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PROLOGUE

Southern France, late August, 1940

The leader of the Andorrans was built like a bull, but he moved with the lightness of a mountain goat. Not once had he stumbled or tripped as he led the small group further and deeper into the towering Pyrenees.

They were high now, long clear of the winding footpaths through the birch forests, way past the rows of mighty beech and the plunging, thundering waterfalls. Here it was quiet, eerily quiet. Here there were few trees, the air was thinner and the paths narrow and steep. Here the ascent was over jagged fragments of rock and long scars of loose scree, which shifted dangerously underfoot, digging into the soles of heavy boots or flimsy, unsuitable shoes. Shoes like the three pampered Parisians wore.

But the Andorran and his two countrymen didn't care about the Parisians or the state of their feet. All they cared about was the money they were being paid to take them – the little Jewish man, his wife and their twelve-year-old son – over the mountains and into Spain, and freedom. Escaping

France while they still could. Escaping the Nazis and their distant camps of death.

This was not the first time the Andorrans had trodden this route with frightened escapees, and it would not be the last. Business was brisk. War was not bad for everyone. There were rich pickings for the enterprising.

The early evening was warm, though soon the warmth would go as the sun dipped behind the peaks. They had been lucky with the weather; no driving rain to soak them through, or low, swirling cloud to swallow the pathways. Instead, on both days, the sun had blazed kindly in clear, cloudless skies.

At the head of the line, the bull-like Andorran stopped and turned. He lifted the leather strap running from shoulder to waist to free the shotgun he wore slung across his back.

"Stop here," he said to the family. "Rest. Eat."

The Parisians nodded, father and son sinking gratefully to the ground while the woman delved into her bag to bring out their meagre provisions.

The Andorrans moved away a little, rested their shotguns against a massive slab of fallen limestone and began rolling cigarettes, muttering to each other in low voices. Soon, the acrid smell of their black tobacco drifted on the air.

They watched the Parisians eating, the man chewing slowly, the woman giving most of her share to the boy, who greedily devoured whatever came his way; cheese, a slice of meat, crusts of stale bread, his tongue flicking out to snatch

the last crumbs from his chubby fingers.

Taking another deep drag at his cigarette, the Andorran leader licked his dry lips and blew a long stream of smoke from deep in his lungs. He coughed loudly, rolled a thick globule of phlegm around his mouth and spat it onto the ground. The woman stared but quickly looked away as he caught her eye. For her, at least, the Andorran felt some grudging admiration. She had not complained once, unlike the whining twelve year old and the wheedling husband.

The boy had grizzled constantly that he was tired and needed to rest – apart from when he was eating. And the nervous husband, with his suit and raincoat, hat, gold-rimmed glasses and brown leather case – he was a moaner too.

None of it mattered to the Andorrans. They simply ignored it. They knew the leather case contained the family's remaining wealth. Jewellery, no doubt; perhaps even gold. And cash – their cash had to be in the case too. That was why it never left the man's side.

With another loud cough, the Andorran took a final drag on his cigarette and threw down the butt, grinding it into the earth with the sole of his boot.

Suddenly a terrifying, piercing scream rang out and echoed across the narrow valley, seeming to bounce off the rock faces surrounding them.

The Jewish man froze and the boy grasped his mother's arm and cried out, "Mamma!"

But the woman remained calm, quickly seeing that the

Andorrans had not flinched at the sound of the scream. There could be nothing to fear, for them at least.

A shape passed in front of the sun and they glimpsed a moving shadow cast on the craggy rocks opposite. The scream came again, even more agonized this time.

And then they saw it. High above the rising shadow, an eagle flew towards a peak. In the bird's talons, a marmot writhed and shrieked. As they watched, the screaming stopped, the animal went limp, and the eagle continued majestically upwards.

Muttering something to his friends, the leader of the Andorrans beckoned to the Parisian, who was clutching his leather case like a shield against his rigid body.

Much of their communication had been though signs and gestures, as the Andorrans' mix of Catalan, Spanish and rural southern French was as puzzling to the Parisian family as their standard French was to their guides.

Before they left Saint-Girons, the Parisian had tried to tell the Andorrans about the long and anxious flight south; about being smuggled across the Demarcation Line into the Free Zone, and the nerve-jangling train journeys to Toulouse, Carcassonne, Foix, and finally Saint-Girons, where they waited to be met. And, all the while, the accompanying fear, the dread that at any moment their forged papers and passports would be too closely scrutinized.

