

The
**FRENCH
AGENT**

BELINDA ALEXANDRA

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My beloved Diana,

It breaks my heart to write this to you, because I know it will cause you grief. You have stood by my side in all things, and I cannot forget the brave face you showed when we said goodbye on the wharf in Sydney. It is the memory of your courage that has kept me strong.

At the time we thought the separation would be brief and the battle easily won. But the war that spreads like an evil stain across the continent is reaching its darkest hour and now requires the greatest sacrifice of all of us who believe in a civilised humanity. You'll understand that, won't you?

I write to tell you that I am leaving for my most dangerous mission yet, and if all should not go well, promise me that you will not allow your sorrow to be prolonged. Your disposition has always been so cheerful, your zest for life so inspiring, and your ability to overcome challenges so valiant. You cannot allow anything to deprive you of your spirit, for our dearest Freddy must always be your first concern.

BELINDA ALEXANDRA

We had four wonderful years together, and my heartfelt wish was always that I would return to you to continue where we left off, and to see our son grow into a young man.

Do not feel sorry for me if I don't come back. It is simply that God had another plan for me and I trust in His mercy that He will watch over my dearest wife and son. Please know that the time I spent with you has been the happiest in a joyful and privileged life. It will be you and Freddy that I will be thinking of until my last breath.

*Until we meet again, on earth or in heaven.
Your forever faithful husband,
Casper*

CHAPTER ONE

Paris, February 1946

Sabine Brouillette's apartment was cold, much colder than it had been during the war when she had been warmed by the hope that tyranny could be defeated and life could be beautiful again. Her chilblained fingers hovered over the saucepan. The flame on the burner she was using to heat the water could go out at any moment. Utilities, along with bread, coffee, oil and sugar, were still rationed for everyday Parisians, while across the river fashion houses were staging shows again and the automobile industry was producing cars based on German design. Wasn't that what General de Gaulle had said should happen? *The days of weeping are over. The days of glory have returned.* France would rise again.

Sabine took her coffee and hunk of dry bread to the dining room. The long table was made of walnut and had seating for ten. She placed herself at the end and stared out at the view of the slate rooftops of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. She was only thirty-six and still had plenty of life ahead of her. Her dark hair had grown back to its pre-war lustre and her olive skin had plumped out again. But ever since she had come back from the camp, she had felt as though she was living in a state of suspended

animation. She was waiting for something – or someone. But for what? For whom? Everyone who mattered was dead. The apartment had once been filled with people and music. Now it was like a grave, the air frozen, the lopsided books on the shelves untouched, the grand piano covered in dust.

Sabine squinted through the doorway at the instrument. The day France mobilised, she had been teaching tiny Hélène Rosenfeld to play Rachmaninov's 'Lilacs'. Now Hélène, her mother, her sisters, her entire family were lying dead in a ditch somewhere in Poland. It was hard to believe that Sabine had once instructed young slender hands – and pudgy eager ones – to play Chopin's nocturnes, Schubert's sonatas and Debussy's lilting 'Clair de Lune'. But she had been an entirely different person then. Four years of living by nothing but stealth, fear and a determination to rid her country of the enemy had altered her. There was nothing in her makeup that had any resemblance to the former Sabine Brouillette – once a highly sought-after piano teacher, once a devoted wife and mother.

Her neighbour, Madame Chout, said Sabine could play again if she really wanted to, that she could adapt the music to accommodate her crippled left hand. But Sabine didn't trust a word Madame Chout said. It would be too painful to pick up the sharp pieces of a shattered life. It was better to move forward, to become somebody else. Besides, if Sabine could gather enough evidence, she was going to have Madame Chout arrested as a collaborator. She took a sip of the bitter coffee and imagined the immaculately coiffed matron being carted off to prison for her crimes. The picture made Sabine smile, her first in a long time.



It was starting to snow outside but Sabine was loath to take the Metro. She didn't like being underground and she hated crowds. It was better to risk the icy streets than to be crammed shoulder to shoulder with her fellow citizens all the way to Place Victor Hugo. She locked her front door and wheeled her bicycle down the steps to the foyer. The concierge, Madame Rouzard, came out of her office and gave Sabine a friendly smile.

'You look nice today, Madame Brouillette. You have colour in your cheeks,' she said.

