

JOHN F. ANDREWS

A
**DOG'S
GIFT**

Novels of
the Great War



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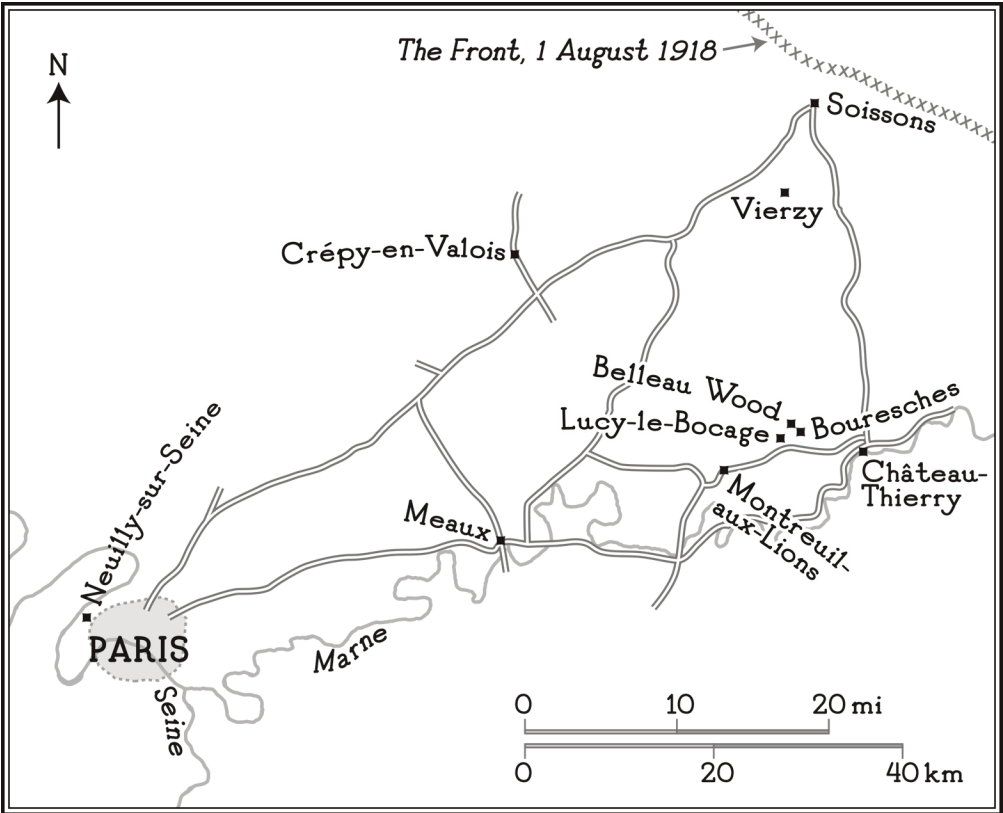
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*Dogs keep us from taking ourselves too seriously.
They also help us face our serious problems.*



Chapter One

Abby

Neuilly-sur-Seine, Suburb of Paris, France
Monday, August 26, 1918

Now, let me tell you something right from the start: Border Collies are the geniuses among dogs. Of that, there is no doubt—no debate, as my Henri would say. And I am one of the smartest. Well, I don't know all the Border Collies out there, and we don't have smartness competitions, but I'm pretty sure I am.

And among the most modest.

My world is troubled.

My people pretend to have happy faces, but I sense the strain under the smiles and cheery things they say. It all seems to have something to do with a word I don't understand—*guardianship*.

Stop.

I lower my nose and study the scent by this tree.

Two of my pack were here. Bruno was first, as German Shepherds like to be, followed by Hugo, who, as a Lab, doesn't seem to care. We met when my Boy and I walked here, and that was a long walk.

We dogs layer our messages. This one? Hmm. Recent, though as you'll learn, dogs aren't good at telling time. Days, weeks, day of the

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week? These aren't important to us, so we ignore them and let people stress themselves about time. The one we can tell is when it's mealtime. I could go on, but my Henri tugs on the dreaded leash.

I add a brief comment, and on we walk.

The smells of the hospital we're heading to grow stronger, and I get myself in order. There are these odors my Henri calls "carbolic" and "alcohol" along with the scents of sickness. This is what my Henri calls a "military hospital," filled with soldiers. They weren't going to let me in at first, saying things like "filthy dog" and "fleabag."

This dog would know if she had fleas, and I don't.

We near the hospital, and my Henri shortens the leash. If I could talk, I'd say, "Okay. I know the routine." When around hospitals and soldiers, Henri stands taller, gets serious, and this dog is the picture of discipline. My nose is next to Henri's leg, in stride, tail down, ears up, mouth closed, no slobber, the way a proper German Shepherd—not a rogue like Bruno, mind you—would march in perfect step with Henri.

We're inside the hospital now. Time to get to work. We go along hallways, passing men who say hello to my Henri. Some lean down to give me a head rub, which I like, and I give them little pants back to show my pleasure. No barking or yowls in the hospital. I did once, and a lady yelled at me.

My Henri and I walk into a large room where he meets with his men.

Now, let's make a couple of agreements. I'll stop calling him *my* Henri and will just call him *Henri* to keep it simple. Same with his wife, Sophie, who I'm sure we'll meet later. I reserve the right to call my Girl *my* Girl and the same with my Boy.

Henri sets his hat on a table and stands behind his seat. His Loyal Dog—*moi*—sits at attention next to him.

The man who's been with us longest walks in with crutches—he only has one leg. His name is George. He remains standing while the others come in, three with crutches and four in the rolling chairs pushed by soldiers. Those walking take seats in a circle of chairs with open spots for those in the rolling chairs.

