

ABSINTHE

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IN the walled garden, night jasmine bloomed. Vines had long ago claimed the marble bench on which Eloise sat, their lithe, entwined suckers furnishing a latticework cushion. Lilies grew in fleshy clumps throughout the garden, waxen blooms pale in the moonlight. Eloise considered these, as she did on this day each year, alone beneath the apple tree, attuned to the sound of a key in the latch and the wet crunch of footsteps upon fallen fruit.

Come dawn, she would gather her cloak about her and tread the damp grass back out into the world. Perhaps promises made to strangers on trains did not count. Perhaps some wickedness had befallen the woman who owned this garden, precluding their rendezvous. Why wait, Eloise asked herself, when she could leave early, in possession of her dignity?

There were rules for chance encounters, and she feared she had broken every one of them: do not entertain romantic fantasies, do not believe promises of future meetings. People would say almost anything to avoid an awkward goodbye after intimacy. Her pig-headedness had only made the situation worse, compelling her futile return to the designated spot, year after year, just in case Madame had been unaccountably detained.

And here she was once more, alone in the ruins of Eden, feeling as Eve might, had the Serpent passed her by.

THE warm July evening that set this folly in motion had its beginnings at Victoria Station in London. The year was 1939 and the Night Ferry to Paris left, as usual, just before 10 p.m. The journey took place on a train named Contentment that swayed and rattled down to the Dover docks where it was loaded aboard a ferry with rails and disgorged some nine hours later across the channel at Dunkirk. Back on terra firma, it sped into Paris by nine in the morning, just in time for warm croissants and *café au lait* in the garden at the Ritz.

In the dining car, Eloise ordered Coquilles St. Jacques Meuniere and champagne, determined to take her mind off the notion of heavy train carriages sinking to the bottom of the Atlantic. At the next table another lone diner read a French newspaper. At first Eloise mistook her for a gentleman. She wore a pinstriped suit, and her short black hair was combed smoothly back from her forehead.

Catching Eloise's eye, she lowered her newspaper and said, "Good evening." Her voice was husky and quite deep, but distinctly female.

As Eloise murmured a somewhat startled hello, the *maître d'hôtel* arrived at the woman's table and they conversed in rapid French. He bowed and called her Madame, then approached Eloise and said, "Excuse moi, Mademoiselle. I took the liberty of explaining your predicament and Madame invites you to join her for dinner."

"My predicament?" Eloise blinked, whereupon the man lost his crisp command of English and ushered her from her chair.

"Charles prefers to circumvent the embarrassing spectacle of two women dining alone in his car," Madame explained dryly.

"Your husband is not traveling with you?" Eloise at once felt gauche American for asking a question that was none of her business.

Madame did not appear to take offense. "Henry would not be so inconsiderate. Besides, he loathes the French."

Eloise wondered how Henry felt about his wife's choice of attire. She could not help but stare a moment longer than she should. Even her shoes were masculine, black and highly polished. It struck her that Madame was almost certainly the kind of woman her parents had warned her about before she left Baltimore—a bohemian intellectual who flouted the rules of society and pursued a dissipated lifestyle in the company of avant-garde artists, political nonconformists and other hotheads. According to Aunt Constance, with whom Eloise would be traveling on the Continent, the cafés of Paris overflowed with such women, recklessly smoking cigarettes and even sampling the illicit Green Fairy. In this day and age.

"Is this your first trip to Paris?" Madame asked.

“Yes. I am to join my aunt. She has been taking the cure in Dax. We are planning to tour the Continent.”

Madame had eyes almost as black as her hair. She regarded Eloise with warm indulgence. “You are not concerned by the political situation?”

“My aunt says we shall avoid Czechoslovakia.”

“The Nazi invasion being an inconvenience, to say the least?”

Eloise nodded. Something in Madame’s tone made her feel slightly defensive. “My aunt says Mussolini is making Italy more efficient, and Mr. Hitler is doing the same for Germany.”

“Efficiency charms a certain type of person, it seems.”

Eloise could not help but smile. “Aunt Constance was married to an accountant.”

“And outlived him,” Madame noted. “Efficiency, indeed.”

Eloise laughed and her body relaxed all of a sudden; it was such a relief to talk to someone willing to say exactly what she thought.