Sabine watched Madame Rouzard's stout legs climb the stairs to the second floor. The steely seventy-year-old had hidden Jewish women and children from the Gestapo. It was Madame Rouzard who had coaxed Sabine away from the window ledge the day she decided that a life without those she loved wasn't worth living. *If you are still here, it is because God has a purpose for you*, she had told her. *France needs women like you to rebuild it. You will do so in memory of all those you have lost. Do it for them.*

Sabine mounted the bicycle and headed in the direction of Rue de Buci. She took a different route to work each day. It was an old habit she couldn't shake. Despite the rationing, there was still a line of shivering people waiting outside a bakery, and the shelves of the shoe store next to it were empty. The once bustling Quai Voltaire was as sedate as a country road, its only traffic bicycles and noisy, foul-smelling petrolettes. The Germans had taken the cars, buses and trucks when they left.

The misshapen fingers of her left hand weakened her grip on the handlebars and the road was slippery. She wobbled and

narrowly missed a man driving a goat cart. He swore at her and shook his fist.

'Pardon, monsieur!' Sabine called back to him over her shoulder. She slowed down, having no intention of falling off and breaking her neck that day. Not while the Nuremberg trials were in progress. A kiosk displayed the headlines. The full extent of the atrocities was finally being exposed. The court had been shown films of the concentration camps. Yet the men in the dock demonstrated no guilt. They even complained that the accusations against them were unjust. But Sabine knew they were already condemned because nobody loved the theatre of perceived justice better than the Americans. It was the thought of the other monsters, the ones who were slipping away, that kept Sabine up at night. For Madame Rouzard had been correct when she'd said that God had a purpose for Sabine. She didn't believe she had any part in building a new France, but she would avenge the old one and all those who had perished trying to defend it.

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Sabine passed the Haussmann buildings of Avenue Victor Hugo with their cream-limestone façades and intricate ironwork balconies and came to a stop outside number 43. The building had been used as a Gestapo office during the war and nicknamed the 'Villa Bömelburg' by the Resistance members after the head of the Gestapo in France. It was now the offices of the branch of the French secret services responsible for hunting war criminals and collaborators. Sabine parked her bicycle next to

the others lined up outside and made her way through the tall wooden doors, nodding to the guard before taking the stairs. For the first month she worked with the Department for the Investigation of Enemy War Crimes she had been haunted by her memories of her own interrogation. It was the spring of 1944 when the Gestapo struck the *Pianiste* circuit, the Resistance group her family had set up after Marshal Pétain's cowardly capitulation. One by one the members fell like dominoes. They were arrested, tortured, deported and shot. Hitler termed it *Nacht und Nebel* – Night and Fog. His opponents were to be made to disappear in such a way that no one would ever know of their terrible fate. Sabine was the only survivor.

Her desk was at the far end of the department, crammed between two filing cabinets and a window. She made her way through the thick haze of cigarette smoke towards it.

'*Bonjour, Sabine,*' Agent Brodeur said without looking up from his typewriter.

The rest of the male agents gave her a curt nod. The other female agent, Juliette Vignes, pretended not to see her. The war had made Sabine aware of inconsistencies in the way people presented themselves – the slightest false note in a story, the tiniest movement of someone's eyes. Juliette's nails were painted bright red, and her stockings were sheer. Her shoes didn't clack like everyone else's, so it was safe to assume they were leather. For a long time, Sabine had suspected that Juliette Vignes had collaborated, or at the very least been involved in the black market. Everyone in the section was supposed to be a former member of the Resistance, but Sabine didn't trust any of them. There had been few true patriots in those early, dangerous days

of the war. Most of her countrymen had been content to throw roses to the invading German tanks, as long as they could get on with their lives. The Resistance only swelled in numbers when the Germans began deporting young men and women for forced labour, and when it seemed clear that Hitler was going to lose the war. Joining the Resistance at the last minute was a way to cover your tracks if you'd been in bed with the enemy.

