

## CHAPTER 1



*Look at the nations and watch—  
and be utterly amazed.  
For I am going to do something in your days  
that you would not believe,  
even if you were told.*

—HABAKKUK 1:5 NIV

31 DECEMBER 1943  
FORÊT DE MEUDON  
MEUDON, FRANCE

If Lila de Laurent were discovered in the forest, she was dead. Orphaned snowflakes drifted down, making the depths of the woods seem far more threatening in their desolation than the streets of Paris ever could. Floodlights grasped behind her, searching through the trees with skeletal shadows as she swept through undergrowth that frayed the hem of her ivory gown into damp strips. The sounds of patrol dogs barking in the distance echoed

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loudly, competing with her own drumming heartbeat as she ran through the snow.

If the Vichy police caught up to her, they wouldn't need an excuse to turn Lila over to the SS. And the Nazis would show no mercy. They wouldn't inquire why a *Vogue* fashion plate was trekking through the Forêt de Meudon on New Year's Eve. A bullet hole through her side and a pistol in her pocket would tell them all they needed to know about who Lila de Laurent had become.

The gloved hand she kept pressed to her side warned of urgency, blood seeping through the thin gabardine plaits of her ivory opera coat—a stain she couldn't hope to hide and an impediment she could not ignore.

*"Il faut que je file!"* Run! Lila gave herself the order through gritted teeth.

Even if it hurt to breathe, or move, or think from one moment to the next, she had to keep going. The Boche were as thick as the trees within the Forêt borders and the Maquis had a system of guerrilla fighters positioned in all directions spanning from Paris. It meant they couldn't account for one combatant's safety—even from their own guns—making the escape through the forest a foolhardy one if she was discovered and disbelieved by either side.

Her comrade, Violette, had repeated the warning with a firm grip to her arm seconds before Lila fled the Hôtel Ritz that evening:

"To go through the Meudon is your only way out now. But be careful; it is overrun. Change your clothes. And cut your hair. If they learn of this, the SS will circulate a photo of you as the fashion princess with the trademark marron locks spilling down her back. You must not look like her. If you are to live, then that girl must first die."

With no time to shed the silk gown she wore or to see to the fallen chignon that now tangled in long ropes over her shoulders, Lila had

already failed that instruction. So she avoided the cleared paths—which were likely host to buried mines at their borders—and kept to the camouflage of snowy places, following the trail set by Nazi-protected rail lines stretching through the trees.

A road curved round a bend and over a rise; château gates emerged.

Imposing towers of stone, twisted bramble, and ironwork stood as ghostly sentries guarding the thicket. Fresh tire tracks marred the road. In the distance a golden halo cut through the trees from candlelight glowing in the windowsills of a grand château. Scores of leaded-glass panes filled the front, beyond a lavish covered portico of burnished stone and the line of snowcapped autos that dotted the circular drive. Shadows moved across the windows as château guests passed by with champagne flutes and the blur of elegant, white-tie dress.

Lila melted into the trunk of a Scots pine to catch her breath, her slippers sinking against frozen pine needles at her feet.

A waning crescent moon hung overhead—near midnight.

An hour more trekking through the blistering cold wouldn't have tempted Lila to stop under normal circumstances, as the only châteaux left in the country still operating as manor houses were controlled by either the Nazi elite or *collaborateurs* in the Régime de Vichy. But peeling her hand from her middle was no longer possible—she'd be knees-in-the-snow from the pain and dead by dawn with or without the Nazis' help.

Her options were run and die, or stop, risk, and pray.

At a château of this size, there must be a service entrance round the back. Perhaps an outbuilding or, if fate smiled, a larder that may be stocked but not checked again until morning. A few hours' sleep . . . protection from the wind . . . even the hopeful promise of food—together they could prove the difference in survival versus not.

With careful steps to avoid the light, Lila followed the tree line around the back, watching for guard patrols that could appear, guns drawn, at any time. A cobblestone path led to the château and she

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stopped shy of it, behind a wagonette hoisted up by its broken wheel upon a pile of stacked bricks.