Oh, by the way. I can count. To ten.

Two of my favorite people come in. Nurse Alice walks beside

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Hiram, who has a bad leg and uses a stick to help him walk. They're about the same height, him dressed in hospital pajamas and robe and her in her nursing clothes. Hiram must have a dog—he knows all the right spots to pet and scratch. Nurse Alice had a dog too. She looks into my eyes with the sadness of someone whose dog is no longer with her.

George and Henri stand next to each other while the others sit down. Nurse Alice and Hiram sit next to each other on the other side of the circle.

"Welcome, Private Morgan and Sergeant Warren," George says. He introduces the other men and then says, "Our leader is Colonel Barton." He motions his hand toward Henri and sits in a chair.

"Thank you, Sergeant," Henri says. Private Morgan's eyes widen. "I'm retired, so you don't need to call me 'colonel' or salute. I served in the French Chasseurs Alpins and finished my career in intelligence. My wife and I live nearby and own a small wine store. Work as a custodian here during the spring showed me the struggles of your comrades, like Private Hiram Stoops." Henri points at Hiram. "The men who recovered the fastest were those who talked about what they'd gone through. It brought back my service days and what my men and I did. So it occurred to me that it would be good for men like us to meet and talk about what we've gone through, our hopes, aspirations, and our futures. I added my little friend, Abby, when I realized how many here grew up with dogs. Many relax with her attention, and that seems to help some talk about the horrors we went through."

Henri unclips my leash while I sit at his side, panting to show that I'm ready.

"You can either call me Henri or, if that is not comfortable, Monsieur Barton. Some of you know Nurse Alice Simmons. She is here to help translate if there are any misunderstandings."

The men who have been in the group before take turns talking about themselves and what happened to them before they were hurt and came here. I go from man to man, and they pet me while they talk. Private Morgan's face frowns from time to time. His eyes lock on to mine, and here's an important point: I know dog boys when I look into their eyes. It gives me a warm feeling. He could become a friend—that sort of feeling. I want to make him feel it too, so I continue to look into

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his eyes—not with the blink-less stare I use on sheep, but a gentle one where I blink often enough that it isn't a challenge.

Now, let me tell you about something important. There are things I smell that fit with some of the words Henri uses, like fear, anxiety, sadness. And pain. There are two types of pain. There's the one you get when something makes you bleed. All the men in this room have the other type; Henri says it is the pain of loss. Every man in Henri's groups has lost something important. Like a leg, an arm, an eye, other parts of their bodies, or things that make them not able to be who they were before the loss. And I don't use just my nose. My eyes see things in faces, hands, and the way they sit. My ears hear the tones of their voices. Well, that's getting complicated. Before Henri started using these fancy words, I had a simple way of putting it: I know when people need me.

Hiram clears his throat. That's my signal. He and I have done this in every session. I sit on the side of his bad leg, between him and Nurse Alice. His hand drops to my ears. He knows where I like him to scratch.

"Well, um, so you see, I was shot in the leg almost right off the bat on June 6," Hiram says. "I was a litter bearer. Lieutenant Grant got shot. Me and my buddy run to him and rolled him on the stretcher, see. I got mine when we skedaddled with the lieutenant to the aid station. Ruined my leg." He points. "Lieutenant Grant stuck with me the whole way here. Wouldn't let 'em put me in the enlisted ward until he was sure the docs took care of me. That's when I met my guardian angel, Nurse Alice." Hiram smiles at her. "Anyways, I'm a farmer from north of St. Cloud, Minnesota." He points at his leg. "Ain't no way I'm goin' back to farmin'. I've had twenty-eight operations to save my leg, and they're shippin' me out to the navy hospital by Chicago next week."

"Waddya think you're gonna do?" Morgan asks.

"All's I knows is farmin' and runnin'." Hiram rubs between my eyes.

Now, let me tell you something. There are a few spots a dog can't get to, and this is one of them. We could try, but claws and eyes? Not good.

"Nurse Alice has worked on my writin' and readin', and Lieutenant Grant told me there's lots of jobs in Chicago, so I figger I'll settle there after they let me out of the hospital." Hiram looks into my eyes. "Learn me a trade is what I'm thinkin'."

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Nurse Alice gives me a rub on my back. I look into her eyes. They seem the same as my Girl and her mother.

The other new patient snarls like an angry Doberman. "That's a pile of . . ."

Okay, there are limits here. There are not-nice words. That one has something to do with cattle and the ground beneath them. I hear plenty of words like this and will not repeat them here for your tender ears. This man smells like one who uses them a lot, so I'll do my best to not offend.

I don't remember his name. Sergeant something-or-other. He has a hooked nose and narrow eyes, so I'll call him Sergeant Hook for now. He's missing a leg.

"Tell me more." Henri shifts in his chair to face Sergeant Hook.

"We're marines, not a bunch of whining ninnies at an afternoon tea party." He slaps the chair next to his missing leg. "My leg got blown off. So what? I'm not like that whiner over there." He points at another man with only one leg. "I'm gonna kick some ass with my good leg when I get outta here."

Does he mean a donkey? You know they kick back. I don't advise a one-legged man to try that. Though the thought of how that would look seems funny.

Now, let me tell you another important point. People use the same word for more than one thing. Like *ass*—do they mean a donkey or a part of the body or a person they don't like? This is a problem for this dog in her attempts to understand what people mean when they say certain words. I will refrain from remarking it about every time words with more than one meaning are said by people. Maybe I'll give a blink when this happens again rather than give you a lecture each time.

