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by Heather Munn and Lydia Munn

How Huge the Night
Defy the Night

FLAME IN THE NIGHT

A NOVEL *of* WWII FRANCE

HEATHER MUNN

Kregel Publications

Flame in the Night: A Novel of World War II France

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For Rich Foss,
my friend

Prologue

WHERE DO WE GO?

Elisa Schulmann took the last pin out of her mouth, slipped it gently into the silk of the skirt she was altering, and picked up her needle. She glanced up; Madame Mercier was watching her, standing in the open doorway that led to the front of the shop. Elisa kept her hands steady under her employer's frown, taking a tiny, careful stitch.

"Wash your hands."

Elisa laid down her work. "I washed them when I came in, madame."

"Wash them again. You're sweating. Do you know how much silk costs these days? If we have to replace that I'll dock every *centime* from your pay. Anyway, put that aside for now, I've just gotten a rush order from Madame Boutet. I'll need you to stay till it's finished."

Elisa sat up very straight, glancing at the doorway of the windowless workroom and the narrowing stripe of afternoon light. She ducked her head, keeping her hands still on the linty black fabric of her skirt. "I'm truly sorry, madame, but you know that on Fridays—"

"You will make an exception tonight."

Elisa lifted her head and looked Madame Mercier in the eye. "I'm truly sorry, madame," she enunciated.

The woman's cold frown sharpened. "You people shouldn't work

in Christian shops. I ought never to have hired you. Always rubbing your differences in people's faces—too good to drink a cup of coffee with us. I wouldn't be so proud if *my* religion was based on doing cruel things to baby boys—"

Elisa was on her feet before she knew it, blood pounding in her ears. She froze. "Excuse me, madame," she said through lips stiff as clay. "I have a personal need." She turned her back and walked carefully to the shop's tiny bathroom, then locked herself in and sat on the toilet lid, shaking.

"God, help me," she said in a harsh whisper. "Help me, please." She closed her eyes, thought of the lines in Papa's face last week when he'd told her the rent had gone up again. *Their* rent, not the neighbors'. *All Jews have gold under their mattresses, didn't you know?* She remembered the day last year when Papa had asked her to take this job. The day David Schulmann, who once was able to provide what was finest for his family, admitted he needed his daughter's help. A tiny, burning coal had lit somewhere behind her breastbone at that moment. It was burning still. *I will not fail them.*

She took a deep, silent breath. *Help me.* She loosened her bun and re-pinned it carefully, then rose and opened the door. Madame Mercier was measuring a hem. Elisa stood silently till the woman finished, then spoke quietly, eyes down. "I apologize, madame. I will try to wash my hands more often. I apologize for my attitude and I will do as much as I can for you tonight."

"Till it's finished?"

"Till nine, madame."

Madame Mercier blew sharply through her nostrils and rolled up her measuring tape.

By nine Elisa had the new sleeves of Madame Boutet's dress pieced, pinned, and the first seam stitched, and she was exhausted. She showed Madame Mercier her work, ignoring the breathy sounds of her displeasure; they were good signs, signs that breath would be

the only consequence tonight. She kept her face respectful as she said *bonsoir.* She walked out of the shop and heard the door close behind her, and filled her lungs with the open air.

The narrow streets of Lyon were deep in shadow beneath the three-story houses, clouds already brightening to pale sunset gold in the sky above. Elisa walked quickly, threading her way to the dingier quarters. Going down her familiar alley, she hugged the gray wall, away from the stench of the sewer drain where something seemed to have died. She let herself in the back door and climbed the stairwell, shutting her ears against the sound of angry voices through thin walls. At her own door her fingers rose instinctively, her eyes on the two ragged nail holes where the mezuzah used to be. They always tightened her stomach a little, those holes. She passed them by and let herself in the door, into peace.

It smelled like brisket. It smelled like Shabbos. The deep, sweet peace of Saturdays in the house in Heidelberg came back to her with the scent, and her eyes stung. Her right hand lifted to the small, bright mezuzah nailed in its new place on the inner doorframe, and for a moment she thought of nothing but the holy words inside. Then she heard her sister's voice: "Just *stop* it!"

She set her jaw and walked down the little hallway to their bedroom. Her brother, Karl, sat on the bed, arms crossed and face defiant, as their sister, Tova, fingers tangled in her half-made braid, wailed, "I'm going to have to redo it all!"

"Karl," said Elisa.

