a click of his heels he turns towards the doorway and Fleurette accompanies him down the corridor. Meanwhile, I wait a few seconds in a vain attempt to calm my hammering heart before I have to deal with the dreaded *Milice*.



Two *miliciens* are leaning against the reception desk. One of them is tapping the wooden counter impatiently, the other smoking a cigarette. They are both about thirty.

‘May I help you?’ I ask. ‘I’m the acting chief librarian.’

These two gentlemen look as though they've never read a book in their lives; all the same, I'm determined to be unfailingly polite.

'We're here to investigate the disappearance of Anna Moreau,' the smoker says loudly.

'We've been very concerned about her,' I reply in a whisper, which I hope will remind them they're in a library.

'Did you know about her being Jewish?' the other *milicien* asks, holding a notepad in his hand. 'And did you know that her name is Abraham not Moreau?'

'Really! We had no idea,' I reply with what I hope is a convincing show of surprise. 'Are you certain?'

The smoker gives me a piercing look. 'She worked in a library in Paris as Elizabeth Abraham and has been using false papers ever since she left there in June 1940.'

'*Mon Dieu!* She was here for three years and we never knew,' I say, adopting my most ingenuous expression.

'Do you know where she is now, *mad'moiselle?*'

‘She went to Lyon to look after her mother. I don’t know what happened after that. The telephone number she left behind wasn’t connected. And we haven’t heard a word from her in the past three months.’

‘Do you realise her mother is dead?’

‘Dead! Oh dear! The day Madame Moreau left, she told us her mother was very ill, but I’m shocked to hear that she actually died.’ I cross myself to emphasise the point.

‘The mother died some ten years ago,’ the smoker says belligerently.

‘Oh,’ I reply.

‘Do you have any idea where Anna Abraham is now?’

‘If she’s not in Lyon, I have no idea at all.’

‘Did she have any friends in Montpellier?’

‘Not that I know of, but she kept to herself. We didn’t really get to know her outside of work.’

The two of them exchange looks and turn back to me.

‘If you think of anything that might help, give me a telephone call,’ the smoker says, handing me a card. ‘And Mad’moiselle Dupré, if you hear from Anna Abraham, please contact us immediately.’

‘Of course,’ I reply with a false smile, watching them proceed across the foyer and into the street. Then I start shaking so hard I have to sit down on the stool behind the desk.

Fleurette appears from the back of the library. ‘*Milice*,’ she whispers. ‘The lowest of the low. Are you all right?’

‘I think so. They’re investigating Anna’s disappearance. They told me she’s Jewish. Did you know?’

She looks genuinely surprised. ‘I had no idea. But I hope she got away safely.’

‘Me too.’

‘You go and have lunch out in the fresh air,’ she says. ‘You’ll need it after the stench those two left behind. Marianne will be here any minute. I’ll look after the desk in the meantime. Off you go.’

Before I can protest, she is standing behind the counter. It appears I have no choice in the matter so I fetch my basket and wander out into the sunshine, making for a little square not far from the library. On the way I find myself passing the central post office in the Rue Foch. On the spur of the moment I step inside. The Poste Restante desk is located beside the telephone booths. I ask the young man standing behind the counter

if there are any letters for Yvonne de Galais, spelling the surname for him. As he checks the box marked ‘G’ from the rows on the wall, I read a sign saying:

MAIL MUST BE COLLECTED WITHIN 21 DAYS OF DELIVERY.  
OTHERWISE, IT WILL BE DESTROYED.

That doesn’t auger well, but, to my surprise, he returns with three letters.

‘I need to see your identity card, *mad’moiselle*, and then you’ll have to sign the register before I can release them to you.’

‘Oh dear,’ I say, making a show of searching in my basket, ‘I must have left my purse behind.’

‘Then I’m sorry, I can’t let you have the letters.’

‘Couldn’t I just sign for them, *monsieur*?’ I ask, meeting his eyes and flashing him a Clara Bow smile.

I’m afraid not, *mad’moiselle*. There are strict procedures imposed by the PTT. You’ll have to come back with your identity card.’



That afternoon I decide to take a detour through the university precinct. It's a longer route, but something about the visit from the *Milice* has made me jittery. As I pass the thirteenth-century buildings of University of Montpellier, I glance back from time to time to check whether I'm being followed. There's no-one there, of course, apart from a few students heading back to their rooms after the day's lectures. I dash past the Faculty of Science and up to the Boulevard Pasteur which leads to the Institut Botanique and the northern entrance to the Jardin des Plantes. Kurt is waiting in the sunken garden, gazing towards the south because he's expecting me to arrive from the usual direction. When he hears footsteps, he turns defensively, only to smile when he realises it's me.

We fall into each other's arms and nothing seems important to me anymore except the flecks of silver in his pale blond hair, the startling blue of his eyes, the grace and tenderness of his hands, the warmth of his lips, the sweet smell of pine needles when I press against him.

'I've been so worried about you,' he says after a while. 'What happened with the *Milice*? I didn't like to leave you with them. They're almost worse than the SS.'

'They were investigating my boss's disappearance.'

‘You mean the woman I dealt with when I returned *Le grand Meaulnes*?’

‘That’s right, her name is Anna. Nobody has seen her since the end of June when she said she was going to Lyon for a few days to look after her sick mother. That’s the reason I’m using her office – I’m her replacement, at least, for now.’

‘But why the *Milice*, and not the *gendarmes*?’ Then it seems to dawn on him that this isn’t an ordinary case of foul play. ‘Was she working for the Resistance? Is that why she went underground?’

‘It has nothing to do with the Resistance. She’s Jewish, but nobody knew.’

He holds me by the shoulders and stares into my eyes. ‘I hope you didn’t help her escape, Camille. If you did, you could find yourself in a lot of trouble, and I wouldn’t be able to help you. I have no influence whatsoever with the *Milice* or the SS. In fact, I steer clear of both.’

‘I told you, Kurt, nobody knew Anna was Jewish.’

When he lets go of my shoulders, I take that to mean he believes me.

‘Oh, by the way,’ he says, fishing in his pocket, ‘Here’s the note I left for you at the hotel. The concierge put it in my pigeonhole. It was there all this time. I thought you might like to have it.’

He hands me the envelope, still sealed and bearing his elegant writing across the front.

‘Thank you. I shall keep it as a reminder that I should have had more faith in you. And coincidentally, I went to the Poste Restante to collect your letters, but they wouldn’t allow me to have them without viewing my identity card.’

‘I should have thought of that when I used your *nom de guerre*, but I didn’t dare use your real name. If the mail is being monitored, a Berlin postmark on a letter sent to the Poste Restante might have set off alarm bells.’

‘How many letters did you send me?’

‘I wrote every week.’

‘Every week!’

‘I was making up for the letters that I didn’t send to little Camille,’ he says with a wry smile.

‘Didn’t you wonder why there was no reply?’

‘You couldn’t have replied. I didn’t include a return address. For the same reason that I didn’t use your real name.’

‘So tell me what you said in your letters,’ I ask, clasping his hand.



‘Well, I wrote to you about summer in Berlin, spending time with my parents, playing with the dogs. I couldn’t mention the widespread destruction from Allied bombing – those things are censored. And I couldn’t say that I worked for a while as my father’s adjutant in the OKW either. But what I did tell you was that I had plenty of time for reflection while I was in Berlin, and I realised I missed you desperately and that, no matter how complicated things are, I can’t live without you.’ He lifts my hand to his lips and presses them against my skin. ‘Put simply, Camille Dupré, I love you.’

For a moment I feel dizzy. Did Kurt Müller really say those words? I’ve dreamt of them for so long that now they’ve actually been said, I’m in a state of shock. He’s looking at me expectantly, waiting for a response. Eventually I manage to reply:

‘I love you too, Kurt Müller.’ My heart is racing so fast that one beat is tripping over the next. Drawing a deep breath, I continue, ‘I’ve been in love with you since I was eleven years old. You were the only man I ever wanted, the benchmark nobody else could live up to. And you still are.’

‘What about the doctor?’ he asks with a grin.

‘He never stood a chance.’



Each afternoon I meet Kurt in the Jardin des Plantes. The sunken garden in the shade of the man-made Montagne du Rocher is our sanctuary, the hideaway where we can put aside the problems of the real world and enjoy the fantasy we are just two people in love and that there are no obstacles to our being together.

Each day it becomes harder to say goodbye, but the gardens close at seven in autumn and the chiming of the town hall clock is the signal for us to leave. On Friday evening we abandon our usual caution and Kurt walks me back to the library. As we stroll hand in hand past the cathedral, he stares up at the twin turrets guarding the entrance, each topped by a witch's hat.

'What does that remind you of?' he asks.

'Carcassonne,' I answer without hesitation. 'Do you remember our motto?'

'*Un pour tous, tous pour un,*' he says, squeezing my hand tightly.

Although I should be feeling calm and safe with Kurt beside me, the edginess I experienced on Monday is back. Like a mother hen checking for a fox, I keep glancing behind us.

'What's wrong?' Kurt asks.

‘I know this sounds ridiculous but I have the feeling we’re being followed,’ I whisper. ‘Could it be the *Milice*?’

Slowly he turns and surveys the length of the street behind us. ‘It’s empty. You’re probably just on edge after everything that’s happened this week.’

Even so, he quickens his pace and surprises me by detouring down a narrow alley that even I didn’t know existed. He’s better acquainted with these old laneways around the university than I am, and soon we’re back at the library where my bicycle is waiting. We exchange a lingering kiss and agree to meet at the cinema the next afternoon.

‘Your ticket will be waiting for you at the box office, Mad’moiselle de Galais,’ he says, waving to me as I set off for home in the fading light.

# CHAPTER 33



*L'orgueil précède la chute.*

Pride goes before a fall.

Old proverb

## September, 1931

I was so busy for the first few days, learning the rules, observing the prayer times, attending classes and doing my chores, that I barely had time to miss my family, let alone Kurt. All the same, there was a dark ache in my chest I couldn't seem to throw off. At night when the lights went out and there was nothing to do except close my eyes, I thought of Kurt and prayed he was doing well at the newspaper, just as I prayed nightly for my father that his chest would get better.

On Saturday afternoon, Papa arrived to take me home for the weekend. When I saw him on the other side of the iron grille, I burst into tears and Sister Agathe told me I couldn't leave until I composed myself. That night I sat in my lovely bedroom with its Juliet balcony, writing my first letter to Kurt. I made two drafts before I was happy with the wording. Then I penned a fair copy in my best handwriting and put it in an envelope addressed to Kurt in Munich. Papa said he would post it for me in the village.

*Domaine St-Jean-de-Rivière  
Saturday, 12 September, 1931*

*Dear-Kurt,*

*I trust this finds you and your parents well. Thank you for taking us to Carcassonne and buying me the knight. I wanted to take him to the Convent but we are only allowed to bring things listed on the inventory. I couldn't even bring my hair ribbon!*

*Did you have a good trip back to Munich? How is Kaiser? Could you send me a photograph of him? Are you enjoying being a newspaper reporter? What kind of things do you write about?*

*As you know, I started at the convent on Saturday. I share a dormitory with eleven other girls. It's cramped and nothing is private. Sister Agathe searched my suitcase the first night and found my movie star pictures glued inside the lid. She tore them off in front of everyone and ripped Gary Cooper to shreds. She said I had broken the commandment about idolatry and that I was a wicked girl. Then she told me to put my hand out and gave me three swipes of the cane. It really hurt but I didn't cry.*

*Each day we have to be up at four for prayers. Afterwards we make our beds and the nuns check that the corners are mitred and the sheets are smooth. If the bed isn't perfect, you are given a demerit point. Demerit points are for everyday misdemeanours. If you get five in the one week, you are given a Saturday afternoon detention and not allowed to go home that weekend.*

*My favourite subject is French Literature. The teacher is called Sister Germaine and she is kind and pretty. In the first lesson she asked us our favourite book. Most of the girls chose the Bible but I selected 'Notre Dame de Paris'. Sister Germaine said it was her favourite too. Imagine a nun liking such a worldly book. I do wonder why she decided to join the convent when she could have had her pick of suitors in the outside world. One day I might ask her, even if it means getting a demerit for being a Schnüffelnase.*

*The only languages they teach here are Latin and Greek. But Sister Germaine has told me there's an elderly nun who grew up speaking German in Alsace and might give me lessons in the evenings.*

*Papa came to collect me this afternoon. I couldn't wait to go home. Please write soon. Don't send it to the convent though. Rumour has it that Sister Agathe opens all our letters.*

*Your friend,*

*Camille Dupré*

The following Saturday, when I arrived home, there was a letter from Kurt lying on the kitchen table – I spotted the German stamp and the airmail sticker from the doorway.

‘We decided to wait for you before opening it,’ Papa said.

That was when I realised it was addressed to the entire *Famille Dupré*. My father read the contents aloud – a very polite letter in perfect French, thanking us for our hospitality. The kind of formal thank-you note Maman made me write when I received a birthday present from my aunt in Arles. Not once did Kurt mention my new school or the jar I had given him. Papa seemed to sense I was disappointed because he whispered,



‘He must have written you a separate letter. It will arrive next week, mark my words.’

*But what if he doesn't write?* asked a little voice inside my head.

That would never happen, I rebuked the doubting voice. Of course he'd write. *Un pour tous, tous pour un.* He wouldn't break a solemn oath.

That evening I wrote Kurt another letter.

*Domaine St-Jean-de-Rivière*

*Saturday, 19 September, 1931*

*Dear-Kurt,*

*Thank you for your letter which arrived on Friday. I am glad your family is well. Kaiser must have really missed you if he's following you around all the time and won't let you out of his sight. I don't think Babette will never be lonely as long as she has Bonaparte.*

*You must be very busy at the newspaper. What kind of stories are you writing? What is happening with Herr Hitler? Have people woken up to him yet? Surely they can see through all those ridiculous things he says.*

*This week I had two German lessons with Sister Pierre. (I have no idea why she has a boy's name and I have no intention of offending her by asking.) Anyway, she said my previous teacher had given me a sound foundation in basic grammar. So there you are! She told me about Alsace Lorraine changing hands between the French and the Germans – it must have been confusing for the people who lived there. When Sister Pierre was a little girl, Alsace was French, then it became German after the Franco-Prussian War and was returned to France in 1918. She grew up speaking only German and learnt French when she was fifty. She speaks it with a strong German accent. Not like you.*

*Sister Agathe searched our suitcases again on Monday. This time she arrived armed with a cane. She practises by placing a piece of chalk on the edge of a desk and breaking it in two. She had heard a rumour that 'contraband' had been brought back to the dormitory after the weekend. So everyone had to remove their suitcase from under the bed and open it for inspection. All she found was a Zig et Puce comic,*

*a block of Chocolat Poulain, a packet of Gitanes and a pair of pink socks. None of those items was mine, thank goodness. However, I did smuggle in a picture of Gary Cooper last Sunday, which is hidden under the lining at the base of my suitcase. I've told no-one about my Gary Cooper – there has to be at least one indicatrice somewhere in this dormitory and I'm not going to get caught again.*

*I'm finding it hard to cope with the routines here. Waking before four o'clock isn't so bad. – I'm the daughter of a dairy farmer, after all, but I miss my Wednesdays off. Here we're expected to do domestic chores on Wednesdays – sweeping the paths, washing the windows, mopping the floors, dusting the furniture, changing the sheets. It's in preparation for our lives as wives and mothers. Woe betide anyone who leaves a wrinkle in a sheet or forgets to mitre a corner. I left a streak on the bathroom mirror and was given two demerits.*

*The worst part is that there's no time in the day for thinking. Sister Agathe caught me staring out the window in her Civilité lesson and warned me that stray thoughts are dangerous and day-dreaming is the Devil's work. I said I'd been listening to her even if it didn't look that way and she replied,*

*‘Then you should know exactly how to set a table.’*

*And she gave me all kinds of cutlery and told me to arrange it correctly. Thankfully, setting the table is one of my jobs at home. It's all quite logical when you think about it. When I laid out the knives, forks and spoons correctly, I could see she was disappointed. I must have smiled because she reminded me that pride goes before a fall.*

*'What's more, Mademoiselle Frisée,' she said, 'pride is the first deadly sin.'*

*Miss Curlyhead! From now on I'm going to call her Sister Moustache, but not out loud, of course, only in my imagination.*

*Your friend,*

*Camille Dupré*

A fortnight passed and there was no word from Kurt. I had an uneasy feeling the thank-you letter he'd sent to all of us was the end of his correspondence. After all, he was back in Munich with his old friends and new job. Why would he have been thinking about us? That had been the summer. Now it was well and truly over. But I was nothing if not persistent – some might have called me stubborn – and I wasn't

prepared to give up yet. I decided to wait one more week and then I'd send another letter.

*Domaine St-Jean-de-Rivière*

*Saturday, 10 October, 1931*

*Dear-Kurt,*

*I trust you and your parents are well, and I hope my other two letters arrived safely. How is your job? Have you been given any exciting stories to write? We haven't heard any news about Germany. Maybe that's a good thing. What has happened to Herr Hitler? Have people realised he's a thug and a bully? I hope so. We did hear that Japan invaded Manchuria. Papa showed me where they are on the map. It is a long way from us so I don't think we need to worry.*

*Sister Pierre has lent me a book of German myths and legends after I told her I wanted to learn about Lohengrin. But Sister Agathe spotted the book on my bedside table and asked me what 'Sagen und Legenden' meant. When I told her, she said they're nothing but lies and it's a sin to read them. Then she confiscated the book. I*

*hope Sister Pierre doesn't get into trouble on account of lending it to me. Her name is in the front of the book.*

*This week in French literature we started reading Les Misérables. I'm the only one in the class who has already read it. Twice actually, but I didn't say that, lest I be accused of the second deadly sin. Everyone is complaining the book is too long. I think they're probably right. I always flick through the boring bits.*

*How is Kaiser? Bonaparte and Babette are both well. I can't wait to see them when I go home on Saturdays. I look forward to seeing my family too, of course. Even Claude.*

*Your friend,*

*Camille Dupré*

After I gave the envelope to my father to post, I made a resolution. I might only have been eleven years old but I had my dignity to consider. I was not going to write to someone who wasn't interested in replying. If I didn't receive an answer to this letter, I wouldn't be writing to Kurt Müller again. As for excising him from my heart, that was another matter altogether.

# CHAPTER 34



*Il n'y a qu'un bonheur dans la vie, c'est d'aimer et d'être aimé.*

There is only one happiness in life, it is to love and to be loved.

George Sand (Amantine-Lucile-Aurore Dupin)

Saturday, 2 October, 1943

On Saturday morning I wake at dawn, tingling with excitement about this afternoon's rendezvous with Kurt. In the distance a rooster is crowing, and nearby a pair of larks are serenading me with their exuberant morning chorus. I don't need to rush – there are no cows to milk or chickens to feed. Even Babette is gone.

At first my mother agreed that our Briard should stay with me as a watchdog. Then she changed her mind, saying an elderly dog couldn't be left tied up on her own all day while I was away at work. I suspect it was really a strategy to convince me I should move to the Domaine Bernard.

As the sun rises above the horizon and the sky glows pink behind the mountains, I don a dressing gown and go outside to draw water from the well. At least five buckets will be necessary – four to go straight into the bath tub, the other to be heated in a cauldron on the stove. This will produce a lukewarm bath, which might not be tolerable in wintertime but is acceptable at this time of the year.



As I lie in the bath, daydreaming about this afternoon, sprigs of lavender and rosemary are floating on the water, thanks to my mother's soap, which she makes with olive oil, lye and flowers from her herb garden. There have been many times when I've dreamt of a grand bathroom with hot and cold running water, but this morning nothing could be better than bathing to the music of birdsong and the fragrance of our own herbs.

Afterwards it takes me an inordinate time to choose my clothes for the day. Finally, in an attempt to be pretty but not obviously so, I choose a white blouse trimmed with guipure lace and a navy-blue skirt, both made for me by my mother before the War. With a jacket worn over the top and my hair pulled into a tight chignon, I look appropriately staid and sensible. The perfect acting chief librarian.



Thanks to Marianne's assistance with the weekly paperwork, I manage to lock up the library at ten past two. I've even had time to undo the bun, brush out my hair and apply lipstick from the tiny amount left in the tube. It's a perfect autumn afternoon – sunny, mild and free from the humidity which afflicts Montpellier in the summertime.

The leaves of plane trees that line the Place de la Canourgue are tinged with yellow. In another month or two they will turn orange and drift lazily to the ground.

As I turn into the Allée de la Friperie on the way to the Rue de la Loge I spot a handwritten sign attached to Anna's faded green gate.

***Furnished apartment for rent.***

***Ground floor. One bedroom. Internal bathroom.***

***Small garden.***

***Enquire within.***

I suppose I should have known that the landlord couldn't leave the apartment unoccupied forever; all the same, I can't bear the thought of strangers living in Anna's little flat, putting their feet on her sofa and tossing her needlepoint cushions onto the floor.

For a brief moment I wonder whether I could be the person to rent the apartment. With the locked gate and the high wall, it would meet with my mother's approval, and

it's just around the corner from the library. What's more, I could still go home on Sundays, just as I used to do when I was at convent school. I could even tend Anna's garden and look after her treasures, awaiting the time when everything could be shipped to America. If the rent is reasonable, this might be the perfect solution to my accommodation problem. So I resolve to follow up on Monday morning.

Strolling down the road, I can hear singing from the open window of a second floor apartment. Further along, I'm sure I can smell the tantalising aroma of real coffee. It's such a pleasant afternoon I could almost convince myself that France is a free country and the Occupation is just a bad dream. But once I enter the vast Place de la Comédie, I'm confronted with the real world – the swastika hanging on the front of the Opera House and German soldiers in the crowd, squiring local ladies and looking as relaxed and comfortable as if they were born here, while the women themselves seem proud to be parading their Teutonic beaux for all the world to see. One of them has even donned her partner's cap.

As I watch these women, I ask myself: What right do I have to assume the high moral ground? Aren't I just as guilty of consorting with the enemy? Isn't it true that I'm meeting an officer right now for a clandestine rendezvous at the cinema, followed

perhaps by a secret tryst at his hotel? If that's not collaboration, then what is? As I interrogate myself, a voice is rising up inside me, saying:

*But there are extenuating circumstances. You knew Kurt before. Before the War. Before he joined the Wehrmacht. Before Hitler came to power. This is a story that began twelve years ago, not just last week or last month or even last Christmas. You and Kurt share a history which goes back to that precious summer of 1931. Being in love with him doesn't make you a collaborator because you can trace those feelings back a dozen years.*

Whether, that's self-justification or exoneration, I'm not sure, but it gives me courage and that's exactly what I need this afternoon. Shading my eyes with my hand, I survey the sun-bleached square, searching for the oversized berets that are the trademark of the *Milice*. If they're here, they've blended into the crowd.

Above the grand entrance of the Gaumont cinema, there's a poster announcing this week's movie, *The Traveller on All Saint's Day*. What an odd title – it gives nothing away. Not that I really care about the film, I just want to be sitting beside Kurt in the privacy of a theatre box.

When my turn comes at the ticket office, I'm relieved to see a new woman behind the glass, younger than 'Greer Garson', and with peroxidized hair marked by a stripe of black on either side of her part. As nonchalantly as I can, I enquire about the ticket left for Mademoiselle de Galais.

'Lucky girl. He's gorgeous,' the blonde says, handing me a small envelope marked 'Galet'.

For a moment I feel flustered. She remembers him! Then I decide it doesn't matter, as long as I remain anonymous. So I smile politely, take the envelope and mutter, '*Merci, madame.*' Then I dash towards the stairs, giving my ticket to the usherette who tears off half, returns the remainder and tells me to continue to the top. Once I'm there I pause to catch my breath before heading to the last *loge*. As I pull aside the velvet curtain there's a brief moment when I'm filled with dread that the box might be empty. But there he is, smiling, taking my hand and kissing me as though we haven't seen each other in months.

'We'd better sit down,' I say breathlessly, glancing down at the crowd illuminated by the house lights. 'If we can see *them*, they can probably see *us*.'

'Still worried about being followed?'

‘I know it seems silly, but the visit from the *Milice* has made me nervous.’

‘You’re safe up here with me,’ he says, wrapping his arms around me. ‘And I’ve brought you a present.’ He leans down to the floor and produces a red and white circular tin marked *Scho-Ka-Kola*.

What a strange name. For a moment I wonder what it is. Then I read the label declaring it ‘*Schokolade*’. In a flash I remove the lid. Inside are eight triangles of the shiniest, darkest chocolate I’ve ever seen.

‘May I?’ I ask.

‘Of course,’ he replies with a laugh. ‘They’re yours.’

I’m about to put the chocolate in my mouth when I realise what I’m doing. It’s German. The tin says: ‘Made in Old Berlin.’ I promise myself I’ll just take one bite, but when I allow my tongue to linger over the creamy, bittersweet morsel I know it’s so intoxicating I’ll have to finish the entire piece.

Suddenly the lights are lowered and the newsreel begins, boasting of Nazi victories when everyone knows they’ve just suffered the biggest defeat in history – the retreat from Russia. If the Germans think they can keep it a deep, dark secret, they’re mistaken. News of that import gushes out like a broken water main. Following the

newsreel there's a cartoon in jumpy black and white called *Nimbus Libéré*, featuring badly drawn characters of Minnie Mouse, Donald Duck and Popeye, flying in American planes and dropping bombs on French families while Radio-Londres proclaims the Americans are coming to help. I can't find anything light-hearted about this film; even the scratchy soundtrack is sinister, and I'm not sure who made it – the Germans or the puppet Vichy government, but it's so horrible it makes me shiver. Imagine taking the cartoon characters we love so much and using them in such a malevolent way.

'It's only propaganda,' Kurt whispers in the same way my papa used to reassure me: 'It's only a nightmare.'