"Every man has his own story." Henri's voice is calm. "Each with our own experience and reaction to those experiences. Tell me about yours, Sergeant."

"This is a waste of my time."

"What else would you be doing with your time while here in the hospital?" Henri asks.

I do not go to Sergeant Hook but move over and sit at attention by Henri's side.

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"Joined the Marines in '14, long before these simps enlisted. Real men we were, not like these losers. I say suck it up, babies. Quit yer crying and carry on."

"What did you do in the Marine Corps before you came over here?"

"I was a DI. Not that that's any of your frigging business, Frenchie."

"You seem to hold a lot of anger inside." Henri rubs my ears.

"Yeah, but that's just cuz the Corps don't carry one-legged sergeants on their rolls."

"So what do you think you'll do?"

Sergeant Hook sits back and crosses his arms over his chest. "Politics. I'm a frigging hero. I'll have a chest full of medals. That'll get me votes. And I'm a great public speaker."

This genius will take issue with that.

"I'll kick their keisters and show 'em how it's done."

"Well, best of luck, Sergeant Warren," Henri says.

Okay, so that's his name, Sergeant Warren. I get it, not Sergeant Hook.

"I agree," Henri says. "This group is not for you. And you're right. Being a one-legged politician may fit you like a glove. Many politicians don't have a leg to stand on. At least you have one."

I'm pretty sure Henri is using something he calls "irony," but Sergeant Warren doesn't react. He may not be as smart as he thinks he is. A common problem I've observed in humans and some breeds of dogs. I could tell you about this bulldog I knew. No time now.

Sergeant Warren gathers his crutches and hobbles out of the room, muttering more cuss words I won't repeat. Unhappy man. Based on what Henri has told me, politicians are like a boy dog missing a hind leg trying to mark a tree.

As we go through what Henri calls "the session," each man takes his turn to talk about his worries while Henri and the others try to help him figure out what he can do after he goes home from the hospital. Nurse Simmons says little, but her eyes hold each talker as if absorbing their every thought and feeling. She takes care of these men in a place she calls her "ward."

We do this most days that don't begin with bacon. Oh, I didn't explain bacon days and no-bacon days. I'll tell you about them later.

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Oh, okay. If you insist. BACON days are my favorite. Well, bacon is my favorite food. Bacon days are the ones when my Children don't go to the orphanage for classes. The other days are what Sophie calls "scrap days" like today, when everyone is busy doing some sort of work.

Get it?

Remember this: I LOVE BACON.

But I digress.

Pardon.

I blink. Now there's a word that both the French and English use the same way. Did I mention I understand both? Growing up in England and living here will do that to a dog . . . if she's a humble genius like me.

The men leave after this session. Nurse Alice comes over while Henri stokes my head.

"How is the guardianship application going?" Nurse Alice asks.

"I'm worried."

Chapter Two

Marcel Durand

Peeling potatoes isn't my favorite job. Still, it's one of those skills that may be useful when I join the army. That is at least three or four years off, depending on what they do with the enlistment age in the meantime. Some my size try to enlist, but fifteen is fifteen, and they won't take me yet.

The kitchen of the orphanage is large, airy, with tall windows, a white-and-black tile floor, and white-tiled walls. I'm at a side table while the assistant cook, Joseph, cleans the stove. It's the sort of kitchen that fits with the size of the mansion-turned-orphanage, now with twenty-three residents ranging from four to sixteen in age. This was the first place my sister and I were sent after we arrived in Paris—our parents killed, seeking cousins we'd never met. It was through this kitchen that I first met my cousins, Sophie and Henri.

My sister worries me. She puts on a brave face, but she has deep inner pain. Maman died saving Geneviève's life. The guilt eats at her—I see it every day. This bathes me in memories of the nightmare we lived through in June, the worry, the confusion, the loss.

I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand and hope nobody saw that. "Get a move on," says Joseph. "What's wrong with you?"

The knife slips, and I nick my thumb.

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That hurts. I grab a towel and press it against my thumb.

"Get a move on, slack boy! Faster, faster!"

"You made me cut my thumb," I say.

"I'll cut more than that if you don't get back to work," Joseph says.

Joseph has something against me. The army rejected him when he tried to join. The shame of that is part of his problem. The rest is unclear to me. It may be because I'm one of the lucky ones—only here for two weeks before moving to Henri and Sophie's apartment. Then I started work in the kitchen. When Sophie, the *chef de cuisine* here, isn't around, Joseph is on my back—work harder, work faster, *rapid, rapid, plus rapid!* He is always nice when Sophie's present because she's his boss.

Joseph slaps the back of my head.

I stand, clench a fist, and drive it into his soft middle.

He doubles over, gasping for breath.

My heart slams against my ribs. Muscles are coiled springs ready to release. My jaw is tight, neck tense, ready in case he returns my blow.

When he gets his breath back, he curses as he straightens up, hands in fists.

"Go ahead, Joseph. Try it."

His eyes are on fire as they stare into mine.

I'm ready, both hands open to counter anything he tries.

Seconds tick on the clock above the stove. My eyes are wide open, staring into his, daring him.

"*Merde!*" Joseph staggers out of the kitchen.

He's a coward at heart. Probably the reason he's here. All the able-bodied men his age, mid-twenties, are in the army. Rumor has it that the army rejected him for mental reasons, and his uncle found him the job here.

Now my face heats. Papa always said to be disciplined. Don't react in haste unless you have no choice. I didn't have to slug Joseph—though it felt good. He's been needling me, trying to provoke me all week. I should have spoken with my voice, not my fist. But part of me wanted to do damage. Break something—his nose, his arm. Something.

My heart is calming, and I slow my breathing.

