MOHINDER'S WAR

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BLOOMSBURY EDUCATION
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY EDUCATION
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK

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First published in Great Britain in 2020 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: PB: 978-1-4729-5837-2; ePDF; 978-1-4729-5838-9; ePub: 978-1-4729-5839-6

Typeset by Newgen KnowledgeWorks Pvt. Ltd., Chennai, India

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PROLOGUE

I pointed to the stranger.

'Who's that woman?'

Mum frowned.

'Which one?'

'The one in the light blue coat,' I said. 'She was crying all the way through the service.'

'Oh,' said Mum. 'She must be someone your great-grandfather knew years ago. I haven't seen her before.'

As we left the crematorium, I saw more unfamiliar mourners. Some were old, others younger, and there were some news reporters too. My great-grandfather had flown in World War

Two, as an Indian attached to the Royal Air Force. He had lived to be a hundred-and-five years old, and we had been close.

I was only thirteen, but we'd had loads in common, which might sound strange, but you never met my great-grandfather. Even at the end, he was like a kid – full of humour and always telling great stories. We both loved books, and when his eyesight failed, I would read to him whenever I could. My grandfather, his only son, had died before him, and he'd lost many of his friends during and after the war. Sometimes I'd sit with him in the gardens of his care home, and he'd become suddenly wistful. He'd stare sightlessly into the distance, as though he'd spotted some dear old friend, or been haunted by some dark memory.

Later, my home town held a gathering in his memory. I was standing by an open fire exit, keeping cool on a hot day, when the unfamiliar woman appeared by my side. Her hair was silvery-grey and her eyes a deep, dark brown. She had a mole on her right cheek and a gap between her front teeth.

'You must be Simpreet,' she said.

My confusion was obvious, and the woman smiled and quickly explained.

‘Mohinder told me about you. In one of the last letters he sent me. He enclosed a photograph of you with your mother. I recognised your mother at the crematorium.’

‘My great-grandad wrote to you?’

She nodded.

‘Every week, until a few years ago. Then the letters stopped. I thought he had died, and my heart was broken, but then I saw a news item about him.’

‘He went blind,’ I told her. ‘I guess he couldn’t write any more. We were really close, so I used to read to him. But he never mentioned you.’

I was puzzled by her words. What did she mean by heartbroken, and why? Instead of concealing my thoughts, I asked her. The woman smiled.

‘Forthright and fearless,’ she said. ‘Just like my brave Mo…’

‘It sounds like you loved him.’

‘I did,’ she admitted. ‘I still do. But not in the way most people might think.’

‘So, how did you know him?’

The woman sighed. I saw the same wistfulness in her expression as I'd seen in my great-grandfather's.

'Mo saved my life,' she explained. 'When I was about your age.'

She pointed outdoors.

'Come,' she said. 'Let's find a bench to sit on. I've got a story to share with you…'

ONE

The sound of failing engines awakened me before dawn. They howled and clattered and thumped, and for a moment, I thought that I might be in danger. However, the wailing soon passed by, and then came the explosion. Maman ran into my room, her long brown hair as wild as her expression.

'Joelle!' she cried. 'Joelle!'

'I'm fine, Maman.'

'It has crashed,' she added. 'Did you hear?'

I sat up in bed, nodded and shivered. It was late November and uncommonly cold, much like the previous winter had been. My bedroom window was ill-fitting, iced over and draughty, and my nose

ran. The climate matched the mood of my country, overrun by Germans and without hope of liberty. France, in 1941, was a shadow of itself, shivering under oppressive forces.

'Will they come here?' I asked, talking of the Germans.

'It is probable,' Maman told me. 'Those dogs will do as they please.'

She spat out her words, her contempt for our conquerors obvious. Everyone hated the Nazis, bar those who collaborated with them. They were the enemy, to be thwarted and resisted, as best we could. Maman and Papa went further still, engaging with the *Maquis* – those who would later be remembered as the Resistance. We sheltered them when required and helped them on their secretive missions. All of which meant danger and possibly death.

For myself, then only thirteen years on this Earth, the concepts of oppression and mortality should have been unfamiliar things. Like far-off countries and exotic foods, they should have remained the stuff of stories. But we were under occupation, and my age meant nothing. Childhood, in its purest

form, was impossible. So, I embraced my new life, despite my fears. I did as I was asked, like a good little soldier might, and each time we frustrated the enemy, however slightly, I felt proud and worthy. Such was my life, then.

'Where is Papa?' I asked.

'He left a while ago,' Maman replied. 'To light the ovens.'

My parents were bakers, with a small *boulangerie* at the heart of our little town. Before the Germans came, business was good, and we lived a charmed life, even though we were never rich. Back then, our town was lively and the people mostly cheerful. Many would gather in the central square, drinking and eating on the long summer evenings, and singing songs. Even the cold dark nights before Christmas were full of merriment. It was idyllic. To a small child, the world seemed vibrant and wholesome, and so wonderfully warm and full of possibilities. Before they came.

Afterwards, everything stopped. The warmth dissipated, the vibrancy dulled, and the people grew fearful and depressed. Our bakery suffered as food shortages took hold, and rationing meant that

everyone went without. Yet still Papa would rise each morning and light the ovens.

'One day the flour will be delivered,' he'd often tell me. 'The war will end, and liberty will return.'

'So, then, save your fuel,' I would say to him. 'Until you need it.'

Papa would shake his head.

'The ovens must never grow cold,' he explained. 'They are hope, Joelle, and we must always have hope. If the fires go out, we have let these animals win. And we will not let them win.'

'So, we must keep the fires burning?'

'Always,' he replied, with a distant expression, as though he were forlorn in some way. 'Always…'

Now, Maman urged me to sleep once more.

'I cannot,' I replied. 'I cannot sleep. Not when they might come, and we have…'

'SHHH!' Maman told me. 'Do not even mention them!'

Down in our cellar, behind a secret door known only to us, hid two people. Two resistors. To think that they, and we, might be discovered chilled my bones more than any ice could.

‘It will be fine,’ Maman told me. ‘Chin up, as I used to say in England.’

Maman was English by birth, from a town called Gravesend in Kent. I had never visited England at that time, but Maman was always full of stories of her childhood and had taught me her language.

‘What shall we do?’ I asked her. ‘If the Germans come?’

‘Nothing,’ she advised. ‘We will do nothing but continue our daily routines. We will be polite and friendly and cause no trouble. They will not suspect a woman and child of anything.’

I nodded and pulled the covers around myself, praying that she was right.

The plane crashed beyond our little house, in fields that had been owned by Monsieur Deschamps until the Nazis shot him and his family for Resistance activity. Their bodies were taken to the town square and left by the fountain. A warning to us all. Grace Deschamps had been my friend, only two years older than me. A happy and gentle girl with a kind heart. Now, as I trudged down an icy