'I know, but that doesn't make it any less chilling.'

The film turns out to be a detective story, though not a very good one. Afterwards we remain seated in the box while the theatre empties of its audience. Then Kurt asks me to have dinner with him at the hotel. Although I anticipated the invitation, it still takes me by surprise.

'What if the colonel is there?' I ask him.

'Would he remember you after all this time?'

‘I gave him quite a lambasting, Kurt. I doubt whether he’d forget that in a hurry. And anyway, I wouldn’t be comfortable in the company of all those glamorous women in evening gowns.’

‘You would outshine them all.’

‘That’s sweet of you, but it’s not true.’

‘I always tell you the truth. Don’t you ever notice the way men look at you?’

‘Not really. I spent fourteen years of my life being the girl whom boys made fun of.’

‘I didn’t make fun of you, did I?’

‘No, most of the time you treated me as an equal. That was one of the reasons why I fell for you.’

‘One of them? What were the others?’ he asks, his eyes sparkling.

‘The same things I love about you now – your compassion, your gentleness, your eyes, your voice . . . I adored you then, and I still do. Except now it’s different.’

‘How is it different?’ he asks in a husky voice.

Leaning forward, I place my lips over his. At first the kisses are soft and sweet, then they become deeper, our tongues entwined in an intoxicating dance.



Eventually he whispers, ‘If you don’t feel comfortable having dinner in the restaurant, come back to my room and we’ll order room service.’

Whatever good sense I might have possessed has been extinguished by the urgency of my feelings, and there’s something else – a growing fear that our newfound happiness might be snatched away from us at any moment. By what or by whom, I don’t exactly know.

‘I’ll leave first,’ he whispers, ‘Let’s meet at the side door in the Rue Richelieu. That way you can avoid the foyer. And you won’t forget your chocolates, will you?’

He catches me against his chest, kissing me ardently before disappearing through the curtains.



It’s my third visit to the Hôtel de la Comédie, but the first with Kurt, who is waiting for me at the side door. A corridor takes us into the annexe where I once used the telephone and happened to meet the delightful Delphine. This afternoon there’s not a *belle-de-nuit* in sight. Kurt takes my hand and leads me up the stairs to the first floor where I’m relieved to find the corridor empty. From his jacket pocket he removes a key, opens a plain wooden door and ushers me inside.

Who would have thought such a knight's chamber would exist behind that plain, stout door? The spacious room is clad to picture-rail height with panels of dark wood and lit dimly by *flambeau* wall lamps like the ones in the cinema. My feet sink into deep carpet. There's a leather armchair beside an ornate secretaire bookcase, but the room is dominated by the vast, hand-crafted bed resembling a wooden sleigh and covered with a quilt of gold satin. The huge windows are draped with black velvet curtains edged with gold fringing.

'Now, my darling, would you care for some early supper?' he asks, handing me a menu.

Having never ordered room service before, I'm excited and intimidated at the same time but eventually decide on the cold buffet. Kurt makes the phone call and adds a bottle of champagne to the order. Suddenly I feel shy, alone with Kurt in his room. His world is so different to mine. He's been to university, lived in Heidelberg, Munich and Berlin, and he's experienced things I could barely imagine. Yet, my heart tells me that he's still my Kurt.

When the food arrives, I try not to wolf it down, even though the array of *charcuteries* is mouth-watering. And I know better than to gulp the champagne – it's

a vintage Bichat and Sons, intended to be savoured slowly. With my glass in hand, I wander over to the secretaire bookcase – the spines indicate they are Kurt’s own volumes – Hugo, Dumas, Germanic legends, as well as a sturdy French-German dictionary. On the desktop are three silver-framed photographs – a middle-aged woman with a gentle face, seated beside a stern-looking man in wire-rimmed eye-glasses, another of a black and white spaniel, and one that takes my breath away – a dark-haired boy, a little girl with curly blond hair and a young man standing beside an elegant black car. The boy is holding a toy sword; the girl is cradling something small in her hands and gazing at the object rather than the camera. The young man could easily be a movie star. I’ve never seen this photograph before, and I am moved beyond words by my own memories of that exhilarating day in 1931 – me in the passenger seat, imagining I’m grown-up and that Kurt is my beau, and Claude in back of the Citroën, hanging out the open window. Now my little brother is hiding like an animal of prey up in the mountains, constantly moving from hideout to hideout.

‘The day at Carcassonne,’ Kurt says with a catch in his voice.

Instinctively I reach out, covering his hand with mine. Our fingers interlace and I lift his hand to my lips, kissing it slowly, tenderly. His hand moves softly on my face;

I tilt my head up, searching his eyes. His hands, warm and firm, grasp my head, fingers sliding through my hair, as he murmurs,

‘Camille, my love, are you sure?’

‘Kurt, I have been sure of this moment for half my life.’

He goes to the drawer of his bedside table and removes a brown paper packet labelled in large italic script: *Only to be used by the German military.*

‘For your protection, my darling,’ he says.

Protection? It takes me a moment to understand what he means. Then I realise it’s one of those things that were whispered about when the lights went out at convent school. *Une capote anglaise.* Although why it was attributed to the English, I still don’t know. What I do know, however, is that there have been many women in his life. How could I possibly compare?

Then I remember that he’s chosen me, and he’s about to write to his parents and tell them so. In a normal world a courtship like ours would have proceeded in a leisurely and conventional fashion towards its consummation, but this is a world gone mad, where ordinary life is fraught with danger, and all that is dear, precious and familiar could be extinguished in an instant.

He crosses the room and lifts me off my feet, holding my body hard against his. We have kissed before, always covertly, fearful of observation, but this is different. The power of him dazes me – I scarcely remember who I am, or what brought me to this point in time. I am swept up in such a surge of sensation that I lose all cognizance of Camille and her world, knowing only this moment, this primal force that we have become.



From the north-west of the city, cathedral bells are tolling the dawn, a fortress' town's ritual. When I open my eyes, the *flambeaux* are burning dimly, and the glow of a lingering street lamp etches its way between the velvet drapes. We are entwined, my love and I, in his sleigh bed. He is sleeping soundly, his naked flesh golden in the lamplight. I am spellbound by the beauty of him, the curve of his shoulders, the precise definition of muscles along his back, the lithe arc of his loins.

Last night, his lips, caressing my flesh, evoked such tumults of pleasure that now, the mere memory renews my hunger for him. This morning I take the lead, moving intuitively against his body. The crisp linen sheets rustle as he rouses from his sleep.

There is no part of me that does not belong utterly to him.

# CHAPTER 35



*Un homme qui connaît deux langues vaut deux hommes.*

One man who speaks two languages is worth two men.

Old proverb

Sunday, 3 October, 1943

Afterwards, we nap for a while and wake to soft October sunshine falling through the gap in the curtains.

‘I’m hungry as a wolf,’ Kurt says, his arm cradling me against him.

‘Me too,’ I reply enthusiastically.

Placing a kiss on my forehead, he slides out of bed and pulls on a shirt.

‘Let’s order some breakfast,’ he says, handing me the menu.

I don’t think I could ever get used to the luxury of having food delivered to one’s door. But any guilt about partaking in this indulgence is overcome by the anticipation of the delicacies on offer.

Once we’ve made our choices, I dash down the hallway to the ladies’ bathroom, wearing only Kurt’s dressing gown. No sign of the colonel, thank goodness. I lock the door behind me and run a warm bath. I’ll have to leave after breakfast – I have no choice. Lucien is holding a special lunch at the Domaine Bernard for my mother’s

forty-ninth birthday. Denise and her family are driving across from Aix, and they've invited the doctor and Père Patric.

I'm back in Kurt's room just before the breakfast arrives – buttery croissants with strawberry jam, and a generous *tasse* of real coffee.

'I might never want to leave,' I tease him.

'You could always stay,' he says with a grin. 'But didn't you tell me you have a birthday party to attend?'

'I wish you could come with me,' I murmur, lifting the cup to my lips and inhaling the heavenly aroma.

'So do I, but we know that's impossible.'

'I wonder whether my mother will ever accept the two of us as a couple,' I say, thinking aloud. 'She's intractable.'

'You can't really blame her. She lost her brother in the Great War and then her husband from the after-effects. And now the country she loves is occupied by a conquering army.'

'But that won't last forever, will it?'



‘The end is coming – there’s no doubt about it. The retreat from Russia has sealed Germany’s fate. Three years ago, everyone was celebrating the success of the *Blitzkrieg*. Nowadays Hitler is rarely seen in public. Our cities are being bombed, families are losing their sons in huge numbers on the battlefields, and ordinary people are beginning to realise the War is lost. But they’re too scared to speak out with the Gestapo and the SS still so powerful. Now they just want to make it through to the other side.’

‘It must be a difficult time for your father.’

‘It’s difficult for everyone at the OKW. Hitler doesn’t listen to his generals. When his plans fail – and they’ve been failing disastrously in recent times, he shifts the responsibility for the losses onto the officer corps.’

‘Are there likely to be repercussions for your father?’

‘He’s a *Leutnantgeneral* – there’s some insulation between his position and the uppermost tier. But that doesn’t mean he’s completely safe from Hitler’s wrath.’

‘So what will he do? Do you think there might be a military coup?’

‘The time for that would have been back in ’33 or ’34 before Hitler made himself Supreme Commander. In those days he was still cementing his power and the

Wehrmacht was largely independent. It's unlikely a coup would be effective now. And even if they deposed Hitler, there are others who would replace him. Bormann or Göring. I'm afraid my father will just have to wait it out, like the rest of us.' He pulls me closer to him. 'Let's not talk about that anymore. It's all too depressing. We have much happier things to discuss. Such as the fact that I love you, Camille Dupré, with all my heart.'

'And I love you, Kurt, *für immer und ewig.*'

'Forever and ever,' he repeats softly.

'May I ask you something?' I ask tentatively.

'Of course.'

'Would your parents like me?'

'They'd adore you.'

'And they wouldn't mind that I'm French?'

'My parents encouraged me to learn French in the first place. My father said it was the language of international diplomacy, and if I was to be an educated man, I needed to know it. By the way, I'm planning to write them a letter as soon as I get back from

Narbonne. They know there's someone special in my life and now I can tell them it's you.'

'Narbonne?' I ask, catching my breath.

'It's only until next Saturday morning. They're sending me there to train interpreters. I'm leaving this afternoon.'

'For a moment I thought they'd transferred you.'

'Don't worry, darling. My father got me this posting because he considered it the safest place in southern France. They won't be moving me if Josef Müller has any say in the matter.'

I ruffle his hair with my hand, running my fingers over his scalp and recalling the way his hair used to fall over his forehead like Gary Cooper's.

'If you keep doing that, I shall never let you leave,' he says, leaning over and kissing me.

'I'll be late if I don't go now,' I say, reluctantly pulling away.

'I miss you already and you haven't even left,' he says. 'How am I going to cope until next Saturday?'

‘Just keep busy training those interpreters while you’re in Narbonne and the time will fly,’ I reply lightly.

There’s a bottle of cologne on the shelf above the basin. He unscrews the lid and places a drop behind each of my ears. The fragrance reminds me of lemons.

‘It’s *Kölnisches Wasser*,’ he says. ‘I use it myself.’

‘But you smell of pine trees,’ I tell him.

‘That must be because I’m from Bavaria,’ he says with a laugh. ‘We have more pine trees than people.’

The town hall clock is chiming ten.

‘We’ve missed Mass,’ he says with a mischievous grin.

‘We’d have to go to Confession first,’ I tease him, ‘after what has happened.’

‘Are you sorry?’ he asks, suddenly serious.

‘Absolutely not,’ I reply with a determination that surprises me. ‘And you?’

‘You are the love of my life, Mad’moiselle Dupré. I have no regrets whatsoever.’



The wind is blowing in my face as I cycle out of Montpellier, its icy breath a harbinger of the winter to come. At the road junction on the edge of the city there's a German checkpoint which is normally unmanned on weekends. Today two young soldiers, barely old enough to shave, are on duty.

'*Carte d'identité?*' one of them demands in heavily accented French.

When I produce my papers he spends so long perusing them that I wonder if there's going to be a problem.

'What were you doing in Montpellier?' he asks.

'I work there. I'm a librarian.'

'Why were you in the city on a Sunday?'

'I stayed the night with a friend after going to the cinema yesterday.'

'What film did you see?'

'*The Traveller on All Saint's Day*. It's a detective story but I wouldn't recommend it.'

They exchange looks and then he returns my papers. '*Merci, mad'moiselle.*'

‘Good day,’ I reply with mock politeness and continue on my way. Who did they think I was? A courier for the Resistance? The world has turned topsy-turvy and everyone is a suspect.

I have to detour via the farmhouse to collect my mother’s best crystal bowl – she has asked me to bring it to serve her *compote* of autumn fruits. As I take the bowl down from the dresser shelf, and prepare to wrap it in a tea towel, I notice something odd on the kitchen table – a tiny pile of chicory powder as though it’s fallen off a teaspoon while somebody was making themselves a cup. Where did it come from? I’m sure I wiped down the table before I left for work yesterday. Did my mother pop in and make herself a coffee? But if she did, why didn’t she collect her crystal bowl while she was here? I glance into the sink, looking for a used cup but it’s empty, just the way I left it. Then I run my eyes over the second shelf of the dresser where my mother keeps her cups and saucers. ‘Everything in its place’ has always been her motto, which I follow rigorously, lest I be chastised for my slovenliness. The cups stand in a row with their saucers propped behind. The painted floral bouquet in the centre of each saucer must always have the flower stems to the bottom to match the design on the cup. Today the last saucer is askew and the handle of the cup is facing the opposite

way. At that instant I realise the identity of the visitor – it was Claude! Frantically I search the kitchen for a note but there's nothing. Does he know I've been living here for the past couple of weeks on my own? Was that why he came? To make sure I was safe? When I wasn't here, he must have assumed I'd spent the night at the Domaine Bernard. I'm sad that I missed seeing him, but I wouldn't swap last night for anything, not even the chance to see my brother.



I'm the last to arrive for lunch, carrying my mother's crystal bowl and an almond cake I made on Friday evening. It wasn't easy fitting both into the wicker basket on my bicycle. After I've wished my mother a happy birthday and greeted everyone, we all take a seat at the table on the terrace. Wisteria blooms are hanging from the arbour even though it's not the season for them to flower. No doubt my father would have had a saying to describe this horticultural anomaly.

There is an empty seat beside me – apparently the doctor is off setting a broken leg and will be here as soon as he finishes the job. Père Patric prays over the food and then

everyone helps themselves to salad leaves and rabbit casserole with Jerusalem artichokes and roast pumpkin.

I survey the others as they partake enthusiastically of my mother's cooking. Denise's two children, in particular, are wolfing it down. Living in a big town, they wouldn't have access to the fresh food that country people still take for granted, even if it's basics like rabbit and artichokes.

Meanwhile I contemplate my own situation. Am I now *une femme déçue*, a fallen woman? What a peculiar term that is. Fallen from grace. Fallen by the wayside. Fallen flat. But I feel the opposite, uplifted, light-hearted, on a little cloud, as we say in French. Do I look different, I ask myself. If anyone is going to notice, it would be my mother, but she seems oblivious to any change in me.

As for Denise, I'm sure she's decided I'm a prim spinster-librarian and always will be. I glance across at the priest – can he see right into my soul? He looks up and gives me a little smile indicating he's enjoying the casserole. He may well be an astute man, as evidenced by his allegorical sermons condemning Vichy policies, but he has absolutely no idea that I lost my virginity last night. As far as he's concerned, I'm still sweet, innocent Camille.



As I sit there, playing with my food, I recall my father's words about Kurt:

'He's a fine young man. If our Camille was Sophie's age, I'd be happy to have him as my son-in-law.'

If Papa was alive, I'd tell him everything. He'd understand.

The doctor arrives in time for dessert, taking his seat beside me at the table. Lucien brings out the birthday cake topped with a single candle because birthday candles, like everything else, are in short supply. We sing '*Joyeux anniversaire*' and my mother blows out the candle, removes it and places it carefully aside, to be used again.

Afterwards Jean suggests he and I go for a stroll in the vineyard to walk off the food. I didn't eat much anyway but I know he doesn't mean it literally. It's just an excuse to be alone with me. I'll have to tell him – not the details – but the fact that there's someone else.

'Have you heard from Claude?' I ask him as we wander among the vines which have started to turn golden. The strains of Lucien's guitar can be heard from the courtyard.

'Have *you*?' he asks in return.

'You always answer a question with another one,' I reply with a laugh.

'Well, *you* evade answering questions by changing the subject.'

‘*Touché*,’ I reply. ‘Actually, I think Claude might have come to the house last night or this morning.’

‘You didn’t see him?’

‘No, I was having dinner with a friend in Montpellier and stayed over. But someone had made themselves a cup of coffee in our kitchen and it wasn’t my mother. She would have put the cup and saucer back properly.’

His left eyebrow rises almost imperceptibly but he says nothing. We amble further into the vineyard towards the stream.

‘Your friend? Is it a woman?’

‘No.’ I don’t dare look at his face. I know he will be crestfallen. ‘I met him a long time ago,’ I continue, ‘but then he had to go away, and now he’s back.’

‘So this friendship is of the romantic kind?’

I take a deep breath before answering: ‘Yes, you could call it that.’

This time he’s the one to draw a deep breath. ‘I gather it’s something serious.’

‘Yes, well, . . . yes.’

He sighs and turns away. Then he seems to collect himself.

‘I hope he’s worthy of you.’

‘He’s a good man.’

‘I really do wish you happiness, Camille, if this man is the one you want. But may I just ask you one question?’

‘Of course,’ I reply uneasily.

‘If you have feelings for this man and he reciprocates, why isn’t he here at your mother’s birthday lunch?’

I swallow hard, trying to come up with an answer. I don’t want to lie outright to Jean Lebrun but I can’t possibly tell him the truth. ‘He’s . . .’ I begin.

‘He’s married, isn’t he?’

‘I don’t wish to talk about it, Jean.’

‘I’m not going to tell you how to lead your life, Camille. You’re a grown woman.’

‘My mother doesn’t know, nor does Claude. Please don’t say anything to them. Promise me you won’t.’

‘I shall keep your confidences, but I can’t continue to come to these family functions, knowing you’re involved with someone else.’

‘I understand. And I’m sorry. You’re a dear, kind man, Jean, and I love you like a . . .’ I stop short, but he finishes the sentence for me:

‘Like a friend.’

There’s a long, awkward silence before I can muster a reply, ‘I wish you well, Jean. I really do.’

‘I know,’ he says quietly.

Then he turns away and heads in the direction of the music. Jean Lebrun deserves to find happiness again, but it can’t be with me.

# CHAPTER 36



*Rien ne pèse tant qu'un secret.*

Nothing weighs more than a secret.

French proverb, originally attributed to Jean de la Fontaine

Monday, 4 October, 1943

After work on Monday I go to 40 Rue du Platane to enquire about Anna's apartment. The landlord is a little man with balding hair, who smells of stale sweat. As he shows me over the apartment, I'm shocked at the way it looks. The *Milice* must have gone through everything, even to the point of ripping open the needlepoint cushions. Who did they think Anna was? The leader of the Jewish Resistance! It makes me ill to see what they've done to her possessions and I fight to control the anger rising in my throat.

'What happened here?' I ask, trying to sound guileless.

'The previous tenant disappeared about three months ago. It turned out she was a Jewess. I had no idea until the *Milice* knocked on my door. I wouldn't have allowed her to rent the apartment in the first place if I'd known. Jews are the scum of the earth, everyone knows that. They asked what I knew about her and I said nothing, except that she always paid her rent on time and never caused any trouble.'

‘It’s a wonder they’re allowing you to lease the apartment again if there’s still an investigation underway,’ I remark, fishing for information.

‘They told me she’s probably fled to Spain. Good riddance, I say. The sooner they round up the rest of the Jews in this city the better.’

I don’t like this man. He’s sleazy, someone Papa would have called ‘*un sale type*’.

‘Are you interested?’ he asks.

‘It depends on the rent.’

The sum he quotes is higher than I expected. It would be a struggle to pay that amount even if I did find myself permanently promoted to the senior librarian’s position. Ever since I started work, I’ve been giving most of my salary to my mother, but there was always a little pocket money left over. Now that she’s married to Lucien, Maman doesn’t need the financial assistance. Even so, this would leave me with nothing left to pay for food and necessities.

‘Not many garden apartments in Montpellier,’ he says. ‘And there’s an inside *chiotte*.’

‘That’s true,’ I reply, ‘but I just can’t afford it.’ Although it’s a statement of fact rather than an attempt to bargain with him, he interprets it as the latter.

‘I’m afraid I can’t go any lower, not even for a pretty girl like you.’ He moves a little closer, the pungent odour of his body assailing my nostrils. ‘This apartment is the best one in the block,’ he says. ‘You wouldn’t want to miss out.’

‘I’ll have to think about it,’ I reply, surveying the overgrown garden. In the three months since Anna left, the heat and humidity of a Montpellier summer have produced a mass of towering weeds and lanky foliage.

When we reach the gate, he says, ‘Ladies first.’

He’s so close behind me that I can feel his breath on my neck. As he closes the gate and locks it, he whispers conspiratorially, ‘Lucky I have spare keys for all the apartments. The Jewess took off with hers.’

Little does he know that I have Anna’s keys in my handbag.

When we exchange brief goodbyes at the corner, I say I’ll let him know my decision but the truth is I’ve already made it. I can’t describe the feeling of relief when he disappears through the front door of the building and I dash along the Rue du Platane towards the library where I’ve left my bicycle. Although I would love to be the custodian of Anna’s apartment and rehabilitate the garden, the landlord would always be hanging around, spying on me. And if he worked out I was Anna’s colleague, things



might become complicated. He's likely to be one of those *mouches* she was always warning me about. A snitch, informing on his tenants to the *Milice*, the SS or the Gestapo.

Besides, that man has his own set of keys which means he can access both the garden and the apartment whenever he likes. I would never feel safe.



It's Saturday afternoon and I'm at the service desk, stamping library books like an automaton and waiting impatiently for closing time. Life has gone on around me this week and yet I've barely noticed. All I can think about is Kurt. The days apart have only made me want him more. I find myself replaying every exhilarating detail of last weekend: the caresses, the kisses, the sense of wonder at our lovemaking. Now I understand what 'made for each other' really means. As for guilt, I haven't allowed it to push its ugly way into my thoughts. Life is too precarious nowadays to procrastinate about anything. This week they've sent him to Narbonne. What if they decide they want him back in Berlin or even that he should serve in Italy or somewhere else where he'll see active service? The very thought makes me shiver.

‘*Mesdames, messieurs*, the library will be closing in fifteen minutes,’ Marianne announces. With her quiet efficiency, she’s becoming indispensable. It turns out she is as anxious to leave as I am – she has a rendezvous with her fiancé, Paul, who works at the Hôtel de Ville.

‘Where are you going this afternoon?’ I ask casually.

‘The Promenade du Peyrou. We thought about going to the movies but it’s a German film with French subtitles.’

‘Oh,’ I reply, trying to hide my relief that she’ll be across the other side of the city.

Ever since I was a child, I’ve always loved that elevated precinct of Montpellier with its golden gateway on the north side and the statue of Louis Quatorze on the other. Rumour has it that the nineteenth-century sculptor who created the equestrian bronze of the Sun King forgot to include the stirrups and was so mortified that he committed suicide soon after it was completed. From the top level of the Place Royale du Peyrou, there’s a vista across the faded terracotta rooftops of Montpellier to the hills where I live. On a clear day, you can even see the Pic du Loup, a dramatic, craggy mountain to the north, and the azure waters of the Mediterranean to the south-east. It’s a trysting

place for courting couples. I envy Marianne's freedom to meet her beau out in the open. Perhaps one day, in a different world, it will be the same for Kurt and me.



As I pull open the velvet curtains on the last box on the uppermost storey of the cinema, Kurt stands and bows.

‘Mad’moiselle de Galais.’

‘Major Müller.’

Then we both sit down out of view and embrace as though we might never see each other again. It's like a wildfire in a cypress forest – ignited by the oils, embers scattering ahead of the blaze and virtually unstoppable.

‘I've missed you this week,’ he says after a while, his hands cupping my face.

‘Me too,’ I reply breathlessly.

‘Tomorrow I'm going to write to my parents and tell them that the special woman in my life is actually Camille Dupré.’

‘I wish I could tell *my* family. Nothing weighs more than a secret.’

‘I know how hard it is for you. But what’s important is that there are no secrets between the two of us. For ten years I’ve lived in a world where the truth has been cast aside, propaganda has prevailed and falsehoods have become so normal nobody questions them. That’s why it’s important to maintain the truth in our own little world. Promise you’ll always be honest with me.’

His words make me blush with guilt. ‘There’s something I need to tell you,’ I begin, watching his blue eyes narrow. ‘It’s about Anna. I didn’t technically help her to escape. She organised that herself. But I did know about it the day before.’

He raises an eyebrow. ‘Did you know all along about her being Jewish?’

‘Not until that day, but it all made sense once she told me. I’d always wondered why she didn’t have any written qualifications but I assumed she’d left them behind in the rush to leave Paris in 1940. Anyway, she needed a few days’ grace in order to escape to Spain and asked me not to inform the authorities until the Monday afternoon that she hadn’t returned from Lyon.’

‘But she didn’t go there.’

‘No, but that’s what she told the staff before she left. I knew it was a lie but I played along with it.’

He's shaking his head and gripping my shoulders. 'Oh, Camille.'

'I did something else too. I took her cat back to the farm with me. Anna hated leaving her behind.'

For an unbearably long time he just stares at me without saying a word. Then he asks, 'Have you heard from her?'

'Not a word. I try to picture her living safely with her cousin in Los Angeles, but if she's there, why hasn't she written to me?'

'She's probably afraid of incriminating you. She would know that foreign mail is monitored. Anything from an Allied country would set off a red flag.'