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Matron comes into the kitchen. “Marcel, I’ll give you a chance to tell your side.”

I describe what happened. Her frown speaks of her disappointment in me. What next?

“Joseph said that when you cut your thumb, he told you to see the nurse and that you hit him.”

“Matron,” I say. “That’s a lie. He slapped the back of my head. That made me hit him.”

“Marcel, I expect more of you. You carry so much anger—I see it; the staff sees it. You need to control yourself. We can’t lose Joseph or you. Both of you owe apologies, and we’ll do that next.”

Joseph comes into the kitchen, a smirk on his face. “Well, boy, what do you have to say to me?”

Matron’s eyes don’t leave me.

My heart speeds, arms tense, neck tingling. “Don’t hit me again.”

“That’s not what we want,” Joseph says.

“You owe me an apology for hitting me,” I say.

The clock ticks while Joseph sneers.

“Joseph, Marcel is right. You first.”

“I apologize if I hurt your delicate feelings,” Joseph says.

“My feelings are not delicate.”

“Joseph, try it again, and mean it this time,” Matron says. “No conditions.”

Joseph sighs. “Okay, I’m sorry.”

I’m sure he isn’t.

“I apologize.” But I don’t mean it. Next time . . .

Chapter Three

Geneviève Durand

Marcel walks out of Matron's office as I stack my books on a side table in the orphanage's entry. Joseph follows him out. The frowns and the fire in Marcel's acorn-brown eyes tell me something's happened. Marcel is working his right fist open and closed like he's ready for a fight—and I suspect Joseph's taunting finally led to an explosion.

Joseph is older, but my brother shot up this summer and is taller than most grown men. I've had to look up to meet his eyes for the past year. And he's muscular from all the farmwork he did back home before we evacuated and ended up here at the orphanage.

"I swear," Marcel whispers, "I'll bust Joseph's nose next time." He picks up his math book from the table, and we go out the front door. He tells me about the incident when we reach the street.

"Let's go to the park." I start walking. "You need to calm down."

Marcel passes me, and I hurry to catch up, his gait full of anger. I struggle to keep up, lugging my load of books.

Unlike Marcel, my day went well. I worked with Nurse Girard and Doctor Favre in the respiratory isolation ward upstairs—the room I started in when I arrived here with pneumonia. They call me *la petite infirmière*—the little nurse. But I'm not a nurse. Not yet. They give me

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little tutorials that will help me with my plan to become a nurse. My job is to write notes and help the girls. I talk with them, give them friendship and a feeling of safety.

“Marcel, slow down.”

I trip.

A hand catches my left arm as books fly out of my right. I stop, gasping, heart pounding.

“Watch where you’re going!” Marcel bends down and picks up my books. He slaps them together and sighs as he stands up. “Clumsy idiot. Here, carry your biology book. I’ll take the rest since you can’t seem to handle them.”

“I’ll watch where I’m going if you’ll watch your temper.”

“What temper?” Anger flares in his eyes.

“That one, you silly idiot.” I smile.

That breaks his moment.

The park is two blocks from the orphanage. We weave along the sidewalk to our favorite bench—one off by itself near the woods where our friends, the Rascals, often bed down.

“Bruno! Hugo!” I shout.

Marcel calls them, clicking with his tongue. He needs a dose of dog, and the sillier the better. That would be Hugo, the black Labrador he and Abby took on as a stray when they made their long journey from Meaux in June.

This would be easier if we had treats. We continue to shout.

Marcel seems more relaxed, his face not so tight, eyes back to normal as he claps his hands.

A black nose pokes out of a nearby bush.

Then a brown snout with its pink tongue hanging out.

“Bruno, come!” I shout as I clap my hands.

Bruno inches out, ears on high alert as he glances to each side in case this is a trick. He walks toward us, wary, sniffing the air, glancing into my eyes for a moment as he looks from side to side. Then he’s with me. I rub his ears and then his chin. He gives the sort of high whine only German Shepherds can make without seeming to whimper.

Then three barks. A black streak barrels our way, hitting Marcel so hard that he staggers back. Hugo’s paws lean on Marcel’s chest while he

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licks Marcel's face. Where that wet tongue has been, I don't want to know. Marcel laughs. He nuzzles Hugo's face.

"He's not as stinky as usual." Marcel sits on the bench, his right hand never leaving Hugo's floppy ears.

I sit with Bruno on my right, his muzzle on my right leg.

It's a funny thing about dogs. When I'm with them, I relax. Rubbing their heads calms me, reminds me of the good things still worth living for. Of course, Abby is the master at this, but some of her talent has rubbed off on these two.

"I wish we could bring them home," I say.

"Then the pack would be complete." Marcel strokes the area between Hugo's eyes. "Almost."

"I don't think we could get Foofoo away from her new lady."

"And Sophie would never allow all of them in the apartment," Marcel says. "Henri's been working on her to accept these two."

Several minutes pass while we pet our friends. I think about what's ahead—what's been bothering us over the past three weeks. I imagine Marcel's thinking about the same.

"I'm frustrated with Henri," Marcel says. "Something's troubling him about our guardianship application, but he won't tell us what."

"I don't understand it, and Cousin Sophie changes the subject when I bring it up." I rub Bruno's neck. "I know you just had a bad time with Matron, but I bet she can help us understand what's ahead."

"Think she'll talk with us? After what I did?"

"No way to know unless we ask." I give Bruno a last head rub, hoping it brings me luck.

The Rascals bolt off into the woods, and I lead on the route back to the orphanage. Matron is in her office doing paperwork. She looks up and gives me a vague smile until Marcel enters. Her face turns to neutral as she motions us to sit in the chairs facing her desk. "Something's been bothering both of you. Is that what you're here to talk about?"

