

LIES TOLD
IN
SILENCE

A Novel

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Chapter 1

May 1914

Barely a hint of dusk lingered beyond the treetops when Helene heard the library door open. Though she had been attempting to read, the room overlooking the Bois de Boulogne was a perfect place for daydreaming, and that evening, as the sun scattered golden light across Paris, she had succumbed to thoughts of summer. Marking her spot in *Les Misérables* with a slender finger, Helene was about to call out when she heard the voice of her father's close friend, Charles Ribot, saying that he was very fearful of Germany's intentions.

Hidden behind the tall back of her chair, Helene waited, silent and still. Adults did not usually admit to fear, and she thought Monsieur Ribot, with his scraggy frame and rasping voice, was a man who instilled fear in others rather than one who would be afraid of anything.

Germany's intentions.

The words spread like a dark cloud preceding a storm, and the pit of her stomach quivered.

Newspaper headlines concerning European tensions alternated from alarming to soothing depending on the day. She knew France and Germany were deeply distrustful of one another, and France longed for the return of Alsace-Lorraine, but articles about

Britain's naval superiority and antagonism between Austria and Serbia confused her. When she had asked her father to explain, Henri Noisette had replied that young women should not worry about politics.

"Germany will not rest until France is on her knees along with Britain and Russia," Monsieur Sembat said.

Curiosity surged. *Perhaps I will learn something*, she thought, continuing to eavesdrop as the three men moved farther into the room.

Helene had known her father's two closest friends all her life and pictured them standing together, Charles Ribot, wearing gold-rimmed glasses that dominated his narrow face and bald head, and Maurice Sembat, punctuating each sentence with large, fleshy hands. Monsieur Sembat had the build of a stocky French peasant, although his family claimed to be descendants of the Bourbon dynasty. He and his wife, Adrienne, had six children, all boys. Occasionally, her father referred to him as "the bull".

"Cigars, gentlemen?"

Her father, with his wavy black hair and thick eyebrows, would be offering a selection of cigars kept in a glossy wooden box bearing the family coat of arms—four fleurs-de-lis surrounding a lion and the words *faith and duty* across the bottom. Moments later, the lid closed with a snap.

"Lucille hates having these in the house," said Monsieur Ribot. "Wonderful aroma. Cuban?"

"Mm hmm. A gift from the German attaché."

"I hope that doesn't make you beholden to the Germans, Henri," said Monsieur Sembat.

"Nothing would make me beholden to them."

Helene tilted her head. She knew that tone. It was the one her father used when attempting to control his anger, like the time Guy failed his history exam or the time Maman disclosed the purchase of diamond earrings at Sunday dinner. Clearly Papa was upset by Monsieur Sembat's implication.

The rasp of a match being struck and the sizzle of flame broke

the silence.

“Brandy?” Papa’s voice again.

Footsteps were followed by the gurgling sound of liquid then glass clinking glass and the rustle of clothing as the men settled into the library’s leather chairs.

Helene imagined the men with their brandies and cigars amongst the dark wood and heavy furniture of the library. Electric lamps gave a warm glow to the otherwise austere décor while plush Persian carpets added a hint of sensuality. Mounted behind her father’s ornately carved desk was a painting of a ship in full sail, angry waves butting against the starboard side, and on the horizon, the setting sun, all but obliterated by thunder clouds.

“Excellent dinner, Henri. Your chef is superb,” said Monsieur Ribot.

“Thank you, Charles. Lise and I are pleased that he came to us after my father died. Lamb is his specialty.”

Helene could tell her father was preoccupied by his clipped tone and lack of elaboration. Normally, he would launch into a story about the famous people Chef had served.

“I wonder if the Balkans will be the trigger. It’s such a powder keg, full of nationalist sentiments and resentments.” Monsieur Sembat returned to the earlier conversation.

“And if it blows, you can be certain Germany and Austria-Hungary will quickly take advantage.” Helene’s father spoke with his usual authority. “Our army isn’t strong enough to intimidate them. Last week, Minister Noulens received a confidential report that Moltke believes France can be crushed within six weeks.”

“Six weeks? Surely not,” Monsieur Sembat said.

“You have access to what the German chief of staff says?” Monsieur Ribot’s voice rose in astonishment.

Helene listened for Papa’s acknowledgement and concluded that he must have nodded at his friends, for he continued talking about Germany as though Charles Ribot had said nothing.

“Our source reports that Moltke has referred to the need to think very carefully when starting a war.”

“Starting a general European war?” Monsieur Sembat sounded agitated. “We must have a source very close to senior German officials if he can provide such information.”

A general European war. Papa and his friends sounded so serious that Helene knew their concerns were real. Fear swirled with the looming possibility of danger.

“Sorry, Maurice, I can’t disclose . . .”