'What about Spain or Portugal?'

'Possibly the same. I should be angry with you,' he says, 'for putting yourself in jeopardy, but you did a brave thing. I couldn't have done it.'

'Of course you could have.'

'You've always seen me as a knight in shining armour, Camille, but I'm just an ordinary man. I follow orders. I keep my head down and try to do as little harm as possible.'

*'Entre deux maux, il faut choisir le moindre.* Choosing the lesser of two evils.'

‘Yes, I’m afraid that’s often the case. And sometimes there’s no choice at all.’

‘While we’re confessing our sins,’ I say, ‘there’s something else I need to tell you. I didn’t exactly lie to you, but I didn’t tell the whole truth either, because I didn’t want to upset you.’

‘Is this about your doctor friend? Did something happen while I was away?’

‘No,’ I say indignantly. ‘I’ve already told you there was nothing romantic between us.’

He smiles ruefully. ‘I suppose I’m a little jealous. After all, your mother approves of him.’

‘He’s a nice man, but that’s all there is to it.’

‘So what is this secret you haven’t told me?’

‘You must promise you won’t tell anyone.’

‘Whatever is said between the two of us remains *sub rosa*.’

‘All right, on the night I came home with the news about Claude’s exemption, my mother showed me a note he’d left, saying he’d gone underground.’

‘So he never knew about the exemption?’

‘No, I’m so sorry. I know how much time you spent organising things.’

‘It doesn’t matter. With a young man like Claude, it was only a matter of time before he joined the Resistance, whether he had an exemption or not.’

‘So it won’t cause any problems for you?’

‘I’m losing interpreters all the time to the Maquis. The STO has backfired on the Vichy government. Even some of those who were exempted are joining up. It’s the best thing that ever happened to the Resistance.’

Suddenly the lights are lowered and the newsreel begins. As usual, we are regaled with the glorious victories of the Axis powers when I know for a fact that only a couple of days ago Naples was captured by the Americans. Afterwards, as Kurt and I hold hands, a German cartoon begins. I steel myself for another *Nimbus Liberé*, but it turns out to be a sweet little animation about a bee buzzing around a meadow where it finds a gramophone dumped in the grass and uses its stinger to play the record lying on the turntable. Interestingly enough, the music which emanates from the phonograph is jazz. It’s reassuring to know that there are German filmmakers who have managed to oppose the Nazi régime with their own little campaigns of resistance.

At intermission Kurt goes downstairs to buy drinks and returns with two glasses of *pastis*. The main feature is subtitled *Lumière dans la Nuit – Light in the Night*. It’s a

rather depressing story about a married woman who has an affair with a dashing composer, which is discovered by her husband's friend. After he threatens to betray her, she takes poison. When the composer finds out, he challenges the friend to a duel. In the process the composer's hand is slashed, ruining his career as a violinist.

After a while we stop watching. Who needs a dark Teutonic tale about duels and betrayal when the real world is a bleak enough place, as it is? Kurt puts his arm around my waist and cradles the back of my head with his other hand. Then he leans forward and kisses me. The touch of his lips is enough to send a shiver of excitement through my body. I can't wait until we can go to his room and be alone.

When the film finishes, we barely notice the lights have come on. After a minute or two Kurt says, 'I'd better leave first. I'll meet you back at the hotel.'

'I won't be far behind you.'

He kisses me once again, a long, deep kiss that leaves me wanting more.

'I love you, Camille Dupré,' he says, flashing me the Gary Cooper smile.

'I love you back, Kurt Müller.'



# CHAPTER 37



*Chaque balle a son billet.*  
Every bullet has its destination.

Old saying

Saturday, 9 October, 1943

Once Kurt slips out of the theatre box, I peer over the top of the balcony to the auditorium below – it’s almost empty. Meanwhile the pianist is playing ‘Lili Marlene’. When the song finishes, I dash down the stairs, through the foyer and into the square. The sun is so bright after the dimness of the cinema that I have to shade my eyes. There’s still a throng outside but it’s starting to thin. I can see Kurt on the opposite edge of the crowd, sending me a smile. I smile back, waiting for him to turn and walk back to the hotel. At that moment there’s a cracking sound. It takes me an instant to identify it. I’ve heard that bang often enough in the woods beyond our farm, echoing like thunder, just as it’s doing now. My gaze hasn’t left Kurt. For a moment he looks straight at me, his eyes wide, then he places his arm to his chest and starts to fall to the ground. That’s when I realise he’s been shot.

People are scattering, moving to cover – behind columns, around corners, into recessed doorways. I make a dash through the centre of the dispersing crowd towards

him, dodging anyone in my way. I expect more gunshots but they don't come. Finally, I reach him. He's lying face up on the cobblestones, bright red blood seeping from a ragged hole in his cape. A few people are gathered around him, but nobody is trying to help. I push my way through and drop to my knees beside him. After I shrug off my jacket, I press it against his chest to stem the flow of sticky blood.

'Get help!' I shout at the people standing nearby. 'Fetch an ambulance!'

'She must be a nurse,' I hear someone say.

Kurt's eyes are open but they're glazed, as though someone has replaced his real eyes with glass ones. He tries to raise his head but I tell him not to move. Then he makes an attempt to speak, murmuring two or three words I can't decipher over and over again.

'Ssshh,' I whisper, placing my free hand over his lips. 'I'm here now, you'll be all right.'

'Will somebody call a doctor!' I cry, turning towards the people behind me, but most of them have decamped and only a few curious onlookers remain. I can feel my jacket damp with his blood. It's all over my hands too and seeping onto the cobblestones. Then Kurt starts to close his eyes.

‘Wake up!’ I order. ‘Don’t go to sleep. Don’t you dare go to sleep. I’m not going to let you die.’

From behind me I hear a male voice saying, ‘Why would she bother trying to save a German?’

‘Nurses have to try. They swear an oath,’ is the reply delivered in a female voice.

I turn around and yell at her, ‘Please call a doctor. He’s dying.’

But nobody cares, so I continue to press on the wound, praying that help will come. ‘Hold on,’ I repeat over and over again. Then I lean against his face and whisper, ‘I love you, Kurt. Don’t leave me. Don’t leave me.’

In the distance I can hear whistles. Then comes the clatter of running footsteps on the cobbles.

‘Leave him,’ the woman behind me hisses. ‘You’ve done your duty.’

The man says, ‘You don’t want to be here when the police arrive. There’ll be reprisals.’

Someone else says, ‘He’s going to die anyway.’

‘You’re not going to die,’ I say to Kurt, stroking his forehead with my free hand.

At that moment someone pulls at my right arm while another person grabs the other. They're hauling me away.

'No!' I scream. 'I need to keep pressure on the wound. He'll die if I don't.'

At first I think it's the police who are dragging me off and I start to struggle. Then I realise it's the couple who were standing behind me. They're trying to help but they don't seem to understand that I have to stay with Kurt. I don't care if the police come and take me away for questioning. I can't leave him on his own. I'd never forgive myself. His mother would never forgive me. He needs me.

I continue to pull away from them but they're too strong. Someone grabs my blood-soaked jacket and wedges it under my arm. As they drag me towards the laneway, I try to turn around to check on Kurt but they keep lugging me along. Kurt is on his own now, lying prone on the ground, his blood pooling on the cobblestones. He's going to die there all alone. Please, please, let me go.

In the lane they pause for a moment to catch their breath but refuse to loosen their grasp. Through the narrow opening onto the square I can make out a pair of *gendarmes* rushing in Kurt's direction but I can't actually see him, no matter how

much I crane my neck. A sea of field-green uniforms flows past. But where is the ambulance?

‘They’ll be scouring the streets for the shooter,’ the man says. ‘We don’t want to be involved in that. Let’s get home.’

The shooter, I say to myself. All my attention has been fixed on Kurt, but there had to be a shooter. Why would anyone target Kurt? He’s a translator. Then an image begins to form in my head – a young man with black curly hair holding a rifle. No, not a rifle, because he could never get that into the city. It would be a pistol. Oh God! Oh God! The picture dissolves as quickly as it appeared – I can’t think about that now. It’s all about Kurt and nothing else.

As the man and woman haul me down the lane, my legs are turning to jelly. If I wasn’t being held up, I’d fall to the ground.

‘Come on,’ the woman says. ‘It’s not far now to our house.’

Suddenly I feel nauseous, a dark veil obscures my vision, and then everything goes black.



When I open my eyes, I'm in a room lit by a standard lampshade, half-sitting, half-lying on a sofa. For a moment I have no idea where I am or how I got here. Then, like a flash of lightning, the memory of Kurt's body sprawled on the ground in a pool of blood flashes before my eyes. Someone puts a cup of coffee in my hands.

'Drink this,' a voice says. I've heard that voice before but can't remember where. I focus my eyes and recognise the woman from the crowd.

'You're in shock,' a man says. The same man from earlier. 'You were remarkably calm in the square but now it's all caught up with you.'

As I take a sip of the hot, sweet coffee, I can feel the heat of it descending to my stomach.

'Do you live around here?' the woman asks.

For a moment I don't know where I live. I spot my handbag on the floor – they must have carried it here.

'Do you live with your family?' the man asks.

'Yes,' I reply.

'Rest for a while and then you can telephone them to come and get you.'

The woman covers me with a blanket. Although I close my eyes, I'm wide awake. After a while she whispers to her husband, 'Poor girl, she was only trying to help.'

'There was nothing she could have done,' he says. 'He was a goner.'

'You know what *I* think about the *Boche* – the only good German is a dead one.'

'He must have been someone important,' the husband says. 'Someone the Resistance wanted dead.'

Although I can hear their conversation, most of it doesn't make sense. The word 'shooter', however, has lodged in my brain, but I can't bring myself to think about who it was or why he did it. Not after the vision that popped into my head earlier.

'Do you think we should look at her papers? See where she lives. There might be a telephone number.'

'I don't like the idea of searching her bag,' the woman says quietly. 'We can ask her again when she wakes up.'

Something about those words and the gentle tone in which they're delivered makes me feel safe. I allow myself to succumb to the fatigue which is overwhelming me.

When I wake it's hard to tell the time because the blinds are down and the curtains closed. The room is still lit by the standard lamp I noticed earlier. My head feels fuzzy,



alternating with fleeting moments of lucidity. Beside the sofa there's a round table holding a photograph of a handsome young man in a French uniform, its frame adorned with a single red paper poppy.

'That's our only son,' the woman says from the armchair opposite me, following my gaze. 'He died in the Battle of France.'

'I'm so sorry,' I say, but all I can think about is Kurt's mother hearing of her son's death. I try to comfort myself with the thought that he might still be alive. Perhaps he's in the hospital now with his chest bandaged. I try to keep that picture at the forefront of my mind but the lucid part is telling me it's not possible. Not after losing so much blood.

'I'm Jeanne David,' the woman says. 'And this is my husband, Marc.'

'Yvonne,' I say. 'Yvonne de Galais. Thank you for looking after me, but I have to go now.'

'You can't leave on your own, Yvonne,' Monsieur David says. 'The telephone is in the hallway. Why don't you go and call your parents?'

'I've washed out your jacket – I'll fetch it for you,' Madame David says.

No! I say to myself. That was Kurt's blood you washed away.

Madame David must have seen the shocked look on my face because she says: ‘It’s all right, dear. I used cold water. You wouldn’t even know it had been stained.’

I pick up my handbag from the floor and gingerly place my weight on my legs. Slowly I rise from the sofa. My legs are working again. ‘I’ll telephone them now,’ I say, removing an aluminium coin from my purse and handing it to Madame David. ‘Please take this to cover the call and the coffee.’

‘We couldn’t take your money, Yvonne. Nurses like you cared for our son before he died. I hope they were as kind to him as you were to that German.’

I give them a little smile. They’re good people. I feel awful about what I’m about to do.

‘You go and make your phone call,’ Madame David says, ‘and I’ll pack your damp jacket in a towel. You can return it to me next time you’re in the area. Marc, could you make Yvonne another cup of coffee – she’s still looking very pale.’

‘Thank you,’ I say, watching them leave the room. As soon as they’re out of sight, I make my way down the hallway past the telephone stand to the front door. Ever so quietly, I unlock the latch and ease the door open. As soon as I’m in the street I start

to run. I have no idea where I am, I'm just relying on my instincts. I have to get back to the Place de la Comédie. I desperately need to know what has happened to Kurt.

# CHAPTER 38



*Il n'y a pas d'oreiller si inconfortable comme une mauvaise conscience.*

There's no pillow so hard as a guilty conscience.

Old proverb

Saturday, 9 October, 1943

It's twilight when I stumble back to the cinema. Even though the chilly breeze with its hint of salt from the sea is clearing my head, that's not necessarily a good thing. When I was in a state of shock, the numbness protected me. But now, the pain is so raw it's ripping at my heart. From time to time I hear the blast of a whistle which suggests they're still looking for the shooter. I try to block the image of Claude that keeps appearing in my mind, but it's taking hold anyway. Who else could have shot Kurt? He's a major, not a high-ranking officer. He works as a translator, for heaven's sake. No-one would target him except for personal reasons. Then it strikes me that Claude might have pulled the trigger but I'm the one who's responsible for the shooting.

Those times I thought the *Milice* were following me, it was really Claude. No wonder I didn't see him – he had always been able to hunt his prey without being seen.

It must have started that day at the cinema when by chance he discovered the renewed connection between Kurt and me. I shudder as I picture him hiding on the edge of the sunken garden watching us. Or outside the hotel last Saturday, observing Kurt and I go inside.

Those coffee grains on the kitchen table – they were Claude’s. Perhaps he came to warn me off. Then he realised I’d stayed the night at the hotel. If he’d been worried about his sister’s honour, that moment would have confirmed his worst fears. And there he was, the man of the family. In his mind, it would have been a brother’s duty to protect his sister. That might have been when he decided to kill Kurt. And it wasn’t as though he could challenge his opponent to a duel, but he *could* use the skill he had learnt at his father’s knee. Claude had always been a sure-shot. In the Wild West he would have made *un flingueur*, the perfect gunslinger. Today he aimed at Kurt and pulled the trigger, knowing he couldn’t miss.

The horrible irony is that Kurt was the one who organised Claude’s exemption from the STO, yet Claude didn’t know. Would it have made any difference? Once Claude was set on defending my honour, I doubt that anything could have changed his mind. And perhaps it wasn’t just about protecting my honour. Maybe he felt betrayed. Long

ago, the three of us had sworn an oath: ‘One for all, and all for one.’ Did he feel that Kurt had betrayed that oath?

Whatever the answer, nothing can change what happened to my darling Kurt.



I’m so lost in thought that I don’t hear footsteps on the cobbles until they’re right behind me and there’s no time to hide in a doorway – two *gendarmes* have already seen me. Frantically I roll up the bloodstained sleeve of my white blouse.

‘*Bonsoir, mad’moiselle,*’ one of them says, shining his torch in my face.

‘*Bonsoir, messieurs,*’ I reply, steadying my voice.

‘Papers, please.’

As I rummage in my handbag, I push back the incriminating sleeve which has started to fall down. ‘Here,’ I say, handing him the identity card.

‘You’re a long way from home, Mad’moiselle Dupré,’ he says, returning my card.

‘I’m staying in Montpellier for the weekend.’

‘Not the best day to be here,’ the other one says. ‘There’s been a shooting outside the cinema. A German officer. We have a description of a suspect. In his twenties. Tall with dark hair. Have you seen anyone of that description?’

‘No,’ I reply, trying to sound composed.

‘Well, be careful. You shouldn’t be wandering around on your own.’

‘Thank you, officers.’

When they’re out of sight I start to shake so badly I have to crouch down in a doorway and wrap my arms around my knees until the tremor stops. Huddling there in the enveloping darkness, I start to weep. For Kurt and for Claude. As I wipe my face on my sleeve I smell Kurt’s blood. Beautiful darling Kurt. The love of my life. The man whom I was destined to meet again. And now his association with me has killed him.

After a while I struggle to my feet and continue in the direction of the cinema. I’m not sure why I need to go back to the place where Kurt was shot – it’s certainly not a safe thing to do – but I’m being drawn there by a force I can’t control.





The Place de la Comédie is almost empty. That might be explained by the presence of a squad of *miliciens* in their oversized berets, looking like cartoon characters. The ridiculous hats belie a home-grown malevolence. Sometimes I wonder whether they are in competition with the German secret police to see which of them can be more evil. Word has it that many of them are hardened criminals recruited direct from prison.

Now that I'm here I'm not sure that I can go anywhere near the cinema. As long as I hover here on the perimeter I can try to imagine it didn't happen. After a while I inch towards the Fountain of the Three Graces, remembering the day I was eating my lunch there and Kurt sat beside me.

As the town hall clock chimes half past eight – thirty minutes until curfew – I realise I can't procrastinate any longer and venture across the square towards the wooden barrier erected around the spot where Kurt was shot. A group of four children are playing with a ball, oblivious to the events of this afternoon. I can't quite believe that life is going on regardless. It takes me some time to summon enough courage to walk towards the barrier. There are yet more *miliciens* sitting on the steps of the cinema,

smoking cigarettes. I've never seen so many of them in the one place. Like a swarm of rats. Whether it's because of Kurt's shooting, I don't know.

Dodging a ball thrown by one of the children, I wander towards the barrier. Once I'm there, I take a deep breath and look over the top. A bloodstain spreads over the cobblestones resembling a huge red birthmark. At the sight of it, I utter a loud sob and turn away. Then I force myself to look at it again. Kurt's life blood spilt onto the ground. Could anyone possibly survive after such a horrendous wound?

All at once, I hear, 'You all right, *madame*?'

It's a *milicien*. I didn't see him approaching.

'Yes, thank you,' I reply, trying to calm my voice.

'This is not really something a lady should see,' he says, pointing to the bloody cobbles.

'What happened?' I ask with a catch in my voice.

'A German soldier was shot. An officer.'

'Was he killed?'

'What's it to you?'

'Nothing. Just curious.'

‘Would you like a cigarette?’ he asks, rolling one.

‘No, thank you. I’d better go. It’s almost curfew.’

It strikes me that, apart from the children, there’s nobody else in this part of the square except the *Milice* . . . and me.

‘They your kids?’ he asks, pointing to the children playing ball.

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘It’s past their bedtime. I’d better get them home. Good night, *monsieur*.’

I turn and start walking away. When I reach the children, I say loudly, ‘Time to go, *mes petits*.’ Then I head towards the western edge of the square. When I glance around, something incredible has happened – the children are following me as though I’m the Pied Piper of Hameln. At the corner, out of sight of the *Milice*, I give each of them five *centimes*.

‘Now, go home,’ I tell them. ‘*Allez-y!* You don’t want to be caught breaking curfew.’

‘Neither do you,’ says the tallest boy, and the four of them run laughing up the side street.

Not long afterwards, the town hall clock announces that it’s nine o’clock. I don’t know where to go so I just keep walking towards the library. Perhaps I could spend

the night there. Then I remember Anna's place. It seems like weeks since I spoke with the landlord, yet it was only last Monday. It might still be empty.

My legs feel so heavy I can barely make it up the hill. A full moon is hanging above me, guiding my way, but making me visible to any gendarmes who might be patrolling the streets. I'm only wearing a flimsy white blouse and the salty breeze which was blowing earlier has returned with a new chilly edge. As I trudge along the back streets, I try to stay close to the walls of the buildings, wrapping my arms tightly across my chest in an attempt to stay warm. When I reach Anna's gate on the Allée de la Friperie, the 'For Rent' sign is still there. After fumbling in my handbag for the keys, I place the small one in the lock. Silvery moonlight illuminates the overgrown garden as I creep along the path, brushing sticky cobwebs out of my way. The blinds are up and the curtains open – that's a good indication there's no-one inside.

I unlock the front door and gently ease it open. There's enough light from the moon to see the place is exactly as it was when I inspected it – torn cushions dumped on the floor, furniture all over the place. Even so, I creep towards the bedroom and check that it's unoccupied. Then I close the blinds and curtains and turn on a light. Anna's beautiful crocheted throw rug is on the floor – I pick it up and place it on the sofa. I'm

so tired I'm sure that if I lie down there I'll fall asleep. But even though the sofa is comfortable, sleep doesn't come. All I can think about is the tragedy I've created. This isn't something that can be repaired like taping together a torn picture of a movie star.

Kurt is gone. My brother shot him. And I'm the cause.

# CHAPTER 39



*Mieux vaut s'adresser à Dieu qu'à ses saints.*  
Better to speak to God than his saints.

Old proverb

Sunday, 10 October, 1943

In his crisp white uniform, Kurt Müller is waiting beside the Three Graces Fountain. When he spots me coming towards him, he raises his cap and I wave joyfully in return. I negotiate my way through the bustling crowd towards the fountain, only to discover that he's disappeared. Frantically I search the square for a white uniform but to no avail. At that moment I wake from my dream and the horror of what happened yesterday hits me like a gale force wind, sucking the air from my lungs.

For a few minutes I sit on the sofa, rocking back and forth with my arms wrapped across my chest, trying to breathe. Then I calm myself enough to tiptoe to the window, draw back the curtains and pull up the blind. Outside, the garden is a still-life in monochrome, awash with grey dawn light. After opening the other curtains and blinds, I look around the living room. I know I should leave things the way they were last night, but I can't bear to toss the crocheted rug back on the floor. Anyway, that ghastly landlord probably wouldn't notice the difference.

I smooth my skirt, don my shoes and pick up my handbag, before tiptoeing out the door and closing it gently behind me. As I open the gate, I peek out into the lane. Apart from a grey cat with a mangy tail, there's not a soul in sight.

My heels are click-clacking on the cobbles so I take them off and walk in stockinged feet until I can bear it no longer and put on the shoes again. Beyond the leafy Place de la Canourgue I come to the cathedral.

It is still an hour before the first Mass of the day. Passing between the witch's hat towers that mark the entrance, I can't help remembering the three of us at Carcassonne. Who would have thought it would come to this? One of us shot, one being hunted and the other racked with grief and guilt. For a long time, I sit quietly in a pew, listening to every heartbeat and trying to clear my mind. Then I bow my head and press my hands into a steeple. In the barest whisper I begin to pray, not to the saints but directly to God. It is a prayer for Kurt, that by some miracle he is still alive and will recover, and a plea for Claude that he will remain safe and free. As I say the words I realise the irony of asking God to protect the person who shot Kurt. But I don't hate Claude for doing what he did. He would have felt it was his duty as my brother.



The sinner in all of this is me. As for my own absolution, I don't seek it from God – I don't have the right. How could He forgive me when I'll never forgive myself?

Above me, the bells of the cathedral are calling the faithful to seven o'clock Mass. Before leaving, I light candles for Kurt and Claude. Then, like a wraith, I slip out the side door and head towards the university hospital – the best in the south of France. If Kurt is alive he'll be there.

The hospital is an intimidating building, its grand front doors guarded on either side by bronze lions crouching on plinths. This morning, those doors are padlocked. A sign tells me that the hospital is closed to the public except for visiting hours from nine to eleven and two till four. Desperately I make my way around the building, searching for another entrance. Finally, I find the ambulance bay but the doors into the hospital are locked and another sign warns: 'No admittance. Medical staff only'.

There is no alternative but to pass the next hour or two in the nearby Place Royale du Peyrou, the square that Marianne and her beau visited only yesterday afternoon. On a Sunday morning when everyone is in church, it is the most serene place in the entire city, apart from the botanic gardens and I couldn't bear to go *there* until I know what has happened to Kurt.

At the top of the promenade there's a vast rectangular pool filled with water pumped from the river via the city's system of aqueducts. On the western edge stands a water tower built in the eighteenth century to resemble a Grecian temple. It's so romantic-looking that people call it the Château d'Eau – the Water Palace. At a time when my emotions are so chaotic, it is soothing to stare at the water glistening in the morning light.

Just before nine I descend the steps to the Avenue Foch and return to the hospital. The ground floor reception desk lies across a terrazzo-tiled foyer. As I cross the floor I rehearse my plan hatched during the time spent in the square above Montpellier. A young nurse stands behind the desk, busily writing on a clipboard.

*'Excusez-moi, mad'moiselle,'* I say.

'Yes, may I help you?' the nurse replies, looking up.

Drawing a deep breath, I begin my prepared speech, praying I sound convincing enough that she won't ask to see my papers.

'My name is Yvonne Müller. I work as a secretary for the German administration. I was informed that my cousin, Major Kurt Müller, was shot yesterday afternoon and was brought here. I'd like to visit him, if I may, on behalf of the family.'

The nurse gives me the once-over, but I feel confident I could pass for an Aryan with my blond hair and blue eyes. And if I look pale and dishevelled, it's understandable.

'I haven't heard of anyone with a gunshot wound being admitted in the past twenty-four hours but I'll check for you, Fräulein Müller,' she says, opening a green-covered register and running her finger down the page.

Meanwhile I hold my breath, praying he'll be here.

'No, I'm afraid there's only been one German admission, and that's a case of food poisoning.'

'Are you sure?' I ask, trying to moderate the emotion rising in my voice. 'Could you check again, please?'

She peruses the register again. 'He's definitely not here.'

'Might they have taken him somewhere else?'

'It's unlikely. If it's something serious, they bring them here. We have all the latest facilities.' She pauses for a moment before continuing, 'There's another possibility. Not a pleasant one, I'm afraid. If he died on the way to the hospital, they would have taken him straight to the city morgue.'

The word ‘morgue’ is so shocking, so utterly final, that I turn away, trying to hide the tears filling my eyes.

‘The morgue is closed to the public,’ she continues, ‘but you could check with the police. If he’s there, they might allow you to see the body.’

As I turn away, I hear, ‘I’m sorry about your cousin.’

‘Thank you,’ I mumble through my tears and make for the doors.