"This has already cost a small fortune," he had moaned, handing over to the Andorran leader the thick wad of

banknotes that made up half the fee for leading them safely over the mountains. The rest was due when they crossed into Spain. The Andorran simply shrugged and pocketed the cash, and the Parisian fell silent, wisely deciding to save his energy for the long, gruelling walk to freedom.

Now they were almost there; they had to be. The Parisian stood up, nodded to his wife and son and, with the case still grasped tightly in one hand, walked over to the Andorran, who smiled at him for the first time since their journey had begun, and then pointed in the direction they had been travelling.

"Spain," he said. "Almost in Spain."

The other man nodded, understanding.

"Come, I'll show you where we go next," the Andorran said, striding away and beckoning for him to follow.

The Parisian hesitated for a moment, glanced back at his wife with a look of confusion, and then hurried after the Andorran. He caught up with him, rounding a turn in the narrow path, and they continued for another twenty metres or so to where a small plateau gave a clear view through distant peaks.

The plateau was little more than a ledge with a steep drop down one side to a dense mass of bushes and vegetation far below.

Standing back from the edge, the Andorran pointed into the distance. "There, to the right, the two peaks close together. Through there, that is where we are going."

The Parisian shook his head. “I don’t understand. You speak too fast. Speak more slowly.”

The Andorran smiled again and gently took the nervous Parisian by the shoulders, manoeuvring him across and in front of him. He leaned down and forward, his cheek close to the other man’s and pointed again. “There, follow my arm to where I am pointing. To the right, the two peaks.”

Squinting through his gold-rimmed glasses, the Parisian craned forward. “What am I looking at? Is that Spain? Is that where…?”

They were his final words. With incredible speed, the Andorran whipped a long-bladed hunting knife from somewhere in the depths of his sheepskin jerkin, and in one fluent move, pulled back the man’s head with his left hand and drew the sharp blade across his throat with his right. Blood spurted in an explosion of crimson as the blade sliced through his windpipe. His legs buckled and the Andorran let him drop to the ground, where he rolled onto his back, choking on his own pumping blood, his eyes staring in disbelief. His body twitched twice.

The Andorran bent down and wiped both sides of the knife’s blade on the dead man’s raincoat, leaving two bloody streaks. He plucked the gold-rimmed glasses off the staring face and slipped them into a pocket. Then he prised open the dead man’s fingers, which were now clasping the handle of the leather case even more tightly. It was locked but the catches were easily forced with the strong blade.

Exactly as he had suspected, there was cash inside. Wads of notes, each neatly folded and secured. He slipped one into a pocket; the rest would be shared later with his companions and the contact who had given them the tip about the fleeing family. There was plenty to go around, especially as the case also contained jewellery: bracelets, necklaces, rings and a carved wooden box containing gold coins.

Grinning at a job well done, the Andorran closed and fastened the case, stood up and, with one foot, pushed the dead man off the edge, watching him tumble over and over, down the steep mountainside and into the vegetation. The body seemed to snag on a branch and was somehow held so that an arm and a leg were still visible. The Andorran sighed. This meant climbing down to free the corpse; they could leave no visible evidence for others passing that way. But then the branch snapped and the body moved again, vanishing from sight, continuing down into the hidden abyss.

All that remained was the man's hat. The Andorran plucked it from the ground and stuffed it into his pocket. It was a good hat; too good to waste.

A sudden anguished scream cut through the air and the Andorran glanced back towards where he had left his friends with the woman and her son. A second scream rang out and the Andorran laughed out loud. This time they were not the screams of a marmot.

ONE

Antwerp, Belgium

War wasn't so bad. Or at least it could have been a lot worse. That was how Paul Hansen saw it. And he wasn't the only one. He had discussed it at school with his friends and at home with his parents. All right, no one actually wanted the Germans here in Antwerp, but here they were and not much could be done about that. Nevertheless, life, in general, wasn't too bad.

The shops still had food. Antwerp was one of the largest ports in Europe and the mighty river Scheldt was still busy with cargo ships coming and going, so the city would always be well supplied. The trains and the trams were still running. Paul still went to school. He could still ride his two-stroke motorcycle over the cobbled streets near his home on the Nationalestraat and all the way down to the docks and the office where his father worked. And when Paul was on the bike, most German soldiers gave him a smile and friendly wave as he went chugging by.