Snow fell, silent but drifting beyond a pitched-wood awning and heathered oak door that was warmed by the glow of an outdoor sconce. A beryl-and-rust-patched Renault idled in the alcove, its back doors ajar and motor spitting exhaust like cigarette smoke rising at a society party. The white text of its business name had faded on the placard, but enough remained that Lila could read upon its side:

BOULANGERIE  
29 Boulevard Rouget de Lisle  
Montreuil, Versailles

*“Merci, God. Merci.”* Lila closed her eyes, her forehead pressed up against the rough wood of the wagonette for support as she drank in deep, steadying breaths. “Montreuil—only two kilometers away.”

She could make it to Versailles from there. Meet her contact. Make the handoff. And then from Versailles . . . she didn’t yet know.

*“Allons-y!”* A man’s shout cut through the sputter of the engine, causing her to jump and look out once again.

Wearing wool trousers, an unbuttoned vest, and a white uniform shirt with cuffs rolled at the forearms, the man hopped down from the back of the bread truck and peered through the service entrance. He seemed to give little care for the bitter cold. Instead he focused on muscling crates in the back, then stormed through the door with such ferocity he nearly took the oak from its hinges. It swung wide in a ferocious clap against the château’s burnished stone and bounced against the wall with a sluggish tremble afterward.

*“Allons-y!”*

The man disappeared through the glow of the servants’ entrance, his calls of “Let’s go!” dying away with him.

Lila scanned the scene. No movement in the front of the truck

meant no extra workers to worry after. And she could just see crates and interior shelving in the back—enough cover to remain hidden. Fighting to stay alert through the ride into the commune of Montreuil, how she'd make it out of the truck unnoticed once there and whether the deliveryman might be friend or foe—those were the worries she'd confront as she came to them.

*Each worry in its time.*

Hoping the mass of snowy footprints around the entrance would conceal the addition of hers, Lila sprinted to the shadows beyond the Renault's back doors and climbed inside. She pressed her back up against the cold metal cage and slid to the floor like melting snow, landing against a wooden crate of baguettes and rustic sourdough boules. The only savior left was the tiny pistol in her coat pocket. Lila peeled her glove off and, in a last defense, curled her bloodied palm around the grip, holding the weapon tight against her lapel.

"Always putting us off schedule." The man didn't shout this time but grumbled a frustrated rebuke barely audible over the Renault's engine. He returned alone, muscling two empty crates stacked one on top of the other, and seemingly without the companion he'd sought.

In the light she could see he was of medium build, tall, and with soft brown hair that looked as though it had been parted and combed once but had been mussed by the dance of wind. The man lifted crates over the tailgate and slid them across the truck's metal floor. He braced hands on the doors to secure them . . . but paused.

Lila held her breath.

She could only pray the ivory satin of her gown hadn't shimmered in the shadows. But the action, however well meaning to save her, proved the opposite. The man surveyed the crates, then lifted a cautious boot to the tailgate.

With agility that surprised even her, Lila thrust the pistol up to shoulder height—hand only exposed—and extended it point-blank to his chest. "*Arrêtez!*"

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Though Lila issued the order to halt with all the confidence she could muster, her bloodied fist trembled as pain pulsed through her. She anchored her arm tighter at the waist and firmed her grip, repeating, “Arrêtez,” not a shout this time, but with what she hoped was an iron tone.

The man raised his palms and exhaled a fog of breath in the cold as he lowered his boot to the ground.

“*D'accord*. Easy . . . I'll not hurt you.”

An ironic promise given she held the gun. But backing down was a good sign.

“What is it you want, mademoiselle?”

Perhaps it was the shock at being on the run for hours through the streets of Paris and a forest teeming with patrol dogs and Nazi guns, but Lila couldn't answer. No wonder her mind had chosen that moment to play its ill-fated tricks, telling her the deep voice that was so deceptively soft as it raked over gravel was one she'd heard before.

Many times.

The voice belonged to a dead man.

“*Bien*. Take it.” He tipped his head to the thieves' hoard of bread in the crates, enough that the light caught his face. “Whatever you wish is yours. Just take it and go. I want no trouble here.”

