

CAROLINE TUNG RICHMOND

THE
DARKEST
HOUR

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ONE

My good Catholic mother taught me to never lie, cheat, or steal.

I pray she can forgive me, then, for what I've agreed to do—for this sin will be far worse.

I hurry down the cramped streets of the Marais district, leaping over the fresh rain puddles and smoothing the creases of my habit. The black skirt drags at my feet, and I hope I don't look like too much of a fraud—because I certainly feel like one.

It has been months since I've knelt for Communion and even longer since I was elbowed into a confessional booth. Yet here I am, rosary in hand, dressed like sour-faced Sister McDougal, who'd rap my knuckles in Latin class whenever she caught me reading Nancy Drew. But getting my knuckles bruised is small change compared to what I've been up to these last six months. If my mother could see me now, if she discovered what I've been training for, I'm sure she'd weep for my poor blackened soul.

But I'll tarnish my soul if that means smashing the Nazis under my boot. I owe that much to Theo, don't I?

I make a sharp right onto rue Charlemagne, a narrow wisp of a road that's crammed full of apartments with their curtains drawn.

Behind me, the sun sinks below the crumbling gray rooftops, tired after another day of this three-year war. I'm tempted to take off my veil and mop the sweat from my forehead, but you never know who's watching you these days. The old man peddling newspapers? The sweet girl playing a game of *escargot*? Almost anyone can turn into a Nazi collaborator for a few francs in their pocket. That's life in war-time Paris for you.

A church bell clangs, and I quicken my stride. My target, Monsieur Travert, won't arrive at Saint-Paul-Saint-Louis for another fifteen minutes, but I can't be late. Not this night. I've worked too hard to let Major Harken down again.

"This is your last chance, Miss Blaise," he told me an hour ago, just before he handed me the loaded pistol. "You know what to do. Stay sharp. Stay low. Don't let anyone catch a whiff that you're an American, and above all else don't get caught. There won't be anyone coming to rescue you this time. Understood?"

I'd given him a crisp "Yes, sir." Tonight won't be like the last time, when I made that one mistake and we ended up with a Class 3 crisis on our hands. I'll prove to Major Harken once and for all that I belong in Covert Operations, and that I deserve this promotion. If all goes well tonight, then he and the other girls—even Sabine—will have to call me "agent."

Agent Lucie Blaise, I think with a small smile. Theo would've gotten a kick out of that.

The smile slips promptly off my lips, however, when I hear the hum of a truck engine rumbling down the street. I don't have to turn

around to know who's behind the steering wheel. There are few people left these days who can afford to drive, due to the gasoline shortage strangling France. It can only be Nazis.

The truck whines to a stop at an intersection ahead of me, and a cluster of soldiers spill out from the doors, all dressed in their crisp gray uniforms. At the sight of them, the whole block holds its breath. A wrinkled woman pedals her bicycle in the opposite direction, and a young mother snatches her children from their third-floor balcony. Meanwhile, I watch the soldiers split off into a nearby apartment building. They're probably searching for a Jew who escaped from the Drancy detention camp or a Resistance member who wasn't careful enough with his radio. Whoever it is, there's nothing I can do for them aside from muttering a prayer that tastes bitter in my mouth. That's a lesson you learn quickly under Hitler's iron fist: You can't save everyone who deserves saving, so you do the next best thing—you take out the ones who don't.

Gathering my skirt, I move silently toward my rendezvous with Monsieur Travert, but one last soldier hops out of the truck and strides down the sidewalk toward me.

Merde.

I try to retreat down a side alley, but it has been barricaded, like many others across the city. My hand itches for my pistol, but Harken told me to use it as a last resort. I'll have to rely on my wits and knife this evening, silent and deadly. That's our general plan of attack at Covert Ops—never draw attention, never leave a mess. So I dip down my chin and allow my veil to fall over my shoulders, letting the soldier

see nothing except for the pale cheeks and innocent eyes of Sister Marchand, the alias I've adopted for tonight.

The slick-haired soldier raises a hand to stop me. "*Arrête! Où allez-vous?*"

Calm and collected, I remind myself. I've been trained for a moment like this.

"I said, where are you going?" he says in broken French. He can't be much older than I am, and he's a few inches shorter than me, too, but he snaps his fingers in my face like he's Napoleon himself. "Speak quickly!"

"I'm heading to the Saint-Paul-Saint-Louis church, mein Herr," I reply without any accent at all. My fluency is the only useful thing that my Parisian father has given me. We spoke strictly French in our apartment back home in Baltimore. If Papa heard anything else, I'd get the buckle.

"Where were you coming from?"

"I've spent the day at the American hospital, over in Neuilly-sur-Seine," I lie.

"The *American* hospital, eh?"

"I tend to the wounded and sick there. It's a true privilege to serve the Lord's children." I give him a humble smile. "Forgive me. The abbess is expecting me, and if you wouldn't mind—"

"Turn out your pockets."

I swallow the sourness on my tongue and reach for my skirt pocket, but apparently I'm not quick enough.

“What are you hiding? Contraband?” He throws me against the brick wall behind us so forcefully that my veil slips an inch, revealing my ash-brown hair. I try to readjust the veil, but I freeze as the soldier’s hands roam over my habit. They brush over the rosary that conceals my scalpel-sharp knife, and they grope toward the very illegal pistol that’s strapped to my ankle. Without thinking, my training kicks in. I twist away from his grasp, using a move that I perfected back in Washington until I realize I’ve shown too much of my hand. His nostrils flare wide.

Stupid, I tell myself. I should’ve let his meaty hands search over me, but I wasn’t thinking. *So stupid, Lucie.*

“You surprised me, mein Herr,” I say, in hopes that he’s dense enough to believe me. “My deepest apologies.”