The prospect of visiting the morgue is more than I can bear – I want to remember Kurt as I saw him in this morning’s dream. The Jardin des Plantes is barely a block away. If I am going to grieve for Kurt, that is where I should go. With my head down, I rush along the narrow pavement towards the gardens, sobbing uncontrollably and avoiding the curious stares of the churchgoers coming in the opposite direction. When I reach the entrance, I discover the place is full of families, and the sense of peace that characterises the garden during the week has been replaced by the hurly-burly of an amusement park. There’s a pair of jugglers on the main path, surrounded by a group of enraptured children, and a stall selling ice-cream. Although I haven’t eaten

anything since lunchtime yesterday, the very thought of food, especially ice-cream made with powdered milk, makes my stomach churn. In despair, I turn back into the street and head towards the library where my bicycle is waiting.

I know where I need to be. My home – the Domaine St-Jean-de-Rivière, the place where so many of my happiest memories of Kurt were made.



When I reach the checkpoint on the bridge out of the city, it isn't manned. I would have expected every exit to be covered when there is a suspect on the loose. A sick feeling rises in my stomach at the thought that the police might have already caught the shooter. But no, that's not possible. My brother would have been far too smart for them. He would have eluded the roadblocks and checkpoints and found a way out, even if he had to swim the river or crawl through the sewers.

As I cycle home, I barely notice the hills clad in fragrant purple heather. Here we call it *la bruyère* – it's very same plant the Gypsies used to sell in Montpellier, until the Vichy regime made them disappear.

In spite of my empty stomach, I summon a burst of energy and make it home in record time. The sight of the olive grove, the withered grapevines and the sturdy stone farmhouse fills me with such a sense of comfort and welcome that I might have been returning after months away, rather than a single day. How quickly one's happiness can be snatched away. And how summarily a precious life can be extinguished.



I pour a hot bath and soak in it until my fingers and toes are wrinkled like raisins. As I dry myself I remember that evening only a week ago when Kurt and I made love, and then the morning when it happened again as we awoke. If I imagined I had cried so many tears there would be none left, I was wrong. When the weeping finally ebbs, the ache in my chest returns, stronger than ever – a heavy, suffocating pain as though someone or something is pressing down on my breastbone. For the briefest moment I consider taking my life. It would put an end to the pain, but it would break my mother's heart and I could never do that. As for my eternal soul, it is damned no matter what I do.

So, I compose myself as best I can and go upstairs to get dressed. My mother is expecting me for lunch. though I have no idea how I can possibly maintain a charade that everything is normal. However, if I am to continue living, I will need to do just that.

Although it's good to put on fresh clothes, it doesn't take the pain away. I hold my crumpled white blouse in my hands, pressing the stained sleeve to my face. I can't bring myself to wash it. Not today. Instead, I place it on a coat-hanger in the wardrobe. As I close the wardrobe door, my eyes fall on the pewter knight in his shell boat, standing on the shelf above my desk. I start to reach for it and notice a folded sheet of paper underneath. How long has that been there, I wonder. As I unfold the paper and recognise the handwriting, my pulse begins to surge.

*I warned you to be careful. You didn't listen. How could you do it with him? It's wrong. Promise you won't see him again.*

There's no date. When did he put it here? Then I remember the coffee grains.

# CHAPTER 40



*Une mauvaise nouvelle a des ailes.*

**Bad news has wings.**

Old proverb



Sunday, 10 October, 1943

When I arrive on foot at the Domaine Bernard, my mother tells me I look exhausted and that I should move in there since I'm obviously not coping on my own. Babette rushes to greet me – she's an indoor dog now and shares the house with George Sand. Fighting back tears, I bury my head in the Briard's curly coat. I have only been here a few minutes and I'm already losing control.

After lunch it's time for *un petit somme*. Maman assigns me Sophie's old room, which is on the ground floor with French doors leading onto the garden. This afternoon the doors are open, bringing the sweet perfume of rose bushes into the bedroom. After removing my shoes, I lie on top of Sophie's coverlet while Babette curls up on the tiled floor beside me, keeping guard and making no comment about me weeping quietly, except to lick my hand in comfort.

The purr of a car engine coming up the driveway wakes me from a fitful sleep in which I'm being pursued by Monsieur and Madame David. I open my eyes, only to

discover it's dark. How long was I asleep? It must have been hours. As the car pulls to a stop on the gravel courtyard, I notice the headlights are off.

In a flash I leap off the bed, pull on my shoes and rush into the hallway in time to see Lucien opening the front door to Jean Lebrun.

'Is it safe?' the doctor asks.

'Yes, Louise is here. Camille too, but she's asleep.'

'No, I'm not,' I say in a low voice, coming towards the front door. 'What's happened?' I almost add 'to Claude' but stop myself in time.

'Please go and ask your mother to make some coffee,' the doctor says to me, before returning to the car.

But I remain beside Lucien, watching as Jean taps on the back door of the car. As the door opens and a figure emerges, my hopes rise. Could it be Claude who is hidden in the back seat? But no, it's Marius. He covers the distance between the drive and the front door in a matter of seconds and embraces his father, kissing him on each cheek. When he catches sight of me, his demeanour changes.

'*Bonjour, Camille,*' he says solemnly.

The tone of his voice is unsettling; Marius is exuberant, arrogant and loud, but never solemn.

‘Come inside, son,’ Lucien says, ushering everyone down the hall and into the kitchen.

‘Marius!’ my mother says, caught by surprise. ‘Is Claude with you?’

Marius kisses her on each cheek and remains silent. My mother glances from Jean to Lucien and back again.

‘What’s going on?’ she asks with a note of panic in her voice.

Jean flashes a look at Marius and then turns towards my mother. ‘There’s been a shooting in Montpellier and—’

‘Was Claude shot?’ she interrupts, the pitch of her voice rising.

‘No, Louise, Claude was the shooter. It was yesterday afternoon. He shot a German officer outside the cinema. Last night he was picked up by a police patrol. They found a pistol in his bag.’

Lucien clasps my mother’s hand as I lean against the kitchen counter where I’m about to make coffee. I was so certain he’d escaped. Suddenly I feel dizzy.

‘Are you all right, Camille?’ Jean asks, rising from his chair and coming towards me as I start to slump to the floor. He manages to grasp me under the arms before I hit the ground and helps me to a chair.

‘Put your head between your knees.’

For a few moments the conversation stops as I collapse into the chair, Lucien brings me a glass of water and my mother fusses over me.

‘I’m feeling better now,’ I say, even though I’m still weak and nauseous.

‘Where is Claude now?’ Lucien asks.

‘He was taken to the Préfecture last night,’ Marius says, ‘but they would have moved him to the prison by now.’

‘Prison! Oh dear God!’ my mother gasps as I sit bent over, my hands clasping my knees.

I’ve passed that prison so many times. It’s almost opposite the Jardin des Plantes. One high wall inside another, and a bleak building with a stone tower and slits for windows.

‘Was this an authorised operation?’ Lucien asks.

‘No, he just went off and did it on his own,’ Marius replies. ‘We only heard about it from an informant at the Préfecture, who went to school with Claude and recognised him.’

‘He’s carrying false papers,’ Jean adds. ‘He’s been using a “nom de guerre” – Charles Batz. The police think he’s an itinerant fruit picker from Bordeaux.’

As I hear the name ‘Charles Batz’, a shiver passes up my spine – that was D’Artagnan’s real name – Charles de Batz.

‘He won’t talk,’ Marius adds. ‘He won’t give them anything. You know Claude.’

We all nod silently.

‘Was the officer someone important?’ Lucien asks.

‘We don’t know who he was,’ Marius replies. ‘Not even his rank. Our contact says he was wearing a cape and there was blood everywhere. It was impossible to see his epaulettes or sleeves.’

I’m feeling dizzy again but I force myself to listen.

‘Is the German dead?’ my mother asks.

‘As far as I know,’ Marius answers.

‘*Morte la bête, mort le venin,*’ my mother mutters. ‘A dead dog can’t bite. At least there’s one less *Boche* beast to worry about.’

I flinch at her words and continue to keep my head bent.

‘Do you have any idea why Claude did it?’ Lucien asks.

‘We can only guess,’ Marius replies. ‘I think it might have involved a girl. He was always disappearing for hours on end. Said he was going hunting and wouldn’t let me join him. After this happened, I wondered if the girl might have been seeing the *Boche* officer as well, and Claude found out. That could explain things.’

‘Will he be tried at the Palais de Justice?’ Lucien asks.

Jean clears his throat. ‘There may not be a trial. Not in a case like this.’

‘You don’t mean . . .’ my mother says hoarsely.

‘Can you get him out of prison?’ Lucien asks. ‘You must have contacts there.’

‘You mean organise an escape?’ Marius says. ‘That building has double ramparts like a fortress.’

‘But you’ll try,’ my mother pleads.

‘The problem is the shooting wasn’t authorised,’ Jean intervenes. ‘Claude just wanted to settle a personal score, and that’s something the *Maquis* frowns upon for

several reasons – it sets a bad example to the others and it undermines discipline. And there’s something else to consider – an attack on a German soldier, for whatever reason, is likely to bring civilian reprisals with it. Unless the culprit turns themselves in, and even then ...’

‘Oh my God,’ I say, thinking out loud. ‘They didn’t catch Claude. *He let himself be caught.*’

The room falls silent.

Then Jean asks, ‘What makes you think that?’

I raise my head and sit up straight, though I still feel a little woozy. ‘He could easily have escaped capture if he’d wanted to. Isn’t that right, Marius?’

‘I did wonder about them catching him so easily,’ Marius says. ‘That boy could make himself invisible when he wanted to. You should have seen him hunting rabbits,’ he says in Jean’s direction.

‘It’s just like Claude,’ I say. ‘He has his own sense of honour. He wouldn’t want others hurt by his actions.’ Tears are rolling down my face.

‘Does that mean he won’t try to escape?’ Lucien asks.

‘If he’s turned himself in to prevent reprisals, that would defeat the whole purpose,’ Marius replies.

‘What will happen to him?’ my mother whispers.

‘He could be sent to prison here or to one of their camps in Germany. Or he might be . . .’ He stops short but we all know the word he was about to say.

‘All for some silly girl,’ my mother cries. ‘It’s just not fair.’

‘Nothing is fair anymore, Louise,’ Jean says, patting her hand. ‘There’s one more thing,’ he continues, addressing all of us. ‘You can’t speak of this to anyone outside this room. Not in person, and certainly not on the telephone. If the *Boche* have an inkling that their suspect comes from this village, there could be reprisals. And they’ll start right here.’

My mother gasps and crosses herself.

‘What about your contact at the Préfecture?’ I ask Jean, ‘Can you trust him? After all, he knows that Charles Batz is Claude Dupré.’

‘That fellow won’t say a word. He’s as solid as the Pic du Loup. Tomorrow you all need to go about your business as though nothing has happened.’ Then Jean turns



towards me. ‘Camille, that means you’ll go to the library as usual in the morning. Don’t change your routines in any way.’

Jean and Marius lead the way to the front door. The hall clock is chiming the half hour. I glance up at the face – it’s half past eight.

‘I’ll need to be off the roads before curfew,’ Jean says. ‘I’ll let you know as soon as I hear anything.’

Marius embraces each of us, leaving his father till last.

‘Be careful, *mon fils*,’ Lucien tells him. ‘*Je t’aime*.’

‘*Moi aussi*,’ Marius replies.

Just as they’re about to go, my mother tells them to wait a moment and dashes back to the kitchen. She returns with a carton of food – nuts, fruit, jam and cheese.

‘For you and your compatriots,’ she says.

‘Be safe,’ I tell them both as I observe Marius lying down on the back seat and the doctor placing a blanket over him. On top he throws a pile of large brown paper bags marked ‘Catheter’ and a few boxes emblazoned ‘Enema’, as well as several rolls of bandages. Anyone shining a torch into the back would think it was full of medical supplies.

‘They never search the back when they see the catheters and enemas,’ he says with a wan smile. ‘Try to get some sleep, Camille. You look very pale.’



When bedtime comes, I can't sleep. Not with Kurt in the morgue, and Claude in prison facing interrogation by the Gestapo. If they take him for a humble fruit picker, perhaps they'll go easier on him. But why would someone like that shoot a German officer? Maybe the Gestapo will think he's a mad man and that the attack was without rhyme or reason. What I do know is that Claude won't make a case for himself. The man of few words will say nothing.

My mother has insisted I stay at the Domaine Bernard, at least until we know what is happening to Claude, and I've barely raised an objection. I don't want to be on my own; I need distractions. But no matter what goes on around me I will still be alone with my thoughts. The only soul with whom I can share my secrets is Babette.

As I lie on Sophie's bed, I close my eyes and try to summon up a vision of Kurt in his white uniform. The radiant blue eyes, the clipped blond hair, the golden complexion. Then I attempt to conjure up his voice, the melodious way he spoke

French with just the occasional clipped consonant to give away the fact he wasn't a native speaker. And as I think of him, I clear my head of everything else. But sleep comes only in brief bursts and even then, Kurt doesn't appear in my dreams. Nor does Claude. Instead there are chaotic nightmares in which the *Milice* tear the municipal library apart.



In the morning, having barely slept, I smooth a dot of rouge onto each cheek and apply the remainder of my almost-empty tube of lipstick. Even so, the face that greets me in the mirror remains a pallid mask. Heedful of Jean's warning, I leave for work at the usual time, taking the regular route and arriving at the library half an hour before opening time. At lunchtime I long to walk to the Jardin des Plantes, climb the artificial mountain and peer into the prison from that vantage point. Instead, I eat my lunch at the desk in Anna's office with the portrait of Général Pétain glowering over me. In the afternoon a circular arrives from the municipal authorities advertising Anna's position. A few days ago I would have been excited about applying; now I don't care.

At five-fifteen I close up the library, unlock my bicycle and ride home to the farmhouse where I collect some clothes and the pewter knight. While I'm there, I rinse

the sleeve of my white blouse in cold water. It's not easy watching Kurt's blood swirl down the plug hole. Afterwards I hang the blouse to dry in the wash-house. Then I cycle up to Lucien's with my clothes wrapped in a couple of pillowcases bulging from the basket on the handlebars.

The first words I ask my mother when I see her are: 'Any news about Claude?'

'*Pas de nouvelle, bonne nouvelle.* No news is good news.' She's in one of those odd moods of hers where's she's denying the reality of what has happened. I can't do much else but play along with it.

After supper we're in the *salon* listening to Radio-Londres on Lucien's fancy radiogram when I'm certain I can hear a car approaching up the drive. As Lucien turns the volume down, I rush to the window, pull the curtain away from the frame just a little so that I can peek out through the gap. No headlights. It couldn't be the *Milice*, could it? Or the Gestapo? My pulse is galloping at the prospect they've uncovered my brother's true identity.

Lucien must be thinking the same thing because he whispers to me, 'Turn the dial to Radio-Montpellier.'

Suddenly there's pounding on the front door. I can't let Lucien open it on his own so I follow in his wake. Jean is standing on the doorstep, and just behind him in the shadows is Père Patric. My head knows what they're about to tell us, but my heart is refusing to believe it.

'May we come in?' the doctor asks.

'Of course,' Lucien says, his voice faltering.

We lead them into the *salon* where my mother is sitting on the sofa, trembling uncontrollably.

'Please take a seat,' Lucien says to the doctor and the priest, who places himself next to my mother and clasps her hand.

Jean leans forward in the armchair and prepares to speak. In his role as a doctor he must be used to delivering bad news, but I can tell he's steeling himself nonetheless.

'It happened this morning at dawn,' he begins.

My mother utters a groan.

'Claude was questioned on Saturday night and all day Sunday but never said a word. Our contact in the prison has confirmed that.'

'My darling Claude,' Maman says between sobs.

‘He is at peace with our heavenly Father,’ Father Patric says. ‘Let us pray for Claude’s eternal soul.’

As the priest begins his prayer, we lower our heads, each one of us remembering the steadfast young man with the mane of dark, curly hair. Afterwards, we sit in silence for a long time.

Then Lucien asks quietly: ‘How did it happen?’

‘It was a firing squad,’ Jean replies. ‘He refused to wear a blindfold.’

I shudder at the image of my little brother standing against a wall, waiting to die, but I can just imagine him waving away the blindfold and bravely staring his executioners in the eye.

‘Can we bury him?’ Lucien asks.

The doctor and the priest exchange looks.

‘I’m afraid not,’ Jean says softly. ‘The Germans will do that.’

‘No!’ my mother cries. ‘He’s my son. They should return him to me.’

‘That can’t happen, Louise,’ Jean tells her quietly. ‘As far as they know, Claude is someone called Charles Batz who harks from Bordeaux. Claude went out of his way to keep you safe. You need to respect that.’

‘He always puts . . . put us first,’ she replies through her tears.

‘Do you know where he will be buried?’ I ask Jean.

‘It’s likely we’ll never know.’

‘He should be having a Requiem Mass like his father,’ my mother sobs. ‘Three priests officiating and the interment in the village graveyard. It isn’t right. I bet they’re having a big funeral for that *Boche* bastard – *qu’on me pardonne l’expression*.’

I swallow hard at her words.

‘I heard a rumour they shipped him back to Berlin,’ the doctor says.

This time I can barely conceal a gasp. In my mind’s eye I can picture a wooden coffin in a railway carriage and Kurt’s parents waiting stoically on the platform in Berlin to meet the train. The pain of that image is unbearable.

‘Do you know his name yet, the German?’ I ask with a tremor in my voice.

‘Only that he was an officer,’ Jean replies. ‘He can’t have been anyone important or we would have heard.’

‘Could we at least have a small memorial service here?’ Lucien asks. ‘Just the family – my daughters, Louise’s sister.’

‘It’s too risky,’ Jean tells him. ‘What if one of your farmhands is an *indic*? For now, this has to remain a secret. I’m sorry that you won’t have a place to mourn your son, Louise, but one day a memorial will be built to honour him and all the local boys who lost their lives in the cause of the Resistance, and it will be right in the middle of the village square. I guarantee it, even if I have to pay for it myself.’

‘I’ll make some strong coffee,’ I say to no-one in particular.

‘Why don’t you add a nip of cognac?’ Lucien suggests. ‘We could all do with it.’

I can’t wait to escape to the kitchen. My body is crumpling from the weight of the grief and guilt I’m carrying. While I watch the water coming to a boil, I lean against the kitchen counter and allow myself to shed the tears that have been building ever since the doctor and the priest arrived. Suddenly I hear Jean’s voice.

‘Father Patric is speaking with your mother and Lucien. I thought I’d give them some privacy. Can I help with the coffee?’

‘Yes, you could put the cups and saucers on a tray and add a teaspoon of that damned chicory powder to each cup,’ I say, furtively wiping my eyes on my apron.

‘I’m very sorry about Claude.’

‘Thank you.’



‘You look worn out, Camille. Did you get any sleep?’

‘A little.’

‘I brought some sleeping pills for your mother. You might want to use them too. Take a quarter of a tablet about half an hour before bedtime. That should be enough, considering neither of you is used to taking them. And it might be best if *you* keep hold of the bottle.’

‘You don’t think my mother would . . .’

‘No, but I’d prefer it if you dispense the tablets.’ He removes a small bottle from his pocket and hands it to me.

‘Thank you,’ I say, glancing across at the ordinary-looking man in the slightly worn brown suit.

‘It’s my job.’

‘What exactly is your job?’ I ask.

‘I’m a doctor, of course.’

‘You can keep on saying that, Jean Lebrun, but I’ll never believe it. How can you know so much about what’s going on if you’re not part of the Maquis?’

‘Doctors are well-informed, Camille. People confide in us, just as they do with priests.’

# CHAPTER 41



*Avoir la mort dans l'âme, c'est vivre dans les ténèbres.*

To be heartsick is to live in darkness.

Old saying

## Early November, 1943

There is no public display of bereavement; we simply resume our lives. In the safety of the Bernard house we can grieve for Claude together, but elsewhere we have to pretend everything is normal. My mother shops in the village as she has always done and joins the gossip sessions after Mass on Sundays, though without enthusiasm. Lucien runs his vineyard and sells his wines, and I go to the library six days a week and act like an efficient librarian when my heart and mind are elsewhere.

The villagers assume that Claude is up in the mountains with the Maquis, like Marius and many of the other local boys. As for the *gendarme* who lives in our village, he's reluctant to hunt the missing lads in case there are repercussions for himself and his family. Nowadays it's the *Milice* who are pursuing the runaways, but so far, they've left us alone. With thousands of cases to deal with in this area, I'm hoping the War will be over before they come knocking.

My grieving for Kurt must be done in secret, hidden away in Sophie's old room, crying myself to sleep. Sometimes I picture Kurt's parents, the kind-looking woman and the dour general, mourning their son and trying to understand how their only child, the young man they believed was safely ensconced in an office job could have become a shooting victim in the main square of Montpellier.

At the centre of my grief is the certainty that *I* am the cause of both tragedies. No wonder I'm feeling sick to my stomach. Some mornings I can barely drag myself out of bed, and when I do, I feel weak and dizzy and can't even eat my breakfast. There are days when Lucien drives me to work because I'm simply too unwell to cycle all that way. If only I could share my secret with someone else. Père Patric is out of the question and so are the priests in Montpellier. The only person who might understand would be Sophie and she's in Paris, living the good life in spite of the War, or perhaps, as my mother once whispered to me, because of it.



When the sickness persists, I come to accept it as penance for what I have done. If I feel wretched for the rest of my life, it won't be punishment enough. My mother fusses

over me, when she should be looking after herself. Every morning she mixes me *une lait de poule* made with eggs, milk and honey. ‘It will build you up,’ she says.

She used to make those frothy drinks for me when I felt so ill in the weeks after my father died. I’m not sure they helped me then, and they certainly don’t help now, but I drink them obediently nonetheless. At least it makes my mother feel better.

One Saturday afternoon, when I return from work, the doctor’s car is parked in the courtyard. The sight of it fills me with apprehension. Taking a deep breath, I rest my bike against the wall and go inside. In the kitchen Jean and my mother are drinking coffee and he’s eating a slice of her honey cake.

‘*Bonjour, Camille,*’ he says. ‘Your mother asked me to pop in and check on you. She tells me you’ve been unwell.’

‘It’s nothing a doctor can fix,’ I reply.

‘Would you mind if I do an examination, since I’m here anyway.’

‘I suppose not.’

‘Why don’t you use the *salon*?’ my mother says. ‘You probably don’t want me in the way.’

It almost sounds as though she’s matchmaking again. I certainly hope not.

Jean and I adjourn to the sitting room where I take an armchair and he sits opposite me on the sofa.

‘Grief can manifest itself in physical symptoms, Camille, but I suppose you know that – your mother said you were ill after your father died.’

‘I was heartsick,’ I say.

‘I lost my wife. I know how that feels,’ he says with a wan smile. ‘And it takes a long time to recover. But I’d just like to check that you haven’t come down with an infection or something more serious. Tell me how you’re feeling.’

‘Exhausted and nauseous. I’ve felt dizzy too.’

‘May I take your temperature?’

‘Of course,’ I say, as he shakes down the thermometer and places it in my mouth. After the requisite time he removes it.

‘Perfectly normal,’ he announces. ‘Have you had any pain with this nausea?’

‘Not in my stomach, but my breasts have been sore.’

‘How long have they been like that?’ he asks, as though he’s suddenly discovered something significant.

‘A couple of weeks, I suppose. I haven’t paid much attention.’

‘Camille, I need to ask you something personal.’ After an uncomfortable pause he continues, ‘Are you still seeing that man in Montpellier?’

‘What does that have to do with anything?’ I ask brusquely.

‘I need to know whether you and he have had intimate relations and when.’

‘I’m not going to sit here and be interrogated by you, Jean Lebrun, about things that are none of your business.’

‘I’m afraid it *is* relevant, Camille. When was your last period?’

‘I don’t know. Six weeks ago, I think.’

‘So you’re two weeks late.’

‘I haven’t been worried about it – my periods stopped for a while after my father died. It was the shock of losing him so suddenly – that’s what Dr Giroux said. I assume it’s the same this time.’

He produces a leather-bound diary from his bag and starts making notes.

‘Have you had relations with your . . . gentleman friend in the past eight weeks?’

‘Yes,’ I say, trying to steady the tremor in my voice.

‘And did you take any precautions?’

‘He used a *capote anglaise*,’ I reply, trying not to blush.



‘Every time?’

I’m about to say ‘Yes’, when I remember the early morning when it happened spontaneously. Aloud I say, ‘There was one time . . . but surely you couldn’t get pregnant from the just one time without protection?’

‘Do you know how many women find themselves expecting a baby from one experience of unprotected intercourse?’

‘Am I expecting a baby?’ I ask incredulously.

‘It seems that way, I’m afraid, Camille.’

For the first time in weeks a wisp of hope is rising in my heart. Kurt’s baby. It’s a miracle. A gift. A blessing.

‘Do you think the father would marry you?’ the doctor is asking.

‘That’s impossible,’ I reply quietly.

‘Shouldn’t you at least tell him?’

‘That’s impossible,’ I repeat.

Jean continues to speak in his soft, considered way, but I’m not listening anymore. It’s like one of those radio broadcasts on a stormy night when the sound is mostly static and only random snatches of audible content come through. I rub my hand over

my stomach, trying to imagine the tiny baby inside. Kurt's child. My little miracle. Then I hear the words: ' . . . the nuns would organise for it to be adopted.'

'What are you talking about?' I ask anxiously.

'As I was saying, you could go away to a convent, before you start to show, and spend the remainder of your pregnancy there. When the baby is born, the nuns would find a family to adopt it.'

'Why would I do that?' I ask, the anger rising in my voice.

'So that nobody in the village would find out. You'd simply say you were going to care for a sick relative in a distant town, or something along those lines, and come back afterwards as though nothing had happened.'

'As though nothing had happened!'

'You'd be surprised at the number of girls who do exactly that.'

