HOW HUGE THE NIGHT

A Novel

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Chapter 1

Not in Paris Anymore

"Isn't that beautiful, Julien?"

"No."

Even without looking, he knew he had hurt his father. He shoved his hands in his pockets and stood there at the top of the hill, looking at the so-called view. A few hills with trees on them and cow pastures in between and, tumbled down the hillside like blocks some giant kid had spilled, the houses of Papa's hometown.

Papa thought he'd given Julien a great present. Taken all his happy boyhood memories and wrapped them in a brown paper package and tied it up with string. *Papa. I know where I'm not wanted.* While Mama and Magali unpacked the boxes, he'd gone down into town and seen the flat, cold eyes of the guys his age. The stares that told him not to come closer. Not to say hi. He'd lost his way and wandered narrow dirt and cobblestone streets, not daring to speak to anyone. He passed old men in cloth caps, cigarette stubs in their dirty fingers, laughing; he heard one say something about "*les estivants*," and his friend reply, "At least

they'll leave." *Les estivants.* The summer people. *No, see, I live here. Unfortunately.*

"I know you miss Paris, Julien. But Tanieux is a very special town."

There was a tightness in Julien's chest. *I tried so hard to lie to you, Papa. I can't do it anymore.*

"I hate it here."

"Julien." His father's voice was sharp. "You know nothing about this town. Do you know what it's called when you hate something you know nothing about? It's called prejudice."

"I know something. I know *they* hate *me*."

"Julien, what basis can you possibly have—"

Day before yesterday on his way through town, Julien had seen a soldier in full uniform—a Third Armored Company uniform, brown leather jacket. A tank driver—*man* he'd wanted to talk to that guy—holding the hand of this beautiful girl in a white dress, with all these guys Julien's age clustered round, and everyone going on about something he couldn't quite hear—blah blah *Germany*, something something *Hitler*, blah blah blah *army*, *get 'em*, loud shouts of *Yeah* and laughter, and then the girl shouting, *It's not funny, it's not funny, you could get killed!*

Julien had stood there, riveted by that beautiful girl shouting at her soldier, and a hot whisper had run through his veins: *It's war—isn't it.* And he'd taken one step into the street, to cross, to ask *What happened? What did Hitler do?*—and the soldier had turned to him with a flat, outraged stare. And then the others, one by one—like he was a cat that had peed on the carpet. The girl in the white dress didn't look at him at all. He could still feel it. It burned.

"That pastor promised you this job in his new school, and now it's not even opening and now you have to teach at the public boys' school. Why do *you* like it here?"

"The new school will open next year, and I will teach there. As you know." Papa's voice was hard now. Yeah. He knew. He knew

next week he would have to walk through the school gate and face those guys who'd looked at him like he was something they'd found under a rock. He would have to walk through that gate beside some skinny Jewish kid with glasses—some kid with parents from *Germany*—their new *boarder,* who was going to get the empty room across from his in a few days so they could be the *two* new boys from Paris, together.

"You also know that there is going to be a war. So aside from *why I like it here*, you could try considering what other reasons your mother and I might have had for moving south."

He'd come home, the day he'd seen the soldier, to find his sister cooking supper. Burning supper. To find that Hitler had invaded Poland and his mother and father were in their bedroom with the door closed. His mother hadn't come out.

There was silence for a moment. Julien thrust his hands into his pockets and contemplated the dull gray slate roofs of beautiful, beautiful Tanieux.

"You see this bush?"

Julien glanced up. Papa was pointing at a green, scrubby thing that looked like an uneven, upside-down broom. He didn't look mad. Apparently they were moving on to botany. "Do you know what it's called?"

"No."

"It's a *genêt*. Around here we used to call them *balais*." *Brooms,* how brilliant. "You could use them for a broom if you didn't have one. You could burn them for winter fuel when there wasn't enough wood."

Or tie them on your feet for snowshoes. For walking to school uphill both ways.

"We did that during the Great War. There wasn't enough of anything then."

Julien looked at the bush, its skeletal green fingers all pointing up at the sky. Dozens like it, all down the hillside, dotted the cow

pastures. They didn't look like anything the cows would want to eat. They didn't look like they would burn either.

"I don't know what the next few years hold, Julien. But the people who live on this land—they know how to survive." Papa looked out over the hills. "You don't know how deep your roots go till you need them."