“Of course, Henri, I wasn’t hinting for that at all. In Public Works, we are privy to some information but not as much as you must be in the War Ministry.”

Helene’s eyes widened at Monsieur Sembat’s statement. While she knew her father worked in the government, she had no idea he was in the War Ministry. Indeed, she was not even aware such a ministry existed. War. Her stomach quivered once more.

The last war involving France took place in 1870. In history class, she had studied the Prussian siege of Paris, including horrifying statistics on military and civilian fatalities, details of food and water shortages and the ultimate surrender of Alsace-Lorraine in exchange for peace. While Sister Louise read from their textbook, Helene had imagined the crashing sounds of artillery and filthy conditions of a three-month siege.

Will that happen again? If Papa is in the War Ministry, would he have to fight?

“Our alliance with Russia is strong, and we can count on Britain’s navy,” Papa said.

“But how will that help? We all know the Kaiser will head straight for Paris,” Monsieur Sembat replied.

Helene resisted the urge to move. If the German army were to attack Paris, the whole family would be at risk. And all her friends. How would they live? How would they survive? She thought of the book resting on her lap, its story of the struggle for freedom and of sacrifice for the greater good. So many innocent lives struck down. Helene wondered whether she should ask Guy to explain the situation in more detail and lost track of the men’s conversation for several minutes until Monsieur Sembat’s angry

voice broke through.

“. . . behaving like a cornered dog because she feels squeezed between Russia and France.”

“Yes, Germany’s fangs are out, but I think it’s Austria we have to worry about,” said Monsieur Ribot. “Serbia has ambitions for expansion, and I would bet money that Austria has plans to attack Serbia.”

“If Austria attacks, Germany is bound by treaty to join the conflict,” her father said.

“German foreign policy has been dominated by military issues for years,” said Monsieur Sembat. “I do not understand why that country has always been so belligerent.” Helene heard liquid spilling into a glass. “Anyone else?” he asked.

“I wonder if Poincaré has the guts for war,” said Papa. “He has certainly become more assertive. At any rate, the general feeling is that our Entente is now much stronger, although Britain resists signing an official treaty.”

If Austria and Serbia went to war, Germany was bound to support Austria. Helene knew that much. She also knew that the Entente was a similar agreement between France and Russia in the event of war. *This can’t be happening*. A sudden thought made her skin crawl with anxiety. *Guy is old enough to enlist*. Helene did not want to imagine what might happen to her older brother, so she focused once again on the conversation taking place in the library. Though she found their discussion confusing, the men’s quiet tones and lack of laughter were foreboding.

After awhile, her father suggested they join the ladies, and she heard them stand and walk towards the door.

“There’s no doubt in my mind,” her father said. “We’re heading for war. The only question is when.”

Chapter 2

May 1914

Henri knew Lise was angry. More angry than usual. He could tell by the way she flicked her skirt back and forth as she left the table and by the tight circle of her mouth. He sighed and made for the library, where a reflective cigar would prepare him for the verbal swordplay to follow. She would be even angrier when he told her his plans.

The last time he was in the library had been with Charles and Maurice. That discussion had unsettled him more than he cared to admit as it became clear that each government department was separately and actively planning for war. *Surely to God it won't come to that.* But the analytical voice in his head said otherwise.

He was increasingly worried for his family's safety. A German attack would inevitably focus on Paris, just as Maurice had said. The way matters stood, the French army would not be strong enough to repel a larger German force. Henri believed in his country's values and took pride in her contributions to the world; nevertheless, he felt that the French army would not prevail unless Britain helped. Discussions were underway between France and Britain, but nothing had been formalized and he worried that time was running out.

Cigar smoke drifted like fading ribbons as he crossed the room

to stare out the window. The weather was warmer than usual, and colourfully garbed women strolled along the streets below, some with their children, others with husbands or lovers. Henri could always distinguish the lovers from those who were married by the closeness of their interlinked arms and intimate glances of anticipation. It made him sad that he and Lise no longer exhibited those signs of deep affection.

How has love slipped away? he wondered. *When did we stop shouldering each other's sorrows, sharing stories over morning coffee, trading knowing glances when friends or family acted true to form? When did we start fencing like adversaries?*

He looked at his watch and took a deep breath. Unless he went to see Lise now, she would begin preparations for bed, and he preferred to have this particular conversation while she was still fully clothed. A few minutes later, he rapped on the door to her bedroom, waited two or three heartbeats and entered without permission.

Lise stood by the window of a room they once shared wearing a long-waisted blouse and a skirt, the fabric white with pale green stripes. Around her neck was a double strand of pearls. When they had first occupied their home, she had chosen blue and taupe décor, telling him that it was neither feminine nor masculine and so would suit them both. With age and workload had come insomnia, and a year ago Henri had begun sleeping in a room across the hall. Whether from annoyance or merely a desire for a fresh look, Lise had replaced the décor with rose and ruffles.