Looking him straight in the eyes, I say, 'I'm keeping this baby.'

'You can't, Camille. It would bring disgrace upon your family. Your mother would never be able to show her face in the village again, and you . . . you would be an outcast.'

'Nobody is taking this baby from me, Jean. If I have to go and live in Montpellier, I will.'

‘How would you support yourself? As soon as it’s obvious you’re pregnant, they’ll dismiss you from the library.’

‘I’ll think of something,’ I say, tears stinging my eyes.

‘What I don’t understand,’ he says, taking my hand, ‘is that if this man is married, why are you so intent on keeping his child?’

When I don’t answer his question, he continues, ‘You know that if you did choose to have the baby adopted out, you could still get married later on and have children with your husband.’

‘But I want *this* baby,’ I say determinedly.

‘Well, whatever you decide, you’re going to need a doctor. And you should see him as soon as possible to make sure that you are indeed pregnant and that everything is fine with the baby.’

‘Couldn’t it be you, Jean? You deliver babies all the time.’

‘It wouldn’t be appropriate,’ he says firmly. ‘But I can introduce you to the doctor at the maternity hospital in Montpellier. And if you’re intent on keeping the baby, we’d better call you *Madame Dupré* when we make the appointment. If they know you’re unmarried, they will assume you’ll be giving up the baby after the birth.’

‘Could I ask you a favour?’

‘Yes,’ he says tentatively.

‘Don’t say anything to my mother or Lucien. Not yet. I need to find the right way to tell them.’

‘There will never be a right way, Camille. But I agree that you should wait a while. The first twelve weeks are the time when you’re most likely to miscarry.’

‘You don’t think I’m going to lose the baby, do you?’ I ask in a panic, remembering Sophie’s dramatic and unexpected miscarriage.

‘It’s unlikely. All the same, I recommend waiting until you reach three months.’



The next afternoon, I’m reclining on the sofa with George asleep on my lap, reading *Notre Dame de Paris* for the umpteenth time when I hear voices outside. I’ve barely sat upright and put the cat on the floor, before my mother enters the room, accompanied by Jean Lebrun.

‘Is Marius all right?’ I ask nervously.

‘He’s fine,’ Jean says, without his usual obfuscations.

‘The doctor has come to see *you*, Camille,’ Maman says. ‘I was telling him that you’ve been much better since his visit yesterday.’

‘Is that right?’ Jean asks with a glance in my direction.

‘Yes, it’s true,’ I say.

‘Well, in that case I must be a witch doctor,’ he says with a smile in my direction. ‘You certainly do look a better colour though.’

‘I’ll go and make some coffee so that the two of you can talk,’ my mother says. She must be thinking that two visits in two days indicates something important. *Ma pauvre maman*. Little does she know that it’s going to turn her life upside down.

‘Camille, I’ve been thinking,’ Jean says, restlessly jiggling his legs. ‘Actually, I have a plan to put to you. Well, more like a proposal than a plan. You know how I feel about you. I haven’t felt this way since Renée – my wife.’ He draws a deep breath before continuing. ‘That’s why I want to ask you to marry me and I’ll raise your child as my own.’

I’m so shocked I don’t know what to say.

‘If you accept my proposal, we could see *Père Patric* about having the banns read as soon as possible. And if we were married by the end of the month, nobody need ever

know that the baby wasn't mine. We would just say it came early. I realise this has fallen from the sky, Camille, and you might need time to consider it, but I'm certain we could be very happy together.'

He looks at me hopefully while I squirm on the sofa.

Eventually I say, 'I don't think I've ever heard anything more selfless and noble.'

'It's not selfless, quite the opposite. I want you for my wife. That's a very selfish desire. But I promise I will love you and your child with all my heart.'

'If I were to marry anyone it would be you, Jean. You're a fine man and you'd be a fine husband. But I can't marry you because I still love the baby's father. And it wouldn't be fair to accept your offer and not be able to give you my heart when it's already taken by someone else.'

'I know you don't love me, Camille. But you won't always love this man, and one day you might even find yourself falling in love with me.'

'The problem is that I've loved him for a very long time. And even though we can never be together now, I will continue to love him. And this baby, *his* baby is my solace. I couldn't inflict all of that on you, Jean. It wouldn't be right.'

He is silent for a very long time. 'I had to try,' he whispers.

# CHAPTER 42



*L'enfant est l'ancre de la mère.*

A child is its mother's anchor.

Old proverb

## January, 1944

A new year has arrived but the War goes on. Will 1944 bring victory against the Germans? Radio-Londres tells us that President Roosevelt has appointed General Eisenhower to command the invasion. But when will it be? And where will they land? Will it be on the Mediterranean coast? If so, the landing point certainly won't be anywhere around here – the Rhône Delta is a *mélange* of lagoons and swamps. My guess is Toulon or Marseille but others are saying the Allies will cross the Channel at the closest point – Calais or Boulogne. Whatever the route, we're all impatient for it to happen.

In the lead-up to Christmas the Allies 'carpet-bombed' Berlin but stopped during the twelve days of Christmas before returning to smash the city to pieces. I can't help thinking of Kurt's parents. Are they safe? Even though they're technically the enemy, I pray for them every night, just as I pray that both Kurt and Claude are at peace with our Heavenly Father.



In the midst of a dark world, the baby is the bright star that gives me hope for the future. I have a tiny bump now, only visible to me. But soon I will need to conceal my pregnancy beneath loose blouses and winter coats. At work, the library is so cold we wear our coats and scarves all day – there is no coal for heating, and trees are being cut down at an alarming rate to be sent to Germany for fuel. On the positive side, it means I should be able to conceal my pregnancy until spring, at least.

As Jean predicted, the morning sickness which afflicted me for weeks has disappeared at last, and I've been to see the obstetrician at the maternity hospital in Montpellier where I'm registered as Madame Dupré and wear a cheap brass ring that passes for a gold wedding band. The doctor has said everything is going *à merveille* – wonderfully – and to return in eight weeks unless there are problems in the meantime.

So far, nobody knows about the baby apart from the doctors, but now that I'm at the twelve-week mark, it's time to tell my mother and Lucien. Although I'd like to put it off, procrastinating will only make it worse. Over the past three months I've rehearsed the confession many times in my head. Every version ends with my mother weeping in despair and calling me a wicked, thankless daughter, while Lucien berates me for breaking my mother's heart – as if I didn't know.

On Saturday I just make it home before an electrical storm hits like an orchestral fanfare accompanied by fireworks. As the heavens flash and roar, I eat supper with Maman and Lucien, while Babette cowers under the table. When we finish I help clear and wash the dishes and then adjourn with my mother and Lucien to the *salon* to listen to the radio. I have no idea how to start a conversation about the baby, and it doesn't help that Maman mentions seeing Jean Lebrun in the village with Lucie Perrault's daughter.

'They looked *very* friendly,' she says with a glance in my direction. 'I knew you'd miss the boat with all your dilly-dallying. Now he's found someone else.'

'I'm happy for him,' I reply.

'Hmmp,' my mother responds.

Tonight, the reception is so crackly that Lucien has to turn off the radio before it's time for the broadcast from London. Lucien and Maman take this opportunity to discuss what they will do about the old farmhouse. My mother doesn't like it being unoccupied. She's afraid the Germans will loot it.

'We could lease it to the new farmhand and his family,' Lucien suggests.

‘They seem nice enough,’ Maman replies. ‘But I’d want to keep an eye on anyone who was taking over my house.’

‘Of course. But whatever we decide, the old vineyard needs to be cleared,’ Lucien says. ‘Leaving those dead vines only encourages mould and disease. We could plant clover there and by next year or the one after, the soil might have improved enough to plant a small crop of Muscat vines.’

‘Muscats, I’d like that,’ my mother says, stroking the sleeping cat on her lap.

After they’ve exhausted this topic of conversation, we listen to the sounds of the storm and I summon the courage to speak.

Clearing my throat, I say, ‘There’s something I need to tell you both.’

‘You can’t move back to the farm, Camille,’ my mother responds. ‘It wouldn’t be safe there on your own.’

‘It’s not about the farm, Maman. I’m . . . I’m expecting a baby.’

‘What did you just say?’ my mother asks as Lucien stares at me in utter horror.

‘I’m pregnant, Maman.’

Lucien hasn’t said a word. No doubt he’s recalling his warning not to break my mother’s heart.

‘Is this some kind of joke, Camille?’ she asks. ‘You don’t even have a suitor.’

‘I do . . . did. I met him in Montpellier.’

My mother’s face is so red I’m afraid she’s about to have *une attaque d’apoplexie*. For his part, Lucien is patting her hand and glaring at me.

‘Is this man going to marry you, Camille,’ he demands.

‘That’s not possible.’

‘How far along are you?’ he continues in a low voice.

‘About three months.’

‘*Sainte mère de Dieu!*’ my mother exclaims. ‘Why can’t this man marry you? It’s his baby, after all.’

‘He can’t, Maman. He’s gone.’

‘Run away, the bastard,’ she hisses.

When my mother swears, it means she’s furious. Lucien rushes to the kitchen to fetch her a glass of Merlot. It’s his antidote to every problem. My father was the same.

‘Drink this, Louise. It will calm you down.’

‘Nothing will calm me down, Lucien. I can’t believe my own daughter has done something so shameful.’

‘Nobody need know, Louise. We’ll organise for her to go away before she starts showing. To a convent in Arles or Avignon. She can have the baby there. The nuns will find a good home for it, and no-one in St-Jean-de-Rivière need ever know.’

‘I’m keeping the baby,’ I say quietly. It’s the conversation with Jean all over again, but this time it’s my distraught mother and enraged stepfather. Poor Lucien, he went through this with his own daughter some dozen years ago, before her pregnancy was cut short by fate.

‘Unwed mothers don’t keep their babies,’ my mother says. ‘It’s just not done.’

‘I’m not changing my mind, Maman. If you’re worried about it bringing shame on the family, I’ll move into Montpellier.’

‘I don’t understand why you would want to keep the child of a man who’s not even around anymore?’ my mother asks in exasperation.

‘Because I love him. I always will.’

‘I’m glad your father isn’t here to see what’s happened to the daughter he doted on,’ she says, shaking her head.

Those words bring tears to my eyes.

‘I think we should all sleep on this,’ Lucien says, giving me a dark look. ‘*La nuit porte conseil.*’

Night will bring counsel.



For weeks afterwards, my mother barely acknowledges my existence. She makes my meals, washes my clothes but rarely meets my gaze and addresses me only when necessary. I can understand her disgust and disappointment but I don't feel guilty. This baby wasn't created from sin; if any child was born of love, it's this one.

The municipal authorities have finally made their decision about the chief librarian's appointment and given it to me. How ironic, when I only have a month or two before I'll have to retire. If I leave it any longer they'll start to guess the truth. I'll tell them I'm needed at the vineyard – it's not exactly a lie in that I've been helping with the accounts for a while now.

If February is the shortest month and *le plus diable*, the most evil, as the old saying goes, then March brings hope and burgeoning life. I'm at the halfway mark in my pregnancy but I'm still able to camouflage my expanding belly. On the first day of

spring I have a peculiar fluttering in my stomach – it’s a sensation I haven’t felt before and I’m concerned for the baby. The next day I make an appointment to see the obstetrician, but in the meantime I decide to confide in my mother because I’m frightened about this new development – not only is it becoming more noticeable but it seems to be happening more often. What if it means there’s something wrong with the baby?

When I approach Maman with my problem, I expect to be greeted with the disdainful stare which has become customary of late.

Instead, she asks, ‘Does it feel like a butterfly trapped inside your belly?’

‘That’s exactly what it feels like.’

‘It’s the baby moving,’ she says. ‘When you were inside me, you used to kick so hard you could wake me from a sound sleep.’

While she’s speaking, the fluttering starts to happen again, almost as though the baby can hear us talking and want to demonstrate its strength.

‘Here, feel this, Maman,’ I say, pressing her hand against my distended stomach and watching her expression. I’m anticipating a look of disapproval, but instead she starts

to smile. It's the first smile she's given me in weeks, even if it's only directed at my belly.

'You have a busy little baby there,' she says. 'I hope he or she sleeps better than you did.'

We've never talked about the baby before. Perhaps the ice has been broken. Still, one swallow doesn't make a summer.



When I leave the library at the end of April, the staff has a little party for me. Marianne makes a flourless eggless chocolate cake using precious cocoa powder, potato starch and powdered milk. By the old standards, it tastes a little odd, but we wolf it down nonetheless.

While I'm in the process of clearing my desk, Fleurette appears at the door with her duster.

'Come in and sit down,' I say.

Closing the door behind her, she takes a seat on the other side of the desk.

'I hope the birth goes smoothly, Camille,' she whispers.



I'm so shocked I can barely speak. After a moment I ask, 'Does everybody know?'

'Only me. It's the way you stand sometimes. Nobody else has noticed.'

'Thank goodness for that.'

'I had a baby a long time ago,' she says. 'It was a little girl. I only saw her for a few minutes and then she was taken away. I wish I'd been able to keep her.'

'I'm so sorry, Fleurette.'

'I was only fifteen. What about you, Camille? Any chance of a wedding?'

I shake my head. There will never be a wedding.



In the first week of June, Lucien returns from the markets in Montpellier with the news that the Allies have landed in Normandy. There's a certain disappointment that they didn't choose the Mediterranean coast instead, but at least it's finally happened. Within days, troops from the German garrison in Montpellier are being moved north to join the forces trying to hold back the Allies. I've always assumed the landings would change things for the better – and they might well do so in the future – but not instantaneously as I had so naïvely imagined. And if I had thought the reduced

German presence in Montpellier would result in a relaxation of their rules and regulations, I was wrong – the Germans are cracking down harder than ever before. With their own numbers depleted, they are bringing in the *Osttruppen*, former Soviet soldiers who've been commandeered into the Wehrmacht, as well as increasing numbers of the home-grown *Milice*. There's nothing more objectionable than being policed by thuggish collaborators. Meanwhile, food and other supplies are being diverted to the Front like never before. It's as bleak a time as the early days of the Occupation.

By the end of the month Captain Bauer has been sent to northern France, and we have no idea when a jeepload of Germans or *Osttruppen* will be turning up to plunder our produce or take Maman's cows. In the midst of this uncertainty I spend most of my time at home, helping Lucien with the accounts and sewing baby garments using our old clothes. Lucien has brought the family cradle down from the attic where it has been stored ever since Marius grew out of it. In the evenings my mother works on a baby quilt while she listens to the radio. Does that indicate she's actually looking forward to the arrival of the baby? I really don't know, though I'm hoping it's another small step forward.

In the first week of July I'm out in the yard, brushing the elderly Babette and wondering whether I should trim her coat on account of the heat, when I notice a vague crampy feeling in my stomach. As suddenly as it has come, it vanishes and I think nothing of it. Half an hour later it's back but no longer vague – it feels like a nasty period cramp. So this is how it starts, I say to Babette, who bore several litters of puppies in her prime and managed every one of those births with enviable calm and efficiency. Once the cramps subside I go inside and tell my mother, who rushes out to the barn to fetch Lucien.

'I'll drive you into Montpellier,' he says, his face flushed.

Although I suspect there are still hours ahead of me, I decide it would be better not to protest. On the obstetrician's advice, I've had my bag packed for the last month. Just as I'm getting into the car, my mother comes and gives me a hug. I'm so surprised I respond awkwardly, not the least because my belly is in the way.

'I hope it's over quickly,' she says. 'Lucien will ring me from the hospital if there's any news.'



The ‘laughing gas’ they had promised me if the pain became too bad is not available – apparently the Luftwaffe has requisitioned supplies of nitrous oxide for use in their plane engines! In truth, I’m glad my brain is sharp and drug-free and I’ll be able to remember everything. At nine o’clock that night the baby is born.

‘It’s a boy,’ the obstetrician announces, but before I can even see my baby they take him away.

‘Is he all right?’ I ask over and over again. I couldn’t bear for anything to happen to him. Not when we’ve come so far together. Not when he’s Kurt’s son.

A kind nurse bends over me and takes my hand, ‘It’s just routine, *chérie*. They’re making sure he can breathe, then they’ll weigh him, check his reactions and clean him up.’

From nearby I can hear faint crying – that must be a good sign even though it sounds just like George’s plaintive meowing.

‘May I have him back after that?’ I beg.

‘Of course you can. You look exhausted. Why don’t you have a little nap in the meantime?’

Doesn't she realise I couldn't possibly sleep until I have the baby in my arms? That he's the reason I've kept going for the past nine months?

'What are you going to call him?' she asks.

'Joseph.'

'The sainted husband of the Virgin Mary.'

'Exactly,' I say with a smile. I couldn't very well give my son his father's first name, could I? So this is the next best thing, spelt the French way.

'His full name is Joseph Claude Jean-Paul Dupré.'

'With a name like that he's going to be someone very special,' the nurse says as she leaves the room.

After a while I do fall asleep and have a strange dream in which my baby is able to talk, but instead of French he is speaking fluent German. When I wake, I look at the wall clock. Almost two hours have passed since the baby was born and there's no sign of him. Icy panic is gripping my heart. Did they find out he's illegitimate and offer him up for adoption? Just as I'm about to press the buzzer, the nurse returns, telling me they had a problem getting Joseph's temperature back to normal after his bath but that he's fine now and she'll bring him to me.

When she returns with a little bundle, all I can see is a tiny red face with tightly closed eyes. Gently she places him in my arms, rearranging the blanket so it's wrapped tightly around him. The first thing I do is to push back the blanket to check his hair. There isn't much of it but the strands are fair. I can't take my eyes off him. He's my little miracle produced that wondrous morning at the Hôtel de la Comédie.

'He'll have blue eyes,' the nurse says. 'They all do when they're born.'

She shows me how to feed him even though he doesn't seem to need any lessons.

'Only two minutes a side,' she warns. 'At least for now.'

'But he's hungry,' I protest.

'I'll take him back to the nursery afterwards and we'll give him a bottle.'

'Can't he stay with me?'

'Against hospital policy, I'm afraid, my dear. We like our new mothers to get a good night's sleep. You want to look rested for your husband when he comes to visit in the morning, don't you?'

'Joseph's father is dead,' I reply in a monotone.

'I'm so sorry. This damned war.'

Checking her fob watch, she says, 'Time's up.'

And before I know it, she has wrested Joseph from me and he's on his way to the nursery. The smell of him persists though – a sweet, spicy perfume like pine trees.



If I'd been concerned about how my mother would react when she first saw Joseph, I needn't have worried. It's love at first sight. She says he looks exactly like I did when I was a baby and that he has helped fill the hole left in her heart by Claude's death. Lucien loves him too. Joseph is hard to resist with his soft golden hair, rosebud lips and snub nose.

When my son is five weeks old, Maman witnesses him smiling for the first time while I'm outside hanging clothes on the line. She crows about this to me when I come inside. The same day, Allied troops land along the beaches of the Côte d'Azur and storm north, taking the Germans by surprise. The advance is so swift they can barely evacuate fast enough. At the same time, the various Maquis groups, now officially part of the Forces Françaises d'Intérieur, come down from the mountains and set about sabotaging the Germans' escape routes – blowing up railways lines and bridges,

disrupting communications and ambushing convoys. At Sunday Mass, Père Patric prays openly for the safety of the *maquisards*.

Within two weeks, Marseille and Toulon have been liberated. Although Montpellier is too far west to be on the Allies' route north, we know that the Germans in the local garrison are likely to make a pre-emptive retreat. At last, hope is rising in our hearts like bubbles in a champagne glass. Even so, when we sit hunched around the radio with Joseph asleep in my mother's arms, we don't dare say the word 'peace' out loud, lest we tempt fate. When news comes that Paris has been liberated and the city has remained intact, we know it's only a matter of time before the whole country will be free and the nightmare over.



By Christmas, pockets of fighting continue on French soil, but most of the country has been liberated. And just when I've given up hope of ever hearing from Anna again, an air mail letter is forwarded from the Montpellier Library, emblazoned with stamps bearing images of the Statue of Liberty and the New York skyline, together with the words 'United States Postage'.



As I grasp the envelope, which has come all the way from the Land of the Free, I am overjoyed that Anna has made it there, after all. But when I examine the handwriting on the front I realise it's not Anna's, and although the return address is Brentwood, California, the sender's name is Mrs G Bergmann. My hand trembles as I rip open the envelope.

*Dear Mademoiselle Dupré,*

*My name is Karin Bergmann and I am Anna Abraham's cousin. I have been wanting to write to you for a long time, but I was concerned the letter wouldn't get through while France was occupied by the Germans, or, if it did reach Montpellier, it would be opened by the authorities. That's why I've waited until now.*

*I know from the letters Anna sent me from Lisbon during the months she was waiting for a passage to America that you had helped her escape and were looking after her beloved cat, George. I would like to thank you with all my heart for your efforts. I hope and pray that nothing you did on Anna's behalf put your own safety at risk.*

*I'm afraid I have some bad news for you. Anna did indeed secure a passage on a ship to New York. It was part of a convoy travelling under the protection of the British navy. The convoy was attacked by German submarines and Anna's ship was torpedoed and sunk. Some of the passengers and crew survived but tragically my dear cousin was among those lost at sea.*

*In her letters she said you had been a good friend to her and I know how sad this news must be for you. I wish I could have told you in person. I do hope we can meet some day. You would always be welcome to come and stay with us in Los Angeles.*

*In the meantime, I wish you and your family a happy holiday season and pray for victory in Europe and the Pacific this coming year.*

*Yours faithfully,  
Karin Bergmann*

# CHAPTER 43



*Tout change, tout casse, tout trouve sa place.*

Everything changes, everything falls apart, everything finds its place.

Old proverb

## Summer, 1946

How did I come to be sitting on a train heading for Paris? It all began with a telephone call from Sophie telling me she had the summer to herself and wanted me to keep her company.

By that, I assumed Sophie's gentleman friend had taken his wife and family on a trip abroad and Sophie had time on her hands. It's true that I've never been to Paris and I've always longed to go there, but I'm the mother of a two-year-old son, and I couldn't just decamp to Paris for a holiday. Unless, of course, I could take Joseph with me.

'The point is, my dear Camille, for you to have a holiday *sans enfant*,' Sophie said over the telephone, 'My little finger told me that you are worn-out and in need of a break.'

'I suppose that "little finger" is my mother.'

'She's more than happy to mind Joseph,' came the reply.

Eventually Sophie wore me down, but instead of the entire summer, we negotiated that I would come for two weeks in July. Even though I knew Joseph would be in safe hands, I couldn't bear to be away from him any longer than that.



As the steam engine travels north, I stare out the window at the villages, the fields, the forests and bustling towns. The railway lines and bridges, which were blown up in the second half of 1944 by the retreating Germans or the Resistance, have now been repaired, and a casual observer might think that the German Occupation had never happened. Yet the personal damage it has caused will never be erased. Not in my lifetime, anyway. Thankfully, those of Joseph's generation will only know of it second-hand from history books and the stories of their elders.

Just the thought of Joseph is enough to make me miss him. From my handbag I remove the envelope of photographs I've brought to show Sophie – they're from Joseph's second birthday earlier this month. What a handsome boy he is, just like his father. I've already taught him a few words of German but have to be careful – my mother detests the language and the people more than ever now.



It's late afternoon when the train pulls into the Gare de Lyon. Instantly I feel like a simple *péquenaud* as I press my face against the window, searching for Sophie amongst the jostling crowd on the platform. When we come to a stop, I stand up warily, testing my balance after sitting for so long. Then I haul my suitcase out of the luggage rack and queue in the aisle, waiting to alight. Once I'm on the platform I'm overwhelmed by the mass of bodies moving towards the exit. We have agreed to meet at the gate if I can't find Sophie on the platform, but there she is, hard to miss with her bright red lips and feathery *calot* tipped at an impish angle.

After she has kissed and hugged me several times, she leads me outside, where she hails a taxi while I turn back towards the station with its clock tower and tall arched windows – it must be ten times the size of the Gare Montpellier-St Roch. Well, I tell myself, you've finally made it to Paris. And soon we're in the back seat of a taxi heading for Sophie's apartment in the fourth *arrondissement*.

'This is the Place de la Bastille,' she says casually as the taxi sweeps around a huge column topped by the gilded Spirit of Liberty extending her torch to the heavens. So

this is what freedom looks like, I say to myself, with a lump in my throat. In a few minutes we are stopping outside an elegant building with a mansard roof in a row of similar grand edifices.

‘Victor Hugo’s house is just a couple of blocks away,’ Sophie says casually as the driver removes my suitcase from the boot, and a doorman appears like magic to carry it inside.

‘Hugo!’ I exclaim, delighted that my favourite author once lived nearby.

‘I’ll take you on a walking tour tomorrow. You can even visit his house if you like – it’s a museum now. But tonight, I want to catch up on all the gossip.’



The interior of Sophie’s apartment is just as I dreamed it would be – parquet floors, tall windows, high ceilings and a profusion of gilded mirrors. She glances in each one as she passes it, smoothing her hair, checking her lipstick, adjusting her scarf and giving herself a fleeting smile of approval.

‘Come and see my boudoir,’ she says, showing me down a short corridor, past a marble bathroom with a Roman tub and gold taps, to the main bedroom. It is light

and pretty, boasting a painted dressing table, packed with silver-topped jars, crystal perfume bottles and framed photographs. As I scan the pictures, I recognise Margot and Lucien, Marius, Denise and her family, and some photos of Sophie with a short man in his fifties – thinning hair, gaunt face, unassuming. That must be her Gentleman. For some reason I'd imagined a Clark Gable type, or an Errol Flynn. In front of the dressing table there's a Louis Quinze chair and beside it, a huge pastel-coloured armoire – how that heavy piece of furniture made it up here in the flimsy old elevator I'll never know. But the *pièce-de-résistance* is an ornate gilt bed with carved cherubs, fit for a queen . . . and her consort.

