

Bridge of Lies

Paula Sheridan

Dangerous Omen

La Garonne River, Bordeaux, France, The Free Zone, 1942

The moonlight shimmered on La Garonne, creating a secret path through the darkness for my clandestine mission with my childhood friend, Pierre. The river pulsed with an unsettling beauty. The moonlit water, the chirping crickets, the wispy fog swirling like phantoms.

Despite the danger, a thrill danced in my veins, an exhilarating sense of adventure warring with the gnawing tremor in my gut. The damp night air clung to my skin as the creaking of the oars added to the troubling silence. Childhood memories of daring escapades flickered in my mind. They battled against my cold, clammy palms, and the frantic hammering of my heart.

What we were doing would get us shot!

At that moment, a sickening thud echoed through the night, shattering the tranquillity. We leaned over and peered into the inky water.

A dead body, a woman in a white dress, bobbed on the tide. A grim omen for our own perilous task.

Suddenly, the thrum of an approaching engine shattered the night's eerie stillness and chilled me to the bone...

I

A Few Days Ago, Old Town, Bordeaux

In the heart of Bordeaux's old town, a swastika snaps in the breeze. Its stark emblem of oppression casts an ominous shadow over Saint-Michel town square.

The cobblestone streets, once bustling with life, lie eerily deserted, save for a few hurried figures making their way to work, their faces etched with the weight of a world in upheaval.

Piercing the dawn's gloom Monsieur Rothschild, scurries along, hunched against the relentless downpour.

His once dignified attire is now a bedraggled mess, his shoes soaked through and muddy from sloshing through puddles, yet he pays them no heed, his mind consumed by a gnawing worry that shadows his every step.

Beneath one arm, he clutches a small satchel. He presses the precious cargo closer to his ribs.

This oppressive regime that has cast its dark pall over his beloved France will not get their soiled hands on this.

He'd die trying.

As Monsieur Rothschild pauses to catch his breath, his anxious

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gaze darts over his shoulder, his kind face pale and drawn, his eyes reflecting the panic that grips his heart.

The rain lashes against his face, mingling with the tears that well in his eyes.

A sudden gust of wind snatches his hat from his head, sending it spinning down the rain-swept avenue like a discarded toy.

For a fleeting moment, he considers chasing after it, the desire for a scrap of normalcy amidst the chaos overwhelming him. But reason prevails, and he forces himself to move on, his head bowed, his hat left to fend for itself in the storm.

2

A spluttering Adler glides to a halt on the opposite side of the street, its headlights cutting through the gloom like piercing eyes.

The car idles menacingly, its engine a low rumble that echoes through the empty street. As the rain lashes against the windshield, the men remain motionless, watching Monsieur Rothschild. The engine crackles and dies, plunging the street into an eerie silence that is broken only by the steady drumming of the rain.

Two men in dark trench coats and fedoras emerge from the vehicle, their faces hidden from view by the shadows. They stand silently, their cigarettes a dull glow in the rain, their eyes glued to Monsieur Rothschild.

3

Kellerman Residence, Bordeaux

Monsieur Rothschild is wracked with exhaustion and fear as he slumps against the imposing oak door of the Kellerman Residence. With trembling hands, he raps urgently. His eyes dart nervously up and down the rain-swept street.

Thank goodness, no one is following today.

Sixteen-year-old Noelle Kellerman answers. She's pretty with a physique stranded between adolescence and adulthood. Her long fringe covers a black eye patch.

In the background, Radio Cadillac hisses and crackles, trying to find a signal as it spills out doom for October 1942.

She's startled at seeing Monsieur Rothschild in his bedraggled state.

Who can blame her? He must look a fright.

She steps back out of sight. 'Maman, come quickly!'

Her mother, Ariella, appears at the door. Attractive and well-dressed, she's also shocked by his appearance. 'Monsieur Rothschild! Are you alright?'

He hunches forward, caresses the leather briefcase. 'Ariella, you

must give this to Jacob when he returns, he will take it across the border to Spain. Our people there will know what to do with it.'

'What is it?' Her eyes widen in alarm as she looks over his shoulder. 'Who are those men? They're looking at us.'

He glances over his shoulder again, his gaze locking onto the ominous vehicle. Then, with a sudden burst of determination, he blocks the doorway with his body and stretches out his elbows as if they were wings.

He must stop them seeing what is about to do.

Carefully, avoiding too much movement, he opens the briefcase and pulls out a delicate silk scarf, its vibrant colours a stark contrast to the grey gloom surrounding them. He shoves it at Ariella. 'Keep this in a safe place, Ariella. Don't hide it in case they search your home. Keep it on you. Always.'

