

## JACQUELINE

### PROLOGUE

*Rennes, France – March 8, 1943*

Her mother's scream was followed by the crash of shattering glass.

“Maman?” Jacqueline Falna dropped her book and dashed toward the sound. She found her mother slumped on the floor. Her face was buried in her hands. The cup of coffee she'd been drinking lay in shards, the muddy liquid seeping into the hem of her skirt.

Jacqueline tiptoed toward her mother, careful to avoid the sharp slivers of china. “Oh, Maman, you have broken your cup.”

The cup was one of Maman's treasures. She said it made the bitter brew of chicory and roasted acorns taste more like the real coffee she loved before the German army occupied Rennes. The dainty china cup was all that remained of a wedding gift from her brother, Henri, who died in the Battle of France. Maman recovered it from the rubble of their home after German planes bombed the city. Had it been only four years ago? Jacqueline remembered that house – the sunny kitchen, the large parlor, and best of all, the room of her very own. Her old home was so different from the cramped one-room apartment here on Rue Noel du Fail, where people lived above and below, and old Madame Dupre, the upstairs neighbor, pounded the floor with her cane whenever Jacqueline was too noisy.

Maman shook with silent sobs.

“Do not cry. I will help you clean it up.” Jacqueline turned to get the broom and spied a sheet of paper lying in the puddle of coffee. She plucked it up by the corner and shook it dry. As she read the message, her chest grew so tight she could hardly breathe.

*‘Dear Madame Falna,*

*It is my sad duty to inform you that your husband, Capitaine Jacques Falna, was lost in battle over Lorient when his plane was shot down by enemy fighters. I regret that we have been unable to recover his remains, but I hope it will be of some comfort to know that he died a hero in defense of our beloved France...’*

She stopped reading. The letter fell from her hands and drifted back to the wet floor. Little sparks danced before her eyes, and the room began spinning. She sank to her knees and put her head in her mother’s lap. Over the roaring sound in her ears, she heard Maman wail.

“Oh, Jacqueline, whatever shall we do?”

As Jacqueline tried to think, an avalanche of pain overwhelmed her. She closed her eyes while Maman stroked her dark curls. Her thoughts drifted back to the last time she saw Papa.

It was Christmas Eve. He came in secret late at night. Since he was a pilot for the Free French Air Force, he had to avoid being spotted by Nazi soldiers. Maman woke her, and the three of them spent the night talking and laughing, basking in the joy of being together. Papa looked so handsome in his dark blue uniform, a medal with the gold-winged FAFL insignia pinned to his jacket. He even brought Jacqueline a Christmas gift – *L’Humble Sainte Bernadette*, a book about Saint Bernadette of Lourdes.

“I know how much you love to read,” Papa said. “This book is about a French girl who was brave and true despite great hardship. She was called by the Blessed Lady when she was only fourteen, just four years older than you. I pray she will watch over you while I am gone.”

*Gone*, Jacqueline thought. *Papa, gone? No, it cannot be!* She forced her eyes open and realized her thumb was in her mouth. She jerked it out, shocked to have lapsed into a habit she broke when she was five. The words echoed in her mind – *lost in battle...shot down by enemy fighters...unable to recover his remains...* A sudden thought made her bolt upright.

“Maman, do not cry. Papa is not dead,” she said. “He is missing, but he will find his way home. He would never leave us.”

Maman shook her head. “Child, you must accept what is true.”

Jacqueline leapt to her feet. “No!” she shrieked, grabbing the letter. “This is not true. He is alive. You will see!” She crushed the soggy paper in her fist and threw it to the floor. Then she ran out the door and down the stairs, almost knocking over Madame Bergier who was hurrying up the steps from her apartment.

“Jacqueline! Is something wrong?” she asked. “I thought I heard your mother scream. Does she need help?”

Jacqueline ignored Madame Bergier and kept running, out onto Rue Noel du Fail and through the narrow streets of the city. She didn’t stop until she reached the Cathedrale Sainte-Pierre. As she entered the dark church, her heavy breathing broke the stillness. She slipped into a wooden pew and bowed her head.

“Please, God,” she prayed, “make it not be true. Please bring Papa home. I will do anything You ask, just let him be alive.” She turned to her left where a statue of Saint Bernadette gazed down at flickering rows of red votive candles. “Saint Bernadette, help me to be brave like you so Papa will be proud of me when he returns.”

The scent of incense and candle wax was strangely comforting. As her breathing slowed, Jacqueline felt the pain in her chest shrink into a hard little ball. She locked it deep in her heart. She knew she could never let it out. If she did, it would surely eat her alive.

## PART ONE

## CHAPTER 1

*Rennes, France – May 15, 1944*

“These are dark times, Berthe.” Madame Bergier picked absently at the yellow star sewn to her blouse. The star identified her as a Jew. “When I pass those Nazi soldiers in the street, my blood freezes. I can feel their eyes on me. I have heard horrible tales of what is happening to the Jews in Germany.”

Maman filled Madame Bergier’s chipped cup with acorn coffee. “Do not worry, Sarah. This is still France, not Germany. Drink your coffee.”

Madame Bergier took a sip and made a face. “Coffee!” She practically spat the word. “The Germans drink coffee while we must settle for this. What I would give for a cup of real coffee with cream and lots of sugar.”

