THE UNEXPECTED TALE *of* BASTIEN BON LIVRE



To Mum and Dad, for their unconditional love and support

To Adam, for making every day unexpected in the best possible way

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Le Parisien

JEUDI, 31 AOÛT 1922

AUTHORS PERISH IN

Celebrated writers Margot and Hugo Bonlivre tragically died last night in a fire at the InterContinental Carlton Hôtel, just hours before they were due to be welcomed as guests of honour at the Cannes Book Festival.

Margot and Hugo will be best remembered for their very first novel written together ten years ago: *The Voyage to the Edge of the Sky.* Though the two authors received some acclaim for their individual works, it was their joint book that became an international bestseller and firmly cemented their place as two of the most successful storytellers in Europe.

The news of their lives being cut so suddenly short will send shockwaves through the world. Authorities are investigating and witness interviews are under way to confirm how the fire started on the hotel's tenth floor. Police are keen to speak to all those who were residents of the hotel at the time of the incident, especially anyone who was staying on the same floor. According to an anonymous hotel worker, who this newspaper

Quotidien

PRIX:
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60, RUE LA FAYETTE

TRAGIC HOTEL BLAZE

spoke with exclusively, a dark-haired man and a young American couple were booked into the rooms opposite the Bonlivres'.

Margot and Hugo Bonlivre had been due to give a speech at the festival dinner yesterday evening. People from all over the continent had gathered in Cannes to attend, as it was understood the couple were intending to make an announcement. Whether it was about a new book or something entirely different, we can only guess.

The couple leave behind their only child, Bastien, aged twelve. At the time of his parents' death, Bastien was staying with Jules and Charlotte Delacroix, owners of Le Chat Curieux bookshop on the left bank of the Seine.

With no immediate family in Paris and any remaining relatives unknown, Bastien will be sent to the city orphanage for boys and will live there until he is eighteen.

Writers all over the world will weep this morning. Not only for the loss of two of our brightest minds, but for all the words they had yet to write. ■

1
UP IN FLAMES



Winter arrived in Paris on a November evening, later than expected, and Bastien realized he was in trouble. He looked around the dormitory as the metal beds of the other boys creaked from the weight of the bitter wind. Snores floated through the air, for they were all fast asleep apart from him. An urge to write had kept him up long past bedtime, despite the cold and frosty Parisian winter that could eat into brains like rot. Bastien shivered; he had to get out of here.

"Here" was the Orphanage for Gentils Garçons in the Petit-Montrouge neighbourhood, where Bastien had lived for the last three months.

Since the day the police had told him of his parents'

fate, happiness had drained out of Bastien like a slow gas leak. With no other existing family to turn to, the authorities had marched him across the river and through the doors of his new home.

He had not gone willingly.

When Bastien was old enough to understand words, his father had named their family The Three Musketeers, for they were united in strength, spirit and look. Bastien had the same fair hair and topaz-coloured eyes as his parents. The freckles that ran across his face and down his arms were an exact reflection of his mother's, and he'd always asked the barber to cut his hair short, just like his father's. The three of them had never needed anyone else, for they had each other.

Now, under the charge of Monsieur Xavier – the new orphanage director who cared for the boys as much as a pickpocket cared for an honest living – Bastien prayed nightly for a long-lost great-aunt to burst through the doors and save him from the misery of scrubbing toilet bowls.

But tonight was not that night.

Bastien looked over at the low, flickering flames of the furnace in the middle of the dormitory. It was the only light in the dark room. Metal beds were lined up

in uniform rows either side of it, one each for the eight boys who currently lived here, destined to spend the rest of their days together until they turned eighteen.

The brick walls were bare, apart from a single, barred window and an old painting of dark-brown eyes that hung on the far wall. Felix, one of the other boys, had sworn he'd seen the eyes blink before.

Bastien rubbed his hands together, warming his fingers, which felt as frozen as icicles. He slipped out from his blanket and placed his pocket-sized notebook beneath the loose floorboard under his bed. If he was caught writing after dark in a notebook he wasn't supposed to have, there'd be a heavy price to pay. Stories were strictly forbidden.

Monsieur Xavier had arrived only days after Bastien and enforced his harsh rules without pausing for breath. The boys all missed the old director; the kind-hearted Monsieur Dupont, who'd gone for a walk along the river Seine early one morning and never returned. He'd treated them with compassion, whereas Monsieur Xavier had swept in like a bad smell and proceeded to empty all of the boys' trunks, telling them that their personal belongings would need to be sold off to provide enough money for their keep.

Sensing Monsieur Xavier's cruelty, Bastien had hidden, under the loose floorboard, the few belongings he'd managed to rescue from home: a copy of his parents' book, *The Voyage to the Edge of the Sky,* as well as his burgundy leather pocket notebook and pen. He would never part with them; they were all he had from his previous life.

