

## Chapter One

MAY 1940

LIGHTNING CRACKLED, splitting the night sky over Paris, illuminating letters painted on the bookstore window across the street: *La Maison des Amis des Livres*. Driving rain pounded the loose shutters of Shakespeare and Company, making them rattle so that Claire Stewart dropped the heavy blackout curtain into place.

“It sounds like cannon bursting, like the end of the world.” Thunder boomed again. She tugged the belt of her trench coat tighter.

“You must go,” Josephine insisted. “The lorry driver won’t wait. This is his last run to Calais. He’s running on nerves, even now. Arnaud told you—”

“Arnaud promised he’d be here. I won’t go without him. I don’t even know our British contact.”

“You know Arnaud. He’ll meet you if he can—last minute, no doubt.” Josephine Ganute—one more aspiring writer, another tumbleweed to make her home amid the burdened shelves of Sylvia Beach’s American bookstore—grunted and gently, firmly pushed Claire toward the door. “This is the last group, and the last driver willing to go. He’s insane to try. The roads must be packed with people fleeing the city. Calais is a

refugee camp—even last week it was so. If you don't leave now, the children will never—”

“But I don't know where to go when we get there!” The pressure in Claire's heart built. Josephine was French and five years older. She couldn't understand how frightened Claire felt.

“The driver knows the fisherman from over the Channel. Arnaud will surely meet you on the shore, if not in Calais.”

“But what if he doesn't? What if they've caught him?” Claire pleaded and hated her pleading. But the possibility glared. Arnaud—her heroic Arnaud—took such chances among those sympathetic with the Germans. So many Jewish families he'd smuggled under their noses—from Germany into Switzerland and France. Now, with war declared and German troops on the doorstep, they were no longer safe in France. Arnaud fancied himself—fancied them—the only hope of Jewish children, and Claire loved him for it. *Reconnaissance, smuggling, resistance*—words so romantic in fiction, impossible and dangerous in life.

Josephine stepped close. Her bony fingers clasped Claire's face. “Claire, Arnaud is too smart for that. You read his message. The Germans will take these children as surely as they snatched the Jewish children from their own country if you don't get them out now, before the troops arrive—and they are coming. That's what matters now. Everything else comes later. *Vous comprenez, non?*”

Claire nodded, swallowing the bile climbing her throat. Of course she understood. Goose-stepping Nazis and their tanks plowed westward; the best intelligence had verified it. *Helping these children to safety means everything to me, too, but I can't do it alone.*

Claire stole one last glance at the dimly lit aisles threatened by crooked and towering stacks of novels. At the tables and chairs helter-skelter from the early evening's stilted book

tea. The chair Mr. Hemingway—her Mr. Hemingway—once insisted on tipping on its hind legs as he smoked. The desk James Joyce was reputed to have claimed as his own.

She faltered at the door. But it opened, and Josephine pushed her into the dark, into the pelting rain. The click of the latch behind rang final in Claire's ears.

"*Vite! Vite!*" the lorry driver called from the street, beating his fist against his door. "Come now, or I leave you!"

Claire stumbled, splashing down the puddled alley. She scrambled over the tailgate, into the canvas-covered truck bed, pushing rivulets of rain from her eyes and hair and shivering from the cold water that streamed down the back of her neck.

The lorry jerked forward, bouncing off the curb.

"*Pardon, désolée!*" Awkwardly, clumsily, Claire climbed over an assortment of small arms and legs—children she couldn't see in the dark, children pulling limbs into huddled forms. Panting, Claire found sanctuary against the wooden wall behind the cab.

She couldn't see to count the number in the transport, couldn't tally the limbs she'd climbed over, but there seemed more room than there should have been. Even twenty would be too few among so many desperate to leave Paris. She must learn their names and those of their parents to write down for the record. *One day these children will return to France and their families—when this madness is over. The list of names and addresses hidden beneath the floorboard of Shakespeare and Company is the only way we'll know to reunite them.*



It was still dark inside the lorry bed when the vehicle finally lurched to a stop. Claire woke, rubbing a crick in her neck. One of the little ones had climbed onto her lap sometime in the night; another slumped a sleepy head against her shoulder.