Julien said nothing. His father sighed, and turned, and led the way on down the road to Grandpa's farm.

They had come here every Christmas since Julien was a kid; he could see it without even shutting his eyes, what it looked like in winter. Snow blowing over rock-hard wheel ruts frozen in the mud, the bitter wind cutting through your clothes: the *burle*, a wind so harsh it had a name. That was Tanieux to him: a winter town, a cold, stone village huddled on its hillside, Grandpa's kitchen its one welcoming place. He'd loved that kitchen, golden with firelight, warm with the steam of a pot-au-feu on the stove.

Now it was hot and bright and dusty, and the garden was a vast green jungle, and his back hurt worse than it ever had in his life, and he was less than halfway done with his row of beans. Mama was in the kitchen, her eyes red and her black hair plastered to her forehead, canning the three buckets he'd already picked, with Magali, his younger sister, stoking the woodstove. And Mama wasn't singing; she was working and not singing. It wasn't right.

Mama was *good*. She should have been an opera singer; there'd never been a day in Paris that she didn't sing. Thinking of it, the sound of it, he was visited with a sudden, painful image of happiness: looking out their kitchen window, down into the little courtyard with the sun shining through the leaves of the tree he'd climbed as a kid, looking at his cousin Vincent standing down there with his brown leather soccer ball under his arm, calling, "Come on, Julien. Let's go!"

And instead, he'd go home tonight and sit with an aching back,

alone in his room, and tomorrow he'd wake up and look out the window and see not his own street but the jumbled rooftops of Tanieux, where nobody wanted him. From the window of his room, he could see all the way down to the boys' school, a square gray block with a low stone wall around it, standing alone on the other side of the river. It looked like a prison from where he was standing. He'd be starting in a week.

He walked away. Suddenly, and fast.

He didn't know where he was going. Away. A feverish energy drove his feet: they kicked at the dirt between the rows, they moved like there was someplace to go to get rid of that aching knot behind his breastbone. Between the edge of the garden and the woods was a long, low stack of graying firewood, and an ax stuck in a piece of log.

He looked around. No one. He tugged on the ax, and it came free. He had seen this before: you lifted it up over your shoulder, and then you swung, and it—

Bounced.

It bounced so hard it nearly jerked his arms out of their sockets. He looked quickly around. Then at the wood: there was a mark, a little line cut in its surface. That was what he'd done.

He raised the ax up again—*Oh yeah? This is for Tanieux*—and smashed it down into the log. It bounced again. He set his jaw.

This is for that soldier yesterday. And that girl—that girl ignoring me. Wham! The ax bounced higher than before, almost over his head, and at the end of its bounce, he bore down wildly and brought it crashing down again with a resounding *whack* as the ax head hit the log side-on, its blade not even touching the wood. "Aaaah!" Julien roared, and kicked the log over and the ax with it.

"Julien!"

He jerked around so fast the tree line blurred. Grandpa. Grandpa standing with his seamed and weathered face set hard as stone. He had *never* seen Grandpa look like that.

"Do you know what one of those things can do to you?"

Julien looked down at the ax, and kept on looking at it.

"Look at me. Do you know?"

Julien looked at him. It kind of hurt. "No."

"It can put a deep enough cut in your foot to lame you for life. It can put a deep enough cut elsewhere to bleed you to death. *Especially*," he said in a sharp voice, "if no one is with you when you do it."

"I'm sorry, Grandpa. I'm really sorry."

"You're the only grandson I've got, Julien."

"Yes, sir."

"And I'd like to keep you. If I may." His voice had the slightest tremble in it. "I know I never forbade you to touch my maul without asking, but I didn't think I needed to."

"Your what?"

Grandpa gestured at the ax. "What did you think that was?"

"An ax."

Grandpa's mouth twitched. A web of smile wrinkles began to break out around his eyes. "Let me show you what an ax looks like."

The ax was thin and sharp, for felling trees; the maul was wedge shaped, for splitting them. At least he'd been using it for the right job. Grandpa showed him how to set his log on a base; how to aim along the grain and keep his eye on it; how to try again. And again. And again. Then showed him how to start with the maul as far back behind his head as he could reach. Since he wasn't strong enough to do it the normal way. Grandpa didn't say that part. He didn't have to.

I'm going to get you, log.