He slaps me hard, just as Papa used to do during one of his drunken outbursts. “What’s your name?”

“S-Sister Marchand.”

He’s about to interrogate me further, but then another soldier comes marching toward us. By the colorful markings on his lapel, he must be the commanding officer. A captain, perhaps.

Suddenly it’s becoming much more difficult to remain calm and collected.

“Who have you detained now, Lieutenant Schuster?” says the captain in German. I’ve picked up enough of their language to follow what they’re saying.

“This *sister* tried to strike me, sir. We should take her in for questioning.”

The older man wrinkles his nose and juts a rough hand toward me. “Your papers.” It isn’t a request.

Reluctantly, I give him every document that I carry: census card, ration card, residence ID, and so on. They’re all forgeries that have been crafted by the Office of Strategic Services—the mother organization to Covert Ops, based in Washington, DC—and, just like my pistol, these papers are highly illegal, too.

The captain scrutinizes each card, and my neck grows hot under my stiff collar. If he even catches a *hint* that I’m not a nun . . . An idea flashes through my head, and I snatch it before it flits away.

“Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee,” I whisper. The words tumble out of me almost like a reflex thanks to all the times I heard my mother murmur them. “Blessed art thou amongst women.”

The captain sighs noisily and thrusts the papers at me. “That’s enough. Hurry along.”

“But, sir!” Lieutenant Schuster straightens. “We should question her at the very least.”

“This stringy thing?” The captain juts a thumb at me, and for once I’m glad to be called stringy. “We’d be wasting our time.”

“She’s too young to have taken her vows! Look at her.” The lieutenant flicks a hand at my face. “How old are you?”

“Eighteen.” Another lie. I’m sixteen just, and with the right clothes I can look younger still, but even Major Harken doesn’t know my real age and I don’t plan on telling him.

“Eighteen? You look barely old enough to attend *lycée*,” says Schuster.

The colonel shakes his head. “I said release her, Lieutenant. That’s an order.”

Schuster’s top lip curls like a slug, and he shoots me a poisonous glare. “Get out of my sight. And don’t be out after curfew, *Sister Marchand*.”

“May our Lord bless you,” I say in my smallest voice, and hurry past them.

One step after another, I wait for Schuster to run after me for more questioning, but I hear nothing except for the chirp of a songbird who sings a tune so sweet that if I shut my eyes, I can almost forget that Hitler conquered half of Europe before the rest of the world could lace up their boots and do something about it. Back in Maryland, the only Nazis in my life were the ones I read about in the papers or in the uncensored bits of Theo’s Victory mail letters. But once those letters ran dry, that’s when everything changed. A week after New Year’s, I skipped school and headed to the Women’s Army Corps to ask for a secretarial job—or any job, really—but the recruiter got this excited look on his face when I mentioned that I spoke fluent French. Not even six months later, I was airdropped into a new country. And now here I am, standing in Paris in its darkest hour, sent to a kill a man I hardly know.

Soon Saint-Paul-Saint-Louis looms over my head, standing proudly like a regal French king. A handful of parishioners shuffle through the front doors for evening mass, but I sneak down an alley that separates the church from the abandoned building next door. The path brings me to the church’s courtyard, a simple space

decorated with a wooden bench and a potted citrus tree that sweetens the air. Here, the priests and nuns come to ponder the wonders of God in between their duties, but the courtyard is empty at this hour. I adjust my veil and knock on the side door three times.

The ancient door creaks open to reveal a sliver of Father Benoit's black robes and wrinkled face. He looks a lot like the priests at my family's parish back home—old and hunched and leathery—and he frowns at me just the same. I suppose I can't blame him for that. I've asked a lot of him. Maybe too much.

"I'm sorry I'm late, Father," I whisper. "May I come in?"

Hesitation brims in his dim eyes. "I'm afraid Monsieur Travert hasn't yet arrived. You may have to return next week."

"I'm sure he's on his way." I place a careful hand on the door, a small reminder of our agreement. Father Benoit can't back out of our plans now. After weeks of coaxing, he finally decided to help us catch René Travert, who has attended Saint-Paul-Saint-Louis for decades. Father Benoit didn't want to betray a loyal parishioner, but he came around when I told him what Travert had done: how pious René accepted a handsome bribe from the Nazis and turned over two British airmen who had been stranded in France after their plane was struck down north of the city. We entrusted their care to Travert, but he delivered them like lambs to the Germans—all for a new pair of shoes and a wallet fat with cash.

I think about those airmen now, both of them so young. They were fighting the Nazis just as Theo had done, and remembering that fact will make my job easier tonight.

There's movement across the street, and I find the middle-aged Travert walking past the alleyway. My pulse jumps at the sight of him.

"I'll be discreet like we discussed," I say to Father Benoit. "Can you see to it that no one enters this courtyard for the next half hour?"

He grimaces. "Very well."

"Thank you, Father. I truly am—"

"Have mercy on René, as our Lord is merciful with all His children."

I give him a tight smile because that's the best I can do. I told him that I'd only imprison Monsieur Travert. I don't like lying to a man of the cloth, but he never would've helped me if he knew the truth of what we do in Covert Ops.

As I turn to go, Father Benoit places a heavy hand on my shoulder. "I shall say a prayer for you, my child."

He slinks back into the church, and I keep my mouth shut because I doubt he'd like what I'd have to say. The truth is, despite the clamminess in my fingertips, I don't need Father Benoit to watch over me tonight. I don't need his kind thoughts, and I certainly don't need his prayers.

But I can't say the same for Monsieur Travert.