"Yes." I nod. "Cousin Henri is applying for temporary guardianship of us. It seems like there's a problem with it, but neither he nor Cousin Sophie will tell us what's going on."

"I am not privy to those matters, if that's what you're here for," Matron says.

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Matron is a stout, dour, gray-haired woman of uncertain age. She seems timeless, like I imagine anyone called “matron” would be. My guess is that she’s in her fifties, but she could be older. Her pale blue eyes seem to penetrate me as she waits for my answer. Her high-necked white shirt is buttoned to the top under a black shirtwaist and dark gray dress. She’s always treated me well but keeps Marcel on a short leash.

“We don’t understand the basics of how this works,” I say.

Matron sets down the document she was reading. “Monsieur Barton will likely have a lawyer petition a judge to hear the case and present an application for temporary guardianship. The Bartons need this to register you for school and to take care of any other legal matters for you since you are thirteen and Marcel is fifteen.”

“I’ve read about guardians and adoptions in books,” I say.

“There are no adoptions in France. The closest thing to that is guardianship.” Matron fiddles with her fountain pen. “Guardianship, or its temporary form, requires death certificates of both parents. Then a family council is set up with a justice of the peace or the magistrate responsible for the area where the family lives or lived. They try to have as many relatives as possible participate to find the best guardian and home.”

“How do we do that now?” I ask. “The army won’t let anyone into the area where we lived—they say it is uninhabitable.”

“And we don’t have any relatives nearby other than Henri,” Marcel says. “The rest live near Grenoble, and we don’t know them that well. I can’t imagine them traveling here.”

“In the absence of a normal family council, guardianship is temporary,” Matron says. “You’re sure there are no other living relatives nearby?”

“No,” I say.

Marcel is quiet, his eyes staring at the floor, fidgeting with his feet.

“Um, Gen, don’t you remember? Maman’s sister. I can’t remember her name.”

My face is hot with a flush. “You may be right.” I look at Matron. “We never met this person, and I don’t know if she’s even alive. There was something between them—accusations that nobody talked about with us.”

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The room is silent other than the tick of the clock on the wall. Voices of children in the classroom next door chatter in a French lesson. I look into Marcel's eyes. "I think her name might have been Eloise?"

Marcel shakes his head. "Ernestine?"

"No." I can't think of it. "It starts with *E*. Eleonore? Eulalie? Elodie? Elia?"

"None of those." Marcel's brow narrows. "Her husband is Bernard. I remember Papa saying it. I think it was Elisabeth."

"That's right. Elisabeth," I say.

"Where does this Elisabeth live?" Matron asks.

"I'm not sure." I narrow my eyes. "Somewhere around Vierzy, south of Soissons, I think."

"What if they apply?" Marcel asks.

"I believe that the closer the relative, the more likely a judge would award guardianship, but I'm not sure," Matron says.

"I wonder if that's what is troubling Cousin Henri," I say.

Chapter Four

Abby

Henri and I leave the hospital after three more “sessions.” We walk down a familiar street, me sniffing out messages and adding a few comments along the way. We turn onto a busy street where the wine shop is.

A trolley clatters by. The smoke from the automobiles and trucks that pass makes it hard for this Border Collie to appreciate the good aromas as Henri stops to look through shop windows. The butcher is, of course, my favorite. Then there’s the bakery, which smells of breads and rolls that I prefer to not eat, but Sophie loves them and I love her, so there. We walk by a bookstore with its musty scent of old books and a boy mouse living inside. Remember—I have a good nose.

Finally. We stop at the door of Barton Wines—I know that because Henri answers the telephone with those words when we are here. Henri grinds the lock and opens the door. The aromas inside are too many to describe. But no mouse.

Now, here is something to keep in mind: Henri and his customers must take the corks out to sniff the wine inside the bottles. I can do that through the cork without opening the bottle. Good corks, bad corks, good stuff, and bottles he should give to the men who sleep in doorways and parks. This Loyal Dog can tell. When I lived with Henri before I

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met my Boy and my Girl, he used to tell me stories about the wines. But I only got a lick of the wine on his finger, never more. That's probably good since I've seen more than one Frenchman who drank too much. Good stuff, bad stuff, I'm sure they didn't know the difference, the way they staggered down streets. Henri and Sophie never get that way from their wine.

My nose can tell some of the Bordeaux wines apart. The Loire, a different nose, and the Rhône, an aroma of its own. Now, let me tell you, I'm not so good that I can pick out a particular château or vintage. Henri has to do something here, yes?

I could go on but, *pardon*, I have a job to do.

Henri dusts the counters and some bottles, humming one of his favorite tunes he says is by a man called Debussy. A "pavane," he calls it. I conduct my own investigation to see if anyone has intruded here since our last time and if there are any mice I missed on first sniff. They're easy to smell. They stink, to my way of thinking.

The shop is a large room filled with shelves holding bottles, and there's also a back room where Henri writes his notes and keeps what he calls his "records." There's a door to the cellar stairway, and let me tell you, those stairs are tricky!

The bell by the door rings.

A customer!

Maybe I'll get back to the cellar later.

Monsieur Sallee, one of the regulars, browses the Rhône rack. I offer him the opportunity to appreciate the benefits of a Loyal Dog. He looks down, rubs my head, and I confirm that there are no other dogs competing for his affection with a sniff of his trouser cuffs.

"Henri, I'm looking for something to go with beef tonight."

"Where did you find beef?"

"I have a source . . ."

