

Angel of North Africa

A novel

by

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Prologue

Fériaana, Tunisia

Midnight on February 20, 1943

For centuries, only the rare bleat of a goat might be heard after midnight in the village at the base of the Atlas Mountains, two-hundred miles southwest of Tunis. This evening, however, and for the past week, sounds of distant shelling along with flashes of artillery filled the air. With Rommel and the German Afrika Corps occupying the region and applying a strict curfew, the village remained bathed in darkness.

On the edge of town, Sophie Sollar slept fitfully in the bedroom of the two-room, stone-and-mud house she shared with her cousin Hélène Al-Hadef. The other room, quite large, served as a medical facility for the women of the village which Sophie and Hélène had been running for three years. Sophie, known in Tunisia as Safiyah Shaloub, was twenty-nine, Hélène thirty-two.

A soft knocking on the door caused Sophie to open her eyes. Sophie and Hélène both sat up quickly when hard door-kicking followed. When alone, the two women spoke French.

“Qu'est-ce que ça pourrait être?” asked Hélène.

Sophie's legs had already touched ground. She didn't know who it was either, but she knew who she didn't want it to be.

The pounding continued, then stopped.

Sophie groped for the lantern and matches on her bedside table. After lighting the lantern with shaking hands, she donned a robe and headed into the main room as the door-pounding resumed. H  l  ne followed. As they walked, both wrapped *nigabs* around their heads, exposing only their eyes. “*Ana qadim!*” yelled H  l  ne, to assure the stranger they were coming. Sophie detoured to the kitchen and grabbed a large carving knife, which she held behind her back.

“*C’est probablement une femme qui accouche d’un b  b  ,*” said H  l  ne, who’d served as midwife to all the women in the village.

Sophie thought of the curfew the Bosches had imposed; anyone caught violating it would be shot on sight.

“*Non,*” she replied shortly.

H  l  ne lifted the latch, opening the door a few inches as frigid night air rushed in. She stood aside so Sophie could lift the lantern. Sophie held the carving knife in a death grip behind her back and raised the lantern high above her five-foot-two frame.

Two men were slumped against the threshold, one with pleading eyes, holding up the other man whose eyes were shut, his head sagging onto his companion’s shoulder. Blood streaked their faces, and blood on their leather jackets almost hid the winged, white star surrounding a red circle: the insignia of the USAAF, the United States Army Air Force. Sophie exhaled and softened her grip on the carving knife.

“Help us, please,” the man with pleading eyes said.

“*Am  ricains?*” Sophie asked.

“Yes. We’re hurt.”

Sophie handed the lantern to H  l  ne and opened the door.

Chapter One

Metz, France

May 1928

A week after her sixteenth birthday, Sophie Sollar paused in front of her home in the Bellacroix arrondissement of Metz. She waved goodbye to her two school friends, and skipped inside. Once the door closed, she heard her father's voice asking if it was her.

"Sophie, *Est-ce que tu?*"

"*Oui, Papa.*"

Sophie entered the sitting room to find, her father, Dr. Charles Sollar, a surgeon, reading a medical journal on the sofa.

"Where have you been?" Charles asked.

"I was at Marie's with friends. Her mother has just come back from Paris and we were looking at her fabulous new dresses," Sophie said.

Charles looked carefully at his lovely daughter, whose large brown eyes and head of unruly, black curls always gave the impression of dynamic tension, like Henri Matisse's famous art piece, *Dance I*. She had her mother's silky olive complexion.

"I thought Marie's mother was with Mama today."

"I suppose."

"So without Marie's mother present, you and your band of mischief makers invaded her closet like the Huns invading France?" Charles asked.

Sophie put her hands behind her back and looked down as if inspecting the floor for insects.

Charles' eyes narrowed. "And you were only *looking* at the dresses, that's it?"

Sophie continued to search for insects.

"You might as well tell me the whole story so when Marie's mother calls Mama to ask why her closet is a mess, we have a defense prepared."

