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A
BAKERY
in
PARIS

A NOVEL

AIMIE K. RUNYAN

Author of *The School for German Brides*

A
BAKERY
IN PARIS

A Novel



Aimie K. Runyan

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Dedication

To my Jeremy,
*who planted the seeds for this book in the earliest days of our relationship.
I couldn't ask for a better partner, a better road trip captain, or a better
friend.*
*Here's to many more years of snuggle-reading on the couch.
I love you.*

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Also by Aimie K. Runyan

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About the Publisher

Chapter One

Lisette

September 2, 1870

“Come away from the window, Lisette. I don’t want anyone knowing we’re up here.”

Maman sat in her chair, needlework in hand since breakfast, though I doubt she’d made more than a dozen stitches in the three hours since, but it gave her hands company as she fretted. We lived on the Place Royale, one of the oldest neighborhoods in the heart of the city. After the Revolution, it was known as the Place des Vosges, but with the reinstatement of the monarchy, it was the Place Royale once more. Some of the oldest and wealthiest families in Paris lived here, and Maman was certain that if the Prussians took Paris, our neighborhood would be a prime target for their cruelty, while I thought she attributed more importance to our neighborhood than it deserved. There was no strategic advantage to invading our peaceful little corner of Paris, aside from the riches they could plunder. It didn’t seem enough to me, but Maman was convinced that if they breached the walls of Paris it would mean our heads. Despite Maman’s concerns, Papa would not retreat to the country as our neighbors had done. For weeks, he refused to think the Prussians would succeed in getting as far as Paris. Now that it seemed likely that they would, he said he would not abandon our home to the invaders, even if it meant risking our lives.

Our manservants, Gustave and Philippe . . . would they defend us against the mob when the Prussians invaded? More likely they would betray us if they thought they could save themselves. For this reason, Papa distrusted them and anyone else of the working class. The defeat at Sedan

and the rumored displacement of the emperor made this possibility, once seemingly absurd, now entirely probable.

“Are you worried, Papa?” little Gislène asked from Maman’s side.

“Not in the least. The emperor will have the Prussians well in hand before long, mark my words,” Papa said as he paced the floor.

Antoine, my little brother, nodded enthusiastically from his chair where he’d spent the last hour reading one of our father’s favorite tomes. He longed to follow in Papa’s footsteps so badly, I wondered he didn’t stitch himself permanently to Papa’s side. Gislène, the baby, was curled up next to Maman on her settee. Maman’s precious little poppet, complete with gold ringlets. It wasn’t hard to understand Maman’s preference for her, and she was sweet enough I couldn’t begrudge her the attentions that preferment afforded.

I was the oldest. Born a girl when they had so desperately wanted an heir, and too strong-willed to be a pet to Maman. At first, I think they viewed me as a bit of an experiment in child-rearing. They practiced their parenting skills on me—with much help from a string of governesses, of course. But it was ten long, disappointing years before their precious boy was born. I think they rather grew to resent me during that time. Once Antoine was born, followed soon after by Gislène, that resentment grew into a usually comfortable indifference. In Antoine they had an heir, and in Gislène they had their sweet, biddable beauty. I was pretty enough, though red-haired and freckled, which made Maman lament for my marriage prospects. It was lonely at times, being the overlooked child, but it had the chief virtue of affording me a measure of independence that more attentive parents wouldn’t have given a young woman of twenty-one.

“I’m going to take a nap,” I announced, rather than claiming my usual spot on the side chair with one of the dry tomes of which Maman approved. Books on decorum and the running of a house, mainly.

“Is that the best use of your time?” Maman asked, always keen to exude more interest in my goings-on than she felt.

“Give her some peace, woman. These are trying times,” Papa chided. My lips parted in surprise for a fraction of a second. He was rarely one to use his breath to come to my defense.

“A sudden headache, Maman. I’ll be right as rain come suppertime, I’m sure.”

She breathed a disappointed sigh as though a midday nap were somehow a moral failing. If it were, it was one she succumbed to at least once a week, but it wasn’t worth the grief to mention it.

“Take this list to Marie for the marketing before you go up then,”

Maman said, handing me a scrap of paper marked with her elaborate script. “I hope Nanette has shown her how to do it properly. I don’t want the shopkeepers swindling us any more than they already are.”