As I gaze around Sophie's boudoir, it strikes me that she has enjoyed this lavish lifestyle while the rest of us have struggled to get by. How could her Gentleman have afforded all these luxuries if he wasn't in cahoots with the Laval government or the Germans or both? And does that make Sophie a collaborator by extension? But who am I to pass judgment on anyone, considering the damage I've done to those closest to me?





Supper is a platter of *charcuteries* and cheeses that Sophie has placed on the coffee table in the *salon*. She opens a bottle of champagne to accompany our meal and soon we're both sitting on the velvet sofa in stockinged feet, sipping champagne and refilling our plates from the delicacies in front of us. It reminds me of the feasts we used to have at the Domaine Bernard back in the early Thirties.

'You have a beautiful apartment, Sophie,' I tell her.

'Alain bought it for me, but I was the one who decorated it. He gave me a budget and I'm pleased to say I only overshot it by twenty thousand francs.'

'Was he upset?'

'Alain? No, it turned out he'd put aside fifty, just in case.'

'Fifty thousand!' I exclaim.

'That's right. He likes to spoil me. I wish you could meet him, Camille, but he's in Spain for the summer. Whenever he goes away, he always brings back something beautiful. When he went to America on business he bought me a full-length ermine coat. I'll show you later.'

'He sounds like a generous man.'

‘Yes, and he’s kind too. I’ve been with so many men who seemed kind at the start but turned out to be just the opposite. Alain would do anything for me. Well, anything apart from leaving his family. I respect him for that, though. The fact that he’s a family man. Besides, I like my independence, I can’t imagine living with a man full-time. What about you, Camille? Do you still see Joseph’s father?’

I shake my head in response.

‘Do you miss him? Or were you glad to see the last of him?’

‘Oh, I miss him, Sophie. Every minute of every day.’

‘I heard he was married,’ Sophie says, reaching for a slice of *terrine*.

‘He wasn’t married. I just let everyone think that.’

‘So, if he wasn’t married . . .’

‘He was German,’ I reply hoarsely.

‘Oh dear,’ Sophie says, taking a generous sip of champagne. ‘I had a fling with a German just after they occupied Paris. That was before Alain, of course. Günther was an Oberstleutnant. I’ve forgotten how to say it in French.’

‘It’s the rank below a colonel. I’m not sure what we call it.’

‘Yes, well, anyway, there was a very strong attraction between us but he was sent off to the Eastern Front and I never heard from him again. Promise me you won’t tell my father. He would never forgive me for indulging in a *collaboration horizontale*.’

‘I promise.’

‘I won’t say a word about Joseph’s father either. Your mother hated the Germans with a vengeance. I imagine she still does.’ Sophie lowers her voice even though it’s just the two of us. ‘A lot of girls who slept with Germans were punished when Paris was liberated. The Resistance shaved their heads and dragged them through the streets with swastikas painted on their foreheads. *Épuration*, they called it – purification. It was horrible. Luckily no-one ever knew about me.’

‘It happened in Montpellier too, the head shaving.’

‘But not to you?’

‘No, nobody knows the truth about Joseph’s father.’

‘I have to say, Camille, it’s fortunate you have blond hair and blue eyes. Otherwise, people might have wondered about Joseph’s parentage. What happened to your German lover, anyway?’

‘He was killed during the War.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘I adored him, Sophie,’ I say, tears welling.

‘Is that why you kept Joseph?’

‘My baby was all I had left. I couldn’t possibly give him up for adoption. But it’s made me an outcast in my own village. My mother too. There are women she’s known since she was a child, who don’t speak to her anymore. And sometimes people cross the street to avoid me, as though I have the plague. Then there’s the whispering – the young men in the village say it served me right because I always thought I was too good for them and that I’ve got my comeuppance.’

‘I knew there were problems but I had no idea it was that bad. Small villages are hotbeds of gossip and prejudice – that’s why I left when I was fifteen. Thank goodness you have the support of my father and your mother.’

‘Yes, I couldn’t have done this without them. They both adore Joseph. Marius too. He’s like a big brother to Joseph.’

‘You know, Camille, I would never have imagined you as the kind of girl to fall for a German soldier, let alone get pregnant to him. But there’s something about those

Germans with their perfect manners and impeccable clothes.’ She smiles to herself. ‘I found them irresistibly attractive. I blame it on Kurt Müller. Do you remember him?’

Suddenly I’m sitting bolt upright, my heart thudding.

‘The German lodger who stayed with your family,’ Sophie continues. ‘He told me once that he was teaching you German and you were as smart as lightning. He tried to teach me a few words but I was hopeless. Anyway, I really liked him, not that we slept together. I think we would have, eventually, but then I found out I was pregnant to my boss and lost the baby right in front of him – by *him*, I mean Kurt, of course. Bless his heart, he comforted me and went for help, but not surprisingly, that was the end of our romance. I wonder what happened to him?’

It’s a rhetorical question but I draw a long breath and decide I can trust Sophie with the truth. After all, I have to tell someone; I can’t keep this secret hidden inside me any longer.

‘He returned to Montpellier in 1942 as a major,’ I say quietly. ‘One day he came to the library to borrow a book and . . .’

For a moment Sophie looks puzzled. Then she raises her hand to her open mouth. ‘Oh, my God, Camille! Kurt Müller is Joseph’s father!’

I take a gulp of champagne and nod my head.

‘I gather this wasn’t a fling. You’re not the type.’

‘No, it was serious. He was about to tell his parents about me. Then he was killed.’

‘God no. That’s so sad.’ After a moment she asks, ‘Was it an ambush?’

‘Something like that.’

‘I’m very sorry, Camille,’ she says, patting my hand.

‘Thank you,’ I murmur.

‘Do Kurt’s parents know about Joseph?’

‘No, I’ve never considered contacting them, even if I could find them. Besides, I have no proof that Kurt is Joseph’s father. We weren’t even engaged. The Müllers are a wealthy family, or, at least, they used to be. They would think I’m a gold-digger.’

‘You a gold-digger? Hardly. And shouldn’t you at least give his parents the opportunity to decide for themselves? Kurt was an only child, wasn’t he? Imagine what it would mean to them to know they have a grandson.’

What Sophie is saying makes sense, except that I couldn’t possibly make contact with Kurt’s parents. How could I face them when my brother was the person who shot their son and I was the reason it happened?

‘Do you know where they live?’ Sophie continues.

I hesitate for a moment before answering. ‘They were living in Berlin in 1943 – Kurt’s father was a general in the High Command but I don’t think they saw Berlin as home, just a posting. Originally they came from Munich.’

‘Do you know the address there?’

‘It was in a suburb called Bogenhausen but that was fifteen years ago. They might be dead by now, for all we know.’

I’m hoping that statement will put an end to her questions and we can forget about finding his parents. Instead, she says:

‘At least it’s a starting point.’

I give Sophie a dubious look.

‘You have no choice, Camille. It’s the right thing to do and this is the perfect opportunity. There’s a night train to Munich. Alain uses it all the time for business meetings. Ever since the end of the War he’s been building contacts in Germany. He does a full day’s work here, leaves Paris in the evening and arrives in Munich the next morning.’ She pauses to catch her breath and then resumes with added enthusiasm.

‘You must do this, Camille. If you don’t find them, at least you would have tried.’ Then a frown crosses her face. ‘*Merde!* I forgot that you would need a passport.’

‘I do have a passport,’ I say hesitantly. ‘I applied for one a few months ago – I’m thinking of taking Joseph to Los Angeles next year to stay with a friend’s cousin.’

‘But I don’t suppose you brought it with you?’

I could easily tell Sophie I left the passport at home and that would be the end of the search for Kurt’s parents, at least for now. But I’m beginning to think she’s right. The General and his wife should be told about the existence of their grandson. What they do after that is up to them.

‘My passport is in my handbag,’ I say, ‘I always carry my papers with me. I suppose it’s a hangover from the Occupation when we had to show them all the time.’

‘Well, there you are,’ she says, clasping my hand. ‘It was meant to be.’

I consider asking Sophie to come with me. She’s a free agent right now, and I suspect she would like to be part of the search, but even though I would appreciate her moral support, this is something I have to do on my own.



# CHAPTER 44



*L'espoir fait vivre.*  
Hope keeps us alive.

Old proverb

# Paris

June 24, 1946

In the morning, when I wander into the *salon*, wearing my nightdress and rubbing my eyes, a glamorously kimono-clad Sophie is already on the telephone, making travel arrangements.

‘I’ve booked you a single sleeping compartment on tonight’s train to Munich,’ she says after she hangs up. ‘It leaves from the Gare de l’Est at seven o’clock. Supper is included in the fare, alcohol is extra. It’s a return ticket but the date is open. You have a booking at the Hotel Weißer Schwan for three nights. Alain always stays there – it’s good value and close to the main railway station.’

‘Oh my goodness, Sophie,’ I respond, ‘you’re more organised than a librarian.’

‘You might remember I topped my class at secretarial college, Camille Dupré, and although I’m currently a lady of leisure, I do have considerable experience in organising schedules,’ she says tartly. ‘By the way, the concierge is called Theodor and

I've told him you're a personal friend of Monsieur Aubert – that's Alain. Now, let's have some breakfast and I'll take you to the Place des Vosges. The Hugo museum opens at ten. We'll spend the afternoon organising your wardrobe for the trip.'

'I don't need a whole afternoon, Sophie. I've only brought two changes of clothes.'

'Well, that's not good enough for Munich, Mad'moiselle Dupré. What if you do find Kurt's parents? You don't want to look as though you've come straight from the farm.'



On any other day I would have been enraptured by Victor Hugo's grand apartment, imagining the famous writers who gathered there, Dumas, Lamartine and George Sand, and lingering over the objects on the great man's desk, but today my mind is elsewhere. After lunch we return to Sophie's flat where she pulls clothes from her wardrobe and lays them on the bed, deciding which items I should borrow for the trip.

'Lucky we're the same size,' she says, tossing a silk nightgown onto the steadily growing pile of garments. I notice that the label is still attached which probably means it has never been worn.

'Nobody is going to see what I wear to bed,' I object.

‘Well, you can’t wear that ghastly flannel *chemise de nuit*,’ Sophie says. ‘It looks like something from convent school. Imagine if there was a fire in the hotel and the fireman had to carry you down the ladder. You’d want to look your best, wouldn’t you?’

I check to see if she’s smiling but her expression is deadly earnest. Looking one’s best is no laughing matter in Sophie’s world. From then on, I allow her to pack whatever she likes. After all, it’s extremely generous of her to lend me her beautiful clothes, and I should be grateful for her help. At the same time, I continue to wonder about Alain Aubert. Sophie has told me he travels to Munich regularly – is that really just a recent effort at commercial *détente*, as she suggested, or was it something that began during the War?

While I ponder these questions, Sophie has discovered that my suitcase is far too small for all the items she has selected, so she telephones the *concierge* and asks him to bring up one of her larger pieces of luggage from the basement storeroom.

‘How am I supposed to carry *that*?’ I demand when I spy the capacious *valise*.

‘You don’t need to. That’s what porters and *concierges* are for.’



It's almost six o'clock, and the taxi that Sophie has booked to take me to the station will be due any minute. For a final time, she surveys my travelling outfit. I'm dressed in my own navy-blue shirtwaist dress with short sleeves and an A-line skirt – summery, practical and crush resistant. After uttering a prolonged sigh, Sophie proclaims it acceptable but boring. She adds a double string of pearls and a navy-blue hat with an alluring half veil.

'Now, that's better,' she says.



If the journey to Paris was a pleasant prelude to what I expected to be a carefree holiday catching up with Sophie and visiting the landmarks of Paris, the night trip to Munich is a journey into the unknown, fraught with anxiety. It begins with the conductor asking for my passport when I board the train. Not just for perusal, though. He intends to keep it for the duration of the journey.

'It's routine, *madame*. You don't want to be woken in the middle of the night by the passport control, do you?' he asks. 'And since we will be passing through two zones, the French and the American, that makes two separate checks.'

Even so, handing over my passport leaves me feeling helpless and apprehensive. For someone who has lived through the Occupation, identity papers constitute the proof of your existence. Without them, you are nothing. My unease is allayed a little by the fact that the other passengers, who are likely to be more experienced travellers than I, are also entrusting their identities to this young man.



As morning breaks, I'm eating a German breakfast and gazing out the window at the Bavarian countryside – no wonder Kurt loved it so much. And yes, there are pine forests aplenty, rolling green hills, craggy mountain peaks and sweet little gingerbread houses tucked into the hillsides. No sign of the War here either. That makes me uneasy.

When I return to my compartment I find that the bed has magically disappeared and the seat is back in place. Just then, the conductor appears at the door to return my passport.

‘We’ll be pulling into the main railway station in half an hour, *madame*. The money changer will be coming through any time now, or you could use the currency exchange at the station. I hope you’ve had an enjoyable journey.’

‘Yes, thank you, *monsieur*.’ I reach into my purse to give him a tip. Not being acquainted with these things, I hand over five francs. Is it too little or too much? The beaming smile on his face suggests the latter. Once he’s gone, I open my passport and examine the very first stamp: *Bundesrepublik Deutschland*. No *Reichsadler*, no swastika. How comforting that those symbols have been obliterated.

As the bucolic scenery disappears and the train approaches the outskirts of Munich, I can barely believe my eyes. Street after street has been destroyed by Allied bombing, leaving only a grey wasteland. If I were to picture what hell looks like, it would be this view from the train window. It reminds me how fortunate we are that Paris was left intact – it could so easily have been the opposite.



After I change my money, I catch a taxi to the White Swan Hotel. Though it’s only a few blocks from the station, I couldn’t possibly lug Sophie’s suitcase that far. Besides,

there are bombed-out buildings on either side of the road and rubble and scaffolding blocking the pavements. When I pay the taxi driver he gives me his card which I place safely in the pocket of my handbag. I suspect I'll need to use it.

The hotel is in a row of buildings which have survived the bombing. The Weißer Schwan is just as I imagined, its exterior painted white with gold trim and a huge wooden carving of a swan hanging above the entrance like a ship's figurehead. In the foyer a group of American officers are seated around a low table, smoking cigarettes and drinking what I assume to be coffee. Their presence is a comforting reminder that Munich is in the American zone. Perhaps I have a romanticised view of Americans from their movies, but it seems to me that if you had to choose an occupying force, you would opt for the *Ricans*. Certainly not the Russians. As for the coffee, I wonder if it's the chicory substitute we're still drinking in rural France. Somehow I doubt it.

At the reception desk I am greeted by Theodor, who speaks to me in French.

'If there's anything you need, *madame*, please do not hesitate to ask.'

'Would you happen to have a map of the city showing Bogenhausen, *monsieur*?'

'Of course,' he says, reaching under the desk.

'And a phone book?'



‘Yes, but it’s rather large. I’ll have it sent up to your room.’

And that’s how I find myself lounging on the quilted bed, poring over a map of *München und Umgebung* with an unopened suitcase beside me. Bogenhausen isn’t very far at all, just on the other side of the Isar. Yet, having seen the destruction wrought on Munich, I’m beginning to wonder about Bogenhausen. Was it bombed during the War? I couldn’t bear it if Kurt’s family home was destroyed even though most people would say the General deserved it. What was it called? *Isarparadies*. Paradise on the Isar.

There’s a knock at the door and a bellboy delivers the phone book together with a note. I have no idea how much to tip him but the smallest amount I have in my purse is a mark. When I hand him that, he beams just like the train conductor.

The note is a message from Sophie – she telephoned this morning, just before I arrived, to wish me well. Meanwhile the phone book lies on a side table where the bellboy left it. Did Kurt’s parents survive the War? If they’re alive, did they come back to Munich afterwards? And if so, where did they choose to live? Was it Bogenhausen, or another suburb altogether? With a surname like Müller, the only way I’ll find them

in the telephone book is if they're at the old address, and that's unlikely. Still, I've come all this way. I should try the phone book first.

Riffling through the weighty volume, I come to 'Müller'. *Mon Dieu!* I knew it was a common name but there's at least a full page devoted to J. Müller. How far along would Josef be? After Jakob and Johann, and before Jürgen. I rack my brain for a middle name but just can't recall it so I work my way systematically through the columns, pausing in anticipation whenever my eyes spot 'Bogenhausen' in the address, and then being disappointed when the street name is wrong. I'm more than halfway through when I see Maria-Theresia-Straße.

Suddenly the telephone rings, giving me such a start, I drop the book on the floor with a thud.

'Hallo,' I say tentatively.

'Camille, it's Sophie. Theodor put me through. How are you? How was the trip? Have you found the Müllers yet?'

'The trip was fine, thank you. And yes, I think I might have found the General. I've been searching the phone book and just discovered a J. Müller at the same address.'

'Well, there you are! Are you going to phone them?'

‘Not until I decide what I’m going to say.’

‘Ring me reverse charges as soon as you’ve made the call. I’ll be sitting by the telephone.’

Oh dear, I say to myself, as we bid each other goodbye and hang up. This isn’t something I can rush. Instead, I order some coffee from room service and sit down on the bed to contemplate what I should say. When the coffee arrives, it smells like the real thing – I have the Americans to thank for that. Just a sip makes me feel stronger. Next to the telephone there’s a notice with a list of the areas which can be phoned direct from the hotel – Bogenhausen is one of them. I clear my throat and dial the number, taking care to place a zero in front, as indicated in the instructions next to the phone. Then I wait anxiously as I hear it ringing. A female voice answers:

‘*Hallo. Müller residence. May I ask who is calling, please?*’

‘*Guten Morgen. Hier Camille Dupré. Kann ich bitte mit Josef Müller sprechen?*’

‘Just a moment, *Fräulein.*’

I hear the receiver being place down and footsteps receding. After a minute or two I wonder if anyone is coming to the phone. Should I just hang up? Then there’s a click and a man’s voice:

‘*Hallo, Josef Müller am Apparat.*’

He sounds like Kurt. Hoarser but the voice has the same melodic quality to it.

Hallo,’ he repeats. ‘Is there anyone on the line?’

Taking a deep breath, I say: ‘*Hallo*, it’s Camille Dupré here. Your son stayed with my family in ’31 when he was studying at the University of Montpellier. I’m in Munich for a few days and thought I would give you a call.’

‘Ah, *Fräulein Dupré*, how kind of you to contact us. I do remember Kurt saying what a happy time he had staying at your home. What are you doing in Munich?’

‘Just a little holiday.’

‘Where are you staying?’

‘The Hotel Weißer Schwan near the railway station.’

‘My wife would never forgive me if I didn’t invite you to stay with us while you’re here.’

‘That’s very generous of you, sir, but I couldn’t possibly impose. I just hoped we might be able to catch up for a coffee.’

‘We won’t take no for an answer, *Fräulein*. I’m sure Kurt would be delighted to see you.’

All at once, the world stands still. The traffic outside in the street is silent. Josef Müller's words are pounding in my head, and I can barely breathe.

'*Fräulein*, are you there?'

'Yes,' I whisper. He can't have said that Kurt would be delighted to see me. I must have misheard him. After all, I'm not a native speaker of German; I might have mistranslated. The truth is that Kurt Müller died on the ninth day of October, 1943.

'Good, I'll send Rainer, my driver, to pick you up at two o'clock sharp. We will look forward to seeing you then. Goodbye, *Fräulein*.'

'Goodbye,' I respond automatically.

*Click.* He's gone.

My breaths are coming so fast I'm afraid I'll faint. Could Kurt really be alive? A flicker of hope is rising in my heart.

Please God, let it be true. Let it be true for Joseph's sake.

# CHAPTER 45



*C'est là, où il y a le plus d'épines que se trouvent les plus belles roses.*  
Where there are the most thorns, you'll find the most beautiful roses.

Old proverb

# Munich

June 25, 1946

For a long time, I just sit on the edge of the bed, repeating Josef Müller's words in a whispered refrain. Could Kurt have survived the wound? Then why wasn't he in the University Hospital? And why did Jean Lebrun say Kurt had been 'shipped back to Berlin'? Unless . . . unless it wasn't in a coffin, as I'd pictured it in the depths of my grief. What if the Germans sent Kurt back on a train to be treated in a hospital in Germany? That would have made sense in terms of his father's rank – the General would have done anything in his power to organise the best treatment for his son. But surely Kurt must have been admitted to a Montpellier hospital, at least initially. Just as I'm trying to untangle the 'whys' and 'what ifs', the telephone shatters my reverie. I'm almost certain it's Sophie, but it could also be Kurt's father so I decide to answer it.

‘Camille, it’s me. Did you phone them? I’ve been biting my nails to the quick, waiting for you to ring.’

I utter a deep sigh. ‘The General invited me to stay at their house. His driver is picking me up at two.’

‘Wonderful! Didn’t I tell you they would be pleased to hear from you?’

‘I haven’t mentioned the baby yet, though.’

‘Don’t worry. You’ll find the right time. Thank goodness I packed those evening clothes. What are you going to wear this afternoon? That floral polished cotton with the little sleeves and tight waist would be perfect or—’

‘Sophie,’ I interrupt, ‘the General said something strange.’

‘What do you mean by strange?’

‘Well, I don’t exactly know, but I think he said, “I’m sure Kurt would be delighted to see you.”’

‘Are you certain he said that? How good is your German?’

‘It’s quite good,’ I reply modestly.

‘Well, I suppose it’s possible. Soldiers went missing in action during the War. Everyone assumed they were dead and then they turned up alive.’



‘But if he was alive, why didn’t he let me know?’

‘Maybe he had amnesia. That’s what happens in the movies.’

‘This isn’t *Random Harvest*, Sophie. And even if he had amnesia immediately afterwards, it wouldn’t last this long. Kurt would never forget me. I don’t understand why he didn’t write. He knew where I lived and worked.’

And then it strikes me that perhaps he did write to me. Perhaps there were letters sent to the Poste Restante, and every three weeks they were destroyed. When I didn’t reply, he would have assumed I wanted nothing to do with him. I start to weep uncontrollably.

‘Camille,’ Sophie says earnestly, ‘calm down. You’ll have all the answers later today. Now, listen to me, you need to stop crying. Otherwise your eyes will be red and swollen. If Kurt really is alive, you want to look your best for him, don’t you? After all, he hasn’t seen you in three years.’

‘Oh, Sophie!’ A sound halfway between a laugh and a sob escapes my lips.

‘Phone me reverse charges from their house. Promise me you will.’

‘I promise,’ I reply through my tears.



At half past one, having bathed in the tub down the hallway, and dressed myself in the blue shirtwaist and sensible jacket, I haul my suitcase down the narrow stairs to the hotel foyer where Theodor is at the reception desk.

‘Oh my goodness, Mad’moiselle Dupré, you should have called for a porter.’

‘I didn’t want to disturb anyone, Theodor.’

‘But it’s our pleasure to serve you, *mad’moiselle*.’

‘You’ve been very kind indeed. Is there an extra fee I need to pay for cutting short my stay?’

‘The Herr General telephoned earlier and took care of everything.’

‘*Herr General?*’ I ask. The title is jarring to my ears, as though it should be accompanied by a ‘Heil Hitler’.

‘Yes, it’s customary to refer to him that way, even now that he’s retired.’

To me, it sounds like a sinister hangover from the Nazi regime, yet I say nothing.

Lowering his voice, Theodor continues, ‘Did you know he had a heart attack in early ’45 and came back to Bogenhausen to recuperate? By the time he was well again, the War was over. Lucky for him he wasn’t still in Berlin when the Russians took the city.’

In an instant his tone changes from conspiratorial to professional. ‘Now would you like a light snack while you wait for his driver to arrive?’

‘No, thank you. I had a large breakfast.’ The truth is I feel sick to my stomach, wondering what lies ahead.

Taking a seat in a buttoned armchair, I absently leaf through a pile of tourist brochures on the coffee table. In the background the radio is playing ‘Long Ago and Far Away’, an American song about making it through the War and reuniting with the love of your life. If only it could be true for me. As the radio sounds the two o’clock pips, a man in his thirties, wearing a smart grey uniform, comes through the entrance doors and makes for the reception desk, from whence he is directed towards me.

With an unnerving Teutonic click of his heels, he says, ‘Fräulein Dupré?’

‘Yes, you must be Rainer. Very pleased to meet you.’

‘Likewise, *Fräulein*,’ he says. His military manner and closely cropped hair suggest he was once in the Wehrmacht. One of the General’s staff perhaps, now serving him in civilian life.

‘The car is parked outside, *Fräulein*. May I carry your suitcase?’

‘It’s a little heavy,’ I warn him, but he lifts it effortlessly as though it contains feathers.



As we drive along Prinzregentstrasse, I peer out the window at the broken city. If you didn’t know otherwise, you might think a giant from *Grimms’ Fairytales* had rampaged through the cobbled streets, wrenching towers from churches, crumpling apartment blocks into a pile of bricks, and tearing the roof off any building which met with his displeasure. Sometimes, one or two buildings remain intact in a block where everything else has been decimated. Why were some spared and others not? In its randomness the destruction is even more terrible.

‘Seventy-one bombing raids,’ it said in the tourist brochure. ‘Please bear with us while we rebuild our city.’

So very German. Do I feel pleased that they got what was coming to them? My mother would say they deserved it and more. But I’m too much my father’s daughter to savour vengeance. As I survey the destruction I feel only an immense sadness.

We cross the River Isar and turn left into a leafy precinct where elegant villas are set back from the road, barely visible behind iron gates and high walls. Perhaps they escaped unscathed like Paris. Rainer slows down and turns into a driveway. The gates are open. A brass plaque on a sturdy stone pillar says: *Isarparadies*. The General's Mercedes purrs up the drive past an avenue of birch trees, their leaves tinted a vibrant chartreuse in the afternoon light. On the left an ornamental lake reflects the summer sky. Then the road curves and I catch my first glimpse of the house standing on a rise, a wedding cake with three tiers and a coating of white render.