"I *didn't,*" said Karl hotly. "I just asked if I could share the washbasin a minute—"

"You hit my elbow!"

"I didn't mean to!"

"But you did," said Elisa. "Apologize. Tova, I'll fix it."

"Sorry," muttered Karl to Tova's shoes.

"Thank you," whispered Tova, tears appearing in her eyes. She gave

Karl a wavering smile. She was the only one of them who used her Hebrew name for everyday; it had stuck, Mama said, because it meant "good." And wasn't that just like a parent, thinking pliable was good—even now, at thirteen years old? Elisa worried for her.

"Shh now," Elisa soothed as she braided her sister's thick, wet hair. "It's all right."

She gave Karl his turn at the basin and then shooed them out so she could change. She heard clinking from the kitchen as she peeled swiftly out of the sweat-stained black working dress. As she combed her hair something rustled behind her. A slip of paper appeared under the door—then flicked back out of sight. She turned her back. *Do you know what I do for this family? I'd like a minute's peace sometime.* Rustle. Flick. She glanced behind. There it was, then—*flick*—a grin seemed to hang in the air. The corners of her mouth softened helplessly. Whispers from behind the door, a giggle. She twisted her hair into a bun, shoving hairpins in ruthlessly, and dove for the paper as it slid forward again. "Ha!" She threw open the door and displayed her trophy. "I win."

"Come to the table," Mama called.

As she followed her siblings down the hallway she glanced aside into her parents' cluttered bedroom. Her smile fell away as she took in what lay on the bed.

Mama's jewelry box. Open.

Her heart tightened, then began to pound. The open lid, which ought to be locked and hidden in its place under the floorboards, spoke to her as if aloud. *It's not all right.* Tova and Karl were almost too young to remember the days back in Heidelberg when the automobile had gone, and the carved walnut furniture, and the piano. Her first piano. She'd cried and cried. The next day Papa had taken her to watch a rally from a friend's third-floor window, her dark curly hair carefully hidden under a hood. She'd heard words she still couldn't burn out of her mind. "We must leave this country," Papa had told her

quietly, as she shivered in the dark shuttered room afterward, hearing the last fierce, joyous voices in the square below. "I am so sorry, Lies. I would not have sold your piano for any lesser reason than this. You see, they will not let us leave with our money. That is the price."

"It's not fair," she had whispered.

"It's not fair," he'd said gravely, as if they were reciting a lesson together. Then, "We will pay them and go."

She leaned on the doorframe, staring at the box. *Who are we paying now? Where do we go?* The handful of bright things in there was all their savings. *Not enough*. Papa said so. He said over and over that the rumors from Paris must be exaggerated; it was impossible to know what had really happened at the Vel d'Hiv stadium, with the reports contradicting each other so completely. Even if the Nazis had done such a thing in the Occupied Zone, he said, it was another matter here. This was still France.

He had written to a friend in Paris to try to learn the truth. He hadn't had an answer yet.

The gold in the box spoke its silent question. "I don't know," she whispered, and turned away. She walked down the hall to the dining room, to where the table with its pure-white cloth stood against the scarred wall, laid with blue-and-white plates, clean napkins by each one. To Mama, behind her two tall candles, and Papa by her side smiling. To Shabbos dinner, and peace for tonight.

Chapter 1

WHEN THEY COME

Julien smiled reassuringly at young Chanah—*Anne, you've got to call her Anne*—and gave a tug on the rope harness that held her to the high oak limb. The girl watched him with eyes bright and brave and a little too white around the edges.

"Did I tie it right, Julien?"

"Exactly right. You do it exactly like that when they come."

Anne nodded vigorously. Julien gave her another smile. His father's words beat in his mind: *They say they are planning a census. That is a lie.*

Around him the treetops glowed green and golden with afternoon sunlight, sweet as if no darkness had ever touched the world. Around him hidden by those summer leaves, Jewish children were strapping themselves into rope harnesses high in the trees, and from round the massive oak trunk came his sister's voice, telling the little ones in the concealed treehouse to lie down. "You'll have to be quieter than this when the police are here."

A week. That was what the *préfet* had said three frantic days ago: *A census, in a week.* Julien's Scout troop had been assigned to the Les Chênes home, where more than half the sponsored refugee children were Jewish, an hour later. An hour after that, they'd been out in these

woods tying ropes, hoisting boards, their wiry troop leader, Marcel, pacing the forest floor beneath them shouting, "I can see you! Move that board! Don't nail *anything* down till you're sure!"