“Where are you from?” Madame asked.

“Baltimore.”

“I was just reading about one of your countrywomen. Clara Adams. The first woman passenger to fly around the world.”

Eloise shuddered. “She must be very brave. I would never dare do such a thing.”

“You may surprise yourself one day. I’ve found we never know what we are truly capable of until we are tested.”

“Have you been tested?” Eloise asked, emboldened by the champagne.

Madame’s expression altered momentarily as though a shadow had passed across her thoughts. “Not as I shall be,” she said, then her eyes were bright once more, and she offered a small platter of appetizers. “Do try a truffle pastry. They’re always good.”

After formal introductions, they consumed fine food and made innocuous conversation until they were the last passengers remaining in the dining car, whereupon Madame summoned Charles and requested her usual, which was how Eloise came to be acquainted with absinthe.

“It’s illegal in Britain and France, now,” Madame said. “However, we are soon to leave Dover, and we will not arrive in

Dunkirk until the morning. At sea, we shall be in no man's land, as it were. Free to ignore the laws of both nations. Imagine.

There was something wicked in the dark glitter of her eyes and the white flash of her teeth. She observed Eloise with disquieting concentration, the way people studied art works they wanted to own. Eloise recognized that covetous appreciation from auctions she attended with her mother, who crammed the walls of their home with peculiar paintings by foreigners.

They were obliged to continue their refreshments in Madame's compartment, for the train would soon be loaded aboard a ferry, carriages squeezed one alongside the next, for the sea journey to France. By a stroke of luck, their compartments were side by side in the same carriage. Madame said it was not luck. Railway officials sought, for the sake of propriety, to locate unaccompanied females in one carriage and lone males in another.

A waiter followed them, bearing a pitcher of iced water, a bowl of sugar lumps, and two Madeira glasses. He placed these on a small table between facing couchettes, bowed, and left.

"Pray sit down." Madame indicated one of the modest seats, and not for the first time, Eloise observed that she was remarkably civil for a person on the fringes of society.

She wondered what her parents would think of her retreating to Madame's compartment. For all she knew, her elegant companion might pursue all manner of vices. She had no doubt that Mamma and Papa would consider her an unsuitable acquaintance, even decadent. Common sense dictated that Eloise should remain no longer, and she had, after all, promised to conduct herself appropriately on her travels.

Guiltily, she blurted, "I wonder if perhaps I should bid you good evening, Madame. You've been so kind, and I don't want to impose further upon your hospitality."

Madame smiled and drew a step closer. She was taller than Eloise, a fact made more pronounced by the immediacy of the small compartment. Up close, her eyes were not black after all. They were the color of mountains at dusk, a serene purple gray, and etched with fine long lashes.

"Consider this an adventure," she coaxed softly. "You are far from home and free to do as you please. Do you really wish to leave?"

Eloise knew the answer her parents would expect of her, but her throat closed over the obligatory words. Unable to endure Madame's teasing stare, she lowered her head and sank onto the seat.

Madame remained standing before her, and Eloise was overwhelmed by a strange urge to touch the fine weave of her jacket. The hairs on the back of her neck prickled, and an oily sensation settled in her stomach. She hadn't noticed Madame's fragrance in the dining car, but an elusive medley of scents troubled her senses now: freshly laundered cotton sullied with traces of smoke. Violets languishing in a shadowed forest. A tease of vanilla and some other subtle spices.

An inexplicable panic rose in her, constricting her breathing. Eloise decided champagne and travel were a perilous combination, one that had obviously gone straight to her head. Fortunately, nobody was here to witness her lapses in judgment. She was in Europe, far from the censure of her family.

Recklessly, she allowed her gaze to meander up the starched white shirt front before her to the collar Madame had loosened, the hollow of her throat, and the strength of her chin, and finally the shadow beneath her lower lip.

Madame was no longer smiling, and as Eloise stared at her mouth, it parted slightly as if compelled by a sharp release of breath. "I'll walk you to your compartment if it is truly your wish," she said, taking a step back.

Eloise met her eyes and found them shuttered, the warm indulgence supplanted by a more distant expression. "No," she said, embarrassed to have betrayed her indecision. "I would prefer to stay."