Our newest kitchen maid had just been hired on a few months before, but Maman had taken little interest in training her up, so the job had largely fallen to our elderly cook and myself. Thankfully, Marie was smart and willing, and all too happy to take orders from me instead of my parents.

I refrained from shaking my head and left, the slip of paper in hand, without another acknowledgment.

The kitchen always felt like a completely different country to me, the way it contrasted with the rest of the house. It was bright and airy, owing to the doors that opened onto the back courtyard. Unlike the rest of the house, which was littered with fussy, expensive knickknacks of Maman’s choosing, each item in the efficient kitchen had a place and purpose. Each spoon, knife, and mixing bowl had a designated spot on a hook, shelf, or drawer and anyone privileged enough to gain admittance to Nanette’s kitchen risked inciting her wrath if a single utensil was mislaid. Gleaming copper pots hung from the walls, or else sat bubbling on the massive cast iron stove that dominated the room, most often laden with soups and stews. As a child, I used to pretend the massive stockpot was a witch’s cauldron and the rows of spice canisters were secret ingredients the benevolent witch—sweet Nanette—had spent a lifetime collecting and preserving. Coriander wasn’t simple coriander, but rather the trimmings of fur from a very rare species of bat collected on a full moon. Oregano was moss of a yew tree blessed by benevolent fairies, and so on.

Nanette enjoyed the novelty of my presence in the kitchens at first. When my curiosity grew into a serious interest, she didn’t shoo me away, but taught me her trade as she would have her own daughter. I learned at her elbow, my little red journal with gilded pages in hand, constantly taking notes. I gave the excuse I was reviewing my lessons in the privacy of my room, and it seemed she was happy enough to believe the fib. On the rare occasion Maman wondered where I was, Nanette and I enacted a plan. The maids were regularly bribed with biscuits and cakes, often of my own making, to come to the kitchens and alert me so I could sneak up the back stairs to my room and come down to her summons from the main staircase after brushing off a healthy coating of flour from my dress. But when I became old enough to go out in public with Maman, my presence wasn’t reliable enough for me to be a consistent help in the kitchen. As Nanette grew older, it had become clear to me that she needed a dedicated

assistant, and so it came to be that Marie was taken on.

Marie was already working on preparations for the evening meal. She moved with a practiced efficiency that betrayed the hard truth that as soon as she'd been tall enough to see over the edge of a stove, she'd been forced to spend most of her time behind one.

"Maman has marketing for you," I said, placing the list on a clean area on the worktable.

"Of course she has," she said, wiping her cheek with her hand before turning her attention back to the simmering pot. She realized the breach of etiquette and looked at me wide-eyed. "I mean, of course, Mademoiselle Lisette. Right away."

I waved dismissively at the faux pas. Maman probably was entitled to any abuse poor Marie could throw her way. "Is everything all right?" I asked. "You don't seem yourself." Her face looked paler than usual, and there were beads of sweat on her brow, presumably from the effort of working through some sort of injury.

"It's nothing, mademoiselle. Don't worry about it." She took a step toward the simmering pot on the stove and her face betrayed that she was in pain.

"Nonsense, I insist you tell me. I can fetch a doctor for you." "No need for that. I twisted my ankle this morning. I slipped on the moss in the courtyard. It hurts something fierce, but it'll be well enough in a few days. I've bound it as tight as I can with a rag. No doctor would be able to do more."

Nanette joined us from the opposite end of the kitchen. "That's what that clatter was this morning? I thought you told me an alley cat had knocked over the washboard I'd left out to dry. Why would you make up stories?"

"I didn't want to get sacked. I got back to work as soon as I could stand."

"Child, I don't know how many times I have to tell you, I won't send you packing for a trifle like that. If I did, I'd be back to doing the job of two until I could convince Monsieur Vigneau to hire a new girl. It took me twenty years to convince him the first time. And that was with our little Kitchen Mouse here badgering him at every turn for the last five."

"I'm sorry, Nanette, I won't do it again." "Well, you can't do the marketing in such a state. I'll have to do it for you." Since the war broke out, we'd trimmed the staff back to its barest levels and there was really no one to spare for the task aside from me.

