DEFY THE NIGHT

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Defy the Night: A Novel
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To Renée, Anne-Marie, Friedel, Charlotte, Laure,
and all the other young women who faced exhaustion, fear, isolation,
and sometimes even death to bring hunted children to safety
during World War II in France

Chapter 1

Barbed Wire and Broken Boots

"I JUST didn't know war was going to be so *boring*," I said.

Lucy rolled her eyes at me.

"Or so *cold*."

Lucy pushed open the door of the *mairie*, and I flinched as the wind swept in, sharp as razors. *La burle*, that's what they call the wind here—the north wind, the bad one. I should've known when we moved to Tanieux from Paris: *if they've got a name for the wind, watch out.*

We'd stood in line in that wind for two hours—two hours in the bone-cracking cold waiting for our turn in the mayor's office to get our families' ration tickets for February 1941. Waiting for those pigs in the Vichy government to tell us what we couldn't buy.

Well, I shouldn't say pigs. Not that they aren't—they are. But rationing's necessary, Papa says. Rationing's something they even do in England.

Where they're still free.

The ration-ticket line still stretched halfway across the open

place du centre as we walked gingerly down the steps. There was ice everywhere, hard, flat Tanieux-winter ice, the kind that's been ice so long it's grayish-white and doesn't reflect the sun. I looked at that long line of people, their hands deep in the pockets of their worn coats, scarves wrapped around their faces, heads down, standing and stamping their feet like horses tied up in the cold. You couldn't see the halters they were tied with. But they were real.

I stopped for a moment, looking at them. Behind me the *mairie* doors opened again, and I saw the line shuffle slowly forward. Something in me snapped. "Race you home!" I shouted to Lucy. I could hear the raggedness in my voice, the edge of anger. I didn't really want to race—I just wanted to run.

I just didn't know what else to do with all the anger in my body.

You know what war is? You shut up and tighten your belt and do what you're told. That's war. You stand in line on the *place du centre* like a dumb animal while the *burle* sweeps across it like a wind from the steppes, because you have to. For you and your family to eat. You forget what meat tastes like, and butter, and cream. You eat potatoes and beans and drink water and then you sit down by the radio and listen up for what They've decided to do to you and your friends next.

I thought we were going to fight. Drive Hitler back, kill him maybe. I wasn't ready for the world to go insane, for him to win, for him to *take over my country*. I didn't expect my own people to start *working with him*.

I've got this friend, Benjamin. More my brother's friend, I guess, but he lives with us. His parents paid room and board for him till they went missing in the invasion. He thought they were dead. It was months before we heard where they were—in Marseille, hiding from the government. Because they're Jewish and they're not French citizens, and here in our new insane world, that is not okay.

Because Jews and foreigners—that's whose fault it is we lost the war. That is the official line straight from the mouth of the great

Marshal Pétain and his government in Vichy, from which he governs us: the south of France, the so-called unoccupied zone. And yeah, maybe I take it a little bit personally. Half my friends are Jews, and practically *all* of them are foreigners. I was the new girl from Paris here the year the war started. I made friends with the other new kids. And now my own government was offering to oblige the Nazis by sticking the other new kids behind barbed wire. They were setting up internment camps for it. My parents had told me. They were putting refugees from the civil war in Spain in there because, I suppose, they were Communists. And they were putting foreign Jews in there because . . . oh yes . . . that's who made us lose the war, as if it was *them* that drove into our country with tanks. And they were putting Gypsies in there, because—as far as I can tell—they just didn't like them. They were putting men and women and kids and old people in there, and for nothing they ever did.

And Benjamin hadn't seen his parents in almost two years, because it wasn't safe for them to take a train.

And there was nothing I could do. Nothing but run blindly across the ice-crusted cobblestones, with Lucy behind me.

"Maga*li!* Don't be *stupid!*"

Speaking of foreigners, Lucy is Irish. They are not actually arresting Irish people at this time. That we know of. Lucy doesn't even have to be here—she could live in America with her journalist father. But she lives with her aunt instead, on the top floor above the bookstore.