A night-time curfew was in place, but Paul was rarely out

after dark. There was talk of young Belgian men being taken away to Germany to work in munitions factories, but it hadn't happened yet. There was always gossip; it rarely came to anything. Besides, Paul was only sixteen. The talk was of eighteen year olds going. By the time they got around to him, if it happened, the war would be over. Everyone said it would.

Paul was on his bike, riding towards his father's office. Edward Hansen was an important man on the docks, a senior manager, responsible for a huge stretch of the waterfront and the hundreds of dockers who worked there.

Dodging the tram rails, Paul guided the motorcycle around the wide Groenplaats, where elderly Belgians and German army officers sat on café terraces, basking in the late afternoon sun. He rode past the towering cathedral and the civic buildings of the Grote Markt and on down to the waterfront, his favourite part of the city.

After less than three years in Antwerp, Paul knew his way around its roads and walkways as well as almost anyone.

Turning northwards, with the Scheldt to his left, he bounced along the cobbled road for half a mile, past huge wharves with forests of towering cranes, glimpsing every so often the bulk of a vessel. Finally he came to a long stretch of iron railings and then a pair of tall gates, which opened into the yard. On the far side, a flight of rickety wooden steps led up to his father's office.

Paul pulled the bike to a sudden standstill as he saw, almost too late, that the gates were closed. Usually they were left open, the yard humming with activity – dockers hurrying everywhere, cranes swinging out over the water and back again, a queue of waiting railway trucks swallowing up the cargo. Now there was no one to be seen. And nothing was moving.

For a moment, Paul was unsure what to do. He cut the bike's engine, climbed off the machine and rested it against the railings. Slowly, he walked to the gates and tried the handle. They were locked.

Glancing around, he realized the street was deserted too, as though everyone had shut themselves away behind closed doors. But he sensed that curious eyes were watching him, peering from shaded windows, waiting to see what he would do.

He looked at his watch. Four forty-five, exactly the time he'd arranged to meet his father. He tried the gate handle again, rattling it noisily, pushing harder this time. But it made no difference.

Paul heard footsteps hurriedly approaching and then felt a strong hand grip one shoulder. "Quiet, Paul," a voice hissed. "You'll bring the Germans if they hear that racket."

Paul turned to see Jos Theys, his father's closest friend. "What's happening?" he asked. "Why is the gate locked, and where is my—?"

"There's no time, Paul. We must get away from here."

"But—"

"Don't argue," Jos snapped. "I'll tell you later. We must go. I've a car nearby."

"But my bike—"

"Leave it!"

Jos yanked the boy's arm, but before they could move they heard shouting from within the yard and saw Edward Hansen run from behind the corrugated tin wall of a warehouse. He was sprinting towards the gates, still fifty metres away.

"Dad!" Paul shouted. "Dad!"

"Get away, Paul!" his father screamed. "Run! Run!"

Paul couldn't move. His feet were rooted to the spot. His father was still thirty metres from the gates when two German soldiers raced from behind the warehouse. One of them raised a submachine-gun.

"Halt!" the soldier yelled. "Halt or I fire!"

But Paul's father didn't stop; he tore desperately onwards.

A single short burst from the weapon knocked the running man off his feet, propelling him forwards even faster for an instant and sending him sprawling. As he hit the ground, a large bunch of keys spilled from his right hand and Paul watched them skid towards the gates and stop a few metres away.

Edward Hansen lay motionless as the two soldiers started to run again, one of them shouting to Paul and Jos.

"You there! Halt!"

Paul was staring at his father's lifeless body as a German officer came into view. He bawled a furious command at the soldiers, who instantly stopped and turned back.

Jos gripped Paul's arm. "Run, Paul! With me, now!"

"But my dad—"

"Now!"

Jos almost pulled Paul off his feet. Suddenly they were running, and Paul found himself being dragged across the road and into one of the many narrow lanes fringing the dockside.

TWO

Paul gazed down from the second-floor window onto the early morning gloom shrouding Sint-Jansplein. A light drizzle fell steadily, turning the cobbles from grey to black. The square was deserted, save for a tram which went clanking and lumbering by.