Sabine sat down without taking her coat off. Government offices weren't any better heated than private apartments. The files on her desk were systematised but there was nothing orderly about her work. She opened a file and stared at the photograph of a woman clutching a child in front of a German firing squad. Seconds after the photograph was taken, the woman and child were dead. She studied the men holding the rifles. Most of them would have had wives and children at home, but she never saw any trace of regret in the expressions of these killers. She leaned back in her chair and stared out the window. Investigating war crimes was like delving into the mind of evil. Every evening, when Sabine went home, she took a bath even when the water was freezing. She had to wash that evil off herself.

She sensed Juliette's gaze on her and turned around, meeting the agent's sour expression with her own stare. Juliette must have suspected that Sabine saw through her, or perhaps all this animosity was simply jealousy over the department supervisor, Robert Fortin, who always included Sabine in formal interrogations and never Juliette. He didn't trust her either.

'Agent Brouillette.'

Sabine turned to see Robert standing in the doorway of his office. He was wearing his winter coat but not for the same reason she was. He had never got over his wartime thinness and was self-conscious about it. He'd been a champion skier and quite a ladies' man in the 1930s, she'd heard. Even now, Sabine thought, if you looked beyond the weariness in his eyes and the frown lines, he was still attractive, with a fine nose and thick waves of black hair. But her observations were purely clinical. Sabine felt no desire for Robert. She didn't feel desire for anyone.

'Can I see you a moment?' he asked her.

She followed him into his office, and he shut the door behind them. Robert's desk, which was three times the size of hers, had so many files stacked on top of it that it was sagging in the middle like an old mattress. She sat down and Robert pulled a packet of *Gauloises* from the drawer. He offered her one, although he knew she didn't smoke. She'd heard that during the war, when cigarettes weren't included in women's rations, he'd always given his share away to his female comrades. She shook her head and he lit a cigarette for himself and sat down, looking at her. There was an intensity between them that was as ardent as if they were lovers. If Juliette had seen that look, she would have been jealous because she didn't understand that sometimes there were things between a man and a woman that went deeper than sex. Robert and Sabine were as wrathful as each other; they recognised each other's souls. Their job was to gather evidence, not to mete out punishment. They were not to behave as the mobs had immediately after the Liberation, settling scores with old enemies and shaving the heads of

ordinary women and parading them through the streets. Even in the chaotic times of the war, the Resistance had followed a strict code of evidence before a traitor could be executed. But without having to elaborate on it verbally, Robert and Sabine had an agreement that if they had a strong enough case against a suspect, and due to the fecklessness of the legal system there was a chance the suspect would get away with their crimes, then that person might be eliminated and the death made to look like an 'accident'. Sabine had lured such a criminal to a hotel room last spring. Robert had stepped out of his hiding place behind the curtains and broken the man's neck. It was justice for the Jewish people who had given that gangster all their life savings, believing his promise that he would spirit them and their families to America, when all he had done was hand them over to the Vichy police.

'We are on a doomed mission,' Robert said finally, blowing out a long stream of smoke into the air. 'Our work is to be phased out. I learned it this morning – the French secret service will be reformed to concentrate on espionage and counter-espionage only. We are in a cold war now against the Soviet Union. Germany is our new ally.'

'The Jews won't forget,' said Sabine. '*You and I* won't forget.'

The vein in Robert's temple swelled. 'Sometimes I think you and I are the only two who will remember. The British and Americans have already moved on. Even the French want to forget all about the war and fill their lives with frivolity.' He gestured to the overflowing files on his desk. 'While you and I pore through these reports, sorting the probable from the improbable, and persecuting black-marketeers, policemen

and whores, a whole other section of the French secret service is in Berlin right now recruiting former Nazi intelligence officers.'

Sabine pursed her lips. She was used to fighting for hopeless causes and wasn't ready to give up the battle. That governments were corrupt, politicians hypocrites and people generally apathetic was not news to her. 'The Nazi intelligence officers will have valuable knowledge of the Soviet Union's secrets,' she said. 'I don't place ordinary rank-and-file party members on the same level as war criminals.'

He leaned back and looked at her warily. 'What if I told you a branch of our services is negotiating with Ernst Misselwitz as we speak. He is sitting in a prison in Germany and is more than willing to give up names of collaborators that might be useful to us in exchange for his freedom. They would like you and me to work with him.'

Sabine flinched as if he'd bitten her. To work with Misselwitz was unthinkable, even if he could name collaborators. He was a former Gestapo agent responsible for the torture and death of hundreds of members of the Resistance, including members of her own circuit.