Julien lifted his maul into position and sighted; then sudden as lightning, he went into the swing with every ounce of strength he had, feeling the power of it, the earth pulling with him as the heavy maul fell—and glanced off hard to the right as the log tumbled off

the base and Julien stumbled forward and cracked his shin on it, painfully. He stood there, his teeth clenched on a curse word, blinking fast against the sting of tears.

"The first time I tried to split wood," said Grandpa's voice from behind him, "my brother asked if I was trying to dig a hole. 'Cause he'd never thought of using a maul, but it seemed to be working."

Julien tried to grin. Grandpa had probably been ten years old. Not fifteen.

"It's not the easiest, moving."

Julien stared at him.

"You're supposed to learn so many things you never knew, and everyone else has known them forever. I only did it once—and I didn't take to it. Came right back home to Tanieux after a year."

Well I don't have that option.

"Looking like a fool. I broke my apprenticeship. That made me officially a failure."

Julien blinked. "So then what did you do?"

"I did what you do when you've failed to better yourself. Became a farmer." He stood silent a moment, his eyes on the hills, and said quietly, "And loved it."

Julien followed his grandfather's gaze out over the long rows of the garden, over the field of oats golden in the sun, to the rounded silhouette of the nearest hill; and suddenly it went all through him again like quiet fire: *War. There's going to be a war.*

"Grandpa? What was the Great War like?"

"We were very hungry."

Hungry? To cover his confusion, Julien picked up the log and set it on the base again.

"The front didn't come anywhere near this far south. You know that, I'm sure. But there weren't enough men to go around here in the hills, and there weren't enough hands to do what needed doing—and even afterward . . ." His eyes were shadowed as he looked at Julien. "It seemed like only half of them came back. And

they weren't the same. There was something in them you couldn't understand. I mean," he said slowly, "something *I* couldn't understand. I wasn't there, you know. Your father wasn't either. He was too young." Grandpa glanced away. "Barely."

Julien looked down at the maul, thinking about this. Neither his father nor his grandfather. And Papa said France would declare war within the week. And here he was.

"Your mother, on the other hand—the front passed over her village twice, in Italy. But you know that, I'm sure."

He looked away. Something was tightening in his chest. *Sure. Of course. Except no one ever tells me anything.* He lifted the maul, and his grandfather stepped back; but then he stopped and looked up at the hills and swallowed. "No," he said. "I didn't."

"She didn't tell you?"

"No." He shook his head. "Uncle Giovanni used to tell me and Vincent all about his friends in the prison camp and the crazy escape schemes they cooked up. It took me awhile to figure out there was more to the war than that."

"They just don't want to talk about it," Grandpa murmured. "I suppose we'll never understand."

Julien looked at the maul in his hands and looked at Grandpa. "Maybe I will," he said.

Grandpa's face changed in an instant. "No," he whispered. He was pale. "Julien. Don't say that. You're fifteen, Julien."

"I know." Julien's voice was a whisper too. He didn't know where to look, didn't know what to do with the fire that was rushing through his body. He hefted the maul and swung it suddenly in a fast, tight circle, his eye on the grain of the wood. There was a *thunk*, and the two halves of the log sprang away to either side. They lay on the grass, incredible, their split edges clean as bone.

The lowering sun shone through the big south window as they finished their quiet supper, making patches of gold on the wall.

Julien's back and arms ached. Mama's eyes weren't red anymore, but something about her didn't seem right. She didn't look at any of them. Papa asked how many jars of beans she'd canned, and she answered without looking at him, without looking at anything—except a glance, lightning quick, toward the window. Not at the light. At the radio.

"Mama," said Magali. She tossed her curly black hair. "Hey, Mama."

Mama didn't answer.

"Mama, tell them about the mouse."

Julien watched his mother swallow and turn toward Magali with difficulty, like someone bringing herself out of a trance.

"In the sink?" Magali prompted.

"You tell it, Lili," said Mama softly.

"Well, there was this mouse," Magali started. "Um, in the sink. Except we didn't see it until I'd run the dishwater. And it was alive—I don't know how it got in there, but it was alive, and it was swimming round and round . . . looking . . . y'know . . . kinda scared . . . and then I fished it out and put it outside. It was funny," she finished gamely. She looked at Mama again. Mama didn't seem to see her. She turned on Julien. "Hey, I heard you split a log. In only half an hour."