Madame gave her a long, assessing look, then took the seat opposite and drew a bottle from her luggage. After rearranging the items on the small table between them, she poured a measure of *Pernod Fils* from the bottle, then placed a slotted silver device over each glass, forming a bridge from rim to rim. Upon this, she set a lump of sugar for herself and two for Eloise.

Holding the pitcher high above Eloise's glass, she poured a thin stream of water slowly onto the sugar lumps. These immediately began to dissolve and drip through the slots. Transfixed, Eloise watched a milky mist rise up through the amber

green liquid in her glass. An herbal fragrance floated from the liqueur.

After Madame had repeated this ritual for her own aperitif, she removed the silver spoons and toasted, "To your education, my dear."

Eloise took a cautious sip and quickly covered her mouth. The liquid was cool, yet her throat burned. The taste was both bitter and sweet. It seemed she had consumed a licorice-tainted flower bud. With each breath it opened farther, teasing her tongue and cloying her nostrils with the scent of wild meadow.

"It is a taste one acquires," Madame said. "Take some more. You'll find it improves."

Obligingly, Eloise took another sip, then another. "I have heard many are addicted to this beverage," she remarked after a few moments.

"It can cast a spell," Madame conceded. "But you're in no danger from a glass or two."

Her hands were pale and fine like the hands of the marble statues Eloise had seen at the British Museum. Impulsively, she touched one and was almost surprised to find it warm instead of cold. "Forgive me," she said, hastily withdrawing. How could she explain herself?

Madame seemed unconcerned. "Will it bother you if I remove my jacket?"

"Not at all." Eloise wanted to shed her own shoes and stockings but suppressed this wayward urge.

Beneath her jacket, Madame wore her plain white shirt tucked into pants that fit quite loosely. These were supported by suspenders, or, as the British termed them, braces. She rolled up her sleeves and opened the window of their compartment, producing a thin cigar. "Do you mind?" she asked. "I would offer you one, but I don't care to see a beautiful woman smoke."

Eloise found this sentiment surprising on several counts, most notably that Madame had paid her a compliment. This was rare; Eloise's looks generally failed to excite attention. She was unfashionably narrow of shoulder and small breasted, and tonight in a long-sleeved deep green dress that buttoned at the front, she felt about as dull as she could be. Her mother said the fabric flattered her pale complexion and copper brown hair, but Eloise

thought it made her look insipid and showed up the cinnamon freckles sprayed across her nose and cheeks. She had tried to cover these with powder, but she knew they peeped through.

As Madame lit her cigar, Eloise said, like a chatterbox, "I've never smoked. Some of my friends from college do, but my father won't permit it. He says only fast women smoke."

"He has a point." Madame's perfectly etched mouth tugged a little at the edges. "If I may ask, how old are you?"

"I'll be twenty-four in September. On the first of the month."

"There's a decade between us. And an ocean." Madame looked pensive. "Will you be back in London after your travels?"

"Only briefly, alas. I've already spent six weeks there, seeing the sights."

Madame sent a slow drift of smoke out the window. "I shall be in Berlin later this month. Are you including Germany in your tour?"

"Why, yes. My aunt is quite desperate to see one of those vast parades they're showing on the newsreels. She thinks the German uniforms are very glamorous."

Her companion fell silent for so long that Eloise wondered if she'd inadvertently said something tactless. Finally, after imbibing some of her own green liqueur, Madame remarked, "Your aunt sounds like a very silly woman."

"I fear so." Even as she giggled her reply, Eloise found Madame's comment increasingly hilarious. It was all she could do not to roll with laughter.

Aunt Constance was her mother's older sister, a strident big-bodied widow who had inherited a vast fortune from her husband and had no children upon whom to lavish it. This meant she'd always spoiled Eloise with extravagant toys and clothing Father considered absurd.

The sable coat Eloise now carried with her had been consigned to cold storage when Aunt Constance sent it for her sixteenth birthday. Her father had only allowed her to retrieve it upon her graduation from Vassar. Eloise ran her hand across the fine soft fur and could almost imagine herself wearing it in Russia, standing upon the timeless steppes described with such calm passion by Countess Alexandra Tolstoy in one of her visits to the college.

“Are you cold?” Madame asked, studying the fingers Eloise had buried.