I was just coming up on their building when the world spun around me—hard. My right foot flew up into thin air, and for a moment all I saw was deep blue sky and the ground coming up to meet me. *Crack.* I could feel the jolt in my teeth.

I opened my eyes. Gray Tanieux ice. Blue winter sky. Lucy's blond hair and freckled face above me, her blue eyes anxious. "Magali? You all right?"

"Ow."

"You didn't hit your head, did you?"

"No. Just my hip. Ow."

Lucy gasped. "Your boot!"

I froze. My boot. My precious, only pair of boots, stitched and re-stitched by Mama. New leather shoes were worth their weight in diamonds, but new boots? There was no such thing. And it hadn't come apart at the seam this time. There was a crack in the leather itself, gaping like a mouth.

"She's going to kill me," I whispered. But the truth was worse than that. *She's going to cry.*

"More importantly," said Lucy, "you can't get any more boots."

"I know," I snapped. Lucy is a fun person most of the time. I swear. I stood up carefully, favoring the boot. There was hard flat pain all through my hip. "I'll fix it."

"You don't even—"

"I said I'll fix it, okay?"

"Uh-huh, Magali. Let me know how that goes."

We glared at each other. A voice behind us broke the spell.

"*Bonjour*, Lucy, Magali." It was Madame Alexandre, the pastor's wife, and her voice was brisk. I snapped up straight. To *attention*. Madame Alexandre, she's a person you listen to.

She stepped up quickly to give us the *bise*, the greeting kiss on both cheeks. I gave her a nervous grin. "How are you girls?" she said. "Do you feel strong enough to brave the cold a little more today? I have a refugee who needs guiding to le Chaux. The Laubracs there will take her in. The priest just sent word."

I *like* Madame Alexandre.

Lucy was saying sorry, she couldn't, she had to help her aunt with the washing. *Because my aunt doesn't know how*, she didn't add. Her aunt teaches at our school. Knows Greek and Latin; needs a maid.

"I can do it," I said quickly. "Madame."

"Ah, that's excellent. Well, I think I should feed her first . . . Are you free after lunch?"

"Yes, Madame," I said. *Free*, I thought. *I love that word.*

The bell on the door of the Café du Centre dinged as I opened it, and beautiful warm air hit my face. The place was full of voices and warm smells: fake coffee, fake cocoa, fake barley-flour pastries. I won't kid you—they made my mouth water. I don't even remember what the real stuff tastes like.

"Magali!" Madame Santoro paused, a tray in her hands, her black hair stuck sweaty to her forehead. "You have come to help Rosa and Nina, no?"

"Um . . ." I could hear the clink of glasses, back in the kitchen, and my friends' voices. I imagined plunging my frozen hands deep in warm dishwater. "*Sure*."

"Thank you, *querida*. So busy on ration day. You are much help."

I slipped into the kitchen, pulled my coat off, and let the steam warm my numb face. Rosa's black eyes brightened when she saw me. Rosa's from Spain and definitely the prettiest of my friends—long black hair and soft, shy dark eyes. I gave her the *bise*, and then the same to Nina. Nina is Jewish, from Austria, and she's probably the least pretty. I don't say that to be mean. She has brown hair that's kind of curly and frizzy, and she either looks you in the eye too long or not at all. She was sitting at the sink on a high stool, her crutches leaning against the wall. I stepped up to the sink with her, but Rosa tossed me a dishtowel.

"Can't I wash? My hands are *freezing*."

"Nina's washing. She needs to sit."

"Just one little minute?"

"Is no problem, I can stand." Nina slid off her stool.

"*Magali*."

"No, Nina, it's all right, you don't have to stand." It's not like she can't use those crutches. She walked here from Austria on

them. But Rosa had those reproachful eyes again. "I'll just warm my hands real quick and then I'll dry." I plunged them in the warm clean water and groaned with pleasure. Nina keeps her dishwater really nice. "Hey Rosa, you free this afternoon?"

"For what?"

"A very important mission from Madame Alexandre."

She looked at me sideways, drying her plate slowly. "With who?"

I dried my hands on my dishtowel. I hated that suspicious look of hers. "With me. And Nina if she's free."