"Yeah? You wanna try?" growled Julien.

"I bet I could do it."

"Don't bet your life savings." The chime of the grandfather clock by the stairwell door cut through Julien's words, and, a second later, the deep tolling of the church bell in town. Papa and Mama were both on their feet.

Mama stood still, both hands on the table. Papa crossed the room and switched on the radio.

Loud static leapt into the room, a buzzing like an army of bees. Mama went to the radio. Julien and Magali followed. Phrases came through as they leaned in: *a general mobilization. Reinforcements being*

sent to the Maginot Line. British forces are landing in France to . . . since our nation's declaration of war . . .

War.

Efforts to persuade Belgium and Holland have failed . . . mmzzzzsh . . . remain neutral. Gallant Poland is no match for the German war machine . . . crack-crack-crack-fzz . . . pushing deep into the countryside . . . ffff . . . no stopping . . . crack-crack-crack-crack!

Papa switched off the radio.

Julien and Magali looked at each other. Magali's eyes were wide.

"Maria," said Papa in a gentle voice. "You get some rest. I'll do the dishes."

Mama nodded, not looking at anything. She walked slowly toward the bedroom door, stumbling on the edge of the rug as if she were blind.

Julien couldn't sleep. His room on the third floor under the eaves was like an oven. His arms ached. His country was at war. He twisted and turned in the sweaty sheets, trying to find a position where his arms didn't hurt.

He got up and opened the window to ragged clouds lit by the half moon. And the faint gleam of the river down at the far edge of town by the school. He turned away.

He slipped out his door, quietly, and down the hall to the stairwell; down the stone stairs, cool on his bare feet, to the second floor where his family lived. The living and dining room was full of moonlight and shadows. He crept to the bathroom door and opened it very quietly. Mama and Papa were asleep in the next room. He'd turn the water on just a trickle, wash the sweat off—

His hand froze on the tap.

"It won't be like that, Maria." His father's voice carried through the thin wall. "We're not in Paris anymore. There's nothing they *want* in Tanieux."

"There was nothing they wanted in Bassano."

He had never heard her voice like that. Bitter.

Papa answered in a low voice Julien could not catch. He put his ear to the wall. He shouldn't listen. He shouldn't.

". . . reasons we're here. And Benjamin—his parents want safety for him more than anything, and *this* is where they chose. Maria, I firmly believe that the Germans cannot get this far south."

"Unless they win." A chill went down Julien's spine, the way she said it. She said it as if they *would*.

He opened the door very slowly, very quietly, listening to his father's murmur in which he caught only the name *Giovanni*, and then *soldier*, and then *Julien's too young.* Then louder: "You will *never* be alone like that again."

"Don't make promises you can't keep." Her voice was flat and terrible.

Julien ran light and silent on his bare feet, through the stairwell door and up the cold stone stairs in the dark, and threw himself into bed, trembling.

He closed his eyes, pictured his street back in Paris, the Rue Bernier: the green grass of the park and Vincent's brown leather soccer ball; the shouts of the guys, Renaud and Gaëtan and Mathieu; Mama leaning out their second-story window, calling him in for supper. Home, Paris, with none of this happening.

This was happening.

He turned over and smashed his face into the pillow. *They cannot get this far south. Unless they win.*

They wouldn't win—they couldn't win. But if they made it into France at all, where would they aim for? Paris—where Vincent and Uncle Giovanni were, and Aunt Nadine and the little girls—that was where. He saw, suddenly, himself and Vincent in brown leather jackets, in two tanks at the mouth of the Rue Bernier, shuddering with the recoil of the guns. *They shall not pass.*

In his history textbook, there'd been a map of the Great War: little red lines, jagged red splashes. Verdun had been a red splash,

and no one had told him Verdun was a city where boys played in the park and mothers leaned out second-floor windows to call them in for supper. Bullets broke those windows. He saw the kitchen at home in Paris, the scarred pine table he'd known forever, broken glass and shrapnel among the dishes in the sink. Stupid. So *stupid*. How could he not have known?

He was shaking.

He got out of bed and went to the window. Dark clouds were blowing in over the moon. A breeze touched his face.

A faint sound began to rise from below, a pure and lovely thread of song through the darkness. Mama's voice. From her open bedroom window, just below his, rose the sound of Mama quietly singing the song she had sung in church every year at Easter ever since he could remember. *To you the glory, O risen one.*

The resurrection song.