Lila stared back into his eyes, their unmistakable clear blue triggering long-buried memories. Though a few years older and thinned down, with an unshaven jaw, in caterer's livery rather than the posh tuxedos of her mind's eye, and standing at the tailgate of a broken-down bread truck in the Forêt de Meudon of all times and places in their busted-up world—nothing could mistake who stood before her.

“You . . .” Lila exhaled, a breath clouding on air as she held firm on her knees.

René Touliard flinched in a reflexive double take when she edged forward and the sconce light cast its glow upon her. If he was startled to see her, he kept hold of his composure—shoulders squared, eyes in

constant communion with hers, his hands stilled on air as snowflakes drifted in a lazy waltz between them.

“Yes—*me*.”

“I thought . . . you were dead.”

“Obviously not. Very much alive.” His manner shifted after he inspected the gun, a furrow marring his brow at Lila’s crimson-stained palm and the traces of blood caked under her fingernails. “How’d you get your hands on that type of pistol? A Liberator. Thought only *La Résistance* were rumored to travel with those.”

“They do.” It was an offhanded remark born of pain and haste—one René wasn’t supposed to read. She had no idea what the weapon was, just that it was her only defense.

“Oh no . . . Lila. What have you gotten yourself into?”

Lila shook her head. “There’s no time. Can you drive?”

“I might. If you lower that. Out of courtesy to an old friend? I’m afraid I don’t trust you not to kill me.”

“An old friend. Is that what I am?” She lifted her chin a notch and kept the Liberator frozen in place as her heart processed the implication that the only man she’d ever loved had downgraded her to a mere friend in his remembrance.

“You were once.”

“Then I wouldn’t trust a friend not to turn this around and . . . use it on me. Not even you.”

Lila’s words tripped over pain, shock, or cold. Any one of them could have their fancy at the moment. She couldn’t tell for certain she wasn’t passed out in a Paris gutter somewhere and these might be her last terrible moments alive before her body gave her over to the grave—to see René in both her dreams and nightmares now too.

Footsteps scuffled behind them.

René darted his glance to the depths of the truck and back again. Lila nodded and descended into the shadows, their back-and-forth forgotten as she eased behind the crates. A younger man invaded the

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alcove in the next breath. He, too, was dressed in caterer's livery but arms void of crates.

"Alright. Here I am—Duckworth at your service."

"*En français, s'il te plaît!*" René snapped, the calm and cool serrated out of his tone. "And don't use that name out here. You know better."

"*Oui, votre Majesté!* Even if no one's about." The young man agreed, though with a ghastly bow and a little cheek about his air thereafter. "Listen, you're mad as a hatter to ask me to leave now. You cannot think to blame me for wanting to stay, not when the invitation to snoop on a New Year's party for the Nazis' top brass is so thoroughly . . . *je ne sais quoi.*"

"*Non.* But I do expect you to remember who you are before you get someone killed. If it turns out to be me, I'll be very displeased and will feel no guilt at taking it out on your arrogant hide." René clicked one of the doors closed so Lila was lost to the shadows behind him. "You wish to remain in your merriment, so stay. I have deliveries to make before dawn."

"And by then I should have all the information I need, as per usual."

"I'll return to fetch you in the morning," René said matter-of-factly, and slammed the other door closed.

The sealed doors muffled their conversation so Lila couldn't make out the rest. But whatever René had said was convincing enough that he opened the truck door and climbed into the worn leather driver's seat alone.

"What did you tell him?"

René sat, staring straight ahead into the darkness of the path that disappeared through the pines as if he, too, were trying to catch his breath.

"Nothing of consequence. Just to have a care until morning. The last thing I need is two problems to contend with tonight."

Was that what she was? *A problem?* Seemed like the bigger problem

in France was uniformed in Nazi gray and pointing loaded weapons in their general direction.

“Why . . . ?”

*Why are you here? Why are you alive? Why did you leave all those years ago?*

Pain seared again, recoiling through Lila’s middle so words died on her tongue. Of all the questions in the world she could have asked him now, she landed on the most hapless.

“Why are you delivering for a boulangerie?”