"Free?"

"Yeah. You know. Not busy."

"Oh." Nina's face fell. "Fraülein—I mean, Mademoiselle Pinatel, she need me in bookstore. I—"

"It's all right. I'm taking this lady to le Chaux who speaks German, but I'm sure she understands pointing and following."

"Nina's taught me a little German," said Rosa softly.

"More than a little! You are very good!"

"I make Gustav laugh."

"Oh, you must not take serious Gustav. He laughs always."

I rolled up my dishtowel and flicked it at Rosa. "So? Can you come?"

"Please stop doing that, Magali."

"C'mon. I didn't do it hard."

Rosa frowned and turned away from me. I sighed and picked up a glass. "C'mon, Rosa, please come. I don't want to walk home from le Chaux by myself."

"You should go, Rosa. You can then practice your German. And meet this woman—from where does she come?"

"Poland. She walked here. In sandals."

"She walked from Poland in sandals?" Rosa frowned, but the corners of her mouth were turning up. "*Really*, Magali?"

"Well, no, see, she walked from le Murat in sandals. She got off the train there by mistake. She'd heard of Tanieux—"

"Oh, but this is good!" Nina's eyes shone. "It is good that people are speaking of it." *She* heard about Tanieux when she was practically dying of fever and malnutrition in the Lyon train station. Heard about it from a random stranger on his way to boarding school—*my* school—who decided to buy them tickets here too. His name's Samuel. He's in my class.

"Yeah. So then she walked the rest of the way. Four hours, in the *burle*."

"When?"

"Yesterday." We all shivered.

"I'll go, Magali," said Rosa.

If Chanah Minkowski had needed to walk from Poland in sandals, she could have. I could see that right away. She was the tallest, strongest woman I'd ever seen, and I know a lot of farmers. She looked like she picked up a pitchfork every day and tossed around bales of hay without breaking a sweat. And then went out to plow. She had shoes now, and Rosa and I had to jog to keep up. My hip hurt and snow was getting into my boot, but I didn't say anything.

Around the crossing at Chabreyres she slowed to a walk and looked around. The hills were white, crisscrossed with thin black lines of fences and their blue shadows, broken by darker patches of woods. Madame Minkowski turned to me and broke the silence, pointing down. "Shoe. Is bad."

She just had to bring that up.

"I'm all right."

"No. Is need, shoe. Not all right." She frowned at me. "I can help. Can . . ." She made some motions with her big gloved hands. "I need . . . *eine Ahle und eine Nadel*. Large."

"You . . . you can sew it up?"

Madame Minkowski nodded.

I turned to Rosa. "What was that German thing?"

Rosa burst out laughing. "In your dreams, Magali! I don't know *that* much German!"

"It's only a couple of words!"

"It's some kind of *tool!*"

"You need goot shoe. You need." Madame Minkowski was looking at me with her big, hungry eyes. It almost scared me. "How old, you?"

"Sixteen. Uh, almost sixteen. I mean, uh, fifteen."

"Say again?"

"*Fünfzehn*," said Rosa.

"Ah." Madame Minkowski nodded, and brightened for a moment. Then her face kind of shut down. "Like . . . *meine Tochter*," she said, not looking at us.

Rosa's eyes widened. "Her daughter," she whispered.

"Where is she?" I said. Before I could think.

If Madame Minkowski's face had shut down before, now it *locked*. She was looking at nothing; at something the wide white landscape was hiding, something terrible we couldn't see. "I don't know," she whispered.

Oh.

There was a long silence.

I could imagine her, the daughter. Strong like Madame Minkowski, but pretty too, with friendly eyes. I could imagine her mother's big arms around her in a crushing hug. Something started to hurt in my throat.

Rosa put her little arm around the woman's big back. A moment later Madame Minkowski had swept us both up, pulled us into this hard, deep, gut-wrenching hug, the two of us crushed in her arms. I hugged back, as hard as I could. Madame, I want to save your daughter, I thought.

But I didn't say anything.

"Goot girls," she said. "You are goot girls." And she let us go, and we went on down the road.