Everything was strange and unfamiliar. The flat, where he had been hidden for the past fourteen or fifteen hours; the kindly elderly couple who lived there, nodding and smiling sympathetically each time he caught their eyes; the room where he had slept – or not slept; just lain awake for hour after hour turning over in his mind the horror he had witnessed. It all felt unreal.

His father was dead.

At first Paul couldn't believe it; wouldn't believe it. But then the sharp sound of the single blast from the submachine-gun rang through his head and he saw, again, his father motionless on the ground. Over and over he heard the staccato burst and saw him. Dead.

Paul remembered little of running through the dockside streets, being shoved into Jos's car and driven to Sint-Jansplein. Everything was jumbled and confused. And he didn't hear the hurried, murmured conversation that followed between Jos and the elderly couple.

Jos left almost immediately, saying he would be back in the morning to explain as much as he could. Paul was too stunned to argue. He watched him go without a word and then sank down onto the nearest chair.

Three times the elderly couple offered food and drink, and each time Paul refused it. How could he eat when he was filled with fear and worry? Finally he was led to a bedroom at the rear of the flat, where he spent the longest night of his sixteen years; hour after endless hour of tortured thoughts about his father. And his mother… Where was she? Was she safe?

At last, morning arrived, but so far, Jos had not.

The smell of freshly brewed coffee drifted from the kitchen and a few minutes later the door opened. "Would you like coffee?" the woman asked softly. "A little breakfast?"

Paul shook his head. "No, thank you. When will Jos be here?"

The woman shrugged her shoulders. "Soon, I think. My husband says soon."

She smiled and gently closed the door, and Paul turned back to the window. The light was a little stronger, but the

rain still fell. One or two people hurried across the square, collars or umbrellas raised. Life went on.

Paul's thoughts turned again to his mother. She would be devastated. His parents were – had been – totally devoted to each other. And she would be frantic with worry about her son, even if Jos had told her he was safe.

Here. In this flat. This strange, unfamiliar flat, with its dark, heavy furniture, its silver-framed, yellowing photographs of stern-looking strangers and its smells of coffee and wax polish.

As raindrops settled on the windowpane, Paul watched them trace a jagged path down the glass. He thought of his parents. He had only properly known them for the past three years.

Before then he was at boarding school in England. His parents were busy criss-crossing Europe, with his father overseeing major improvements to the continent's largest docks. And where Edward Hansen went, his wife, Clarisse, went too. They were inseparable.

Edward Hansen's own mother had been French and his father English, and Paul went to the same boarding school his dad had attended as a boy.

Paul loved every moment of his time in England. He never felt particularly French – or English – or even Belgian, like his mother. Paul was proud of his mixed parentage and his mixed grandparentage. On his father's side there was also a French grandmother, and on his mother's side

there was a Belgian grandfather and another French grandmother.

And, like his parents, Paul was naturally good at languages. He spoke English, French and, now, Flemish fluently. Most people hearing him speak in any of the three would assume he was a native.

Which, of course, he was.

There was a soft knock at the front door and the elderly man hurried in from the kitchen.

"Who is it?" he asked.

"It's me, Jos."

The man unlatched the door, pulled it open and Jos Theys, his face drawn and haggard, stepped inside and walked quickly over to Paul. The elderly couple hovered in the background.

There was no time for pleasantries. "You must prepare yourself for more bad news, Paul," Jos said.

"What do you mean?"

"Your mother, she's been taken in by the Germans. Yesterday evening, before I could speak to her."

Paul's heart thudded in his chest. "Taken in? But why? Where?"

"We don't know. But the Germans are looking for you too."

"Why is this happening?" Paul suddenly shouted, leaping to his feet with tears in his eyes. "I don't know what's going on. I don't understand any of it."

“Sit down, Paul,” Jos said gently. “I’m going to explain as much as I can. Please sit down.”

Paul sank back into his chair, suddenly afraid to hear what Jos was about to tell him.

“Your father was a very brave man,” Jos said. “He led our group here in Antwerp. He made operations on the docks as difficult as possible for the Germans by slowing everything down. Little things – freight held up or sent to the wrong destination, cargo not unloaded when or where it should be. It all makes a difference.”

“Your group?” Paul asked. “You … you mean—?”

“Yes, the Resistance movement. Edward started it here. There were just a few of us at first, but the numbers are growing all the time, mainly due to your father’s tireless efforts. But someone betrayed him, perhaps one of our own. And that means we’re all in danger.”