"Your parents will have my hide if I allow it," she said. "I'll make do,

really.”

“They’ll never know I was gone,” I pressed. I could almost feel the warm September sun against my face and would have gladly traded the sooty air from town for the stagnant air of the house for any price. I was nearly mad to be confined there, no matter how fine the carpets or how lavish the furniture and trappings.

“It’s not safe for a well-born girl such as yourself to be out in public unescorted just now, mademoiselle. You’d be risking your life.”

“So, you’ll lend me a dress. That way I won’t be conspicuous at the market. Marie will take a rest in my room. We’re not too far from the same size. They expect me to be napping until dinner, which is exactly what you should be doing.”

“I haven’t a spare,” Marie explained. “I’ve been saving for another, but I’ve only been here two months . . .”

“Never mind that. You can wear one of my nightgowns and I’ll wear what you have on, if you don’t mind.”

Marie looked as though she wanted to object but restrained her reluctance behind clenched teeth. She was clearly using every bit of her will to manage her pain and she hadn’t the strength to argue. She moved the soup to the cooler side of the stove and wiped her hands on her apron in resolution.

I let her lean against me as we took the back stairs up to my room. Mine was the closest to the stairs and thankfully the easiest for her to retreat from if someone were to come looking. I fervently hoped no one would take an uncharacteristic interest in my whereabouts.

As we exchanged clothes, she spewed advice about which shops to frequent and how much to haggle at each. Though having provisions delivered had been the custom, the war with the Prussians had sent everything into a tailspin. We had to go in search of what we needed, hoping to find the ingredients to cobble together meals. I prayed I would remember the details Marie prattled off, but it seemed unlikely. I’d just have to do my best and hope I didn’t pay so much for the weekly supplies that Maman would accuse poor Marie of malfeasance.

Marie’s dress smelled of sweat, grease, and stale flour. I was glad I’d had cause to lend her a nightgown so the smell of it wouldn’t permeate my sheets. The nightgown could be laundered before I needed it again, but the sheets would have to wait another week. I’d have to sprinkle them with a bit of my jasmine perfume before I slept that night. It would be all I could do to bear the smell on the dress as I walked in the great outdoors, let alone on my sheets in the confines of my bedchamber as I tried to sleep.

Impulsively, I took the bee bottle from my vanity, and put a dab of the scent behind each ear. It wouldn't cover the smell, but it would be enough to distract me from it. I gathered a few coins and banknotes from my own cache in case I had to visit a shop where Papa didn't have an account.

I looked at my reflection in the glass and winced. The smell aside, Marie's dress was stained and shabby and I felt as though I looked as worn and wan as the fabric that had seen more use than it should have been called to. I snuck out the back courtyard exit as quickly and quietly as I could. Officially, since the siege, I was only allowed one daily constitutional in the Place Royale, preferably in the shade of the arcade so as not to exacerbate my freckles. The grassy square was transected by Stabilise walkways; a mixture of sand, gravel, and whitewash just like in the gardens at Versailles. I'd traversed each footpath a million times in the past month, and each time I heard the grating *crunch-crunch-crunch* of the coarse soil under the soles of my kid boots, I feared I was one step closer to madness. It was with a breath of relief that I escaped onto the cobblestones of the rue de Rivoli and the rest of Paris.

Before the upheaval, I loved to sneak away and lose myself in the bustle of the city. It likely wasn't the safest thing for a young woman to do alone, but I had usually been able to persuade a housemaid to accompany me and give me a wide berth. I loved to ramble about the long winding avenues, made even wider and more accommodating during the recent tenure of Baron Haussmann as prefect. Papa despised Haussmann's grand apartments, along with so many of the changes made since the emperor began renovating Paris with the zeal of a discontented housewife, but I recognized the charms of the wrought-iron balconies and the convenience of having roads wide enough for carriages to pass one another.

Despite the temptation, I wouldn't let myself wander aimlessly that afternoon, no matter how much my soul yearned for it. I managed to procure most of what Marie was meant to buy at the butcher, though the supply looked scarce compared to the months before the war. The fromagerie had barely any stock at all, and Maman would have to do without her favorite camembert from Normandy. Papa would simply remind her, in his less-than-diplomatic way, that war called us all to make sacrifices and that hers was comparatively easy to bear. The shelves at the dry goods store were sparse, but not entirely empty.