I put my nose to work. I'm pretty sure what Henri will recommend and go to a shelf, find a bottle with a good cork and a fine aroma, and stand, sniffing it. I don't touch the top of the bottle with my nose. Henri told me that buyers are put off by collie snot.

"Ah." Henri goes to a shelf. "Abby may not be an expert at wine pairings, but she found a good one for you. This is one you haven't

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tried. A fine St. Joseph, four years old, in my cellar until last week. Abby and I tasted one, and she approved.”

She most certainly did. I’d smile if I were a Lab.

“So it must be good.” Monsieur Sallee rubs my head and gives me a smile. “Still only open in the afternoons?”

“*Oui*,” Henri says. “Same problem—can’t find anyone to work with me. The fit men are in the army, the women are working in the factories or hospitals, and nobody seems to want to work here.”

Henri takes the money and puts it in a drawer.

Monsieur Sallee holds the bottle. “Well, I’m glad you’re open again. That time in the spring, when the Boche went on the offensive, made wine almost impossible to find.”

“An anxious time,” Henri says.

“One of my friends said that if the Americans hadn’t stopped them, the Boche would have taken Paris by storm.”

“Well,” Henri says, “that was the general thought. But I think the attack was to distract us from their bigger ones to the north, in the Somme. Besides, the Boche outran their supply lines. I don’t think they planned for that attack to enter Paris. That doesn’t take anything away from what the Americans did.”

“How do you know?”

“I have my sources,” Henri says.

“I hear that the fighting destroyed all the towns in that area.”

“I haven’t been there myself, but yes,” Henri says. “My young cousins, Marcel and Geneviève, barely escaped from Bouresches with my little friend here. Their mother died from German bullets when they fled.” Henri pats my back. “The entire area from Château-Thierry to Soissons is a disaster—Bouresches in ruins. I don’t know when anyone will coax grain from the fields or vegetables from the gardens again. I imagine the residue of the gases will poison any animals the farmers bring back.”

I give a soft yowl. A sad one. I miss that home. There was—I’m not sure of the words here—something about it, like lying in the sun and knowing I’m safe.

Monsieur Sallee leaves with a tinkle of the little bell above the door. I follow Henri into the back room and settle on my bed. Henri shuffles

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through papers and a book on his desk, wearing reading glasses. I sense worry. I'd go to him to comfort him, but he seems to need both hands to do his work. So I close my eyes to listen and appreciate the aromas surrounding me. There is one bottle with a bad cork out there. I'll get to that soon. But first, one other thing I do well . . .



The shop bell tinkles. A customer! My ears perk, and I roll over and sniff. Sophie! The soap she calls "lavender" is easy to smell with my fine nose. I give her my Sophie yowl and stretch. She'll want to rub this dog's head, and I better be ready.

Henri rises from his chair, smiles, and waves Sophie into our room. She takes a seat in a plush chair in the corner between the desk and the back wall. Henri naps in the chair when things are quiet. My nap pillow is next to it.

"How do the books look?" Sophie asks.

"As you would expect." Henri shrugs. "The losses aren't huge, but I'd like to at least say we're breaking even."

That's not what he was saying to himself before my nap.

"We're still doing okay, though, yes?" Sophie presses her lips together and gazes into my eyes as if asking me if he is lying.

Well, he is, but how can I tell her?

"How bad? You know I can read you."

Henri pulls at his collar. "It's a good thing we have other resources. We're losing the amount of the rent and bills."

Now, here is one thing about dogs, and I may repeat this more than once. We don't lie. I blink. This is another one of those words. We do lie down. But we don't tell lies. We can't. We can't speak in words, and lies are all spoken, though Henri told me they also are written. Without thumbs or fingers, dogs are in no danger there either.

"Perhaps I should apply for a position in one of the restaurants?" Sophie says. "Or get in touch with my contact at the agency?"

"We're among the lucky," Henri says. "We have much to be grateful for." He rubs my ears. "Besides, I don't want you to go back to your old job. It was exciting, but I came too close to losing you."

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"Ah, but we were good," Sophie says. "Well, except for me getting caught in Stuttgart."

"My love, I thought I'd lost you when the Boche put you in their prison. What I had to do to get you out is something I don't want to repeat."

"You still have the dagger." Sophie frowns. "I remember every time I see you use it to open mail."

"And you, your pistol."

"I like the way it fits my hand."

"I hope I never need the dagger for anything more than an envelope. And I hope you never have to pull the trigger again. I'm not sure there are enough Hail Marys to atone."

Sophie nods. "Bring the books home. I need to look them over too."

I think Henri may be in trouble with her.

"But the court, the guardianship, the children?" Sophie's voice is tense.

"Lucien sent a note earlier. Judge Porcher will hear the case. If he could put a gun to my head, he wouldn't hesitate to pull the trigger. He swore revenge the last time I saw him."

"But there are laws." Sophie stares at the wall behind Henri.

"He can do much damage even if his rulings are reversed on appeal. You know how long that can take in peacetime—it will be even longer with the war. Claire's sister filed a competing claim for guardianship."

"Who?"

"Elisabeth and Bernard Lacroix. Never met either."

I keep myself in position next to him. He has all the signs of needing comfort. The frown, the slumped shoulders—something a dog can't do, by the way—and the scent of worry.

There.

Henri's hand drops down to give my neck a scratch and then settles on the area between my eyes. I know he's worried now.