Madame Minkowski did fix my boot. She got across to Madame Laubrac what she needed, and sat by the fire stitching while the rest of us drank hot *verveine* tea. Tight, neat, strong stitches. You could see right away what kind of a guest *she* was going to be. She gave us each another bone-crushing hug when we said goodbye.

The boot was tight and warm the next day, walking down to school. My classroom used to be a barn, and it's dark and warm inside with the woodstove going, and all the wooden shutters over the windows. I sat there in the dim electric light, listening to the teachers and not hearing what they said, trying to draw Madame Minkowski in the margin of my notebook. That look in her eyes when she said, "I don't know." I couldn't draw her right, of course. I couldn't get her out of my mind.

I sat there drawing her until Monsieur Weiss came with Nina for chemistry class. Nina is in the *sixième* class with the twelve-year-olds usually, because her French is so poor, but for math and chemistry she's with us. She sits in the front row with her head thrust forward on her neck, drinking it in, taking notes like mad. He repeats things in German for her. *I* don't even understand what he says when he's speaking French. She's his favorite student.

My mother loves her too. She eats at our house almost every week.

She's like that, Nina. How could she *not* be the adults' favorite? She was homeless and almost starved to death, so now she thinks getting to go to school, do dishes at the café, and sleep in a bed is the greatest privilege known to man. Or rather, woman.

I don't always like her, to be honest. I thought I was going to, when we met. She'd walked halfway across Europe and sneaked across two different borders in the dark. I thought she'd be . . . well, *cool*.

The first time she ate with us she was so tense. Her smile

stretched too tight. Too nice, too . . . *eager to please*. Like she thought we'd kick her out or something. It made me embarrassed for her. The second time she ate with us, she broke down sobbing in the middle of the meal for no reason I could see.

That night my mother took me aside, after dinner, and told me about the camps.

She told me how they'd taken what used to be refugee camps and strung barbed wire around them, put men with guns in guard towers. She told me how they'd been arresting people for months, on the quiet: *sans-papiers*, people without papers. Refugees, foreigners, people who weren't welcome here. They put them in these camps with straw to sleep on and fed them two pieces of bread a day plus turnip soup. People got sick and died in there, and nobody cared. She told me about the day the Germans had sent France trains loaded with more than six thousand Jews they'd decided to get rid of, and the government refused them, and the train sat unopened for three days in Lyon. When they opened the cars, some of the people inside were dead. The rest got taken to one of those camps.

She told me Nina and her brother almost got taken to one too. When they first got here, the stationmaster—if you can imagine—thought they looked like trouble, and almost got the mayor to call someone up and have their papers checked. They didn't have papers, because they'd burned them so no one would know they were Jewish. They had to lie low for a while after that.

"Nina needs our protection," Mama told me. "It's not foolish for her to be afraid. It's smart. I don't believe *Monsieur le maire* would do anything against her now, or Monsieur Bernard either. I think they've accepted the presence of refugees in Tanieux, like it or not. But I want you to be careful just who you speak to about Nina, Magali. Don't mention to anyone that she's Jewish, or that's she not French. Can you do that?"

"Yes, Mama," I said. But I was thinking, that's all you want? To

keep my mouth shut? They're putting people behind barbed wire just for who their parents are, and all you want is for me to be quiet? Do nothing?

I'd heard Madame Alexandre talking with Madame Raissac the day before in church. I'd heard just the one thing Madame Alexandre said, in a low clear voice: *God will judge them*. I remembered that, looking at my mother's serious eyes, and I thought, why? Why does it have to be *God will judge them*? Shouldn't it be *God is judging them*, one of these days now, soon? And I thought, why do we have to shut up? Why? When it seems like God is doing the exact same thing about this stuff that everyone else is doing.

Nothing.

Monsieur Weiss started to wipe the chemical formulas off the board. I came back to myself with a jerk, and looked down at my paper. I hadn't copied anything I was supposed to.

I'd spent the hour drawing tangled strands of barbed wire all over the margins of my paper. Even over Madame Minkowski's face.