I gave my list to the shopkeeper, who looked from it to me and gave me a once-over. He said nothing but set about gathering up the goods Maman had requested. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Some coffee and flour, a few odds and ends. He was able to gather the entirety of the list in a few

minutes' time and brought the items to the counter where I waited.

"Who d'you work for?" he asked, head cocked to the side, as though still assessing me.

"The Vigneau family on the Place Royale," I said. "You can add this to their account."

"You're not the regular girl," he said, now crossing his arms over his chest.

"No, Marie turned her ankle and I've come in her place," I explained. "She wasn't in any condition to walk so far."

"And how am I supposed to know that you're not trying to get free food and charge it to one of my best clients' accounts?" The color in his face was rising and I knew his temper must be close to the boiling point. It would be for me to diffuse it.

"If it's a problem, sir, I can settle the bill in cash this once. I can have them send you a note if I have to come in the future." I reached into Marie's pocket where I'd stuffed a few bank notes. "Will this do?"

"A hundred francs? Are you mad? How in God's name would a kitchen maid come across a hundred francs?" I felt my stomach sink. I hadn't thought about how it would look for a servant to be carrying such a sum.

"The mistress of the house"

"My dear girl, whoever you are, I know enough of Madame Vigneau to know she would no sooner trust a new servant with a hundred francs than she would spit in the emperor's eye."

"Is there a problem, Monsieur Levesque?" A young man in a National Guard uniform approached the counter. His hair was the color of polished bronze, and his eyes were a startling blue. He couldn't have been more than twenty-five years old but had the commanding presence of one who had been in uniform for years. *Monsieur Levesque*. Of course. We hadn't had a maid in my lifetime who hadn't complained of his sour nature.

"Ah, Monsieur Fournier. This—woman—claims to be in the employ of the Vigneau family. And in possession of a large sum of money. It's clear as day she's a thief and a liar."

"Those are weighty accusations, monsieur. Have you any proof of wrongdoing aside from her having money?" The guardsman, rather a tall man, stood to his full height as if conveying the seriousness of the charges.

"No, but since when does a kitchen maid have a hundred francs in her pocket? It can't be through fair means." The shopkeeper crossed his arms over his chest as if his pronouncement was enough to settle the matter.

"You should have been a detective, Levesque. It might have suited you better than being a shopkeeper."

“Are you saying I’m ill-suited for my job, monsieur?” His arms dropped to his sides, and he took a step closer to Monsieur Fournier. A bold move considering how easily the guardsman could set this man in his place.

“I think a shop-keep who isn’t willing to sell goods for ready money needs to consider how he runs his business.”

Levesque snapped his mouth shut. “The total is three francs, *mademoiselle*.” The last word was dripping with disdain. I felt the color rise in my cheeks at the gross overpayment I had offered him. I found a ten-franc bill and slid it across the counter to him. He gave me my change and stared at me with daggers for eyes as I loaded the wares into Marie’s marketing basket. I nodded and exited back onto the street. I exhaled in relief, glad I was nearly finished with my outing, having learned a valuable lesson in how far my ignorance of real life extended.

“Hold on then,” the National Guardsman said when I was ten paces from the shop.

“How may I help you, Monsieur—?” “Fournier,” he reminded me. “Théodore Fournier. You can help by telling me why you’re pretending to work as the Vigneaux’ hired girl and what has happened to Marie.”

“So you believe Monsieur Levesque,” I said. “Why didn’t you arrest me?”

“I don’t believe him exactly,” he said. “And Levesque is a proper bastard. I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of letting him think he’d found a criminal.”

“You think I’m a criminal?” I asked. “No, but kitchen maids don’t carry hundred-franc bills.” He grabbed my hands to look at them. “They don’t have hands that have clearly never seen a drop of dishwater. Nor are they in the habit of wearing jasmine perfume. What’s more, that dress is Marie’s. I want to know what’s happened to her.”