A little, Eloise admitted. Indeed, she was shivering. She felt hot inside, but chills kept crawling across her skin.

Madame extinguished her cigar and closed the window, drawing the curtains so the compartment seemed warmer. She cleared the table and folded it away, then sat down just inches from Eloise. Slouching back against the corner where the seat met the wall, she stretched her legs out before her, crossing them at the ankles.

“Is that better?” she asked, tilting her head to face Eloise.

She was so beautiful, Eloise had trouble finding a sensible reply. Her skin was the color of a honey-dipped pearl. It beckoned Eloise’s fingers. Oddly compelled, she slid along the seat until their thighs almost touched. It was as if she were in a dream, trying to find her way out, needing an anchor to keep her from drifting. She lifted her hand, and when her fingertips connected with skin, she gasped and quickly shrank back.

Madame caught her by the wrist and placed the imprisoned hand on her cheek, sandwiching it gently beneath her own. “You can touch me, Eloise. I am not offended, and we are at sea. Rules don’t matter here.”

“I feel intoxicated,” Eloise confessed.

“Then I recommend you make the most of it. I can’t imagine you’ll have the opportunity once you are traveling with your aunt.”

Madame regarded her with an expression Eloise had never seen before, a look so frank and knowing, she felt her every thought and feeling must be transparent.

To her shock, Madame’s lips brushed her palm. Blood rushed up Eloise’s neck to her face. Her heart pummeled against her ribcage and beat a rapid tattoo in her ears. Her limbs were heavy and languorous, yet her mind seemed brilliantly alert. She tried to make sense of the impulses she could barely repress. She wanted to reach for Madame. She wanted to kiss her. What was happening to her? Was this the legendary effect of absinthe? Did Madame also feel this way from consuming it? Eloise immediately knew she should leave, but she remained exactly where she was, an accomplice to her own undoing.

Her dress felt too tight at the throat, so she reached for her buttons, fumbling to unfasten the top few.

“Allow me,” Madame said, as one of the buttons snapped off and flew onto the floor.

Eloise lowered her hand and tilted her chin up in defeat. The brush of Madame’s fingers against her skin as she deftly unfastened one button after the next made her mouth go dry. She wanted more. More than the incidental collision of skin.

“Let’s loosen this a little.” Madame slid a finger beneath the bodice’s neckline and slowly worked her way along.

Eloise heard a sound and knew she had whimpered. Mortified, she averted her eyes.

Madame’s hand stilled at her nape. “Would you like me to kiss you?” she asked, her breath damp on Eloise’s cheek.

Eloise could only nod, aware of a hot, flooding sensation between her legs and a clamoring need to act on all she was feeling. She moved closer, bringing their bodies into contact. Madame’s lips brushed hers with unbearable delicacy. It was not enough.

Eloise kissed her in return, but more firmly, communicating what she wanted. Madame’s fingers moved from her nape through her hair, cradling her head. Her next kiss was completely different. She parted Eloise’s mouth with her own and deliciously explored her, sending goose bumps marauding over the hidden parts of her body. Her breasts, her thighs, her spine. Madame’s tongue teased its way deeper, and her hands finally delivered the caresses Eloise craved. A shock of desire made her freeze for a split second when Madame found a nipple and slowly teased it through the fabric of her dress.

Somewhere in the recesses of her mind it occurred to Eloise that she should not be doing this with a woman, but she cut the thought loose. Almost immediately another took its place, and this time she broke contact, just barely.

“What about your husband?” she whispered against Madame’s lips.

“Henry and I have in common other interests.” The hands did not pause in their work for a moment, one of them sliding beneath Eloise’s bodice as the other fully unbuttoned her. “Our marriage is a convenience, for both of us.”

Eloise's teeth chattered as her dress was drawn from her shoulders, and Madame's lips abandoned hers to heat the skin she was baring. Helplessly sagging against the back of her seat, Eloise surrendered to sensations she had never known. Madame's touch was the complete opposite of the nervous grabbing and aggressive intrusion she had experienced while dating in college. With every stroke and bite and kiss, her flesh blossomed, and the moist ache at her core became a throb, as if a tiny separate heart beat there.