When Monsieur Weiss rang the bell for lunch break it was snowing, thick flakes blown almost horizontal by the *burle*. It had already drifted boot-deep against the doors. But I wasn't going to let that stop me. "Hey Lucy, want to meet the train?"

"In this? You joking? It won't come in today. Besides, I have to make lunch." She gave me a *bise*. "See you!" She jogged off into the snow.

Fine. I jogged off myself, ignoring the twinge in my hip, and took a left up the Rue du Verger to the public girls' school. Rosa'd go with me.

"In *this*?"

"Please, Rosa?"

She looked at me, and her soft, pretty face went still. "Lucy wouldn't go with you, would she?" she said quietly.

"That's not why!" I try not to lie. I really do.

Rosa looked away.

Just come to the station with me, Rosa. You know you want to. If you're mad I didn't ask you first, well I asked you now, didn't I? "Please?"

Rosa and I used to love meeting the train, back when we were the two new girls together—before Lucy came. Everyone in Tanieux loves our train. It's probably the one thing Monsieur Bernard, the Vichy-loving stationmaster, and I have in common. "I bet you *la Galoche* does make it. She's a *tanieusarde*, a little snow doesn't scare her."

Rosa lifted one shoulder and almost looked at me. I grabbed her hand. "C'mon!"

When we got there you couldn't see very far down the tracks in the swirling snow. Monsieur Bernard stood there with his kepi and his clipboard, ramrod-straight against the gusting wind. But I was right. A long, high whistle came from up the track, and soon there came her smokestack out of the blinding whiteness, cutting through the mist and snow, the flakes melting in her hot-white steam.

"I told you! She's not scared of *this!*"

Rosa laughed. "She's not a *person*, Magali!"

"Sure she is."

We watched her pull in with a long hiss of brakes; watched the men begin to unload crates from the cargo cars. The passenger car doors opened. I clutched Rosa's arm.

A little girl came first, in an old gray coat two sizes too big for her, a blue wool hat jammed over the dirtiest, most matted hair I'd ever seen. Then a little boy with a runny nose and red, infected eyes that made streaks down his filthy face. I stared. A toddler with a scarf wrapped round most of its head climbed down. And then a young woman.

She was clean, in a brown wool coat and hat that fit her; she didn't have the look of a refugee. Except for the gray weariness of her face. And the huge, battered suitcase, and the baby she

clutched to her chest with her other arm. The conductor stepped down behind her with two more suitcases and set them down. She didn't even see him. She had dropped her suitcase in the snow and closed her eyes.

Monsieur Bernard stepped up to her. I had seen him do this routine before. "*Bonjour, Madame*."

Her eyes flew open.

"What is your business in Tanieux?" His voice was challenging.

It was magic. She took one look at him and her spine snapped up straight, and I found myself looking into wide-awake, steely gray eyes in a face that gave no quarter. "Would you direct me to the residence of Monsieur César-Napoléon Alexandre?" she rapped out firmly in perfect French, looking him in the eye like it was *him* who was out of line.

I stared at her.

Monsieur Bernard stepped back a little. "Certainly, Madame."

I was in love.

Rosa pulled at me, but I shook her loose and stepped up. "He's our pastor, Madame. We could walk with you there."

Her eyes flew wide open again. "Oh," she said. "Would you?"

I KEPT an eye on the little girl with the tangled hair and carried the suitcases. Rosa took the boy by the hand and carried the toddler inside her coat. The woman came behind us with the baby and the last suitcase, stumbling with weariness in the ankle-deep snow. I could see we ought to leave her at Pastor Alex's door, whoever she was, and not get in the way. I could see it was no time for a bunch of questions or any other kind of talk. It was time for her and those kids to be given a warm bed. And a bath, hopefully. For the kids.

Still I couldn't help asking, as I showed her in the Alexandres' gate and put the suitcases down. Because I just couldn't work it out. "Madame? Where are these children from?"

"Paquerette. It's Paquerette." I blinked at her. "My name." She shook her head a little, as if gathering her thoughts. "These children are from the internment camp at Gurs."

My heart beat fast. "Madame—"

"Paquerette."

"Will you be here tomorrow?"

She looked around at the driving snow. "Probably," she said.