I looked down at the stained dress and then to my hands that were free from the callouses and blisters of an honest day’s work. I cooked when my schedule allowed, but I didn’t have to ruin my hands scrubbing the pans after I had finished. My disguise had been woefully incomplete. “You’re an observant man, Monsieur Fournier. Marie is well,” I assured him. “She lent me her dress as I didn’t have anything suitable.”

He cocked his head, considering my story. He didn’t dismiss me out of hand but wasn’t fully convinced of it either.

“But what is your connection to the house? How do you know Marie?” I

stared at him, wanting very much to turn the question to him. How had he come to know sweet young Marie? To recognize her dress so readily?

I took in a deep breath. There seemed no sense in withholding the truth from him. "I'm the eldest daughter of the house."

"Ah, bored little rich girl taking the day off to see how the poor get by?" he asked, his jaw tightening as he spoke. He said the word *rich* as though it were a curse.

"No, it was as I told Monsieur Levesque. She turned her ankle, and she wasn't well enough to do the marketing and I was the only one who could go in her place. I thought dressing like a servant would be safer."

"You're not wrong on that score," he said, his face softening a bit. "It was foolish for a girl like you to go out alone."

"But not foolish for Marie? She can't be much older than I am. What right have I to send her to run errands that I wouldn't be willing to do myself?"

He paused a moment. "If you truly believe that, there may be hope for us yet. All the same, let me walk you home. Were you finished with your marketing?"

"I had one other errand, monsieur," I said. "I don't mind walking alone. It's not far."

"I'd feel better if I stayed with you," he said. "What's more, you could yet be lying, and I won't know the truth until I see you walk through the door of that house."

"Very well," I said. "If I may be so bold as to turn the question on you, how are *you* connected to Marie?"

"She's from my neighborhood in Montmartre. I've known her since she was a girl. Her getting a position in a posh house on the Place Royale was the talk of the place for a good week."

I considered his words. It was likely true that a job as a kitchen maid in a house like ours was a dream come true for many in that part of town. It was a great deal of work, but there was plentiful food and a warm bed at night. Many had it worse, and it hardly seemed fair.

My reverie was cut short as we reached my desired stop. "Just here." I pointed to the fabric shop that still looked resplendently well-stocked. People had less care for muslins and silks when a wolf was growling at the city door. He took the marketing basket and held my provisions as I placed my order.

"Let me see the blue linen there, please," I said. The shopkeeper handed me the bolt of fabric. It was thick and durable, and not unpleasant to look at. Sturdy, but wouldn't be too rough against the skin. And it would stand

up to a good washing, which was imperative. I nodded my approval. “Five yards of this. And another five of the green.” I had him gather up good thread and the buttons needed to make a plain but serviceable dress from each.

Methodically, the shopkeeper cut the length of fabric and collected the notions. This time I waited for a total before removing money from my pocket.

“Don’t you have a seamstress for that sort of thing,” Fournier commented as we began to walk back in the direction of the Place Royale. “I thought they brought samples of imported fabrics from the orient to your house, took measurements, and other such folderol.”

“It isn’t for me. Clearly Marie is in need of a new dress.” I gestured despairingly to the dress I wore. “I thought the blue would do nicely for her.”

“Maybe more mistresses should be forced to wear their hired girls’ dresses. What about the other cloth?” His voice had softened, taking on the tone of a conversation instead of a schoolmaster scolding an unruly pupil.

“I needn’t tell you that war is upon us, monsieur,” I said. “It seems that having something sturdy to wear would be prudent.”

“You’re wiser than your upbringing would usually permit,” he said, staring off as he considered my words.

“You don’t care for the wealthy, do you?” I said. “How can one care for a cancer eating away at the very marrow of our society. No, I don’t care for the rich at all,” he said, his teeth grinding for a moment before he controlled his rancor.

“Those of us who were born to it have no choice in the matter,” I reminded him.

“No, and those who are born to it are generally given an education that prohibits them from doing something of use with their riches that would be of benefit to their fellow man. And so, the cycle continues.”

“We do our charity work, monsieur,” I said, thinking of the hours Maman forced me to spend making up baskets of food for the less fortunate. It was important work, but always done in the company of tedious people.