Madame Bergier had become a daily visitor since the letter came. Maman enjoyed her company, and Jacqueline loved playing with Miriam, her baby. Jacqueline often wished she had a brother or sister, but when Madame Bergier brought her son along, Jacqueline was glad she was an only child. Just because David was a year older and a boy, he thought he had the right to boss her around.

Jacqueline bounced Miriam on her knee. The baby smiled and drooled. When Jacqueline wiped her little chin, Miriam grabbed her hand and gummed her finger.

“You are very juicy today,” Jacqueline sang in a high-pitched voice that made Miriam laugh.

Madame Bergier rose to leave. “I must find something for dinner. I hope Isaac was able to buy some fabric. We are down to our last bolt of cloth. If we do not sell some clothing soon...” Her voice trailed off. Monsieur Bergier was a tailor known throughout town for the quality of his work. He had a thriving business before the war.

Maman hugged Madame Bergier. “Things will get better. We must trust God and remain hopeful.” In spite of her brave words, Maman looked tired and beaten. Since the letter came, she seemed to grow older each day. Her hazel eyes had lost their sparkle and were ringed with dark circles. She’d become reed-thin, and streaks of silver were appearing in her hair. *That horrid black dress she wears every day does not help*, Jacqueline thought. *Dressing like a widow – as if she has given up on Papa.*

Madame Bergier lifted Miriam, leaving a long string of drool on Jacqueline’s skirt. “She will be getting a tooth soon,” Madame Bergier said. “I hope she did not soak you to the skin.”

“I do not mind.” Jacqueline tickled Miriam’s toes. She didn’t know then that she’d never see Miriam’s first tooth.

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Jacqueline looked down at the street from the apartment’s lone window. A listless breeze stirred a few scraps of paper in the gutter. Other than that, Rue Noel du Fail was free of trash. German law forbade the people of Rennes from discarding any rubbish. Rags, paper, feathers, rubber, leather – even the horns and hooves of animals – had to be reused. Jacqueline decided to go outside and collect the paper. Maman could use it for lighting the stove.

She was picking up a torn page from *Ouest-Éclair*, a newspaper Maman called “a piece of Nazi trash,” when a shiny black car pulled up. A well-dressed young woman stepped out, but Jacqueline pretended not to see her. The woman’s name was Yvonne Jamet, and she lived in the apartment on the top floor. Maman told Jacqueline not to speak to her because she was a

*collaborateur*, a woman who kept company with the enemy. But Mademoiselle Jamet had always been kind to Jacqueline, greeting her with a smile and sometimes giving her a piece of fruit or chocolate. Even though she had stylishly curled hair and wore face powder and rouge, Jacqueline thought there was sadness in her eyes.

Mademoiselle Jamet blew a kiss to the German soldier in the car. As he pulled away, she turned to Jacqueline. “*Allô, Jacqui,*” she said, bending to straighten the seam of her stocking. They were real silk stockings, not the painted-on seams some girls used.

Jacqueline mumbled a greeting without looking up. She hoped Maman wasn’t watching.

Mademoiselle Jamet ruffled Jacqueline’s hair and disappeared into the building in a cloud of perfume. Her shoes were made of soft leather and didn’t make the clomping sound of the wooden-soled shoes most French women wore. Jacqueline felt a stab of embarrassment as she looked down at her skinny legs sticking up from ugly black rubber galoshes. Maman had traded some food tickets for the boots when Jacqueline’s feet outgrew her shoes.

She sighed. Mademoiselle Jamet was like a brilliant peacock with her beautiful clothes that fit just right, her platinum curls, and her bright red lips. Next to her, Jacqueline felt like a little brown wren – brown hair, brown eyes, brown patched skirt, and a faded blouse that once belonged to Maman. She wondered where Mademoiselle Jamet went with the tall, blonde soldier in his shiny car. A fancy restaurant, perhaps? Or a party where people danced and ate bonbons and drank champagne while the rest of Rennes scavenged for scraps of food? Maybe Maman was right, but somehow Jacqueline couldn’t believe that Mademoiselle Jamet was an evil person.

A faint, high-pitched screech broke her thoughts. She looked around but found nothing unusual. Children were jumping rope a few houses down. An old woman dressed in black swept the sidewalk across the street. A mother rounded the corner pushing a baby carriage. Curious, Jacqueline followed the noise to a narrow alleyway that ran alongside the building. It seemed to be

coming from a rain barrel standing in a corner under the Bergiers' window. She peeked inside and found a scrawny orange kitten. He was mewling pitifully, paddling his legs to keep from sinking. When he turned his face to her, she saw that his right eye was missing. She reached in and grabbed him by the scruff of his neck. He hissed and twisted, trying to hunch his back.

“Calm down, little one.” Jacqueline stroked his wet head. Soon the kitten went limp and hung dripping from her hand. He looked at her with his one green eye and gave a soft mew.

“Where did you come from?” she asked. Most of the stray cats had long since disappeared. Although no one spoke of it, Jacqueline believed they'd found their way into someone's stewpot. *When your stomach is always empty, she thought, you are not fussy about what fills it.* She sat down and placed the kitten in her lap, using her skirt to rub him dry. His eyelids drooped, and soon he was asleep.

“Now what?” Jacqueline muttered. The only answer was a soft thrumming sound coming from the damp ball of fur nestled in her lap.