Madame, she gasped, as her brassiere was discarded. She felt dizzy and overwhelmed.

Dark, glittering eyes lifted to hers. You want me to stop?

No. She caught a handful of Madame's shirt.

My name is Sylvia, she was reminded, and Madame pulled her to her feet. Let's make the most of the Spartan comfort British Rail affords us.

She tugged at a lever and the narrow couchette folded out to a fully made-up bed. Eloise thought her face was probably scarlet at the sight of the pale sheets and the feel of her dress sliding past her hips as Madame helped her out of it. She felt exposed and self-conscious, excruciatingly aware of her imperfections. The freckles on her chest, her small breasts and thin hips. Madame must have felt her stiffen for she reached past her to the lamp cord, dimming the lights. Then she took Eloise in her arms.

Tenderly kissing her cheek, she said, You are enchanting and I want to make love to you.

I don't know much, Eloise mumbled. I mean, I haven't

There's nothing to worry about. You're perfect. Madame drew back the bedding and lowered her onto the cool sheets. We can stop any time. Do you understand?

Eloise stared up at her and had the strangest feeling that she had been waiting all her life for this moment, for this woman. I don't want to stop.

She watched with dry-mouthed longing as Madame dropped her suspenders and unbuttoned her shirt. When she unfastened her pants, Eloise shamelessly reached out for her, begging, Hurry. Please.

Laughing, Madame said, An impatient virgin. How very tempting.

Divested of her clothing a few seconds later, she seemed to Eloise to be the perfect woman, an Aphroditeô high breasts, gentle curves, strong but feminine. Leaning down, her breasts grazing Eloise's, she tucked one finger into the elastic of her bloomers and said, "You won't be needing these."

Once naked, Eloise shyly moved over to make room in the narrow bed, and Madame joined her. For a moment, they lay on their sides, facing one another, then Madame slipped an arm beneath Eloise's shoulders and drew her so close they seemed to glide against each other with every breath.

"Promise me something," she said.

"Anything." Eloise planted a small kiss in the hollow at the base of her throat.

"Afterwards. Later. Always remember this exactly as it truly was."

"What do you mean?" Eloise asked.

Madame caressed her cheek. "Don't allow anyone to make it ugly."

"That would be impossible," Eloise said, wallowing in her fragrance and the sensual dialogue of their bodies. She felt Madame sigh.

"You know very little of the world."

Angling her head so she could look into her eyes, Eloise said, "The only world I want to be in is this one. Right here, with you."

"Then kiss me," came the reply.

And in the silken haven of Madame's flesh, Eloise discovered herself.

THE next morning, Sylvia handed her a folded slip of paper and a heavy key. "If you wish to see me again, come to this address a year from now. Let yourself in through the gate in the wall, and wait for me in the garden."

"A year! Why can we not see each other sooner?"

"Because the world is about to change, and we cannot make plans. The best we can do is try to keep a promise."

“I’ll come on my birthday,” Eloise said, imagining how special and perfect that would make the day. She looked down at the address. Le Chambon-sur-Lignon. Across the top of the card, a name was printed in plain black letters. Lady Sylvia Devon.

“It’s a villa I have in the mountains,” Sylvia explained as Eloise confounded herself, trying to accept that she had not only been relieved of her virginity on a floating train by a woman wearing men’s clothing, but that the woman was also a British aristocrat. It was the type of thing that could only happen abroad.

“Of course you are welcome to visit any other time,” Sylvia continued, “but I may not be there. I shall see to it the servants know who you are.” A film of tears spiked her lashes and made her eyes even more eloquent in their beauty.

“What’s wrong?” Eloise asked.

“I believe I’m afraid. Most unlike me.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“Honestly?” Madame seemed momentarily bemused. “That I’ll never see you again.”

“Oh, but you will. I promise. I’ll be there on the first of September next year.” Eloise hoped her sincerity showed in her eyes, but she sensed a quiet, inexplicable sorrow in her companion.

They held one another, and Sylvia placed her lips to Eloise’s forehead. “Whatever happens, be careful, my beautiful girl. Go back to America soon.”

The last time Eloise saw her, she was striding through a sea of people, across the cavernous, arched hall of the Gard du Nord, followed by a stringy little man dragging her luggage on a cart. She looked back once, blew Eloise a kiss, and walked out of her life.