“Yes, in plain sight so everyone can see how magnanimous you are. Do you honestly think a basket here or a few coins there is enough to solve the hunger gnawing away at the city? No. There needs to be real change.” His words were laced with the fire of conviction.

“I can’t disagree,” I said. “It always seems as if my mother does just enough charity work to absolve her conscience.”

“And so it always is with your lot. But you seem to have more gumption than many of them. Maybe there is hope, after all,” he said, echoing his sentiment from before.

“I’m glad I meet with your approval in some estimation at least,” I said, surprised to find the statement was true. “You are passionate about your cause.”

“It’s not just mine. It’s the cause of every man, woman, and child who must work for a living. Don’t fool yourself into thinking it’s anything less.”

“I don’t doubt it,” I said sincerely. “Though I’m not permitted out all that often, it’s plain to see that the poor are suffering.”

“You’d be kept from seeing most of it, wouldn’t you?” he asked, more to himself than to me. “But at least you see it. Many turn a blind eye when faced with it.”

Not for the first time, I felt useless. Of course my upbringing had been manufactured to prepare me for a life of being ornamental, but I felt myself spilling over the edges of the mold that had been carved out for me.

“I want to help,” I said. “Truly.”
“I believe you,” he replied. “But it’s not help in the form of charity baskets and alms that’s needed. We don’t need reform by inches. We need revolution.”

“Hasn’t that been tried?” I asked, keeping the irony from my tone. “Or do you wish for the guillotines to return to the Place de la Concorde?”

“No. Unlike many of my compatriots, I am not a violent man. I abhor it, in fact. But there are times when the only solution to the problem at hand is force. The working people of Paris deserve to have a say in their own lives.”

“What can be done?” I asked. “What can we do?”
“We resist,” he said simply. “We rally the people to the cause and remind them who has the boots on their necks.”

“You make it sound so brutal,” I said.

“Because it is,” he said.

I thought of the way my parents spoke to the servants, to anyone of lower rank, and knew he was right.

We reached the gate to the servants’ entrance to the back courtyard where the staff accepted deliveries and such. I produced a key to open it, waving it once I’d turned the lock.

“See, legal admittance, good sir. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a kitchen maid who will lose her post if she’s discovered napping in my bed.”

“You are a surprise, Mademoiselle Vigneau. I hope you surprise me again by coming to hear a talk next Tuesday at Les Halles. It might prove rather interesting to you if you truly want to help.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said, glancing down at my feet.

“I hope you will.”

He handed me my basket and walked back into the streets of Paris without another word. I stood and watched a moment as he grew smaller, then disappeared. I didn’t know who this man was, not truly, but found myself churning with envy. He had a depth in his convictions I’d never experienced, nor could I ever hope to equal.

Chapter Two

Micheline

February 25, 1946

I sat straight upright in bed, the nightgown that had once been Maman's now doused in sweat. It was a solid minute before I realized the air-raid sirens had been in my dreams and that I didn't have to drag Noémie and Sylvie down to the cellars of our little two-story building to wait out the bombing. The war had been over for months, but the nightmares made it feel as though it never ceased.

I looked over at little Noémie who had crawled into my bed at some point in the night. Her red ringlets framed a face that was better suited for a gallery in the Louvre than our apartment above a bistro with peeling dark-green paint in the far reaches of Paris. She took deep even breaths and looked as though the war was the furthest thing from her mind. A long-forgotten ghost of a memory that would only come back as a twinge of sadness, rather than a tidal wave of grief. I couldn't take solace in much, but Noémie's innocence was my safe haven. I would have given my very life to protect it.

"Nightmares again?" Sylvie asked from her bed on the opposite side of the room.

"Yes, go back to sleep, darling," I bade gently. I'd hoped that it was just before dawn, but my bedside clock told me it was still the middle of the night.

"We'd all sleep better if you'd move into Maman's room, you know," Sylvie said, covering her head with her pillow. "I've half a mind to take it for myself if you won't." Her voice was muffled by the pillow, but even the thick puff of goose down didn't dampen her vitriol. She was twelve,

soon would be thirteen, and grew more challenging with each passing day. I sighed and tried to take solace in that too. I was just her age when the war broke out and hadn't had the luxury of being a difficult teenager. Noémie, at the tender age of eight, was more restful company.

