

A SPRINKLING of DANGER

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nosy crow

For Richard

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Alice Éclair hurried across Pont d'léna, holding a cake box close to her chest and wishing that she had set out before it started to snow. Paris looked beautiful, cloaked in white, with flakes falling like icing sugar all around, but the box that contained her precious creation was getting decidedly soggy and she had to get to her destination before it caved in completely.

The remains of Christmas hung all around. The streets were packed with shoppers eager to take advantage of a bargain at the sales, and it was hard work dodging the crowds. Alice breathed a sigh of relief as she rounded the corner of the street that led to Claude's flat and hammered on his door.

"Finished already, Alice. Excellent work," said the older spy, waving her into the warm kitchen and putting an espresso pot on the stove.

Alice placed the box on the table and undid the grosgrain ribbon. She took a deep breath before removing the lid, hoping that the puckering she could see in the cardboard did not mean that what was inside was damaged.

"Oh, stop fussing, Alice," said Claude. He whisked the top off the box.

Inside sat a cake iced in shades of pink and peach, with wisps of gold leaf that shimmered in the light. On top was a vase made from spun sugar that looked like etched crystal. Bursting out of the vase was a bouquet of red and white camellias and red roses surrounding a single blue hyacinth.

Claude nodded admiringly. "Fantastic work, Alice," he said. He reached down to take a closer look at the flowers. "How do you get them so lifelike?"

"*Maman* made me take a painting course," said Alice. "I still think a white flower in the middle would have been better. That hyacinth looks out of place. I made some ivy too, if you think that would work…"

"Ivy? Absolutely not. Alice, did nobody ever teach you the language of flowers?"

He pointed to the flowers one at a time. "Red roses mean deep love. Red camellias, you are a flame in my heart. White camellias, you're adorable. And the blue hyacinth means constancy. Together they are perfect for the message I need. Ivy means friendship, which would be very sweet, but not quite what I'm aiming for."

Alice rolled her eyes. Grown-ups in love were

so boring. She had hoped that Claude would be immune.

"Now then," continued Claude, not noticing Alice's look of disdain. "How do I get into the centre?"

Alice reached into the box and took hold of the vase. She pulled on it gently and it lifted free from the cake, revealing a hollowed-out centre, lined with gold leaf.

"Perfect," said Claude. He slipped a hand into his pocket and drew out a velvet box marked with the crest of one of Paris's most exclusive jewellers. Placing it gently in the hollow of the cake, he replaced the vase of flowers and smiled at Alice.

"I don't see that anyone could resist this," he said.

"An engagement ring?" asked Alice.

"Maybe, maybe not," he said, closing the lid of the box. "Now then, to business."

Five minutes later, they were sitting at the table with Claude's huge radio transmitter between them. Claude fiddled with the dials on top while Alice blew on the piping-hot coffee that he had placed in front of her, hoping that this time he'd remembered not to make it *quite* so strong.

After a few minutes there was a buzzing, and a voice Alice did not recognise came down the line.

"Henri!" Claude cried. "How are you?"

"Cold," said the voice. "We don't all get the cushy jobs in the city, you know. These mountains are bitter."

Claude laughed. "I was never a mountaineer, Henri. You know that. Any news?"

"Not much," said Henri. "I thought I saw a hare the other day. A rare grey one. But it was nothing. The snowdrifts are building fast. Soon it will be difficult to get through."

Alice raised an eyebrow. She had expected important information about France's security. Why was the agent talking about wildlife? Claude hastily scribbled down *hare – enemy agent, snowdrift – our radio connections* on a piece of paper. Alice nodded. Of course, they needed a code. The agent had not spotted any of the enemy, but the radio network was being built so they would certainly catch one soon.

"Don't forget to check for burrows," Claude said. "Those hares can hide in the smallest of places."

Burrows must mean enemy hideouts, thought Alice.

"Understood," said Henri. "Now, listen, Claude… What? NO!"

There was a crash at the end of the connection as Henri was cut off. Claude leapt from the table as the sound of an explosion burst from the set. "Henri? Henri – are you all right?"

The radio set buzzed. Alice felt her hands go clammy. She knew that the agents working in the mountains were taking great risks, looking out for enemy agents who might infiltrate France. Had Henri been discovered and attacked?

"Henri!"

There was a crackle and then another voice came down the line.

"He's a little busy, I'm afraid, Claude. But you can always talk to me instead."

Alice's blood ran cold. She recognised this voice, but the last time she had heard it, its owner had been falling from a steam train after betraying her and his country.

It was Uncle Robert.



"What are we going to do?" asked Alice for about the fiftieth time.

Claude paced the kitchen. "About Henri? Nothing," he said. "The other agents in the area know that his location has been betrayed. They will do what they can, but they might be putting themselves in even greater danger." He looked out of the window and muttered to himself. "Well, this is more proof – I *knew* he would be involved somehow."

"Uncle Robert?" asked Alice.

Claude stopped pacing. "No, not your uncle." He wrenched open a drawer in the kitchen dresser and reached to the back. Alice heard a click, and a panel on the side of the dresser popped open. A secret compartment. Claude drew out a roll of papers and tossed them across the table.

"How much do you know about what's happening at Versailles?" he asked.

"The film set?" Alice asked. All of Paris had been agog for weeks at the news that a production company from America was moving into the Palace of Versailles to shoot a film about the life of the last queen of France, Marie Antoinette.

Claude flicked through the papers and smoothed out a newspaper cutting. A man in an evening suit smiled out of a report on a glitzy film premiere. "This is the director. Glen Carmine. He's American. They started the film with a French director but he was hit by a car a few weeks ago. It was a hit-and-run, and Mr Carmine was all too eager to step into his shoes. In fact, he was on the phone to offer his services even before it was public knowledge."

"And you don't trust him?" Alice said.

"More than that!" spat Claude. "The man is a traitor, I'm sure of it. In the war he fought on our side, but he took too much interest in the movements of troop divisions he had no connection to, always asking questions about their whereabouts. There was talk that he was a spy for Kaiser Wilhelm."

"But you said he's American?"

"You, more than most, Alice, should know that the enemy will recruit from all nations. After all, isn't your uncle French?"

Alice winced. She had idolised Uncle Robert once. He was the person who had first taught her how to spy and she had trusted him almost as much as she did her own mother, only to have him betray

both her and France by turning out to be in the pay of the enemy all along.

"Why didn't you arrest Carmine in the war then?" she asked, eager to change the subject.

"Oh, it's never that easy, is it? I couldn't get enough evidence to make a charge stick, so no one believed me. But I felt it, instinctively. And now he is back in the country, I've been waiting for a sign that he might be up to something. I don't think the betrayal of Henri is a coincidence. You see, Carmine knows those mountains. He became a film director because of his first hobby – nature photography. There are few people who know more about the French mountains than he does, and he's a skilled mapmaker. I *knew* he wasn't here just to make a film."

Alice was not so sure. Henri could have been betrayed by any number of people. But then, she had never seen Claude so animated. She decided to trust him.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked.

"There is one way to check that he is really only there to make a film, Alice. We need to spy on him – find a way on to that film set," he said. "I have

all phone calls from the palace monitored. I have intercepted all post from there and from the lodging houses of the cast and crew. I have agents in the area ready to follow him at all times, but I haven't uncovered *anything*. I need someone on set to be my eyes and ears. I would go myself, but I'm too busy. We desperately need more spies. And that brings me to another thing, Alice. How would you like to help me train some new recruits?"