DURING the five years that followed, the world changed, and so did Eloise. When the Nazis marched into Paris, Aunt Constance rushed back to Chicago. Eloise was supposed to go with her, but instead she fled to the Auvergne, needing to find Sylvia’s villa.

The place was locked up and she rented a small cottage in the village, intending to wait for Madame's return. She wrote to her parents telling them not to worry; Germany was not at war with America. Predictably, they sent money. Lots of it, over the months that followed. Each time urging her to come home.

In the end, she left it too late. Pearl Harbor was bombed, and America was finally at war. It was no longer safe to live in her cottage, so she went to Sylvia's villa on the outskirts of the town, and Monsieur and Madame Raynaud, the couple who maintained the villa, took her in.

There, in the relative tranquility of the mountains, Eloise put to good use the money she'd saved from her parents, doing what she'd been doing since 1940: forging documents for the Résistance, delivering packages, and escorting rescued British and American pilots from one safe house in the area to another, she and her charge riding their bicycles past groups of German soldiers like any rural couple.

Her Résistance connections had given her the identity papers of a dead girl from Marseille who was killed on a mission. Even now, with Allied tanks rolling through the Auvergne, she carried Bernadette Touchet's documents out of habit.

Yesterday came the news that Paris had been liberated, and it seemed everyone had a special bottle of wine saved for the celebrations. Eloise rushed to the village, wanting to get drunk and eat food with salt on it. Instead she saw some men drag a collaborator from his home and hang him, and she could not stop crying. She pedaled back to the villa as fast as she could and had remained there ever since, too numb to think.

Surely Madame would come now. The war was over, at least in France. If she didn't come, it could only mean one thing, and Eloise would go home. She couldn't stay here forever. The Raynauds had contacted Lord Devon, and he said Lady Devon had left for a trip to Switzerland one day and had not returned. That was in 1943. He thought she was dead.

Eloise refused to believe it. She faced her wristwatch to the moon. The hands pointed north. Midnight. With a ragged little sigh, she opened her knapsack and took from it the bottle of *Pernod Fils* she'd been saving since she first came to the garden in

1940. On each of her birthdays she'd brought it with her and left with it unopened. But not tonight.

She got up and walked through the garden to the mausoleum beyond the apple trees. On a marble slab that confined several of Madame's French ancestors, she set down the bottle, two glasses, precious sugar, and a pitcher. Into this, she poured some water from the hip flask she always carried.

Draped in the dark sheet of night, her table seemed to belong in a dream and she in a ghost world. She wondered where the girl on the Night Ferry had gone. Sometimes she mourned her, for it seemed Eloise had died, and in her stead, evicting every trace of her softness and naiveté, was Bernadette, who did her thinking in French and did not trust a soul, her own included; she had witnessed too much.

Where could she take refuge within the occupied territory of her mind? Where was peace to be found but in memory? Eloise closed her eyes and conjured the feeling of a narrow bed, a low ceiling, the rock and sway of the boat train, the magic of Madame's hands on her bare skin, the taste of her mouth, the heat of their passion.

With a certainty she'd too long scorned in herself, she whispered, "I met the love of my life, and there will never be another."

Eloise could not explain why she was convinced of that. She supposed some of life's most important events masqueraded as chance and were only later proven to have been destiny. Meeting Madame had changed everything, and the truth was, even if she could go back in time and make different choices, she wouldn't. She regretted nothing. Only the loss of what might have been.

Tears rolled down her face as she placed a single sugar cube on the silver spoon over one glass and two cubes on the other. She lifted the pitcher high and slowly released a shimmering trickle of water into each glass.

"Goodbye, Madame," she said and felt the air stir behind her as if her words had summoned a ghost.

Shivering at the thought, she looked back over her shoulder to the wall of granite and the statues of angels that decorated the mausoleum. Deep in shadow, still and silent, the angels stared back at her, and for a split second she thought one of them moved.

Laughing at herself for this fancy, she wiped away her tears and loudly declared, *ōI hope no German soldier is stupid enough to think he can hide from the Americans, here in this garden.ō* On the off chance, she added, *ōDeutsche? Lassen Sie Ihre Waffe fallen! Kommen Sie hier.ō*

She didn't even bother to reach for the gun she always carried with her. Most of the German soldiers still hiding in the countryside were not trying to return to their units. They simply wanted to surrender to the Americans so they could sit out the rest of the war in a prison camp instead of fighting the Russians.

