

# PROLOGUE



*German-Occupied Paris*

*Tuesday, July 7, 1942*

*10:28 pm*

An unseasonably cold wind whipped through the slender woman's wool overcoat, chilling her to the bone. *I can't be late—not tonight*, she thought, as she hurried down the street of the darkened city. The curfew had been in effect since 8:00 p.m. In her imagination, every one of her footsteps sounded alarmingly loud. In reality, though, she had mastered moving with the speed and stealth of a rabbit on high alert.

Ahead of her, the rumble from an approaching truck echoed off the granite walls of a nearby shop. Holding her breath, the woman flattened against the door. *Please don't see me*, she prayed. As the truck sped past, she curled her lip at the sight of the swastika painted on its side.

Rounding the corner, she arrived at a heavy glass and metal door, turned the handle, slipped quickly into the building, and then quietly entered the apartment at the end of the hall. There seemed to be little difference between the dim light cast by the waning crescent moon and the total blackness inside. When she fumbled to lock the door, a small light was switched on behind her.

"Oh, you startled me!" she said in a hushed voice. In actuality, it was the odor of lactic acid that surprised her. She

never could grow accustomed to that chemical smell, but she knew she shouldn't complain about that lifesaving tool in every forger's tool kit.

"My apologies, but thank you for being on time," a young man replied. She saw that he wore dark pants, a crisp shirt, black suspenders, and a look of utter exhaustion.

"Of course."

"I believe these are our best yet." He gestured toward three sets of false papers laid out on a table: identity cards, passports, a marriage certificate, food ration cards, birth and baptismal certificates, and library cards.

The woman put on her glasses to inspect the work up close. "Yes, I agree," she said, after several minutes. "These *are* fine. Not one error." The paper, the stamps, the ink colors, the signatures—all would pass even the most meticulous scrutiny. "You really are an incredible artist. And for cards that are brand-new, they look perfectly aged. *Merci beaucoup.*" The woman hugged the man with whom she'd worked before but whose given name, for security reasons, was still unknown to her. She knew him only by his code name: Night Watch.

Separating the papers into three stacks, she tied each with a ribbon of a different color and slid each set inside a medium-size envelope. Then she tucked them into her satchel beneath a large bag of sandwiches, taking care not to crush the precious papers.

"May our God and the God of our ancestors lead us toward peace, guide our footsteps toward peace, and make us reach our desired destination for life, gladness, and peace," Night Watch whispered, as they stood by the door.

The woman nodded and looked straight into his fresh face, finishing the Traveler's Prayer: "And may our God rescue us from the hand of every foe and ambush." As she slowly turned the knob and opened the door a bit, the young man

peered into the hall and then gave her his okay to hurry toward the main entrance of the building. In a moment, she was outside again in the wind, her silent steps now even quicker than before. Her chest tightened as she thought about what she was about to do—what she was being forced to do.

After a few blocks, she came to the door of a stationery shop and gave it a single rap with her knuckles. It swung open immediately, and as she swept past the man who had admitted her, she tapped his shoulder in greeting. Inside, a small lantern tried valiantly to light the back room where a woman sat waiting with a sullen-looking girl at her side. The girl brightened and leapt to her feet when she saw who had come in.

“Mama!” she whisper-yelled. The girl, age 11, was dressed in traveling clothes and holding a small knapsack. The woman bent down to greet her with a warm embrace.

To the male and female escort, she said, “Everything is ready. Here is your paperwork. Brave souls have risked everything to provide these. They are as good as authentic and should give you no trouble.” She hugged her colleagues in the underground and then, once more, bent to draw her daughter, Esther, close.

“Mama, why can’t you come with me?” she said, wrapping her arms tightly around her mother’s neck. Her two younger sisters had already been whisked away, far from France, for safety. Papa was gone. Now this.

“Remember, *chérie*?” the woman said, crouching beside her daughter and taking her hand. “I made a pledge to our friends and neighbors of the 20th *arrondissement*. You mustn’t worry. These kind people will deliver you to a lovely couple in the south. And don’t forget to call your escorts Mama and Papa, as you must pretend to be *their* child on your journey. I would take you myself, but . . .” She stopped herself, not

wishing to worry her daughter, and simply enveloped her in one last hug, adding softly, "Remember, I will come for you soon. You, Miriam, Naomi, and I will all be together again."