The anxious line of Sophie's mouth slowly morphed into a smile.

"You're not mad?"

"They weren't your mother's dresses. I'd be more worried about Marie! I bet you looked stunning in the latest fashions."

Sophie squealed, "I did," then bounded over to hug her father, before settling in next to him on the sofa.

Charles took a lock of Sophie's curly hair and twirled it around his index finger. Sophie brushed his hand away.

"Why do you always do that?" Sophie asked.

"Because you're my daughter and the miracle of miracles to me and your mother. No other reason," Charles said. "It makes me happy."

"It doesn't make me happy," Sophie lied.

Sophie actually loved the attention shown to her by her father. Sophie had myriad girlfriends and had spent many nights at dinners, sleepovers, parties and on short trips with her friends and their parents. None of her friends' fathers doted on their daughters like Charles did on Sophie. But Charles didn't spoil Sophie with gifts of jewelry, dresses, shoes and toys. He spoiled her with his time, and she loved it.

"One day you might miss it," Charles said.

"Never."

Charles, now 46, was handsome, fit, fair skinned, with dark blue eyes, and a full head of light brown hair with bits of gray at the temples, belying his Austrian roots. Though on the short side of five-foot-eight inches, he exuded the confidence a surgeon should have. He smiled, leaned over and kissed Sophie's forehead. "I have some very exciting news."

"What?"

"Our family is going to the United States for a year in August."

"What for? I don't want to leave. My friends are here," Sophie cried, sliding away from Charles.

"There are some new surgical techniques that I need to learn. We'll be in a city called Ann Arbor."

"I've never heard of Ann Arbor."

"It's in the Michigan region near the big city of Detroit, which was founded by a famous French explorer, Antoine de La Mothe-Cadillac," Charles said. "Besides, you'll go to school there and learn English."

"I speak French, German and some Arabic already. I don't need another language," Sophie replied, her frown deepening and her arms folded tightly.

"I know it's hard to leave your friends, but it will be a grand adventure to see America. Mother and I are so excited by it all. Anyway, it's decided and your friends will be here when we return," Charles said.

"I think I'll just die," Sophie said, sliding off the sofa onto the floor, spreading her arms onto the sofa's cushions, then throwing her head back.

Charles laughed at Sophie's act of utter desperation. "Quite the theatrics. You won't die, and now for protecting you from Marie's mother, you'll do me a favor."

Sophie rolled her eyes. "Do we have to tie surgical

knots again?”

“Yes. I haven’t got a son and my only wish in life is for you to join me in my practice.”

“Mama says girls aren’t supposed to be surgeons.”

“And I say, let them stop us. How are you doing in your science classes this term?”

“Top of my class. It seems to annoy the boys no end that I excel over all of them in math and science.”

“Good.” Charles stood and went to a chest of drawers, removing a spool of black sewing thread. He unraveled an eight-foot piece, snapped it off, then snapped it in half, then half again. Pulling an armchair next to the sofa, they both sat. He slid the four pieces of thread under the arm of the armchair, and gave two ends of one piece to Sophie. He kept the other piece for himself.

“First, we’ll do twenty one-handed knots right-handed and then swap threads and do twenty left-handed. Go!”

Without a hint of effort, Sophie threw knots with her right hand. Charles started a moment later, smiling as they worked together.

A moment later, Mira Shaloub Sollar, Sophie’s mother, entered Charles’ study. Petite with the same curly black hair and olive complexion as her daughter, Mira had given Sophie not only her beauty but her dry wit. In her daughter, Mira recognized her husband’s unbridled ambition, which she tried to hold in check, most often without success.

Neither Charles nor Sophie saw Mira enter; they were concentrating too hard. Mira crossed her arms and waited to be noticed, but the knot-tyers had placed all their focus on flying fingers.

“Our daughter,” Mira announced, “does not need to be a surgeon, or even a doctor. She’d be old and

withered before she finishes school.”