*Do any of them speak English? Ten months in Paris and my French leaves so much to be desired.*

Despite the hammering rain, the scent of sweet Channel air cleared her nostrils. Claire pressed her head against the wooden slats. *At last. Please, Arnaud, be here. Be here and help me get these children to safety.* She hoped for an easy send-off and a speedy return to Paris, where they'd regale Josephine with tales of their latest exploit over a warm fire and a fine bottle of wine in the back room of their dear, familiar bookstore.

*Arnaud and I will laugh in the face of the danger we defied and plot our next adventure, keeping our secret even from Sylvia. Owing the bookstore, and employing Jews, she runs risk enough.*

Claire's reverie was broken by raised male voices outside the lorry—intense, animated arguments in French so hard and clipped she couldn't catch the words. Claire shook the arm of the child beside her and shifted the little one in her lap. "*Réveillez-vous. Restez silencieux.* No talking, but be ready." She smiled into the dark, hoping to infuse her voice with comfort and confidence, hoping they understood something of her mixed French and English.

She pitied them for being bumped through the night with barely more than they wore . . . pitied them for leaving parents and older siblings they loved and who must love them. She swallowed, trying to imagine such love. *Off to a new country where you'll understand precious little of the language. Poor souls, fleeing home and dear Paris in springtime. Poor, brave little soldiers.*

Knowing time was of the essence, Claire gently pushed the child from her lap and crawled toward the tailgate. She peeked beneath the canvas, eager to glimpse their surroundings and to encourage their driver to move the mission forward.

The engine roared. Tires spun and the lorry jerked to life again. The sudden sharp swerve and the squeal of floored brakes

brought cries from every child. Claire's head slammed against the tailgate.

One of the larger children yanked her back into the center of the bed. "Mademoiselle!"

"All right. I'm all right," Claire mumbled, reaching for her forehead. But her fingers came away sticky.

A mile or more the lorry bumped and sped. Finally the brakes slammed again. Still dazed, Claire didn't move from the floor. Five minutes must have passed before the driver lifted the canvas. "*Vite!* Come quickly—now!" He pulled open the tailgate and lifted the children down in the pale light of a shaded lantern. "Get your things—all of them. Leave nothing!"

"Arnaud?" Claire whispered into the streaming rain, her vision blurred and head pounding.

"He is not here." The driver's panic seeped through every word. "The fisherman's contact said he has not come; neither has the children's escort. The tide is turning—not a moment to waste. Run down to the water's edge now!" He pushed the children toward the shore, young ones clasping the hands of older, taller children, all stumbling after a flapping mackintosh-clad fisherman with a feeble torch.

"A fishing boat . . . on the Channel . . . on a night like this?" Claire's temples throbbed and she couldn't stop the world from spinning. "Is it safe?"

"Safer for them than Paris."

"They must wait for their escort. We can't send them off alone."

"Did you not hear me, mademoiselle? The tide is turning. It will be daylight before it turns again. The captain cannot wait. He refuses to come another time." The stale breath of the driver nearly overpowered her. "You must go with them, mademoiselle. *Tout de suite!*"

“Me? No, you don’t understand. I’m staying . . . returning to Paris. There are more children to help. These will be safe in England, but I’m needed—”

“They cannot go without an escort. Your English fisherman won’t take them alone. There is no one else and there will be no more trips. To wait is madness!”

Claire counted the children’s fuzzy silhouettes against the fisherman’s torch as they clambered over the side of the boat. Five. Only five souls from one very small to one nearly as tall as Claire. She closed her eyes and painfully shook her aching head. “Surely he can manage five children. I must go back for Arnaud. I don’t know what’s happened to him.”