René glanced over his shoulder to her form doubled over in the shadows. Softness greeted her in the attention from his eyes, and heaven help her, from somewhere deep inside, Lila could still read that look and she knew what it meant. He was calculating—thinking a thousand things he wouldn’t say.

“You’re hurt?”

“Oui. I’m afraid I am.”

“Here.” He tossed a coat to the floor that grazed her knees in thick wool. “Stay warm, *Luciole*. I’ll get you out of here.” He kicked the truck into gear and it lumbered toward the forest’s vast darkness as she pulled the coat over her shoulders like a blanket.

*Luciole.*

Lila wished she hadn’t heard the nickname again.

It had been ages, not since they’d once seen the anomaly of fireflies dotting a summer sky over the gardens of Versailles. And she thought she’d never hear that voice again or never see those eyes glance her way. Yet here he was—*her* René. Back from the dead just as he pleased. Like it was that easy to do. And casting a quick wave to the uniformed soldiers at the guard shack as they allowed the truck to pass through the château gates to be swallowed up by the ink of night.

Once through, the Liberator no longer seemed needed.

Lila allowed the pistol to sag and she went down with it, the cool metal floor welcoming as it met her cheek. She lay perfumed by

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the random scents of yeast, balsam, and him—from the collar of the coat—drifting as the pain finally came out of dormancy to its full fervor. She twisted her fingertips into a fist against the wool lapel and squeezed her eyes shut.

“Lila?” A pause, and then a shout. “Lila—*réveille-toi!* Do you hear me? Wake up!”

“I’m awake . . .”

Yet she drifted off, the crags and crevices in the forest road causing the truck tires to bump along, jostling her toward sleep like an odd sort of Pied Piper’s lullaby.

“I can’t drive and see to you at the same time. You must stay with me. Keep talking. Tell me, what in heaven’s name are you doing in the middle of the Meudon? Do you have any idea how dangerous it is out here?”

“I think I’ve got a pulse on that.”

“Might we table your wit for just one moment? How did you get here?”

*No. We won’t talk of yesterdays that led to today. Not now.*

Best to keep focused on the task at hand. “I can’t even say. But on foot through the forest as far as I could manage.”

“From where?” He glanced over his shoulder, then back to the road, hitting her with glances that said he wanted an answer. “How did you venture this far south?”

“I’m bound for the village of Versailles. Château side. Surely you remember it.”

“Versailles is swarming with military police.”

*Of course I know it is. I’m no ingénue now.*

She exhaled, losing herself in the pain. “I know.”

“Then you must also know there is no way for a rogue bird to fly over without the say-so of the Boche, let alone a bread truck to roll through the front gates of Versailles with a stowaway in tow. It’d be a death wish to try—yours and mine.”

“I must . . . get there.”

Lila breathed deep though the pain sliced her in two. She’d heard it from her father’s experience in the Great War that men withered after taking a bullet—they fell down, bathed in blood, and remained silent, or gritted their teeth like they were chewing iron. Now she knew why. Either scenario seemed more favorable than the fire coursing through her at the moment.

Tears gathered in her eyes and she turned her forehead to the damp, rusted floorboards, refusing even then that he’d see her cry.

“*C’est pas possible!*” he muttered as he shouldered them around a tight turn against a snowbank.

“You . . . believed in the impossible once, didn’t you?” Only the chugging engine answered back, and she knew she’d hit a nerve. “Tell me! Didn’t you?”

“But we do not live in that world now, Luciole.”

Lila slid her palm along the hem of her opera coat, searching for the lump sewn into its lining. She found the treasure safe. And for the moment so was she. That alone meant Providence still watched over them. Lila had made it out of the Hôtel Ritz. Out of Paris. And now it seemed she’d landed in the hands of the one person on earth she could trust to take her the rest of the way to Versailles.

“Perhaps not. But even if this is the end, we still have to try.”

“The end of what?”

“My nightmare in Paris since the day you left.”

The last thought that penetrated Lila’s mind before she tumbled into oblivion was that even in the midst of their war-torn world, impossible might never be fully out of reach. After all, René Touliard had returned from the grave and that could mean everything. Lila could only pray she wouldn’t find herself there in his stead.

“Happy New Year, René,” she whispered, and let go.