“And my mother … is she in danger?”

“She was working with us, Paul. Your parents did everything together.”

“But why did they kill him?”

“I think it was a mistake,” Jos answered with a sigh.

“A mistake?”

Jos nodded. “As we were running away, there was an officer shouting at the soldiers. They stopped chasing us and turned back to your father.”

“I don’t remember,” Paul said, “it was all so quick.”

“The officer seemed furious,” Jos said. “Your father was

far too important to the Germans to be killed. They wanted to take him alive."

"Then why did they do it?"

"I believe the soldier acted on his own initiative. They didn't expect Edward to grab the keys and make a run for it, and when he didn't stop running, the soldier simply opened fire. He's probably regretting that decision."

"But why was my dad so important to them? Because he formed the Resistance group and could give them names? You just said there may be someone who's already doing exactly that."

"Yes, you're right," Jos said. "But your father had much more important information, vital information that could have a major bearing on the outcome of the entire war."

Paul's eyes widened, his thoughts racing as one stunning revelation followed another. "What information?"

The elderly couple were still nearby, listening but saying nothing. Jos glanced at them and, without a word, they went into the kitchen and shut the door.

Jos leaned closer to Paul and spoke softly. "Over the past few years your father has been responsible for overseeing massive changes to all the largest docks and harbours in Europe, including those in Germany."

"Yes," Paul said, "he told me about them."

"He probably knew more about present-day German harbours than anyone outside Germany; the design, the layout, and even more importantly, the defences and military

installations. Just think what the British Government could have done with that information. It could have changed the course of the war."

Paul nodded, anxious for Jos to continue.

"Your father was just about to share that information with the British, but at the last moment someone betrayed him. That's why the Germans acted so quickly and why killing him must have been an error. They needed to find out exactly what he knew and who he might already have talked to."

"Yes," Paul breathed, nodding his head again as the pieces of the puzzle gradually fell into place. "I see that now."

"And as your mother went everywhere with him," Jos went on, "I imagine the Germans will be interrogating her at this very moment. But if I know Clarisse, she'll tell them nothing." He paused for a moment and stared into Paul's eyes. "If they find you, it will be your turn."

"But I don't know anything."

Jos shrugged. "The Germans are unlikely to believe that, which is why we must get you out of Antwerp quickly."

"Get me out? To where?"

"To England."

"But I can't! Not while my mother's—"

"There's nothing you can do for your mother, Paul. Not now. All we can do is wait for information, and hope."

Paul stood up and went to the window, trying to give himself a few moments to collect his thoughts. The rain had

stopped; a few more people were milling about the square. On the far side, a baker's shop had opened its doors, and lights burned dimly in the café next door to it.

"How will you get me to England?" Paul asked, turning back to Jos.

"Your family's escape was planned some time ago," Jos replied. "Edward was due to hand the group over to me in the next few days and then all three of you were to leave. It would have meant a new life in England, at least until the war is over."

Paul shook his head. "I had no idea. They never said a word."

"It was for your own safety. Edward could have gone earlier; the British wanted him there, but he refused to leave until he was completely satisfied that the group here in Antwerp could function without him." He paused again, looking at Paul. "He was always stubborn, your father. Perhaps you're like him?"

"I don't know," Paul answered with a shrug. "My mother sometimes says I am."

Jos smiled. "But not too stubborn to see that we have to get you away from here. Your false papers are already prepared."

"Papers? Why do I need false papers if I'm crossing the channel to England?"

"No, that's impossible now," Jos said, shaking his head. "The Germans check every vessel heading out to sea and

have every metre of the coastline under surveillance. You'll be taking a much longer, but far safer, route."

Paul sat down again. "I don't understand. Which route?"

"You're travelling south; everything is being arranged," Jos said. "Down through France, across the Pyrenees into Spain, and from there to England. We have contacts in a small town in the south of France. They will be waiting for you and when the time is right, they will organize for you to cross the mountains."

Paul could hardly believe what he was hearing. "Where is this town?"

When Jos replied his voice was little more than a whisper. "It's close to the mountains, in the Ariège region. You'll be safe there until you cross. The town is called…" He glanced at the door to be certain that even the trusted elderly couple would not hear his next word. "…Lavelanet."