Julien knelt at the window and listened, lips parted, taking in that pure sound till it ached in his limbs. He leaned his face into his hands and saw her in his mind, standing alone and singing, and it came to him that if he ever became a soldier, it would break her heart. The war would have to last three or four years first, and she could not survive that. And then his going away. Her voice rose easy as a bird to its final line: *No, I fear nothing.* Then stopped.

Julien looked up. The moon was gone, and so were the stars, and he was on his knees. "God," he whispered. His voice was dry. "God. Please don't let them get to Paris. Please keep . . . everybody . . . safe." He sounded like a child—*and God bless Mommy.* When had God ever stopped a war because a teenager asked him to? The image came back, the tanks firing, the recoil, Vincent's face grinning. He could never be a soldier. Never drive a tank.

It was unbearable.

I want to do something. God. Let me do *something. Please.* The word *serve* rose in his mind, the word *protect*, but he couldn't even think

them; it sounded stupid. What did he know how to do? Do the dishes, play soccer. Split wood.

The breeze brought the scent of rain in the dark. A drop fell on the windowsill. He got back into bed, pulled the sheet up over himself, and slept.

Chapter 2

Burn

Nina read the words on the pale green card for the last time. *Name:* Nina Krenkel. *Birth date:* 07-08-1924. *Birthplace:* Vienna. *Hair:* brown. *Eyes:* green. *Race:* Jew.

Then she opened the furnace door and put it in.

The flames flared and ate the words in long licks. It was a ghost card of curled ash, the words still visible for a moment, slowly fluttering apart in the wind of the fire's burning. Nina watched, transfixed, as her name fell away into flakes on the glowing coals.

"Nina! You *did it*!"

She whirled to face her younger brother. "I promised. And you promised too."

"But we never got the fake ones!"

"He said we had to do it anyway. We have to, Gustav. We have to do everything he says." Her eyes burned. She stood, pulling herself up by her crutches. "You want to go up there and tell him we're not doing it? And let him die knowing that?"

"But Nina, Uncle Yakov—"

"Uncle Yakov is *wrong!*" she shouted. "Did you hear what he said? He said *crazy*. Is Father crazy, Gustav? Tell me." She looked him in the eye. "Do you honestly think he is crazy?"

Gustav looked at her, his black eyes wide. "I—" He shut his mouth and looked down at his shoes. Shoes that Father had made him. "No," he whispered. "He's not crazy."

"I know it's scary, Gustav. I'm scared too. But he knows." *Just look in his eyes. Did you ever wonder if dying people can see the future? It scares me, Gustav, it scares me so bad, the things he looks like he knows.* "He says we're safer if we go. He knows. So we're going." She stood leaning on her crutches, looking at him; then she held out her hand. He looked back at her for a long time, put his hand in his pocket, and pulled out a pale green card.

She took it and bent again to the furnace door.

Everything was ready. She had packed food, clothes, blankets. She had the key to the drawer with Father's letters in it, his will and the money and the tickets—the drawer where the false identity papers were supposed to have been when they came. They wouldn't come now, Father had told her in his thin, labored voice—he could hardly breathe now. "He cheated me," he'd whispered. "He cheated my children. May he be forgotten." Then he'd swallowed and said, even softer, "Or maybe they caught him. Who knows?"

Father was in his attic bedroom, where he had been for weeks, the room where the doctor had told them he would die. Soon. The sun slanted in through the window; the white-stitched stars on the brown eiderdown shone, and so did Father's eyes, out of the dimness. "Nina. Nina, my daughter." She was still catching her breath from climbing the stairs on her crutches, but he had less breath than she.

"Father, I've done it. I burned mine, and Gustav's too."

His skin was paper thin around his eyes. His breathing rasped. "Good," he whispered. "Nina. I love you so much."

She looked at him. She must not cry. "What should I do next, Father?"

"Your hair." His thin hand came up a little in a helpless movement toward her, as if he would have taken her long, wavy hair in his fingers to feel it. "It's so lovely. So . . . Jewish. It won't be safe. And the world was never safe for a woman alone, Nina. Tell Gustav to cut it now. You think you can do it? Be a boy?"

"I picked myself a name, Father. Niko."