Henri picks up a paper with his other hand. "This is a report from our old agency. I asked for some background, and, well, friends came through. Here it is. 'The subject, Bernard Lacroix, was born on the third of March, 1879, in Bordeaux. His father is alive and works at a vineyard where he and his wife live in a tenant cottage. That is where

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Bernard grew up. The family inherited a wheat farm southeast of Soissons, near the village of Vierzy. Bernard and his cousin took over the farm. The cousin died in 1910 from consumption. Subject married at age nineteen to Elisabeth. Two sons. Claude, the oldest, killed in action in the Somme on December 23, 1917, awarded three Croix de Guerre medals. Julien, killed in action in the Salonika campaign on March 18, 1917. Bernard fought in the Somme, where he was awarded the Croix de Guerre twice. Sustained shrapnel injuries in an artillery barrage.' Now this is interesting—he was wounded the same day Claude died, December 23 last year. 'Above-the-knee amputation of the left leg and wounds to the left arm. Clean service record. Fitness reports are good—hard worker, patriotic. Currently completing his rehabilitation and has a prosthesis.'"

"Is there anything left of their farm after the battle around there in June?" Sophie asks.

"I asked about that when I got the report. They're still recovering the dead and all the other detritus left after the battle in that area. It mauled the villages and surrounding countryside. Almost no building remains undamaged. Many are no more than piles of rubble. Some residents have been moving back in and are repairing their homes, against army orders. Army engineers haven't cleared the fields. Pieces of unexploded ordnance, including gas cylinders, litter the surface and lie under the ground."

"Did the report include Bernard's address?" Sophie asks.

"Just the land description for his farm fields."

I move over to Sophie. Henri smiles. "Our little friend thinks you need her comfort."

Sophie nods. "So Bernard owns a farm. That's a count in his favor."

"But the farm fields throughout that area are ruined."

"A man with a leg amputation won't be able to farm," Sophie says. Her hand feels tight as she strokes my back. "Even worse with an arm injury. What about Elisabeth?"

"My contact had no further information," Henri says.

Sophie leans toward Henri. "Do you think Elisabeth is after money?"

"That could be the motivation. Then there is Pierre's home with a

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small mortgage from a bank destroyed in the fighting. I've checked—the money he and Claire saved was in a bank in Château-Thierry. If the banker didn't take everything, the Germans did. It's a mess."

Sophie looks up. "And I was getting used to the idea that God had smiled on us with Marcel and Geneviève. With Porcher hearing the matter and Elisabeth's petition, we're sunk, aren't we?"

"I'm meeting with Lucien in an hour," Henri says. "There is always room for hope."

"Bring those records—the man I married would know I don't like being lied to. And he knows that hope has no place in a battle plan."

Chapter Five

Geneviève

We leave the orphanage after thanking Matron for the information. It is a warm, humid evening. I'd love to go find the Rascals again, but we need to head home for supper.

The orphanage is six blocks from our new home with Cousin Henri. A mild breeze and the large shade trees between the road and sidewalk give some relief from the heat. We pass six-story buildings of the same design, set back behind low fences with small front yards. In class we learned that a man named Haussmann designed these and the other buildings in Paris—with shops on the ground floor and the mezzanine above it; the best apartments, like Henri's, are on the second floor with smaller ones above. They are nothing like the hodgepodge of rough houses of Bouresches, which I miss so. The battle for our village destroyed it and our home, or so Henri told me.

"Just when it seems like things are going our way, this comes up," I say.

"We don't know if this Elisabeth is in the picture at all, you know."

"There must have been a reason Maman was bringing us here. It feels as though we're going against her wishes to do anything else."

Aeroplane noise interrupts my thoughts.

It's heading this way.

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I flatten myself against a tree trunk, heart racing.

And in a flash, I'm back in the field west of our old home in Bouresches. Some of Papa's men carry me, using a door from our home like a stretcher. Me coughing, scared, too sick to walk, afraid I'm going to die.

Noise from three Boche aeroplanes comes from the east, heading our way. The soldiers run, and I grip the edges of the door to stay on.

Shouting.

Abby barking.

Marcel shouting.

The soldiers drop the door on the ground.

Gunfire as they shoot up at the planes. I see the Boche aeroplanes with three wings and wild colors—green, yellow, blue, red—machine guns blazing.

Maman leaps on top of me.

I can't see the aeroplanes, just her eyes, wide, mouth open, screaming.

Then her body jumps three times.

Warm liquid covers me.

Screaming.

Mine.

Maman's beautiful eyes. Vacant. Dead.

I stumble.

Marcel stops, his hand on my right elbow. "Gen, I hate what this has done to you. To us."

"The sound of that plane. Every time I hear one go over, I . . . I don't know what you call it. It's like I'm living it over again."

"Like your nightmares?"

I swallow and nod. The words won't come. Tears flow, and my throat is too tight to even squeak.

"Can't get my mind off it either. I'm"—his face reddens—"so angry about what they did to us. I want to find them and break them. Shoot that damned Boche pilot in front of his daughter and see how they feel then." He pounds his right fist into his left hand.

"I hate what the Boche did to Maman, Papa, and us," I say. "But I feel more sadness than hatred. And fear."

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Marcel is silent, but his jaw is moving as if chewing on something. His acorn eyes gaze at me, wavy brown hair due for a cut poking out under a driver's cap, corduroy trousers and a simple cotton long-sleeved tan shirt. Marcel's face is more rugged than handsome, I suppose—Papa showing through. He's smart too, especially at math—says it will be a key to his success as a soldier when he's old enough to join. I don't see how equations will protect him from bullets. Another of my worries.

"I never thought I'd say this, but I'm going to miss the orphanage." I need to steer him away from the rage radiating from him.

"I won't. To me, it's just a stop on a road."

"We are the lucky ones, aren't we?" I ask.

"How do you figure?" He closes his eyes as if controlling something inside. "No and yes, I suppose."