As she'd expected, there was no answer to her command about dropping weapons. Instead a soft click made her breath freeze in her chest. A tiny flame pierced the darkness and spread a halo just far enough to illuminate part of a face. A cigar tip glowed as its owner took a puff.

ōYou had me terrified there for a minute,ō said a husky voice.

Eloise lurched to her feet. She tried to walk but her legs were shaking so violently she had to clutch the marble coffin so she would not fall.

ōYou're here?ō she gasped, and Madame stepped out from behind a statue, set her cigar down on the pedestal, and closed the distance between them.

It had to be a dream. But the hands that caught hold of hers were warm, and the body she felt was flesh and blood. The lips that trailed across her face were those she had longed for night and day. Frantically, she slid her fingers into Sylvia's hair and kissed her so hard and so long, they both had to stop and catch their breath. Their faces were wet; Eloise had no idea with whose tears.

ōI thought you were dead,ō she croaked.

ōI know.ō Sylvia cradled her close. *ōI'm so sorry, my darling girl.ō*

ōI can't believe it.ō Eloise ran a hand over Sylvia's face, allowing her fingertips to verify the planes and hollows imprinted so long ago. The bones were more prominent now, and a thin track of flesh was knotted from her right temple to her jaw. Horrified, she said, *ōYou've been hurt.ō*

ōHaven't we all?ō

ōWhere have you been?ō

“We’ll have plenty of time to talk about that.” Sylvia drew back a little and put her arm around Eloise’s waist. “I have something to show you.”

She walked Eloise to the granite wall, collected her cigar, and moved a small urn at the angel’s feet. The door to the mausoleum opened, and they entered the lamp-lit interior. In the center of the room a stairway led down. Eloise stared in astonishment as they followed it through a crypt to a concealed storage bunker packed with supplies, then along a narrow corridor lined with stretcher beds.

“What is this?” she asked.

“A safe place.”

Stunned, Eloise sank down on one of the beds. “You were here all along?”

“No.” Sylvia sat down next to her. “I was away almost all the time, collecting the people I brought here.”

Hurt consumed Eloise. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It would have been dangerous for you to know.”

“I don’t understand. If you were here, why didn’t you meet me? I came every year.”

“I know. I wanted to. So very badly.” Sylvia gazed at Eloise as if devouring her. “At first, I thought if I didn’t come, you would simply go back to America. You’d be safe. I wanted that. Later, I had to protect you as best I could.”

“But I knew what was happening in the village!” Eloise protested. “Every time the Vichy patrols came through, I knew all the Jews hid in the forests.”

“And many hid down here,” Sylvia said, “including the ones we took across the border to Switzerland. I didn’t tell you because I couldn’t. The Vichy did not suspect me or the Raynauds, but if you’d been caught on any of your Résistance missions—”

“You think I’d have told the Gestapo under torture?”

“Anyone would.”

Eloise didn’t know whether to be angry or touched, but she understood Sylvia’s choices. She lowered her gaze to the hands holding hers and realized several of Sylvia’s fingers were missing. Everywhere she looked, there were scars. Along the forearms exposed by her rolled-up khaki sleeves. At the base of her throat. Even her beautiful mouth was slightly twisted in one corner.

“I am not as I was,” Sylvia conceded dryly. A pained uncertainty entered her expression. “If you find me unattractive—”

“Stop.” Eloise placed two fingers across her lips. “You could not be more perfect. I fell in love with you the moment I first saw you, and nothing has changed.”

“Then I am Fortune’s pet.” A smile of pure joy lifted Sylvia’s face, erasing the pain so evident. “I think I fell in love with you the moment you took that first sip of absinthe. I felt like I had corrupted the most innocent creature alive. From that moment on, all I could think about was completing your education.”

Before Eloise could reply, she was in Sylvia’s arms, where she needed to be. And Sylvia’s kiss told her everything she needed to know. The world had gone mad and yet there was hope.

Love could survive anything. For them, it had.

THE END