"That's my girl. That's a very smart name." Suddenly a fit of something like coughing took him. Something in between coughing and choking, again and again the head bobbing forward and the wet sound in the throat. She bent over him, mouth open, hands going to him helplessly. Nothing she could do. He swallowed and breathed again. "Soon, Nina," he whispered.

She bit her trembling lip hard.

"You will live, my daughter. You will give me grandchildren. You will find a place where you are safe." *Did you ever wonder if dying people can see the future?* There was a strange light in his eyes.

He was gazing at her, the shimmer of tears growing in his eyes. His voice came out hoarse: "Nina, Nina, I want so much for you to live. Promise you'll do everything I told you, Nina. Niko."

"I promise," she whispered, and bent her head.

Chapter 3

Foreigner

"Julien, this is Benjamin Keller. Benjamin, Julien Losier."

Julien stuck out his hand to shake. Then he stuck it so close to Benjamin's stomach that the guy couldn't miss it even if he *was* looking straight at his highly polished shoes. After a moment, Benjamin gave him limp fingers. He shook them.

"It's such a pleasure to meet you," Julien heard his mother saying behind him. Then Madame Keller, a little breathy, said: "I know you'll take such good care of Benjamin. I can see it in your face." She had a slight German accent. Julien clenched his teeth a little tighter.

"Would anyone like some coffee?" asked his father.

Benjamin stood there, skinny, looking about twelve. All you could see of his face was his nose and the tops of his glasses. A book dangled from his left hand, wrapped around one finger. Julien pictured himself walking through the school gate with him.

"Cream? Sugar?"

I am going to die.

They poured Julien *verveine* tea because, for some reason, fifteen still wasn't old enough for coffee. Benjamin opened his book under the table and began to read. They talked about the new school, and they talked about the history of Tanieux, and they talked about how Monsieur Bernard, the stationmaster, didn't think the pastor should be opening an international school in wartime and how wrong he was. Benjamin's father sipped coffee and said he had heard wonderful things about Tanieux, and the pastor and his wife—a man with piercing blue eyes and a tall, rawboned woman—sat across the table from him and beamed. That pastor. This was all his fault.

Julien knew three things about the pastor: Papa was crazy about him, he was a pacifist, and his real name was César Alexandre. Rumor had it his middle name was Napoleon. Poor guy. That might explain the pacifist thing.

Papa called him Pastor Alex. His new best friend.

"Certainly there is some anti-Jewish sentiment," Monsieur Keller was saying. He had an accent too. "It might not be something a non-Jew would notice, but we feel it is on the rise. And ironically enough, we have started to feel the effects of anti-German sentiment as well."

Anti-German sentiment! In Paris? *Really*?

"I have hopes that Benjamin will find much less prejudice here," said the pastor.

Julien slumped in his chair. *We are* both *going to die.*

They walked the Kellers to the early train. The station was full of people waiting, jostling, talking; farmers in their cloth caps standing by their stacks of crates, live chickens clucking from some of them; kids poking their fingers in and running away, screaming with laughter. And the summer people, the *estivants*. Women in white silk dresses with wide, immaculate straw hats; men in suits, hanging back from the dusty farmers and the grubby kids; their

own children scrubbed and ready to go home to Lyon or Dijon or Paris. Where they belonged.

Where he belonged.

A high, far-off whistle, and the children began to yell: "She's coming! *La Galoche!* She's coming!" Madame Keller was shaking Mama's hand again and again; Julien saw with horror that she was beginning to cry. He looked away and saw something he'd never seen before: Benjamin's face. Benjamin, standing straight like a real person, looking at his father, his eyes big and brown and dark. And then the train was steaming round the bend, and some kid was jumping and waving at it, and the stationmaster in his dark blue cap with cold fury on his face was shouting, "Get behind the line, brat!" The kid flinched and fell back, and then the train was steaming into the station, and there was chaos and noise and luggage and boarding, and the Kellers looking through the window at them, their faces up against the glass, and Benjamin looking back at them, and the wheels starting to churn, and the train pulling out with a high, eerie whistle onto its long track between the hills.

And Benjamin, standing by Julien, staring at his feet.

A thick, smothering silence seeped out from Benjamin's room and filled the house. He sat at every meal, looking at the food he was pushing around on his plate, dampening every attempt at conversation. Breakfast would end, and Papa would tell the top of Benjamin's head that they were going out to the farm. Did he want to come? A tiny shake of his head.