And I know what he means. How is there luck when the Boche murdered both our parents, destroyed our home, and left us with nothing but the clothes we wore and a suitcase each? But then, we're alive and lucky that Abby found Cousins Sophie and Henri after she led Marcel here. So no and yes to luck.

"We'll live here once the guardianship is complete," Marcel says. "I never thought I'd say this, but I'm looking forward to school next month." He winks at me. "Don't tell anyone I said that."

His voice is calm again. He's back under control, and I know he's been working at that.

I laugh. Lighten things up; help him calm down. "I never thought you'd say that either. We have so much to catch up on. Okay, we can go. I promise to pay attention and not trip."

We are three blocks from home. Two French soldiers walk our way on the sidewalk, smoking cigarettes, laughing about something. I sense Marcel standing taller. He wants to be them—to be a soldier. And not any soldier, but a Chasseur Alpin, like Papa and Cousin Henri—the elite of the elite of the French Army.

The two stop about two meters in front of us, blocking the sidewalk. Marcel is bigger than either of them, and they don't carry guns.

"Good afternoon," Marcel says.

"You're out of uniform," the taller one, a corporal, says.

"That your girlfriend?"

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"I'm Marcel's sister."

"Marcel, eh?" the corporal says. "Well, Marcel, what's your excuse? Mental case?"

"What do you mean, Corporal?"

Marcel is taller than the corporal. His shoulders are wider, and he's more muscular than the private.

"Only cowards and mental cases are not in these." The short one motions toward his uniform. He takes two quick steps forward and shoves Marcel, who doesn't give an inch.

"I'm not a coward or mental." Marcel's fists bunch.

I take a step closer to Marcel and touch his left arm.

The corporal moves next to the short one. "Try it. We'll show you how real soldiers treat cowards."

I stand in front of Marcel. It's all I can think of to defuse this. "My brother is fifteen. Our father was a Chasseur Alpin. He was killed in action saving his men in June. We are patriots. Marcel is too young to enlist."

"He's bigger than me," the corporal says.

"Need a girl to fight for you, coward?" The private stands in a boxer's pose, fists up.

Marcel hands me my books and takes a step to the side. "That doesn't change the age on my birth certificate."

"What's this all about?"

I turn and see Joseph standing behind us, a frown on his face.

"We're asking this coward why he's not in the army," the corporal says.

"Simple," Joseph says. "He's fifteen. He works on my staff at the orphanage."

"And you?" the private says.

"None of your business. I'll go for the police if you don't move along." Joseph walks around the corporal. "Marcel, Geneviève, let's go see your guardian, Colonel Barton. He'll want to hear about this."

We walk behind Joseph.

"Thank you," Marcel says.

"You're welcome." Joseph waves and turns at the next corner.

I never would have expected that. Joseph helping? There is more to

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him than I suspected. Marcel has had confrontations like that before. People assume that any male between the ages of eighteen and forty-five not in uniform is a coward or a mental case. Confrontations like that happen every day.

I'm relieved. Marcel was ready to fight, but two soldiers against one fifteen-year-old is not a fair fight. Marcel would have done some damage since he's bigger than either of the soldiers. And for what? That was so pointless. So idiotically male. So like this stupid war.

The soldiers lost their courage when Joseph showed up. He's tall but not that big. But the soldiers were both smaller than either and must have figured their odds in a fight might not be in their favor.

We walk in silence for the next two blocks—me carrying my load of books, and Marcel, the muscles on his face twitching as though chewing. I don't want to know his thoughts.

Marcel puts his hand on my arm. He laughs and points down the road. He shouts, "Bruno, Hugo!"

The Rascals stop. Something hangs from Hugo's mouth. Probably their supper. Bruno charges off, Hugo in his wake. I smile. They are what so many humans aspire to be—carefree. I wish they had a potion for that. Marcel needs it.

Bruno and Hugo must stay in this part of town because the garbage is higher quality and Abby is nearby. They may be bigger, and boys, but she's the leader of this pack.

We continue the rest of the way home. I can't wipe the smile off my face, thinking about the Rascals. But the close call we had in that confrontation rains on those thoughts.

Marcel unlocks the heavy glass-and-oak front door to the apartment building. The white marble floor of the foyer shows a little yellow puddle—the French bulldog upstairs must have leaked. A brass cage elevator stands to the left; we take the stairs to the second-floor landing. Abby's welcome yowl greets us as Marcel unlocks the three deadbolts on the black-painted oak apartment door. Abby's black nose pokes toward us as Marcel opens the door.

"Good girl," I say as she stands back to let me in, tail wagging, eyes on mine.

The apartment is the nicest place I've ever lived. The parquet floors

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shine, and the off-white walls and ceiling with simple crown moldings are elegant. *Le grand salon* to the right through two glass doors faces the street and gets rare use for guests. *Le petite salon* ahead of me is where we live, with its street-side windows opposite a marble fireplace we have yet to use this summer. Next to that is Henri's windowless office with its wooden bookcases, large mahogany desk, and three leather chairs around a coffee table. The hallway to my left leads to the four bedrooms and the back of the apartment, where Sophie holds court in the kitchen and dining room.

Marcel's room is across from mine, looking out on the avenue in front of the apartment. Mine is quieter, the window opening into the courtyard behind the apartment. I drop my books on my desk next to the nursing book Nurse Simmons lent me. I hope she will join us for supper on Sunday. I have so many nursing questions for her.

School starts in two weeks. I can't wait.

But this guardianship business seems like a wall standing in the way. I dread the thought of not living with Cousins Henri and Sophie and what that will mean for the rest of my life.

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