"But how will you *find* us?" Esther asked, choking back tears.

"Through my connections, darling. I'll know where you and your sisters are at all times. And our apartment will always be home. Don't forget. Because if something happens that makes it impossible for me to come for you, please, go home, as soon as it's safe. Just ask for Mr. Bissett, the property manager, or his wife or children. I gave him our key to safe-guard. Everything has been arranged. Will you remember?"

"Yes, Mama. I will. *Je t'aime.*"

"Forever, *ma trésor.*"

And with those words, the woman clutched her heart, then watched her daughter wave goodbye and walk out the door with her escorts. Before leaving the building herself, she pulled a red journal from her pocket and turned to the page that held the information about her two younger daughters. There, she wrote down the real and false names for Esther. Next to that, she wrote the names of the couple who would act as Esther's guardians, along with their location. It was a risk to have all of this information in writing, she knew. But what choice did she have? She was terrible with codes. She was a language teacher, after all, not a mathematician like her late husband. She snapped the book shut and, with every ounce of courage she could muster, she stepped over the threshold and disappeared back into the night.

# 1

## ON THE WAY!



*Over the Atlantic*  
*Spring Break, 2013*

Jake broke his pencil. The loud snap garnered quick glances from a few of his fellow plane passengers.

"Easy there, Rembrandt," Ben muttered, not looking up from his tablet.

"Ugh!" Jake responded, digging into his backpack for another pencil. "I was really hoping to coast through the second semester of our freshman year. *Why* did I sign up for this art class? I can't draw!"

"I'll tell you why. Because every legendary architect has drafted in pencil and because being able to sketch will help you get to where you want to go." Now Ben looked up and brushed his thick red hair from his eyes.

"Maybe I won't be an architect then," Jake responded.

Ben chuckled. "Jake McGreevy, the 15-year-old who can tell a hip roof from a gambrel roof at a quarter mile won't be an architect? That's rich."

"Why? Because architecture is in my blood?"

"Your dad seems to love it."

"He does, doesn't he? I guess I'll just have to hope that by the time I'm through graduate school, they'll have some sort of brain scan that can transpose my thoughts onto paper."

"Could happen. But meanwhile, maybe one of the street artists in Paris will be able to give you some tips," Ben said.

"If we have time."

"True. We might be pretty busy baking each night for practice." The boys had won a spot as partners in a baking contest for teens at the famed Le Cordon Bleu cooking school in Paris—and the contest would be televised. They still couldn't believe their luck: going to Paris over spring break by themselves! Of course, it wouldn't have been possible unless Ben's aunt, who was living in Paris, had agreed to let them stay with her.

"Plus," Ben said, "we're going to need some time to dig into your mother's past while we're there. It's strange that your dad never looked through her stuff before now."

"Yeah, I think he was just so depressed when she was killed that he couldn't do it. But when I started asking questions after we solved the mystery of her death in Chicago, he showed me all of her boxes."

"Hey, at least he *saved* everything."

"Right, and this has to mean *something*," Jake said, as he pulled a photo out of his backpack's pocket. The tattered black-and-white image featured a woman with two young girls and an infant, standing in front of a window. "This photo was all my mom had left from the house fire that killed her mother—that's what she told my dad. We're pretty sure this photo was taken in Paris, based on the design of the buildings behind them."

"Was your mom's father killed in the fire, too?"

"No. My mom apparently never knew her father."

"Oh! So then what happened to your mom after she lost her mother?" Ben asked.

"She got taken in by a foster family. She was just six years old when it happened, so she apparently didn't have a lot of

memories of her mom. But she knew her name, of course: Miriam Charpentier."

"Well, they say a picture is worth a thousand words. I guess we have an essay to write."

"Good thing writing is easier than drawing," Jake said. "At least for me, that is."

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The plane's pitch shifted slightly, signaling its descent. Half an hour later, the plane had arrived at the gate at Charles de Gaulle Airport. Ben and Jake pulled their violins from the overhead compartment and made their way through the bustling terminal. Having been so far back in the plane, they found that their luggage was already on the carousel when they arrived at baggage claim. Jake pulled his trusty Leatherman from his suitcase and clipped it to the outside pocket of his backpack. After a brief hold-up in customs, where the agents had to measure the knife blade to confirm it was legal, the boys found their way into the reception area.

"There's my aunt!" Ben pointed and started walking faster.