Julien's father had barely been home these three days. When he was, he'd stand moving his lips, folding a sheet of blue-lined paper over and over in his fingers as he stared at nothing you could see. Then striding into his study, locking himself in there with Marcel, with Madame Thiers, with Pastor Alexandre. No words for his son except, "Don't be late for Scouts."

They'd been entrusted with more than Scouts usually were. But Julien was eighteen now, and Marcel was twenty. They couldn't be soldiers. But they could do this.

Julien steadied himself on the oak limb, high in the green, and quizzed Anne on the alert signals. She recited them breathlessly, word-perfect, head high; Julien could see her at a blackboard, bright eyes on the teacher, and his throat twinged. *This isn't a test. You kids could get everything right—*

Or maybe it is a test. But not of you.

Marcel had chosen this oak. He'd played in it with his brothers, he'd told Julien with a reminiscent grin: pretending to be Huguenot pastors hiding from the soldiers, if they could resist dropping acorns on them. *My family's been here six hundred years, you know,* he'd said. *One of our ancestors was a martyr.* The people here remembered. They had done this before.

A young rough voice rose from the other side of the oak, somewhere above the treehouse: "I'm nine years *old*, I can—"

"Don't be an idiot, Jean-Marc!" Another young voice, shrill with indignation. "Why don't you *ever*—"

"Wait here," Julien murmured to Anne. "Don't untie by yourself yet, all right?" He began to climb upward.

His sister Magali's voice snapped up from the ground like a whip: "Marek, *no!*"

Marek? As in *Guess what Marek did today?* Magali asked that almost every night at the dinner table, after her workday with "her kids" at Les Chênes. Usually rolling her eyes. *Guess what Marek did today,* Julien's mind babbled as he climbed feverishly, *he fell from the top of an oak tree and—*

The scream struck through him to the roots, like lightning. He braced for the sound of a body hitting the earth—then scrambled desperately upward as the boy shrieked again from up high. And there he was, a small form dangling by one armpit from a loose harness, legs kicking, free hand flailing in the air.

A lanky boy shot into view from above, flung himself belly-down on Marek's branch and wrapped his legs around it, reached down and caught the loose end of the harness in both hands, screaming: "Stop kicking! *Stop!*"

"Wait—wait!" Julien crawled toward them along the limb, not daring to look down. The lanky boy was twelve at most, barely heavier than Marek—he'd be yanked off the branch. "Don't take his hand—just wait . . ."

He made it, braced himself, his face almost in the boy's determined face—*Étienne, his name's Étienne*—and they grasped the rope together. They hauled up: ten centimeters. Twenty. Marek's free hand found a branch jutting from their limb and locked around it. Julien reached down and took the boy under the armpits, fingers knotting in his sweaty shirt. Étienne took up the slack and secured it around the limb with a quick and fumbling hitch.

"That branch—down there." Julien barely had the breath to speak. His shoulders were trembling, and he didn't even have Marek's full weight. He'd never be able to lift him all the way onto their limb. "If we can get his feet on that one—he can stand."

Étienne scrambled down to the lower branch, not quite within reach of Marek's legs, and held out his hands, ready.

Marek was shaking his head.

"You have to—let go," Julien gasped. "I swing you—sideways—Étienne puts your feet—on the branch. Have to."

Marek's eyes were huge. Tendons stood out like bars in his thin wrists. He shook his head again.

Sharp terror stabbed through Julien's gut, and the strange, cold knife of memory: the *préfet*'s voice, the *préfet*'s cold eyes: *Nothing you can do, nothing you can do*—eyes on Papa—*nothing you can—*

"Let go!" he snarled, guttural, and his body was hot suddenly with inexplicable rage.

Voices rose from the ground.

"We're under you."

"We'll catch you."

The Scouts—Marcel, Pierre—the Les Chênes workers, his sister, and—was that *Benjamin*? Julien looked into Marek's wide eyes: the whites glaring, a mere rim of brown around the huge black pupil. Then he felt it, the boy drawing breath, the eyes going up to his hands—Julien's knuckles spasmed into their tightest grip.

And Marek let go.

Pain flared through Julien's back as he swung the boy sideways, Marek's hands digging into his shoulders, both of them gripping like death. The limb tore his shirt and scraped his chest as he pushed himself forward along it—and Marek's feet found the branch and Marek's hands found Étienne and the weight lightened and was gone, and Julien did not let go. He could not let go. Deep, rough breaths rasped in and out of him, and the world was green and tilting, and the voice of the *préfet* was in his ears, was everywhere.