“Ha! It seems he has left you, *chérie!*”

It was the thing she’d feared each day—that he would leave her, that he did not love her as she loved him. Still, she shook her head, vouching for him. Something warm and liquid seeped into her eye. “Then you must go with the children, monsieur—you’re responsible for them. Arnaud paid you. Please, I must get back to Paris.”

He slammed the tailgate. “You are crazy, mademoiselle. I will not take you. And I am not responsible for these young ones. I’ve done what I was paid to do. I’ll not risk my life or my family.”

Unbelieving, Claire yanked his arm as he climbed into his lorry. “Wait! I’ll go with them tomorrow night if the contact doesn’t come.” She steadied herself against the cab door. “Let me talk to the fisherman—ask him to wait one day—just until tomorrow night. Arnaud will come, I know!”

“I told you: this is his last run. He’s a fool to try even now.” The driver pushed her away. “You’ll be lucky to get through the harbor.”

Claire’s head rang and swam. The reversing lorry roared to

life once more, its spinning tires spraying her with cold rain and filling her mouth with graveled mud as the darkness closed in and claimed her.



“Shh, she’s coming round,” a feminine French face, dancing in the light of a swaying battery lamp, whispered over Claire’s pounding head.

“Wipe her forehead now—quick—before she wakens. It will sting more if you don’t.” A boy, perhaps eight or nine, spit into his soiled handkerchief and passed it purposefully toward the feminine face. “Clean out her eye or she’ll go blind from the blood.”

“Oh, be quiet,” the lovely girl ordered. “You say the stupidest things, Gaston.”

Claire groaned and closed her eyes again. The crashing in her head and the rolling in her stomach heaved into one large inner motion. “Where am I?”

“You’re on the HMS *Miss Bonny Blair*,” a new voice announced in perfect English with a very French accent. Claire opened one eye to see a taller boy, maybe eleven or so, hovering too close. The boy blushed. “At least that’s what Capitaine Beardsley said before we left the shore beyond Calais, though I think it rather more a fishing boat.” He grabbed a bar above his head to steady himself.

“Captain Beardsley? A fishing boat?” Claire heard herself moan again.

“Aye, aye.” The youngster called Gaston pushed closer. “And we’re all his mates. That’s Bertram, my brother. I’m Gaston—Capitaine Beardsley’s first mate. And you’re the lively wench he rescued.”

“Gaston! That is vulgar. Mademoiselle is our rescuer,” the

feminine voice gasped. “I’m Jeanine.” She leaned closer, confiding, “We were told never to give our family names, but I will tell you that Elise, here, is my sister. This littlest one came alone and is called Aimee. These boys we met through Monsieur Arnaud.”

“Arnaud? He’s here?” Claire’s heaving stomach skipped into her heart.

“*Non, mademoiselle,*” Jeanine sympathized. “He is not. He told us he would come if he could, but . . . You’ve been calling for him in your sleep.”

Claire pulled herself to one elbow and reached for her forehead. “Sleep? How long?” *I must convince Captain Beardsley to turn the boat around.*

“Hours, I’d say,” Gaston cheerfully volunteered.

“What?” Panic sped through her veins.

“We must be nearing England’s shores,” Bertram offered. “Rest easy, mademoiselle. Capitaine Beardsley said he will find you a doctor once we land.”

“It doesn’t take hours to reach England.”

“It does when you’re going the long way round,” Gaston declared. “*Le capitaine* said we travel wise as serpents and harmless as doves.”

*What can that mean?* But Claire’s head hurt too much to think about it now. She lay back on the makeshift pallet and closed her eyes against the swaying walls and the heaving in her stomach. She hated crossing the Channel in fair weather. She’d never have dared to cross it in foul, much less on the back of a storm-tossed sea. *Mad sea captain—he must be kin to Captain Ahab!*

The last thing Claire heard was Gaston admonishing Jeanine, “You needn’t have shushed me. I simply made a mistake with my English. She’s not ‘lively’ at all, not a bit, even for a grown-up. But she is quite a ‘likely’ wench, I’d say—at least that’s as Capitaine Beardsley vowed.”