The notebook had been a gift from his parents the night before they'd left for Cannes that summer. They'd bought many notebooks for him to write in before, but this one was different. Inside was blank, apart from the first line of a story they'd written: "*Once upon a time, there were three musketeers destined for a great adventure.*"

"This tale starts with us, but it ends with you," his mother had said as she passed him the gift across the table.

"Go forward and write the unexpected." His father had paused, taken Bastien's hand and clutched it tightly in his own. "Keep this notebook safe and never let it fall into the wrong hands. This is your story to tell."

Bastien had looked curiously at his father, who was usually joyful and as light as the paper he wrote on. The serious look on his face didn't suit him and so Bastien

had smiled and hugged him tightly, almost knocking over the bowl of lemon juice for their crêpes.

"Promise," Bastien had replied.

Bastien had kept this promise and always kept his notebook close, but tonight had been the first time since the summer that he'd felt the urge to pick up a pen. He'd been too sad. How could he write without his parents? He was supposed to tell stories about their endless adventures, but now they were gone and he was stuck here.

He still didn't understand how it had happened, how a fire had broken out in the finest hotel in all of Cannes and taken his parents away from him in a matter of minutes. Bastien was supposed to accept it, but what if he didn't want to? He just wanted them back.

Still, he was a Bonlivre. He knew that meant something. Even though the four brick walls of the orphanage stunted his ideas – every new seed of a story wilting before it had a chance to truly grow – Bastien reread *The Voyage to the Edge of the Sky* most nights under his blanket, with the hope that his parents' magical words might rub off on him.

Before, Bastien had always walked around with a book permanently glued to his nose. Limiting what he

read was like asking the roses in the Luxembourg Gardens not to grow: it was simply against his nature.

The locked doors that kept the boys trapped inside, away from Paris, were another reminder of the bleakness of a place he could never call home. Monsieur Xavier dictated their every waking moment, but Bastien noticed how the director's coal-black eyes always lingered on him for longer than anyone else.

How he missed the freedom to roam his city! Bastien missed morning games of hopscotch outside his apartment with the neighbourhood kids. He missed weekend adventures with his parents; taking the train north to Lille or going on long walks in the Forest of Fontainebleau and climbing to the top of the gorge.

Most of all, Bastien missed Le Chat Curieux. It was his favourite bookshop on the left bank of the Seine, owned by Charlotte and Jules Delacroix. He'd first visited with his parents when he was barely old enough to walk, but he'd stumbled through the door and made a firm friend in Alice, Charlotte and Jules's daughter. Bastien missed her terribly. He often wondered why she hadn't visited or written yet, like she'd promised. Had she already forgotten all about him?

Bastien had pleaded with Jules and Charlotte to take

him in before he was swept off to the orphanage, but the adoption laws in France were as rigid as steel and as much as they wanted to take Bastien under their roof, it was not to be. Now, he woke each morning to the same dormitory room and the same locked door and realized that his dreams of freedom were nothing more than grand fantasies, and that they were as unattainable as finishing the story in his notebook without his parents, or being happy – *truly* happy – ever again.



The heavy thud of the double dormitory doors quickly pulled Bastien from his reverie. The creeping footsteps of Monsieur Xavier approached for the routine midnight inspection and Bastien watched from back under his blanket as the man came to a stop in front of the furnace.

Although the director cared very little for the boys, he drew the line at letting them all perish of pneumonia, for if he didn't keep them alive and well he wouldn't receive any money from the government. For Monsieur Xavier, a life without luxury was unimaginable; the greatest tragedy at the orphanage wouldn't be an outbreak of tuberculosis, but a lack of fresh oysters for his dinner.

Monsieur Xavier picked up the bag of coal next to the furnace and turned it inside out and upside down. Out fell a few black crumbs and the director's grumble bounced off the walls.

Bastien wondered if any of the other boys were awake; the director's leather boots slapped loudly on the floor and were impossible to ignore. If they were, no one dared to move. Last month when Monsieur Xavier was carrying out his nightly inspection, Timothée, one of the older boys, had risked a trip to the toilet after a few secret sips of apple juice that Chef had snuck into the dormitory. Timothée had ended up without a blanket to sleep under for a week; to be without one this winter didn't bear thinking about.

Eventually, the sound of footsteps faded into nothing and Bastien's relief floated up like a kite. He rolled over on his side and realized his relief had been too quick. Monsieur Xavier's hot-anchovy breath lingered in the air and Bastien squeezed his eyes shut so hard that black rings swallowed the director. All fell quiet, except for the sound of fingernails scraping.

Although he knew he shouldn't – for a look risked too much – he dared to open one eye.

What Bastien saw next made him cry out in pain

as though he'd been struck in the face.

The Voyage to the Edge of the Sky was in Monsieur Xavier's hands and he was headed for the furnace.