Thank you, God.

Out at the farm, there was work to be done: there was harvesting and wood to be split and freedom to be drunk to the last drop. Julien could feel his swing growing truer, his muscles harder, his lungs deeper in the open air. A pleasant ache now ran through his limbs at night, instead of burning.

At home they had the radio, but no news. The *boches*—the Germans—were busy tearing up Poland. In France, nothing moved except reinforcements to the Maginot Line, the massive line of fortifications that would keep the Germans out of France. "*C'est une drôle de guerre*," the announcer said. Funny kind of war. Julien kicked his ball around the little walled backyard in the evening, alone, thinking of Vincent. He'd asked Benjamin if he could teach him a little about soccer. Benjamin had said it wasn't his life's ambition to kick a ball.

Julien kicked his ball, and the wall sent it back to him perfectly, without fail. You couldn't score against a wall. You couldn't tell a wall about how Verdun wasn't just a red splash on a map, or the broken glass in the sink, or how bad you wanted to drive a tank. To *do* something.

Papa got out the big family Bible for Friday night devotions, and Benjamin said his second full sentence. He said, "So this is one of the things I have to do to live here?"

Papa stared at him. He ran his hand through his hair and said, "No. You don't"—Benjamin's chair scraped on the floor—"*but* you will stay seated until I have finished speaking, young man."

Benjamin sat motionless, his chair facing half away from the table.

"We are starting a new book of the Bible today," said Papa. "Genesis."

Benjamin did not move.

Papa outdid himself. He had Julien flip the lights off as he talked about the darkness before the dawn of creation. He talked about the word, and the act, and how the authors of the Bible knew that descriptions of God were nothing compared to showing what he did. In the dark, Julien heard the scrape of a chair on the floor. God's first act, said Papa—the giving of light. And he switched the light back on, and Julien blinked in the sudden blaze. Benjamin was back at the table, looking at Papa with his wide brown eyes.

Monday was Julien's last day on the farm. School started tomorrow. Tomorrow he would try his chances with Benjamin and those guys who'd stared at them in the street. He'd find out where there was some soccer going on. Then they'd see what Julien Losier was made of.

He and Grandpa were digging the last fall potatoes, Grandpa putting a digging fork in the ground and turning up a handful of them all golden for Julien to gather. He'd thought this was a weed patch till Grandpa had showed him the thin, withered stalks in a neat line where the potatoes hid. They worked in silence together, keeping up the rhythm, the only sound the small nourishing *thunk* of potato on potato in the basket.

When the silence had deepened and lengthened between them, Grandpa opened his mouth.

"How's life with Benjamin?"

"Oh," Julien said, and exhaled slowly, his fingers digging into the dirt. His mind was suddenly blank. "It's . . . it's not . . ."

Grandpa turned up another clutch of potatoes, and Julien gathered them with quick fingers. Grandpa planted his fork, put his foot on it, and paused.

"Not so good," said Julien finally.

Grandpa nodded without surprise, and Julien felt the ache in his chest give way a little.

"I don't know, Grandpa, it's just . . ." *Horrible. He makes everything weird, and wrong, and he's German, and I think he hates me.* "I wish . . ."

"What do you wish, Julien?"

"I wish one single thing was the way it used to be."

Grandpa nodded. "You've lost a lot this summer," he said.

A rush of tears filled Julien's eyes, and he blinked fast. He bent down to gather a stray potato.

Grandpa was quiet for a moment, leaning on his fork. Julien looked up and followed his gaze past Tanieux's hill and the farther wooded ridge, on toward low green mountains in the west, with the sun above them.

"The two-headed mountain. See it?" Grandpa pointed with his chin. One of the green peaks was split in two, one part taller than the other. "Her name's Lizieux."

Julien nodded.

"I like to think she's the first thing our ancestors saw of this place on their journey north." He looked at Julien. "Never let them tell you you're not from Tanieux, Julien. You're part of the story Tanieux is most proud of."

"What?"