'Well, how do you feel about that?' Robert asked.

She tempered her bitterness. 'I don't believe they will disband us just yet,' she said. 'Not after the support for the Nuremberg trials. Our department is still useful for public relations, and as long as we have the sanction to hunt' – she met Robert's gaze meaningfully – 'we have a chance to serve justice.'

'You remind me of my wife, Sabine,' Robert said, with a painful grimace. 'She died with a gun in her hand.'

He rarely talked about his wife, in the same way Sabine rarely talked about her husband and child. Something in his tone unsettled her. That the French government was corrupt wasn't why he'd called her into his office. It was something else. Something she didn't already know.

'What?' she asked.

He regarded her for a moment and then stubbed out his cigarette. 'I don't want you to get emotional. When an agent gets emotional, they make mistakes. You are too precious to me to let you make any mistakes.'

'I don't feel anything anymore,' she said. 'Everything died in the war.'

Robert hesitated, then seemed to come to some decision in his mind. He picked up a file. 'An interesting piece of information has come from the military interrogators at Balingen prisoner-of-war camp,' he said. 'It seems a German cipher clerk has cracked to save himself. He has provided some vital information about the *Pianiste* circuit.'

Sabine's heart slowed to the point it almost stopped. The faces of people who were forever lost flashed across her mind – Jacqueline, Madeleine, Henri ... Lucien and Pierre.

'I don't know if I should tell you,' said Robert, frowning again. 'This one is too close to home.'

'Tell me. What information has the clerk provided?'

Robert bit his lip and leaned forward. 'He has revealed who betrayed the circuit.'

Sabine kept her eyes fixed on his face.

'You were right in your suspicions that it was a double agent,' he continued. 'One who had direct contact with Berlin.'

According to the cipher clerk, the messages the agent sent were always marked “Highly Reliable”, indicating someone important, someone high up in the circuit.’

‘So, has he revealed the traitor’s identity?’ she asked.

Robert leaned back in his chair. ‘The cipher clerk was curious to know how Germany had recruited such a fine agent. He had a friend in the analysts’ department and put that question to him. His friend answered that it was too dangerous to ask questions like that. But he did tell him the double agent’s codename.’

‘Which was?’

‘The Black Fox.’

Sabine tried to picture the person but could only see the animal, creeping under the cover of darkness, sniffing for the scent of its prey. A black fox was rare in Europe. She had never seen one in the wild.

‘Where is the analyst now?’ she asked. ‘I’ll interrogate him.’

Robert shook his head. ‘He’s dead. He was killed in the bombing of Berlin.’

Sabine chewed her lip. ‘But there will be records for the Black Fox in France. Where is all the information that was retrieved from the region’s Gestapo headquarters?’

Robert pushed the file towards Sabine. ‘When the British bombed the Château de Valois, the Resistance members who raided it did a rush job. They only had time to take files from desks.’

‘They didn’t search for a safe?’

‘There wasn’t time. They had to get in and out before the German reinforcements arrived.’

Sabine bristled. The Nazis were meticulous record-keepers. They kept track of their agents and informers. Rushed or not, failing to retrieve a safe from Gestapo headquarters was a grave mistake. It could have saved hundreds of lives.

‘The safe might still be there. Under the rubble,’ she said.

‘I had our agents in Bergerac check,’ Robert told her. ‘They’ve had some preliminary digging done and they have sighted a safe. It will take them all day to get it out. I want you there tomorrow when it’s opened.’

‘I’ll leave first thing in the morning,’ Sabine said, scooping up the file.

Their eyes met and that familiar feeling of understanding passed between them. Ever since she had returned to Paris, she had been investigating the fall of the *Pianiste* circuit. Sometimes when a circuit was compromised it was because of carelessness on the part of a member bragging too much to friends or some other foolish behaviour, but most of the time it was because a member had been caught by the Gestapo and was persuaded to save themselves by denouncing others. When the demise of the *Pianiste* circuit came, however, the arrests were systematic, which implied the Gestapo had very detailed information. It could only have been the result of infiltration by a double agent. But as much as she had investigated the matter, as to that person’s identity, dead ends were all that she had managed to find. Now her answer might be lying in a safe in the rubble of a former Gestapo headquarters.