His heart fills with a profound sadness, as his eyes meet Ariella's. 'It is the only way,' he whispers, his voice barely audible over the crackling of the radio.

Monsieur Rothschild turns to go.

Ariella reaches out and grabs his arm. 'Come, you'll be safer inside!'

'You can see I'm being followed.' He inclines his head to the Adler. 'Go, quickly, hide this treasure under your clothes! Then get out of town.'

'A scarf is treasure?' Her brows pucker as she looks down at the cloud of silk in her hands.

'Not the scarf, but what it reveals when completely wet.'

She looks up at him in confusion.

'A map showing places across France where our people have hidden their Jewish treasures. It must never leave your body, Ariella. Never!'

4

Noelle looks at Maman as Monsieur Rothschild hurries away.

Maman tucks the scarf around Noelle's neck. She places a finger on her lips and pushes Noelle further back into the house. 'Go and hide this under your clothes. Now, quickly!'

Noelle fondles the scarf. 'Who is following Monsieur—'

'Shh! You heard him. Keep this on you, always. Never remove it.' She flicks a finger at the light switch.

The warm, comforting glow fades, plunging their home into an unsettling inky blackness.

The shadows dance ominously, their forms shifting and contorting in the absence of light. A sense of dread settles over the room, as if the darkness itself is alive, lurking in the corners, watching, waiting for the right moment to strike.

Noelle sidles closer to Maman. 'I'm scared, Maman. When will Papa be home.'

Whispering, Maman pushes Noelle into the living room. 'Please, ma chérie, go inside, hide the scarf and stay hidden.'

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Noelle steps backwards, deeper into the house yet panic swells in her chest. 'Don't go outside, Maman, please.'

'I'll watch Monsieur Rothschild to see that he is safe. I will only be a moment.'

Noelle sneaks into the next room, her heart pounding like a drum against her ribs. She casts a fleeting look back, her eyes meeting Maman's silent plea for discretion.

As the door clicks shut behind her, she is driven by an insatiable curiosity and tiptoes towards the living room window, her bare feet moving silently across the cold wooden floor.

With a trembling hand, she parts the curtains, a sliver of light piercing the darkness. She peers through the narrow opening, and gasps.

Her heart leaps into her throat.

5

Monsieur Rothschild steps cautiously away from the Kellerman's door, his heart flaps in his chest like a trapped bird. He pulls his coat up over his ears and keeps his eyes on the ground, avoiding the damp puddles that reflect the gloomy sky.

The Adler's engine coughs and sputters to life, its menacing growl piercing through the rain-soaked silence.

Monsieur Rothschild doesn't look behind. He knows there are they.

Instead, he swallows his fear and shoulders the cutting wind, his breath forming wispy clouds in the frigid air.

A car door opens and shuts, its metallic clang echoing through the deserted street.

He glances sideways through narrow slits.

Two dark silhouettes loom against the grey backdrop. Their leather soles squeak on the cobblestones.

Will they take him here in broad daylight on a public street?

A German voice calls out, 'Herr Rothschild, bitte.'

Monsieur Rothschild's mind racing.

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Should he give in to these menacing figures or make a futile attempt to escape?

Before he can decide, a strong hand grabs his coat from behind, yanking him backward. He stumbles, his feet losing their grip on the slick pavement. The two men drag him towards the idling Adler, their grip unrelenting.

He struggles against their grasp, his voice a strangled cry lost in the coming storm.

The door of the Adler swings open again, and he is shoved inside.

The door slams shut behind him with a finality that sends a shiver down his spine.

At least the map is safe.

6

At the window, Noelle presses her nose to the glass, a tear trickles out of her eye. She swipes it away to stay focused and tilts her head sideways.

Just outside their door, Maman gawks at the men. She rushes outside, slamming the house door behind her.

Noelle cries out when Maman pull her cardigan tightly around her and strides to the car. ‘Excuse me, Monsieur, what is going on?’

‘Come back, Maman!’

Maman glances over her shoulder and gestures for her to move away from the window.

Noelle steps back but cranes her neck to spy on the street.

Maman turns back to the man in the trench coat. ‘You cannot just—’

He spins around, grabs Maman and yanks her head back. ‘Where is it?’

Maman screams, but the man lifts her and shoves her into the back of the car with Monsieur Rothschild.

The Adler speeds away.

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Noelle rushes outside. Her heart fills with dread. She runs after the Alder, waving her arms. ‘Maman! Maman!’

As Noelle races down the street, a pick-up truck pulls out from a side road, forcing Noelle into the kerb.

A tall, bearded man jumps out and bundles her into the passenger seat. In the turmoil, her eye patch is torn off. As she is driven away at speed, her eye patch floats in a muddy puddle on the empty street.