For a moment, Henri admired the curves of his wife's silhouette and the loose waves of her light brown hair. Normally, her hair was pinned up or encased in a close-fitting hat, but when he had first met Lise, it was the way her hair fell softly along her face and neck that had caught his attention, each curl seemingly designed to accent a particular feature.

He closed the door. Lise turned, but there was no smile on her lips or warmth in her deep brown eyes.

"Yes?" she said.

"Lise, please stop this. We need to talk."

“Stop what?”

“You know very well what.” Henri pulled the corners of his mouth down. *She’s being deliberately obtuse*, he thought, *and she knows how irritating that is.*

Lise fingered her pearls, twisting the largest one around and around. “It seems that you tell others your concerns before you tell me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Lucille Ribot told me all about your conversation with Charles and Maurice. To avoid embarrassment, I had to pretend I was in your confidence. Which clearly, I’m not.”

Henri cursed himself for not anticipating that Charles would tell his wife, one of Lise’s best friends. “I’m sorry. You’re right, I should have told you. I suppose you wouldn’t believe me if I said I was trying not to worry you.”

“Really.” It was a statement not a question.

“It’s complicated, Lise. Stop posturing and listen.”

Henri had considered various alternatives for describing the political and military situation. Should he err on the side of alarm, which might make his decision more acceptable, or calm logic in order to avoid an irrational outburst? He used to be able to tell her anything.

Lise folded her arms and tipped her head in a slightly mocking way. “I’m listening.”

As Henri summarized the conversation he had had with Charles and Maurice, her brow furrowed. She rubbed her chin several times but to his surprise did not interrupt once.

“So you think war is inevitable? Just yesterday Papa said that he’s certain Germany and Austria-Hungary are just being provocative and have no malicious intent.”

“With great respect to your father, his diplomatic contacts are mostly retired and out of touch with what is really going on.”

As Lise turned away from him, he could hear the slow release of her breath. Henri put one hand on her shoulder.

“What will this mean? Our children . . .” Her voice wavered

and she did not move away.

“I’ve been making plans. I think it will be safest to leave Paris for a while. The next few months could be a turning point. If for any reason conditions worsen, Paris will not be safe. Madame Lalonde says she can have Tante Camille’s house ready for you and the children with a week’s notice.” Henri paused. “I think Maman should go with you.”

“Beaufort? You want us to go to Beaufort?”

Henri nodded.

“And you?”

“My duty is here.”

“And your mistress?” Lise whirled away from him like a cat from a hot spark.

“My what?”

“Will she be in Paris? Very convenient, Henri, to send your wife out of town for an extended period. No doubt you thought I was too stupid to notice the way Madame D’Aubigne flirts with you and the way your tongue hangs out whenever she’s around. And if I was too stupid, others made sure that I knew.” Lise raised her shoulders and gestured with one hand. “Don’t look so shocked. You should know that’s the way it works. Gossips love an embarrassed wife just as much as they love a cuckold.”

A woman of his wife’s upbringing would consider the word *cuckold* too crude for polite conversation, so Henri knew she had chosen it to emphasize her contempt for his behaviour.

It was true, though he was not ready to admit it. Vivienne D’Aubigne had flirted with him since the night they were introduced at the opera. Bold and provocative, she wore dresses promising barely hidden delights while beguiling him with red lips and curving hips. Everything about her was different from Lise, and he had allowed himself to be enticed into an arrangement that had only recently lost its appeal.

No wonder Lise has been so remote and sharp-tongued, he thought. During his weekly visits to her bedroom, she had submitted to his love making which, he now realized, was merely a charade to avoid confrontation. And she had withdrawn from him,

offering a cheek to be kissed rather than her lips when he returned each evening, failing to smile when he teased the children, conversing without engaging, her countenance subdued rather than animated.

Henri's back stiffened as he went on the offensive. "Are you suggesting that I don't have the welfare of my family uppermost in my mind?"

"It's only your children you care about. You stopped caring about me years ago. And don't think I'm fooled when you say you're working late. I can smell her on you. Such cheap perfume." She pressed a handkerchief against her nose.

"You're hysterical and don't know what you're talking about."

Lise raised a hand to slap his face, but he grabbed her wrist before she could reach him and held it in the air.

"Enough. You and the children will do whatever I decide."

Henri dropped his wife's arm. Never in twenty years of marriage had Lise attempted to strike him. She glared at him but remained silent, blotches marking her face, breath unsteady. *Now would be the time to apologize*, he thought. *Admit the affair and face the consequences*. He wondered where such a conversation would lead and whether it would be best to ask her forgiveness when emotions were calmer.

God she looks beautiful when she's angry. Whatever possessed me to start up with another woman?

Henri stepped closer. His wife stepped back and turned away.