Except that it's a wedding cake with part of its left side blown away and a framework of scaffolding rising up around the rubble.

Rainer pulls up in front of an impressive flight of stone stairs leading to the house. Then he comes around to the back and opens the door for me.

'*Danke sehr*, Rainer,' I say, stepping onto the crunchy gravel. 'I'll just fetch my suitcase.'

'*Nein, gnädiges Fräulein*, I can do that later.'

The last time I was called a *gnädiges Fräulein* was in 1943 when a German colonel assumed I was a prostitute.

Clutching my handbag, I gaze up at the damaged house, looming above me, and try to calm my racing heart. Is it too late to ask Rainer to drive me back to the hotel? What am I doing here anyway? It was all very well for Sophie to encourage me to find Kurt's parents, but she's back in her apartment in Paris. And what if Kurt really is alive? What if he's made a new life for himself in the past three years with a wife and family? What if ...? I start to feel dizzy. Oh, please don't faint right here in front of the General's house. I try to focus my thoughts on the photographs of Joseph tucked safely in my handbag. I need to do this for my son.

As Rainer stands to attention at the base of the steps, I offer a forced smile and begin to climb them. At the top I come face to face with a pair of tall doors bearing stained glass panels. How did those survive the bombing intact, I wonder. Suddenly Rainer is beside me, pressing the doorbell. I can hear it ringing inside the house. There's no escape now. No running away. Through the coloured glass I can make out a woman coming to the door. Could it be Frau Müller? One of the double doors opens to reveal a maid dressed in a black tunic and white blouse straight out of a Hollywood movie.

Rainer speaks for me: 'Fräulein Dupré to see the Herr Generaloberst.'

The maid replies, 'Do come in, *Fräulein*. He is expecting you.'

I am ushered down a wide, terrazzo-tiled hallway and into a salon where tapestries depicting idyllic pastoral scenes hang from every wall. There is no sign of the bomb damage until I notice an archway to the left boarded off with a sign: *Achtung! Kein Eintritt.*

In my head I can hear my mother's voice: Serves them right, damned *Boche*.

In this vast space the click-clack of my heels echoes like thunder. I take a seat in an elaborate armchair. The maid offers me coffee which I politely decline. Coffee makes my heart race and it's already pounding far too quickly.

Then I hear footsteps approaching along the hallway – the confident stride of someone accustomed to being in command. As he enters the room, I rise from the chair, unsure whether a lady should stand in the presence of a general, but decide it is better to be overly formal than too casual. Josef Müller is as tall as Kurt but heavier with grey hair that might once have been blond, and a deep vertical line running down each of his cheeks. His eyes are a pale shade of blue behind steel-rimmed glasses. He is accompanied by a black spaniel who resembles Kaiser but can't possibly be the same dog.

‘Fräulein Dupré, how good to finally make your acquaintance after all these years,’ he says with a courtly bow.

‘Thank you, sir. It’s a pleasure to meet you.’

‘Do sit down, Fräulein.’

I resume my seat on the *fauteuil*, sitting up straight and crossing my ankles modestly. I feel like a schoolgirl in an audience with the *Mère Supérieure*. The General remains standing with his faithful dog beside him. There’s an authority about him that fills the room. In my imagination I picture him leading his troops on a vast battlefield, even though it’s likely he spent most of the war inside the *Oberkommando* near Berlin.

After a long pause he says, ‘My wife asked me to apologise on her behalf. She had a doctor’s appointment this afternoon. She won’t be long.’

‘I hope it’s nothing serious.’ I’m recalling Kurt’s emergency trip to see his mother in Berlin.

‘No, just a routine visit.’ He places the slightest emphasis on ‘routine’, prompting me to wonder whether it’s *not* routine at all.

‘You have a beautiful home, sir,’ I say, trying to start a conversation. I still can’t bring myself to say ‘Herr General’.



‘You are most kind, *Fräulein*.’

An awkward silence follows as I wait for him to elaborate, but he seems to have exhausted his small talk. Finally, I hear footsteps in the hall and Frau Müller appears in the doorway. Although she must be in her early sixties, she looks much younger in her smart grey suit and matching picture hat, more suited to a luncheon party than a visit to the doctor. Her slender frame verges on being too thin. She greets her husband with a kiss on each cheek. Neither mentions the doctor. The moment she sees me, she rushes over and clasps my hand.

‘My dear Camille, how wonderful to meet you at last.’

‘You too, Frau Müller.’ I try not to stare at her hands with their blue veins protruding like those of an old lady. Up close her face seems unnaturally sallow even though she’s tried to conceal the pallor with a dusting of powder and an application of bright lipstick.

‘I apologise for not being here to greet you. But I’m sure Josef has kept you entertained.’ She gives me a wry smile which seems to indicate she’s well aware he’s not a natural conversationalist. ‘Why don’t you and I go for a little walk in the garden? After that, we can freshen up before dinner.’

‘That sounds lovely,’ I reply, picking up my handbag. The photographs inside are my talisman – I need to keep them close to me.

Frau Müller leads me across the hall and into another *salon* with glass doors opening onto a rose garden where paved brick paths meander between the bushes.

‘Come and smell the *Tausendschön*. It’s my favourite,’ she says, stopping before a leafy bush heavy with cuplike pink blooms.

I place my face close to the petals and inhale the fragrance.

‘It certainly lives up to its name,’ I say.

She gives my hand a squeeze. ‘Your German is very good, my dear. Where did you learn it?’

‘From your son. We made a deal when he was staying with us.’ I pause for a moment in the hope she’ll provide a clue about Kurt but she just smiles. So I continue, ‘If I helped him with his French, he would teach me German. At the end of his visit he gave me his dictionary. I still try to learn ten new words a day. But I’m afraid my grammar leaves a lot to be desired.’

‘Not at all. Now tell me, how is your family?’

‘My mother is well, thank you, but . . .’ Today my emotions are so close to the surface I have to compose myself before continuing. After a moment I say, ‘My father passed away ten years ago.’

‘I’m so sorry to hear that,’ she says, grasping my hand. ‘Your poor mother. He can’t have been very old.’

‘Forty-three. He never really recovered from being gassed.’

‘So many soldiers on both sides suffered from that dreadful poison gas. You know, Camille, if women ran the world, it would be a more peaceful place. But don’t tell my husband I said that.’ She gives me another of her knowing smiles. ‘And your little brother? You’ll have to excuse me, but I can’t recall his name.’

‘Claude. We lost him during the War.’

‘*Ach, du lieber Gott!* What grief you’ve had to bear.’ She hasn’t let go of my hand since she first took it in hers. ‘I remember Kurt saying that he felt like a big brother to the two of you. Being an only child, he didn’t have siblings of his own. That’s why I was so pleased when he spent those months living with your family.’ Absently she picks a few yellowing leaves from an otherwise perfect rose bush. ‘Did you know that Kurt was in Montpellier during the War?’

I should have anticipated this question and, just as I'm agonising over how to answer it, Klara arrives bearing a silver tray with glasses of lemonade and a tiny porcelain pillbox. It's a hot afternoon and I haven't had anything to drink for hours. After gulping down the homemade lemonade in a very unladylike fashion, I place the glass back on Klara's tray. Frau Müller opens the pillbox, extracts a tablet and takes a few sips of her lemonade before handing it to the maid, who makes a little curtsy and heads back towards the house.

Meanwhile I'm still deliberating about how to reply truthfully without revealing too much. Besides, I don't know exactly what he said to his parents about the 'someone special' in Montpellier, or whether he said anything at all. Eventually I say, 'Kurt and I met by chance when he came to the library where I worked. He didn't recognise me because I'd grown up and looked different.'

'But *you* recognised him?'

'Of course.'

'He must have been embarrassed when you told him.'

'Indeed.'

She pauses at another bush and snaps off a dead rose still lingering on the branch.

‘Kurt didn’t want to be a soldier, you know. He wanted to be a writer. But generations of Müllers have been military men, going back to Josef’s grandfather who became a Field Marshall, and his father who fought in the Franco-Prussian War with Hindenburg. I think Kurt felt he was letting Josef down by working as journalist. That it wasn’t a manly vocation. But he did very well and made us proud. Then Hitler shut down the decent newspapers and put the journalists in concentration camps. Kurt was lucky to escape imprisonment but it affected him badly. So after a difficult year or two he enrolled at Officers’ Academy. He wanted to make Josef proud of him. He spent the first few years of the War with the General Staff in Berlin. And then Josef pulled some strings to have Kurt assigned to a desk job in Montpellier, translating documents. It seemed like a perfect posting – he was familiar with the area and spoke fluent French. We thought he would be out of harm’s way.’ Her voice is breaking. I clasp both of her hands in mine.

‘I know what happened,’ I say in a hoarse voice.

After a moment she says, ‘Apparently it was some local man who did it. They couldn’t get him to say why. Kurt was wearing his officer’s cape that day. They think the shooter might have confused him with someone more senior. Oh, my dear, you’re

crying. I didn't mean to upset you with all this talk about Kurt being shot. The culprit was executed, so at least we can be assured that justice was done.'

I can't stop the tears rolling down my cheeks and dropping onto my blue bodice.

'Please don't cry, Camille. In an hour or two you'll see him for yourself.'

For the second time today the world goes silent – no buzzing of bees, no birch leaves rustling in the breeze, not even the hum of traffic on the Maria-Theresia-Straße.

'My dear, you look very pale.' The voice seems to be coming from faraway. 'Sit down here.'

She helps me to a garden bench and sits beside me, clasping my hand.

'I'm sorry,' Frau Müller says. 'All this talk about the War is making you queasy.'

'No,' I protest. 'It's not that. I think I'm just a little tired.'

'Well, no wonder, after that long trip from Montpellier. You can't have slept much on the train. I'll show you to your room and you can take a nice nap before supper. And don't you worry about Kurt. He's doing well, considering. Just few months ago the doctors decided he was well enough to start work again. Nothing too physical or demanding though. He found a job at the *Munich Echo*, reviewing films and plays.'

'That would be right up his alley,' I say, trying to steady my breathing.

‘Yes, three days a week in the office,’ Frau Müller continues, ‘the other days at home. They’ve been most accommodating. He’s even bought a little car, a Volkswagen *Käfer*, and learnt to use his left foot to brake and change gears. Like a racing driver. He still has a lot of pain and it makes him morose at times. Depressed. That’s why we were so happy when you phoned this morning and agreed to come and stay for a few days. It will be such a lovely surprise for him.’

‘Surprise? You didn’t telephone Kurt to let him know?’

‘He’s not in the office today – he’s in Starnberg for a story. But I’m certain that seeing you will be the best medicine he could possibly have.’

‘I hope so,’ I reply, trying to convince myself. Anyway, I’ll know soon enough. Then it strikes me that Frau Müller just said Kurt was using his left foot to change gears, as though there was something wrong with his right leg. But that doesn’t make sense. He was shot in the chest, not the leg.

As I ponder this puzzle, we make our way back through the fragrant rose garden to the glass doors where Klara is waiting.

‘Camille dear,’ Frau Müller says, ‘I’ve put you in the bedroom with the best view of the river.’ Then she addresses the maid, ‘Klara, will you show Fräulein Dupré to her

room? Oh, and Camille, the General likes his supper served at seven o'clock sharp. He's a man of order and routine.' Then she lowers her voice. 'It's been a difficult time for him lately with the denazification hearings. They're interrogating all the generals. Josef was questioned for three days.'

'Was he exonerated?' I ask tentatively.

'The Americans are yet to make a decision. In the meantime, he's not permitted to leave Munich.' For a moment her voice breaks. She fixes her eyes on mine. 'He's an honourable man, Camille. He only did his duty.'

I'm not sure what to make of those words. Admittedly, Frau Müller is a woman who used to read the *Munich Post*, and that imparts a certain credibility. But what exactly was the General's role at the OKW? When does 'doing one's duty' cross into the realm of criminality? Where is the boundary? So many questions. But now is certainly not the time to ask them. I offer Frau Müller what I hope is a sympathetic smile and follow Klara upstairs.



# CHAPTER 46



*Il n'y a pas d'amour sans obstacles.*

There is no love without obstacles.

Old proverb

# Bogenhausen, Munich

June 25, 1946

The bedroom is on the very top floor of the house with a Juliet balcony, but far grander than the one at the Domaine St-Jean-de-Rivière. Even though there's a sweeping view of the Isar River, I think I'd still prefer our ancient olive grove. From here it's impossible to see the damaged part of the house, even when I stretch over the balustrade.

Suddenly I'm so exhausted that I decide to follow Frau Müller's advice about taking a nap. I kick off my shoes, remove my dress and lie beneath the coverlet, dressed only in a satin slip and stockings. Almost instantly I fall asleep and dream of gliding along the Isar in a boat pulled by a white swan.

When I wake and glance at my watch, *mon Dieu!* it's half past six. How could I have slept so long? I dash over to the suitcase and rummage through it. It's full of Sophie's expensive clothes, but nothing that I would feel comfortable wearing. With the clock

ticking towards seven, I don my own navy-blue dress and jacket. Then I take a seat at the dressing table and brush my hair, letting it fall to my shoulders in its natural curls and holding it back on one side with a hair comb. After applying a dash of pink lipstick, the colour of Frau Müller's *Tausendschön* rose, I grab my handbag, open the door and take a long, deep breath before descending the six flights of stairs.

'The Herr General and Frau Müller are having an aperitif in the drawing room,' Klara announces when I reach the bottom of the staircase. She must have been stationed herself there, waiting for me.

'Has K . . . Herr Müller arrived home yet, Klara?'

'Not yet, Fräulein Dupré.'

'Are you expecting anyone else?' I ask.

'Nobody else, Fräulein. Shall I take you to the drawing room?'

'Please,' I reply, concealing my relief that it will only be four for supper. No wife, no children.

With my heels clinking on the tiled floor, I follow Klara down the hallway past large empty rooms. Having lived in a farmhouse where space was in short supply and every room was in constant use, I find it difficult to come to terms with so many rooms which

are there purely for show. Perhaps in the days of the Third Reich there were grand parties in these vast interiors, guests greeting each other with ‘*Heil Hitler*’ and parroting the warped doctrines of the Führer – the very thought makes me shiver. The General might have seen himself as an honourable man caught up in the Nazi maelstrom, yet he was part of it nonetheless.



Josef Müller rises from the sofa as I enter the drawing room and offers me a chair.

‘Did you manage to have a nap, Camille?’ Frau Müller asks.

‘Yes, thank you, Frau Müller. I slept like a baby.’

‘It certainly did you the world of good. You look lovely this evening, doesn’t she, Josef?’

‘Indeed. And you too, my dear,’ he replies, while Klara offers aperitifs from a tray.

Just as the grandfather clock in the corner chimes the quarter hour, I hear a muffled male voice in the hallway. A shiver passes through my body. I’d know that voice anywhere. Then footsteps on the tiles are coming ever closer. But it’s not a regular *click clack*, more of a shuffling sound alternating with a thud. And suddenly he’s

standing in the doorway, dressed in a tweed suit and carrying a walking stick in his right hand. His hair, which once had glints of grey, is now almost entirely silver. My heart is beating so wildly I move my hand to my chest to try to calm it. He doesn't see me – my armchair is not directly in his line of sight. Part of me desperately wants to rush towards him and throw my arms around him. But I remain frozen to the seat as he moves towards his mother to kiss her.

'We have a surprise guest, darling,' she says, inclining her head in my direction. 'You remember Camille, don't you?'

As he turns and sees me, there's a silent intake of breath, an almost imperceptible arching of one eyebrow, a narrowing of the blue eyes and a long period of silence, so long, in fact, that I wonder what his parents must be thinking. At last, he comes towards me, supported by the cane. I want him to take my hand, to kiss me, even if it's only on my cheek. I long to feel his breath against my skin and to smell the welcoming fragrance of pine trees.

'It's good to see you, Camille,' he says as though I'm a long-lost relative he really couldn't care less about.

'You too, Kurt,' I reply in a strangled voice that I don't recognise as my own.

Meanwhile my heart is racing out of control. Surely he can hear the pounding. Neither of us touches the other; we don't even shake hands. Perhaps he's in shock. That might explain the aloofness. Or more likely he blames me for what happened to him, and why shouldn't he? It was all my fault. I dart a glance at his parents – his mother wears a polite smile, his father's face is as expressionless as his son's. Heaven knows what they are making of this reunion. Panic is rising in my chest.

'Camille is here in Munich on a holiday,' his mother says. 'She phoned us this morning and we invited her to stay. We thought you would both enjoy catching up on old times.'

'Old times,' he repeats in a monotone.

In my head a voice is saying,

*He doesn't want you here. He doesn't love you anymore. In fact, he hates you, and rightly so. You were the reason he was shot. You should never have come.*

Only the thought of Joseph stops me from excusing myself, rushing up to the bedroom and packing my suitcase.

'Kurt was interviewing an actor today for *The Echo*,' Frau Müller says, trying to lighten the mood. 'Who was it, Kurt? I've forgotten his name?'

‘Curd Jürgens.’

‘That’s right. What did you think of him?’

‘An interesting man. He was interned during the War. A Bavarian by birth but lives in Vienna now.’

It is the most that Kurt has said since he entered the room. Perhaps there’s still hope.

‘Do you like the movies, Camille?’ Frau Müller asks, valiantly trying to include me in the conversation.

‘I love them,’ I reply, my gaze never leaving Kurt’s face. ‘Gary Cooper is my favourite actor.’

‘Really?’ she responds brightly. ‘I’ve always thought Kurt looks a little like Gary Cooper.’

‘I think so too,’ I reply, silently daring him to contradict me.

‘And what do you do, *Fräulein*?’ the General asks.

‘Please call me Camille. I’m a librarian but I’ve been working at home for the past couple of years helping to run the family vineyard.’

Kurt's eyes narrow again. Whether he's curious or detached, I don't know. I can't read him anymore. He seems like a different person. Remote, surly, closed-off.

'So you like reading, *Fräul* . . . Camille?' the General asks.

Poor man, he's actually trying to ease the tension by asking questions.

'Yes, I do, sir. In fact, when I was at school I was teased for being a *rat de bibliothèque*. How do you say that in German, Kurt?' I ask, trying to coax his old self to emerge from behind the dispassionate mask.

'It's the same,' he replies dully. 'A *Leseratte*. A reading rat. The English call it a bookworm.'

Is his expression softening just a little? I can't tell. At that moment, Klara enters the room.

'Ladies and gentlemen, supper is served.'

'Kurt,' his mother says, 'would you kindly escort our guest into the dining room.'

It's a command, not a request, and Kurt does as he's told, offering me his left arm. Judging by the bleak look on his face, he can't bear to be in my company at all. As I wrap my arm around his, he pulls away – just slightly, but enough for me to feel mortified. It's as though he's trying to hold me at arm's length.



If I'd hoped the mood would lighten during supper, I was wrong. Kurt speaks only when spoken to, while his mother and I attempt to maintain a semblance of conviviality. Even the General tries to make conversation. It's obvious that Frau Müller is embarrassed by her son's behaviour. When the dessert arrives, I'm relieved that the meal is almost over and I can soon make my excuses and retire to the bedroom. In the morning I'll thank the General and his wife for their hospitality, call a taxi and take the next train back to Paris. And Kurt will never know he has a son.

After Klara clears the dessert plates, she returns with a pot of coffee which she pours into *demi-tasses*. I'm about to decline when Frau Müller says, 'Kurt, why don't you take Camille for a walk in the rose garden? It's so pretty in the twilight. I'll send Klara out with the coffee.'

As I glance in Kurt's direction, he's giving me the strangest look. Then he turns towards his mother, 'I'm sure Camille is tired. She would no doubt prefer an early night.'

At this point I'm completely confused. There are so many questions I want to ask him and this may be my only chance.

'I'm not at all tired, Kurt,' I retort. 'I had a nap this afternoon.'

‘In that case. . .’ he says brusquely, grasping his walking stick and offering me his arm. I put the strap of my handbag over my wrist and we make for the French doors.

‘Mind the step,’ he says as we reach the terrace. The words are polite but the tone is icy.

I’ve never dared to dream of a reunion because I knew it was impossible, except perhaps in the afterlife. But if I had concocted such a dream, it could well have been set in a garden – the *Jardin des Plantes*, most likely – but we would have been gloriously happy, not as distant from each other as the moon and the earth.

# EPILOGUE



*A coeur vaillant, rien d'impossible.*  
For a valiant heart, nothing is impossible.

Old proverb

# Bogenhausen, Munich

June 25, 1946

When we reach the arbour at the end of the garden, I can sense that Kurt is in physical pain, even though he's trying hard to hide it.

'Let's sit here among the roses and enjoy the perfume,' I say lightly, trying not to look as he sits down and stretches out his right leg. What happened to him to cause his leg to be so painful? It was a chest wound – a horrible wound, but how could it cause this?

'I'm sorry to surprise you like this,' I say.

It takes him a while to reply and then he says: 'I didn't think you'd ever want to see me again after what happened.'

At that moment Klara appears with a tray, placing it discreetly on a wire garden table. As soon as she's gone, I ask: 'So you knew it was Claude?' I don't dare look at him.

‘Not at the time. I didn’t see who did it. I was looking at *you*.’

‘You don’t think I was involved, do you?’

‘God, no. I never thought that,’ he says firmly, his eyes flashing. It is the first real emotion he’s displayed all evening.

‘So that’s not the reason you’re angry with me?’ I say quietly.

‘I’m not angry.’

‘Well, indifferent then. Disinterested, detached.’

‘I’m not indifferent.’

‘When did you find out it was Claude?’

‘Not until I was back in Germany. I was shipped to Berlin a day or two after the shooting. Before that, I was in a little hospital near the north end of the Place de la Comédie. They carried me there on a stretcher. I had blood transfusions while I was there. Not that I remember any of that at all, or the train journey, for that matter.’

The words are tumbling out as though he’s telling the story for the first time. Then it strikes me that perhaps he is.

‘Apparently I had a whole carriage to myself with a nurse and a doctor. My father organised it. The last thing I remember before the shooting is looking at you across the crowd.’ He turns towards me, his eyes still a piercing blue, even in the fading light.

I consider placing my hand over his but decide things are still far too ambiguous for that.

‘Did you hear what happened to Claude?’

‘Yes, and I’m so, so sorry, Camille.’

‘How exactly did you find out?’ I ask in a whisper.

‘The Gestapo came to my hospital bed in Berlin with a photograph of Claude. They asked me if I recognised him and I told them I’d never seen him before. Then they said he’d been found guilty and that . . . that he’d been shot a couple of days after he was arrested. It took all the willpower I could summon not to weep.’

I stifle a sob. ‘So they didn’t ever know who he was.’

‘They thought they did. Apparently his papers said he was Charles Batz. When I heard that name, it broke my heart.’

‘Thank you for not saying anything.’

‘Would you expect me to do any less?’ he asks.

‘A lesser man would have taken his revenge by naming Claude, and that might have set off reprisals against our family and the village.’

‘It never crossed my mind to seek vengeance, Camille. All I could think about was the grief you and your mother must have been feeling.’

‘Then, why didn’t you try to contact me?’

In reply there is only silence.

‘Or did you try, and I didn’t know?’

‘No, I didn’t try. I thought you would be hating me for what happened to Claude.’

‘It wasn’t your fault, Kurt,’ I reply. ‘If anyone was to blame, it was me. You were shot because of me.’

‘It wasn’t Claude’s fault, or yours. And I’ve realised it wasn’t mine either, though for a long time I blamed myself for pursuing you when I should have left you alone. But none of us is to blame for setting those events in motion. We were all victims of the War. And the simple fact is that you and I were as ill-fated as any two lovers could be.’

‘Star-crossed,’ I say softly.

‘Exactly. Since we’re asking questions, Camille, why didn’t you ever try to contact me before now?’

‘I thought you were dead.’

I allow those words to hang in the air like icicles before continuing. ‘I was there, Kurt, as you lay bleeding on the ground. I shouted for help and staunched the blood. But no matter what I did, I could see it flowing onto the cobbles. A couple of onlookers dragged me away before the police arrived. I fought and struggled with them because I didn’t want to leave you. The next morning, I wanted to believe you were alive so I went to the University Hospital to see if you were there and they told me to try the morgue. That was when I gave up hope.’

He is gazing at me, his eyes brimming with tears. I’m crying too, I can feel the tears sliding down my cheeks.

‘So it was you,’ he says, his voice shaking. ‘The Gestapo mentioned a nurse who tried to help me while I was lying on the ground. I don’t remember a thing but I’ve had dreams about it and the woman always has your face.’

‘I was leaning over you and you were trying to speak, but I couldn’t make out what you were saying.’

‘In my dreams I’m saying “*für immer und ewig*” over and over again.’

Forever and ever! So that’s what he was trying to tell me.



We reach for each other's hand at the same time and I move close to him, resting my head against his chest.

'You probably saved my life, Camille Dupré,' he whispers. 'The doctors in Berlin said I would have bled out without the first aid administered at the scene.'

'What happened to your leg?' I ask quietly.

'The chest wound seemed to be healing well and then I picked up a blood infection that spread down my body. The doctors decided to try the new Sulfa drugs they'd been using in the field hospitals. In the meantime, my mother called for a priest to give me the Last Rites. It was touch and go for a few days, but then the drugs started to work and the infection was halted. The doctors had to cut away the infected areas and in the process some nerves in my groin and right leg were severed.' He pauses for a deep breath. 'They told me I could never have children and I probably wouldn't be able to . . . So that's the other reason why I didn't attempt to contact you. It wouldn't have been fair. Why would you want a man whose body was disfigured, who couldn't make love to you or give you children?'

‘And you answered that question on my behalf, did you?’ I ask reproachfully. ‘Don’t you realise that I’ve loved you for fifteen years, and I’m not going to stop loving you, no matter what?’