"You weren't listening when your father and the pastor were talking to the Kellers. You were thinking, 'That's just history.' Julien, history is where we come from." His grandfather's warm eyes were webbed with a thousand smile wrinkles. "Listen now. Our people came up from the south. They came in fear. Because they were Huguenots, and religious freedom had been revoked in France, and the king's soldiers were arresting and torturing any Protestant they could find. They came looking for shelter. Refuge." He looked at the far green mountains. "They came up the Régordane road, the old road beyond those mountains, and I like to think they looked east one morning and saw Lizieux holding up her wounded head and thought, 'Maybe there. Maybe there is a place for us.'"

Grandpa turned to Julien. "They came here. And they were taken in."

Julien looked at the mountains from where he knelt, his hands in the dirt. "I see," he said.

"Oh, Julien, I want to tell you so many stories, if you'll hear them. I want to tell you the stories of Tanieux. The story of how it started. Of Manu and how he built the chapel by the stream—have you seen it? Four hundred years old, that chapel is. Listen. Winter's coming. That's when we tell each other stories here. By the fire, when the *burle* is blowing outside. Come winter, I'll tell you the stories of Tanieux. If you're willing."

"Yeah," said Julien slowly. "That sounds good."

Julien walked home slowly, watching the sun sink over Lizieux behind long bars of white and gold. Thinking of how Grandpa had called the mountain she. Of his people, whoever they were, fleeing north on the old road past the mountains.

Julien had fallen behind the others as he climbed the hill; halfway up, he passed a farmhouse, old stone with a slate roof and a broad orchard in back. A wall around the farmyard. And, leaning on the wrought iron gate, one of the guys who had stared at him in town.

Julien gave him a nod; the ice blue eyes looked right through him as if he wasn't there. It didn't matter whose people had come up the Régordane road; this road, on this hill, was someone else's ground. *That* guy's ground.

Julien gave the cold look back and walked on past with his head high. He'd see him at school tomorrow.

And he would show him.

Chapter 4

Go

Death came for Father in the night.

That was how she thought of it—could not help thinking of it—that something had come and taken him. She hadn't known. He'd been the same as ever when she went to bed. But this morning—She could feel the stillness of his body even from the doorway, even in the dark, and her throat tightened. She tried to keep her hand from shaking as she laid it on his heart to feel for the pulse; his flesh was cold, and for a moment, raw terror touched her.

Death has come, the stranger. Death, the thief.

But as the words rose in her mind, she was already turning away from him and into action. There was only one way to love him now. *Promise you'll do everything I said.*

I want you to leave the instant I die. Take my eiderdown. Unlock the drawer. Take the tickets and the money, put my will and the first letter on the kitchen table. Mail the second letter. Uncle Yakov will get it within the day and come. He'll bury me. Let the dead bury the dead. But you—get out of Austria while you still can. Go to the station, and get on that train.

She had the eiderdown off him and rolled up and the papers out of the drawer, and she was down the stairs before she had time to think, to tell her mind in so many words what had happened. Then she was shaking Gustav, whispering. "Gustav. Gustav. It's time."

She couldn't go up to him again. She knew she should go up with Gustav, kiss Father on the forehead, say goodbye; but she could not. If she let herself do that—if she let herself cry—no. She had to do everything he'd said. Check through the packs, put in the money, the tickets, the letter; put the will on the table with her books and her mother's painting—the only thing she had from her . . . *Please give these things to Heide Müller at my school, and tell her to keep them for me. Do not worry about us. God will take care of us.* She hadn't written that to please Uncle Yakov. It was true.

"There is no God, most likely," Father had told her once, when he was healthy and strong. "And if there is—" He'd stopped, his eyes very sad, and hadn't finished the sentence, even when she asked. But she couldn't believe like him, she couldn't help it. Somehow there just had to be a God. Especially now. Especially—she turned sharply from the letter, to the window; no sign of dawn in the sky. *Oh Gustav, come down*. She began to check through the packs again.

He came down. His eyes were huge in the darkness, looking at her. She held out his pack to him, and he took it. "Are you ready?"

He nodded.

They crept down the stairs and through the dark clutter of the workshop to the back door; Nina unlocked it, and stopped, her heart beating fast. They would walk out this door into the world. Alone. Only God to protect them. "Hear, O Israel," she heard herself murmur, and stopped. She felt Gustav's hand seeking hers, and took it and held it tight; and he joined in. "Hear, O Israel. The Lord our God"—they whispered the Sh'ma into the stillness—"the Lord is one." *Hear, O God. Hear us, help us, oh help.*

Together they slipped out the door into the dark.