Charles and Sophie shook their heads at Mira, but continued to tie knots without missing a beat.

“In her own time, my daughter will choose what path she will follow,” Mira said.

Finally, Sophie and Charles ran out of thread and stopped.

“I agree, my love,” Charles said. “Our daughter can be anything she wants.”

Mira smiled and uncrossed her arms.

“As long as it’s a doctor,” Charles finished. He stood, walked over to Mira and gave her a hug and kiss. The smile on her face had already disappeared.

“Oh, Mama,” Sophie said, as she stood. “Papa’s being funny. Clearly, I will marry a prince, become deliciously rich, mingle with courtiers, buy my wardrobe from Parisienne designers, and never exert myself at all.”

Charles and Mira looked at each other, began to laugh, and walked to Sophie and gave her a communal hug.

Mira, needing the last word, said, “You’ll find a Jewish prince in France when dinosaurs lay eggs under the Arc de Triomphe.”

The next round of laughs ended when the phone rang in the kitchen. Mira dropped her arms and hurried to answer. Charles and Sophie heard her say hello from the other room.

“Who is it?” Charles called.

“It’s Marie’s mother. She wants to speak to Sophie.”

Chapter Two

December 1933
Strasbourg, France

Despite Mira Sollar's objections, Sophie had entered the six-year medical program at the Université de Strasbourg in 1930, having graduated high school a year early. Only four women in a class of a hundred and ten had gained admission. Sophie had ranked in the top five of her class for the past three years.

Fifty-five third-year medical students, paper and pen in hand, stood at the benches of an enormous laboratory lined with identical monocular microscopes, taking a final examination in pathology. The microscopes, en toto, gave the appearance of thin-necked penguins in a trance-like state, glued to the benches.

Three professors walked around, proctoring the exam. Every five minutes, one of the proctors rang a small bell and the students moved to the next microscope station. The students interpreted what they were seeing on each microscope slide, including the type of tissue, the organ from which it had come, and the disease which might or might not be present.

In the middle of the laboratory, Sophie scribbled furiously in her test notebook then bent over to take another look into the microscope at a slide of a tissue preparation of liver from a patient afflicted with cirrhosis.

The bell rang and the students stood in unison. Sophie smiled confidently, flipped her notebook to the

next page, and moved to the next microscope.

A secretary entered the room, whispering to the head proctor, "Please send Sophie Sollar to the office of the dean when the exam has concluded."

Twenty-five minutes later, Sophie entered the office of Professor Claude Beaumont. Bald, angular, and with a full beard, Beaumont stood to greet his star student. A matronly woman dressed in all-white stood next to Beaumont, the school nurse, Madame LeConte.

"Please have a seat, Mademoiselle Sollar," Beaumont said.

Sophie sat, curiosity shining in her face. Beaumont moved in front of her as LeConte took to Sophie's side.

"It's about your mother," Beaumont said.

"She's skiing with my father and their friends at Champe de Feu," Sophie said. "They go every year before the holiday."

"I'm afraid I have some bad news," Beaumont continued. "Your mother, along with four others, has been killed in an avalanche. Your father has been injured, but not seriously."

"I need to go to them!" Sophie cried out, jumping up.

LeConte extended her arms to catch Sophie as she wobbled, then helped her sit back down.

"I need to go," Sophie repeated, beginning to hyperventilate. "Papa will need me. Where is he now?"

"He said that he'll meet you at home," Beaumont said. "Maybe sit for just a moment. My driver will take you to your apartment and wait until you've packed. He'll then drive you to the train station. He's waiting out front in a blue Citroën."

"I was ... to join them... on Saturday," Sophie said

haltingly, putting her hands to her mouth.

“We’re sorry for your loss,” Beaumont said. “Take however much time you need before returning to school.”

Sophie, sniffing, stood slowly and faltered a bit, then caught herself. “I’m okay. I need to go. Papa will be lost without my mother. So lost.”