As I lean against him, he runs his fingers through my hair. ‘I’m sorry to have doubted you. When did you find out? About me being alive, I mean?’

‘Only this morning.’

‘*Ach du lieber Gott!*’

‘When I phoned here and your father happened to say “I’m sure Kurt would be delighted to see you”. And even then, I thought I might have misheard.’

‘Oh, Camille,’ he says, raising his hand to my cheek and stroking it. ‘I had no idea. What a tumultuous day you’ve had!’

For the first time I allow myself to smile. I suppose that’s one way to describe it.

‘What made you come to Munich then?’

‘It’s a long story involving my stepsister Sophie.’

‘Sophie Bernard?’

‘One and the same. She convinced me to stay with her in Paris for a few weeks – her gentleman friend is away for the summer. And then she persuaded me to look for your parents.’

‘So you told her about us.’

‘I had to tell someone, Kurt. She’ll keep it secret. She had her own love affair with a German officer.’

‘But, if you thought I was dead, why would you want to search for my parents?’

Slowly I remove the envelope from my handbag and open the flap. Kurt watches as I take out the pile of photographs.

‘This is why,’ I say, handing him the pictures.

Moonlight is flooding the rose garden, its rays bright enough for Kurt to see the images clearly. He holds each one in front of him, examining it closely.

‘I’ve never seen these pictures of me before,’ he says, flicking through them. ‘I must have been about two or three. Did my mother give them to y—’

Then he stops dead. I can guess which picture he has reached. It’s the close-up of Joseph and me taken by Lucien.

‘Oh my God, Camille, is this my son?’

‘No, he’s *our* son,’ I reply.

After a long silence he says, ‘I can’t believe it.’ Then he starts to laugh. Kurt has a lovely laugh, low and melodious. ‘We have a son, we have a son,’ he repeats like the refrain of a much-loved song.

After a while he says, ‘But how could it have happened? We took precautions.’

‘Not on the Sunday morning. And thank God for that, or we wouldn’t have this beautiful boy.’

‘It’s a miracle, Camille,’ he says. ‘I never expected to be a father, not after the infections and the surgery. This is the greatest gift you could have given me. And my parents will be overjoyed. It will mean so much to my mother to know she has a grandson.’

He kisses me in the way he used to, long and deep. The sparks are still there – I can feel the fire igniting.

By the time we wander hand-in-hand back to the house, Kurt’s parents have gone to bed, and Klara has left only enough lights burning to guide our way upstairs.

As I spot the telephone in the hallway, I whisper, ‘I promised Sophie I’d call her. She’ll be on tenterhooks.’

He glances at his watch. 'It's too late now. Phone her in the morning. Let's keep this news to ourselves for tonight. I want to rejoice in it – just the two of us.'

As we climb the stairs, Kurt's cane makes such a loud thud it seems to echo through the otherwise silent house. It turns out that his bedroom is on the top floor, next to mine. Did Frau Müller have some inkling, when she put me in that room, that I was the 'someone special' Kurt had once told her about?

'This was my boyhood room,' he explains as we linger outside his door, still holding hands like teenagers. 'Not very practical nowadays, I suppose. My mother wants me to sleep downstairs, but I'm determined that some things won't change.'

'I don't think I could bear to say good night and go back to my room,' I whisper. 'May I sleep in your bed tonight?'

He hesitates for so long I'm worried he will say no. Then I hear: 'It's not that I don't want you to, Camille, but I'm not the man I once was. My body is scarred and broken. I don't want you to be repulsed by it.'

'Listen here, Kurt Müller,' I say firmly, 'I was there when your body was torn apart. I thought I'd lost you forever. Now I have you back, and little Joseph has his father. Tonight I just want to lie in your arms and listen to the sweet sound of your breathing.'

Kurt smiles down at me, pushes the door open and turns on the light. His bedroom is furnished as much as a study as a place to sleep. *Escritoire*, bookcases, *chaise longue*, a small drinks cabinet.

‘If I didn’t know better,’ he says, removing his jacket and loosening his tie, ‘I’d think I was hallucinating. I can hardly believe you’re here and that we have a son. I want to know everything. Everything from the last moment you saw me.’

He leads me to the bed, throws back the coverlet and settles me into the centre. From his cabinet he withdraws a bottle of brandy and half-fills two tumblers.

‘Should be champagne,’ he says. ‘But never mind – plenty of time for champagne later. Let us wet our son’s head with the finest French brandy.’

Our arms interlink as we raise the tumblers of cognac – it must be cognac, no mere brandy ever tasted so sublime as this – and we drink to the health of our child.

‘You’ve been so strong, Camille, keeping our baby when there must have been pressure to do otherwise.’

‘He was my anchor, Kurt. I don’t think I would have survived without him.’

‘And you told no-one, except for Sophie, that I was the father? Not even your mother?’

‘Maman would be the last person I’d tell. She’d never forgive me.’

‘Does she know that I was the target of the shooting?’

‘Heavens no! Not even the Maquis know that. If my mother found out, it would break her heart. And she’s already been through so much.’

‘But this is *your* life, Camille, not your mother’s,’ he says quietly. ‘*She* was given a second chance at happiness in her marriage to Lucien. Don’t *you* deserve your chance too?’

‘I’d never thought of finding happiness again. Not until tonight. But I can’t see how that’s possible. Not with what happened that terrible day in Montpellier.’

I can feel Kurt’s hand, warm and dry, pressing mine, but I can’t bring myself to look at him. For a long time, we sit side by side, neither of us speaking. From downstairs I can hear the hall clock chiming midnight. A new day.

‘What would your father say if he were here?’ Kurt asks, breaking the silence.

If only I could speak with Papa. He could always see both sides of a situation. He believed in forgiveness and moving forward. He would understand about Kurt and me being in love. All of a sudden, I can hear my father’s gentle voice echoing down the years:

*‘Tenir compte du passé, mais il ne faut pas dicter l’avenir.’* Heed the past but don’t let it dictate the future.

As I repeat those words to Kurt, he says:

‘That sounds just like your father, he was always the voice of reason and love.’

‘Wise words and proverbs are all very well, Kurt, but there are so many obstacles in our path.’

‘You’ve already overcome so much, Camille. And I have too. How much stronger would we be if we were to meet the challenges together? Shouldn’t we at least try? For Joseph’s sake?’

I draw a deep breath and squeeze Kurt’s hand. Every instinct compels me to touch him, embrace him, hold him so close that the despair of the last years will be consumed by the sweet smell of his skin, the smooth, familiar contours of his body.

Gently I undo the buttons of his shirt. As it falls open, I stifle a cry. That golden flesh I had worshipped in moonlight three years ago is seared with ragged scars, marking the frantic efforts of surgeons to deal with the original wound and then stem the course of a deadly infection.



All of a sudden, I'm transported back to the Place de la Comédie where I feel again the pulsing warmth of his blood as I kneel beside him, trying to stop the flow with my jacket and watching helplessly as it seeps onto the cobblestones. So much blood. Then I groan as strangers seize my arms, dragging me away while I fight to stay with him. And just as suddenly as it started, the flashback is over and I'm examining my palms, almost expecting to see them covered with his blood.

'My darling Camille,' Kurt says, putting his arm around me and pulling me close.

Tracing my hand tenderly over his scars, I whisper, "These are a testament to your will to live, Kurt. To the valour of your heart. You must never be ashamed of them. Never. They make you more than you were before.'

All at once, any reticence is abandoned, and his arms enclose me fiercely, fervently.

'Our lovemaking can't be the same as it was before,' Kurt whispers.

Gently I place my fingers over his lips. 'Shhh, my darling. You're alive and we're together. Nothing else matters.'

And whatever happens tomorrow or in the days ahead, at this very moment, anything seems possible.



*L'espoir fait vivre.*

Hope keeps us alive.

Old French proverb

Deborah O'Brien 2020

# AUTHOR'S NOTE



The idea for *Camille Dupré* came to me when I was at university, studying French and German. At the end of third year, I visited France for the first time. One night, not long after I had returned to Sydney for my final year of study, I had a dream about a German student living with a French family in the 1930s and returning years later in Nazi uniform. That was it – no details, and more of a premise than a story.

After completing a couple of chapters inspired by the dream, I showed them to a friend who wrote for the university newspaper. He told me the manuscript was ‘rubbish’ so I

put it aside and resolved never to show my fictional work to anyone again. But I continued to write – non-fiction for publication – and fiction in secret.

Decades later, thanks to the encouragement of my mother, who had always wanted me to write a novel, I found the courage to complete a manuscript and submit it to a literary agent, Sheila Drummond. That book was *Mr Chen's Emporium*.

In the autumn of 2016, I was doing a clean-up and came across an old exercise book labelled *Beloved Enemy*. Inside were the original pages written in a tiny script with a lot of crossing out, asterisks and arrows. I had to use a magnifying glass to decipher the miniscule text. It turned out the story was melodramatic and the characters were cardboard cut-outs, but the writing wasn't bad at all, and I liked the concept. That week I started the story anew, calling it *The Fume of Sighs*, as in the quote from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*:

*Love is a smoke raised with the fume of sighs.*

But very soon, I settled on a simpler title – *Camille Dupré* – after the narrator of the story.

The original version had taken place in an unspecified town in Vichy France. This time around, I decided to be specific, choosing Montpellier, a city I knew well from walking almost every street and alleyway. Most importantly, its prestigious university has always attracted international students which gave me a suitable place for Kurt to study, while the surrounding countryside with its perfumed hills and picturesque vineyards provided an idyllic setting for Camille's home.



Place de la Comédie with cinema on the right.

Photo: D.O'Brien

This time around, I had the vast resources of the internet to help me with the research. And it wasn't long before I had discovered invaluable documents from the period, including a detailed street map of Montpellier circa 1945, a plan of the Jardin des Plantes from 1942, and an original ordinance banning firearms and radio receivers/transmitters from the Musée de l'Ordre de la Libération (which I adapted for the book).

The map of Montpellier was my talisman, always beside me as I wrote the manuscript. The old part of the city hasn't changed much at all, but the rest has been transformed – the fabulous new town hall, for example, which was relocated from Place de la Canourgue to the Place Georges Frèches. I also found photos of the city from the 1940s, mainly of the Place de la Comédie. After zooming the images to the maximum size, I played detective, deciphering signage, using my trusty magnifying glass.

I couldn't find any evidence of the existence of a public lending library in Montpellier during the War. Nonetheless, one probably existed and, if it did, it might well have been close to the Hôtel de Ville (town hall), so that is where I located it in my story.

There were, of course, specialist academic libraries attached to the various faculties of the University of Montpellier.

It is an historical fact that the Nazis issued a list of authors whose books were to be banned from French libraries, although in general, they didn't hold the public burnings which happened elsewhere.

Ever since my university days I have been a keen 'collector' of French proverbs. What makes them especially charming, apart from their Gallic pithiness, is the fact that so many of them rhyme. I supplemented my collection using a variety of sources including *The Idioms of the French and English Languages* by Louis Chambaud, H. D. Symonds, London, 1793 and *Dictionnaire des proverbes: français-anglais, anglais-français* by Françoise Bulman, Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1998.

While researching the Service du Travail Obligatoire, I came upon a number of original propaganda posters and short films, exhorting young Frenchmen to join up. Several short documentaries about the STO also proved helpful, including *STO: Avoir 20 ans sous l'Occupation* written and directed by Philippe Picard and Jérôme Lambert.

Those of you who've read my other books will know that I'm a film buff. I grew up reading my mother's movie almanacs from the late 1930s and early 1940s – I still have them with their magnificent monochromatic portraits of the great stars: Crawford, Gable, Garbo, Bogart, Dietrich and, of course, Gary Cooper. The cover of this book, depicting French actress Annabella, actually comes from one of those old annuals. Like Camille, my mother, aged eleven, used her pocket money to buy movie magazines. I did the same when I was growing up. In creating my male protagonists, I often start with a movie star – for this book it was the young Gary Cooper, an Adonis if ever there was one.

In describing the tragic story of the *Munich Post* and its heroic journalists, I referred to Sara Twogood's *The 'Munich Post': Its Undiscovered Effects on Hitler* at the University of California Santa Barbara Holocaust Oral History Project website.

The description of Munich in 1946 was informed by a German newsreel from August of that year.

The character of Anna is a tribute to my Jewish great-grandmother, Elizabeth Mary Abraham, with whom she shares a surname.



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A big thank you to my Highlands neighbours, Sharyn and Angela, who have offered friendship, humour and home-grown veggies during the lockdown.

Finally, I am indebted to my husband, who has been my greatest supporter, and to my son, daughter-in-law and grand-daughter, who are always in my heart.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo: C. Whipper

**B**orn and raised in Sydney, Australia, Deborah O'Brien is a writer, visual artist and teacher. She has written and illustrated stories for as long as she can remember, earning two dollars for the first story she submitted as a ten-year-old to 'Sun-Herald Juniors'. After graduating with a BA in French, German and Political Science from the University of Sydney, she completed a post-graduate Diploma of Education and became a high school teacher and year coordinator.

Following the birth of her son, she began running painting classes from home, which proved to be such a success that she was invited to teach art workshops across Australia and New Zealand and later in the UK and France.

During this time Deborah authored/co-authored a dozen books on art, craft and design including the best-selling *Folk Art of France: Décor Folklorique*, a project which involved a 4000 km research trip through the backroads of rural France. As a contributing editor to *Fine Art and Decorative Painting* magazine, she wrote a popular monthly feature for almost nine years. She even found herself doing a stint as a craft presenter on Foxtel's Lifestyle Channel, demonstrating faux finishes, stencilling and decorative painting techniques.

After years of penning stories in secret, Deborah made her fiction debut in 2012 with *Mr Chen's Emporium*, which was published by Penguin Random House. The book went on to become a bestseller and a book club favourite and was included in a *Reader's Digest Select Edition* and published in Germany by Ullstein as *Amy's Geheimnis (Amy's Secret)*. *The Jade Widow* (2013) and *A Place of Her Own* (2014)

completed the 'Emporium Trilogy'. All three books are still available as print and e-books.

Deborah's critically acclaimed contemporary novel, *The Trivia Man* (Penguin, 2015) was also published in Germany by Goldmann as *Ein anderes Wort für Glück* (*Another Word for Happiness*) and has appeared in *Reader's Digest Select Editions* in English, German and Czech. Her fifth book, *The Rarest Thing* (Lomandra Press) is set in 1966 in the Victorian High Country and is inspired by a real historical event – the discovery of a live mountain pygmy possum, a species long thought to be extinct.

Together with her husband and two sheep dogs, Deborah lives in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales.

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# GLOSSARY

## ***Ah! Mon château est beau***

French folk song, possibly dating back to the Middle Ages. The title means: ‘Ah! My castle is beautiful’. It is a childhood singing game in which girls make two circles. One circle sings the verse, the other the chorus.

## **A tout de suite**

See you soon.

## **Bow, Clara**

Popular American film actress in the 1920s and early 1930s, who became known as the ‘It Girl’. She starred with Gary Cooper in the classic film *Wings* (1927).

## **belle-de-nuit**

Prostitute, lady of the night



## **Bisou**

Pronounced *beez-oo*, this is a popular name for horses and means ‘kiss’.

## **Blanche-Neige**

Snow White

## **Boche**

Derogatory term used by the French to describe the Germans, particularly during World War II. It can be used both in the singular or the plural. *Boches* is also correct. The ‘s’ isn’t pronounced in French.

## **Boucle d’Or**

Goldilocks

## **Boum**

Delightful song about the joys of love composed and sung by Charles Trenet in the late 1930s. With altered lyrics, it was used by both sides – the Resistance and the Germans during World War II. You can watch the wonderful Trenet perform the original version on YouTube.

## **buffet froid**

cold buffet

## **café-tabac**

The heart of village life – a café and bar, also selling cigarettes.

## **calot**

A cap-style of hat, popular with ladies in the 1940s.

## **Charlot**

The French nickname for silent screen star, Charlie Chaplin, whose most famous character was the Little Tramp. Chaplin was much loved in France.

## **chiotte**

toilet

## **chouchoute**

darling

## **confiseries**

confectionery

## **Cooper, Gary**

American film actor who came to fame in the late 1920s and had an ill-fated romance with Clara Bow at that time. Cooper was known for his good looks and cowboy roles.

## **décavilloneuse**

harrow

## **Denazification**

Process of removing Nazi officials and dismantling the vestiges of the Nazi regime. Tribunals were held in which senior officers of the Wehrmacht, as well as Nazi judges and other officials, were questioned about their actions during the War and punishment was meted out if they were found guilty of criminal behaviour. This culminated in the Nuremberg Trials.

## **dessin animé**

cartoon

## **Dieu merci**

Thank goodness.

## **Écoute-moi bien**

Just listen here.

## **épicerie**

grocery store

## **Épuration**

Retribution taken out on French collaborators during and after the Liberation of France.

## **exposé oral**

oral presentation

## **fauteuil**

armchair

## **Fernandel**

Much loved French actor and comedian, a native of Marseille. known for his long face and large horsey teeth.

## **flambeau**

flame, as in an Art Deco flambeau lamp or sconce.

## **Forces Françaises d'Intérieur**

French Forces of the Interior or the FFI, the formal name given to the Resistance/Maquis, following the Allied landings in Normandy and Provence in the summer of 1944.

## **Général de Gaulle**

Leader of the Free French during World War II when he was based first in London and then North Africa before the Allied landings in France.

## ***Le grand Meaulnes***

First and only novel by talented young author, Alain-Fournier, who died on the Western Front in September, 1914 at the age of 27. The main character is Augustin Meaulnes, a young man trying to recapture the past.

## **Gabin, Jean**

Renowned French film actor, who was often compared with the American Spencer Tracy in his exceptional ability to play 'ordinary' men.

## **Garson, Greer**

Red-haired British-born American movie actress, best known for her Academy-Award-winning role as Mrs Miniver in the patriotic anti-German film of the same name (1942) about the home front in England during the evacuation of Dunkirk.

## **Gestapo**

Much feared *Geheime Staatspolizei* (secret state police), the Gestapo operated in Germany itself, and Occupied Territories such as France.

## **gigot d'agneau**

leg of lamb

## **gnädiges Fräulein**

miss/young lady

## **Hauptmann**

Captain

## **immer und ewig**

forever and ever. Literally, always and eternally.

## **indicateur (m.), indicatrice (f.)**

informer

## **J'ai un faim de loup**

I'm as hungry as a horse. (In French: I'm as hungry as a wolf.)

## **jardin des plantes**

botanic gardens

## **Jürgens, Curd**

German actor who changed the spelling of his first name to Curt when he went to America to make films.

## **Käfer**

Volkswagen 'Beetle'

## **Kölnisches Wasser**

4711 *eau de cologne* from the city of the same name.

## **lait de poule**

Egg flip. Literally, hen's milk.

## **Languedoc**

Region of southern France to the west of Provence. Montpellier is the biggest city – in the early 1940s the population was about 40,000. It is the administrative centre of the modern *département* of Hérault.

## **Laval, Pierre**

Right-wing, pro-Nazi politician, who was appointed Premier of the Vichy government in 1940 after the fall of France and the negotiation of the armistice. The Vichy government was, to all intents and purposes, an instrument of Nazi Germany. Its President was the World War I hero, Général Petain, whose portrait hung in all public buildings.

## **ma chérie**

my darling/sweetheart

## **maman**

Mum



## **mamie**

Grandma

## **Maquis**

A name used for members of the French Resistance based in southern France, particularly in the rugged and remote areas. Individual members were known as *maquisards*.

## **mes petits**

my little ones

## **Milice**

Much hated military police force, established in mid-1942, and made up of pro-German Frenchmen, often working at the behest of the SS. With their local knowledge, they were used to track down and arrest members of the Resistance.

## **miliciens**

Members of the Milice

## **Moi aussi**

Me too

## ***mon ange***

my angel

## **mon cher**

my dear

## **mouche**

Literally, a fly. During the German Occupation it was used to describe someone who denounced others to the authorities. They were also known as *indicateurs*, or *indics* for short.

## ***Nimbus Liberé***

Vichy France/Nazi propaganda cartoon, available to view as a video clip online. I have included it in a 1943 chapter, and some sources do suggest it was released then, but its content indicates it was released in 1944, possibly after D-Day.

## **nom de guerre**

An assumed name. Literally, ‘war name’.

## ***Notre Dame de Paris***

A novel by Victor Hugo, named for the famous cathedral. Better known in English as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

## **NSDAP**

Nazi Party

## **OKW**

Oberkommando der Wehrmacht – German High Command housed in underground bunkers near Zossen about 30 kilometres south of Berlin.

## **papi/pépé**

Grandpa

## **péquenaud**

country bumpkin

## **Pétain, General**

World War I military hero who became President of the puppet Vichy government.

## **petite amie**

girlfriend

## **poussette**

baby stroller

## **Préfecture**

Government offices. *Préfecture de police* means police station/headquarters.

## **PTT**

Postes, télégraphes et téléphones

## **(le) quatorze juillet**

Bastille Day – 14 July

## **Radio Londres**

Prohibited Free French/French Resistance radio station, broadcasting from the BBC studios in London and established after the fall of France.

## **réfracteur**

Anyone who evaded the STO. In modern parlance, a 'draft dodger'.

## **Reichsadler**

Eagle emblem with a wreath below containing a swastika.

## **Reichswehr**

The name of the German army during the Weimar Republic and up to 1935.

## **Ricains**

Slang name for *Américains*.

## **Service du Travail Obligatoire (STO)**

A program of forced labour introduced in France under the Nazi Occupation to provide workers for German farms and factories. Originally it was voluntary and French prisoners of war were exchanged for volunteers who received pay but this did not produce the numbers necessary to meet German 'quotas'. This scheme was administered by the Office de Placement Allemand (OPA). In April 1943 young men born in 1920 through 1922 were

singled out for conscription but there were a number of exemptions, including one for agricultural labourers. In June of that year that exemption was removed.

## **sillon**

furrow

## **Sommerzeit**

German for daylight saving

## **SS**

*Schutzstaffel* – Hitler's feared secret police and paramilitary force.

## **Sturmabteilung (SA)**

Also known as the SA or Brownshirts or storm-troopers, the *Sturmabteilung* (literally storm department) was effectively Hitler's private army under the leadership of Karl Röhm. It consisted largely of louts and gangsters and grew to be a couple of hundred thousand strong. In the middle of 1934 Hitler organised for the murder of Röhm and a number of other members of the SA to curb its power. This became known as the Night of the Long Knives, even though it took place over several days.

## **Sulfa**

Developed in Germany, Sulfa drugs (short for Sulfonamide) were an early form of antibiotic used to treat wounds before the advent of penicillin.

## **surname**

nickname. Surname is *nom de famille*.

## **tatie**

Auntie

## **Tausendschön**

A variety of old German rose known in English as the Thousand Beauties.

## **la Tramontane**

Strong wind which blows from the north or north-east across Languedoc. It can hit at any time during the year and can be destructive.

## **les trois pas**

Bowls game, popular in southern France, before *pétanque* overtook it in popularity in the 1940s.

## ***Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours***

*Around the World in Eighty Days* by Jules Verne

## **Vel' d'Hiv round up**

On 16 and 17 July, 1942, over 13,000 Jewish men, women and children from the Paris area were arrested by the French police under the orders of the Nazi regime. Most were taken to the Paris velodrome where they were held in squalid conditions. Then they were crowded into windowless freight wagons and sent to Auschwitz. Many did not survive the journey; those who did were sent to the gas chambers. The story is told movingly in the French film, *La Rafle* (2012). You can view the trailer online.

## ***Vénus Aveugle***

Known as 'Blind Venus', this film was made in 1941 by renowned French director, Abel Gance.

## **Volk und Vaterland**

The people and the fatherland



## **Wehrmacht**

Name of the Germany army from 1935 until the end of World War II. Previously, it was known as the *Reichswehr*.

# AFTERWORD

This book is my gift to you to read in lockdown and during the challenging times ahead.

All I ask in return is that you consider making a donation to the charity of your choice. Perhaps one with relevance to mental health such as Beyond Blue.

If you would like to send me your thoughts about ‘Camille Dupré’ or tell me about the charity to which you’ve donated, please use this email address:

[deborah@deborahobrien.com.au](mailto:deborah@deborahobrien.com.au)

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including reading group questions, articles and book reviews,  
visit Deborah's website:

[www.deborahobrien.com.au](http://www.deborahobrien.com.au)



# ABOUT THE BOOK

## St-Jean-de-Rivière, Languedoc, 1931

Jean-Paul Dupré, a veteran of the Great War, and his family own a vineyard not far from the ancient city of Montpellier in south-western France, where they supplement their income by taking in foreign students from the nearby university. Twenty-one-year-old Kurt Müller is the latest lodger, undertaking a summer course in French before beginning a career as a journalist at a left-wing newspaper in Munich.

With his Teutonic looks and charming manners, Kurt is different from the awkward young men who have stayed with the family in the past. Eleven-year-old Camille, soon develops a secret crush on the handsome German, while nine-year-old Claude adopts Kurt as his big brother.

## Montpellier, 1942

When German troops occupy southern France, Major Kurt Müller, fluent in French and familiar with the area, is assigned to the military administration in Montpellier.

Meanwhile, twenty-two-year-old Camille Dupré is junior librarian at the city's public lending library. One winter's day, when a German officer appears at the service desk, Camille finds herself

face to face with Kurt Müller. He, however, doesn't recognise the girl from his past, now grown-up. Shocked to see that the young man she once idolised is wearing a Nazi uniform, Camille has no intention of revealing her identity to him.

But the time comes when she has to seek Kurt's help. And soon Camille finds herself enmeshed in a web of secrets and lies that will change her life forever . . .

*A compelling read about the resilience of the human spirit  
in a world where friends have become enemies and ordinary freedoms no longer exist.*

Robyn Goodwin, author