Do not obstruct us. The eyes on Papa. *Or it may be* you *we are forced to deport.*

"Your turn."

Julien's eyes flew open.

"To let go," said Marek, looking at him with concern.

Julien's hands sprang open. "Sorry. Sorry. I . . ." He pulled himself

up, drew a steadying breath. "That was amazing, Étienne, that was—well done."

Étienne's shoulders grew straighter, his over-bright eyes meeting Julien's. Then he turned and growled at Marek. "You'll stay in the treehouse when they come. Or I'll *drop* you next time."

"Okay," said Marek. "Sorry."

Julien lay back down on his branch and closed his eyes.

The *préfet* hadn't said it only to Papa. He had said it to Pastor Alexandre as well.

Because of the letter.

Three days ago, Julien had stood in the church courtyard among the other young people of his town, waiting for a visiting official from the collaborationist French government in Vichy to walk out through the dark church doors. Marcel stood at the head of the group with a protest letter about the Vel d'Hiv roundup in his hand. Julien still had the torn flap from the envelope, a tiny ball of paper in his pocket, soft now with handling.

We know what you people did in Paris. We know, and we do not condone.

They might have had no warning of the census if they hadn't provoked them with the letter. Papa said so. Papa said it was the right thing.

The smile had faded off the official's face as he read the letter; he stammered something about Jews not being his business, thrust the letter at the *préfet* beside him, and fled to his automobile. The *préfet*'s hard eyes dismissed the young people with a glance, and came to rest on the pastor and his assistant, Julien's father.

A census, the *préfet* had said, dusting his hands. There was nothing in this talk of deportation. He didn't want to hear another word about

arrests in Paris; here in the Unoccupied Zone, France made her own laws. Eventual resettlement was a possibility, the *préfet* had said, but what was it to them? Yes, in about a week.

A word to the wise, messieurs les pasteurs. *Do not obstruct us.*

Julien rolled and unrolled the ball of paper in his pocket between his finger and thumb as Marcel came to him under the tree.

"That was well done."

"I never," said Julien in a low voice, "*ever* want someone hanging over certain death from my hands again."

Pierre butted in between them, his farm-bred shoulders taking considerable space, and glanced up far too casually to gauge the distance. "That wasn't certain death. Broken ankle. *Maybe* two. Or I'd have broken an arm catching him, I guess."

"Better if it was you," said Marcel quietly. "Four more days."

"Mmm." Pierre looked toward the children's home. "There'd be ways to hide him. Root cellar maybe. I figure, you tell 'em how sorry you are about the rats, but the traps'll take care of them soon. They ask what kind of traps, you tell them to step carefully. City man won't set foot underground after *that*, you watch."

"I'd rather not, thanks," Julien told his old friend coolly. "Not sure I'd enjoy the show."

Pierre grunted, looking grim.

Under the oak tree, the Les Chênes director was gathering the children, a commending hand on Étienne's shoulder, Anne on his other side. Brother and sister, Julien remembered suddenly. He looked past the children and met the eyes of his best friend, Benjamin, slight and pale among the suntanned Scouts, wiping his glasses on his shirt. Julien beckoned him over.

"You came?"

"I came to tell Marcel your father wants him." Benjamin put his glasses back on. His eyes flicked from side to side. "I . . ."

Marcel nodded. "In one more minute."

"You want to go straight to the Tanières?" Julien asked Benjamin softly. "See the cave?"

Pierre gave a silent whistle. "A cave?" He cut his gaze over to Benjamin. "Has he ever been up in the Tanières?"

Shut up, Pierre. "He'll know the place like the back of his hand by tomorrow night. You watch."

Benjamin said nothing. The dark circles around his eyes stood out like bruises. Nearby Marcel and the Les Chênes director were speaking of alternate plans, long-term hiding places, a village in the Ardèche. Anne was speaking to her brother; Étienne turned and Julien met his eyes, still wide in his pale face.

Julien's mind stuttered back to the gravel church courtyard beneath the gray sky, the silence of the watching people as his father and Pastor Alexandre had stood shoulder to shoulder, looking the *préfet* in the eye.

You ought not concern yourself with these foreign Jews.