Part of me should have been grateful Sylvie had the chance at a proper adolescence, but the raising of her was left to me, and she seemed determined to make up for my lost opportunity, even if it meant driving me insane in the process.

"You will not," I said, summoning the authority of a sister seven years her elder. "It is Maman's room and will remain so until she comes home."

Sylvie shot me daggers. Twelve-year-olds really were a pestilence. She'd done the hard work of coming to grips with Maman's disappearance, where I was not yet able. It had been different with Papa. His death records were conclusive. Killed in action near Sedan. We'd all accepted the news of his death with grief, but without the burden of uncertainty. It was a rare family in Paris that hadn't lost a father, brother, husband, or son to the war. Others had waited for years for their loved ones to be released from prisoner-of-war camps in hopes something would be left of the man they'd sent off to war. If a family had only been called to sacrifice one, they were counted among the lucky.

Maman's story was harder to accept. We hadn't the means to leave Paris early in the war, and soon it was too late to escape, even if we'd had the money. She'd been scrupulous about keeping us safe. Religiously checking the oilcloth that covered the windows for any gaps that might let out a glimmer of light. Never letting us leave the apartment alone under any circumstances. Always choosing the routes to the market with the least chance of meeting a German patrol. She was vigilance personified.

But one day, almost two years ago, when she went to trade her ration coupons for groceries, she never returned.

There had been no air raid while she was gone. There had been no exceptional upheaval in the streets that day. But she disappeared all the same, and we were left behind to make sense.

The woman who always left us, cloistered for our safety, with the words "*Stay here safe and sound for me, my darlings, so I may run my errands with an easy heart and come home all the sooner,*" left just after the midday meal on a reasonably calm Tuesday in June and never came home. The city had just been liberated from German control and we'd begun to breathe a bit more freely. We didn't realize what a mistake that was.

I swung my feet out of bed, careful not to stir Noémie as I stood, and exited to the little parlor. School wasn't for hours yet. The girls could

sleep, and I could tend to the mending long before I saw to their breakfast.

Maman and Papa had never been wealthy, and if they had left any money behind, apart from the few hundred francs I found tucked away in Maman's drawer, I never found it. When I went to the bank to inquire if there was anything in their account, even with Papa's papers in hand, they would not help. Papa had worked in a factory for a good steady wage, while Maman took odd jobs and tended to us.

We were more comfortable than most in the neighborhood, however, as we owned our little building. I didn't have to worry about rent, which was a blessing I remembered each night when sleep eluded me. It was just a small apartment over a little bistro, but it was ours. We took in a modest rent from the people who ran the restaurant, which had helped my parents through lean times and kept us afloat now, but only just. I took in mending to help ease the strain on our finances. I also took in washing. I minded children while their mothers ran errands. Anything to earn a few *sous* to keep bread on the table and the wolves from the door.

I took a blouse from the mending basket and fixed the torn cuff in less than a quarter of an hour. I'd finished the three other pieces in the failing light the night before, so the lot was ready to return. Madame Dupuis had sent mending weekly since she'd learned of our plight. Some of the skirts she'd sent for hemming barely needed a half-dozen stitches, but she insisted on paying me as though I'd spent a full hour to repair the entire garment. A few times I wondered if she hadn't torn the clothes herself to have a reason to send them to me, for I couldn't imagine a sedate matron of seventy-odd years being so hard on her things. She had a girl come to do the heavy cleaning, and she didn't venture out much at all. Whatever her motives, I remembered her generosity as well in my prayers, even when my soul felt too broken to make them.

I looked through the basket and every last piece was now in perfect repair. I cursed my own industriousness, for it left me with nothing to do.

I loathed nighttime.
Nighttime was almost the hardest.

The very worst was on those rare occasions when I slept through the night and woke up in the morning, refreshed only for the sinking feeling to return to my stomach as I remembered Maman was gone. For a little while on those mornings, it felt like losing her all over again.

It was too easy to get lost in the abyss of my own thoughts. Reading, which used to be a great pleasure of mine, could not keep my mind from wandering.

Wandering to the fear that lurked in every dark crevasse. Wandering to