We do not know any Jews, the pastor said. *Only people.*

Ten thousand people arrested. Children torn from their mothers' arms—by French police. Ten thousand people shoved into a stadium, penned like cattle in the heat for days. Then given to the Germans—those who survived.

Not a word about it on the radio. But Pastor Alexandre had a letter from an eyewitness. The memory of Benjamin's face, when Papa had brought home the news, still hurt like a backhand blow. Benjamin was from Paris.

His friend hadn't spoken for two days after that. When he did, it was worse. He spoke names.

Sara Weizman. Rudy Steinmetz. The Rosenbergs. The Schneiders—no—they're citizens—I think they're citizens, Julien . . .

They hadn't done it for defiance, that protest. They hadn't done it for show. They had done it because silence was *wrong.* The truth had power, Papa said; God called those men to repent, even now. They

had done it because it hadn't even been on the *radio*—as if no one in France should care, as if no one should remember Sara Weizman. Julien crushed the paper between his fingers, watching Benjamin's eyes travel the edges of the woods.

"Let's go," he said.

"Going up the old bridge road?" said Pierre. Benjamin nodded. They fell in together, walking down the long sunlit path away from the oak tree. "I have to go up that way, see a farmer. Find out if he really has a—" Pierre bit down on the word he'd been about to say and threw them both a grin.

"A what?" said Julien as the voices receded behind.

"Not really supposed to talk about it."

"Great work so far, then."

Pierre gave him a rueful glare. "Hiding's all right if you have to. Question is, why do we have to?"

Benjamin spoke in a low, dark voice. "Because we don't have *guns*."

"Got it in one."

A chill went down Julien's spine. He glanced back toward Les Chênes. "You're looking for—"

"Someone's got to do it."

"Someone does *not* have to do it, Pierre Rostin." Julien stopped on the path and raised a stiff arm toward the children's home. "Do you need me to draw you a picture? What happens to the kids if we bring Vichy down on us by *shooting* people? What happens to—" He broke off his gesture toward Benjamin, who had gone very still.

"Well that's rich. You people and your letter, like they're gonna ask the *boches* to give those people back because somebody *disapproves*—"

Benjamin was pale, Julien saw. *Those people have names.* "We couldn't shut up about it. Let them go on thinking nobody cared—"

"Grow up, Julien. We're past that point. There's only one thing they listen to."

Julien's fist was up between them before he knew what had hap-

pened. His blood was pulsing in his ears. He stared at the fist, and put it away.

Pierre crossed his arms. "Y'know, I liked you better when you didn't think punching me was a sin."

Julien snorted. *I thought it was a sin all right. I just yielded to temptation.* "You hated me. You don't remember?"

"I remember you stood up for Benjamin. There wasn't anything wrong with that."

A corner of Benjamin's mouth turned up ironically as their eyes went to him. "No," he said. "I don't suppose there was."

"That's all we're trying to do," Pierre said. "Protect the people we care about. *All* of them. Look, I believe in God as much as you do, but some things aren't complicated. A mad dog comes onto your farm, you shoot it in the head or you run in and bar the door. You don't poke it with a stick." Benjamin was nodding. "Shooting's better. It doesn't come back."

"They're not dogs."

"They're traitors," Pierre snapped. He looked away into the green. When he looked back, his voice was quieter, his eyes simple as earth. "They threatened your father, Julien."

Papa had preached, the day of the letter. Preached like the schoolteacher he used to be, drily parsing the Greek words for *submit* and *obey* and the limits of a Christian's duty to the authorities. Not looking at the Vichy men in the front row. *I offered to take this one,* he'd said. *Pastor Alex doesn't trust himself. He gets carried away.*

Julien looked back along the path, a long tunnel of shifting leaf-shadow and sun, Marcel at the end of it, coming toward them. He remembered how the sun had come out strong for just ten minutes as they sat in the old stone church, the long squares of light falling sharp and brilliant from the windows, lighting heads here and there in the dimness like haloes. He remembered how small Papa looked as he passed through one of them on his way up to the pulpit, his

serious face and combed brown hair exposed as in a searchlight before he walked forward into shadow. He remembered how sure his voice sounded, announcing the first hymn: "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." How the government men fumbled with their hymnals; how the voice of the church rang out as one.

He turned back to Pierre. "They did. He still thinks we did right. He knows what he's doing."

Marcel caught up to them, smiling. "Your father?"

Julien nodded.

"Yes. He does. Come on, you guys."

They followed him together, down the path through the shadow and light.