

June 1937

Paris

Chapter 1

I practically floated in the door from school. It was one of those days where everything had gone my way and I couldn't wait to tell Tante Madeleine all about it. Especially the part where Monsieur Fontaine, my art instructor, singled out my painting, praising it for its composition and brushwork.

I found my aunt in her studio, which was flooded with late-afternoon light pouring in through the large windows that faced the street. It spotlighted the bronze sculptures sitting on plinths behind her. As I entered, Tante Madeline looked up from the clay model she was working on. It was of a man and woman embracing, a commission from a wealthy client. She put her wire loop down and wiped her hands on the smock that covered her white blouse and grey trousers.

"There's a telegram for you," she said, reaching over and picking up a buff-coloured envelope that lay on the table in front of her.

I clapped my hands together in delight. I hadn't thought this day could get any better, but it was going to. I'd been waiting and waiting for word from the Académie Julian, where Mama had gone. More than anything I wanted to study painting there.

"It's from Berlin," Tante Madeleine added quietly, her brow furrowed.

"Berlin?" I felt a prickle of unease. Who in Berlin would send me a telegram? I didn't know many people there anymore. And the ones I did know, like Father and Frau Weber, wrote letters. Or occasionally telephoned.

My aunt hopped off her stool and handed it to me. "You'd better read it."

I tore it open.

YOUR FATHER HAS DIED...

There was a loud rushing in my ears. My knees went weak. I gripped the table to keep from falling. There was more, but I couldn't take it in. The words were swimming on the page. Papa. Dead. It couldn't be true. It had to be a mistake.

"What is it, Amelie?" Tante Madeleine's voice seemed to be coming from far away. She put her arm around my shoulder. Gently, she took the telegram from my trembling hand and read it aloud.

"Your father has died. Reading of will at 10:00 June 14. Nollendorfpl 7. Interment at 14:00. Alter St.-Matthäus-Kirchhof. Eva."

Tante Madeleine pulled me close. "Oh dear God! How could she be so cruel?"

Because she's Eva, I thought dully. My stepmother, hated my younger sister, Gigi, and me right from the start. Only she hadn't let on until she'd married Papa. She was the reason we'd fled Berlin for Paris four years ago. I hadn't seen her since. But now it seemed I would have to face her again. And it was the last thing I wanted to do.

"How can Papa be dead? Just like that," I said, brushing the tears from my eyes, only to have them fill again. "I spoke to him two days ago and he was fine." I thought back to our conversation. "He was going to take us to the world's fair next month."

"I don't know, Amelie." Tante Madeleine shrugged helplessly, concern etched on her face. "Maybe it was an accident." She hesitated. "Perhaps I should telephone Eva and find out what happened?"

"No!" I knew my aunt didn't want to talk to my stepmother any more than I did. "It doesn't matter. It won't change anything. And I'd rather hear it from the lawyer."

“Are you sure?” She gave me a searching look. “Berlin is more dangerous now than when you left. The restrictions on Jews...”

“I know. I read the newspapers. It’s the last place I want to go, but we’ll only be there for a few days. I have to say goodbye to Papa.” A sob caught in my throat.

Tante Madeleine shook her head slowly. “I’m so sorry, Amelie.”

“It’s not fair.”

“No, but life rarely is.” My aunt sighed quietly. “Gigi will be devastated.”

Gigi. Papa’s pet. She was just two when Mama died. She’d never really known her, so she and Papa were especially close.

“Where is she?” I asked.

“With Guy.” He was Gigi’s best friend. “She should be home soon.” My aunt looked down at the telegram still in her hand. “Poor little Gig,” she said softly, almost to herself. “I can’t believe she’s an orphan at eleven.” She looked back at me. “It’s probably best for you to break the news to her. Will you be all right?”

I nodded, fighting back the tears.

“I’ll go to the train station now and get us tickets for tomorrow. I’m coming with you to Berlin. You’re not going into that hornet’s nest on your own.”

After Tante Madeleine left, the tears came. I sobbed uncontrollably. I couldn’t believe Papa was gone. Forever. How could it be? I could still see his dark eyes light up when he spotted me or Gigi. Hear his laugh as he teased us. Feel his arms around me. I loved him—in spite of everything.

“Amelie, what’s wrong?” Suddenly, Gigi was beside me. She took my hands in hers.

“Are you hurt?”

“No,” I said, starting to pull myself together. I wiped my eyes with my sleeve.

“Why are you crying?”

I took a deep breath. “Something terrible has happened.”

“Is Tante Madeleine—”

“Papa’s dead.” It sounded harsh, but there was no easy way.

Silence. Then, “No, he’s not!” Gigi shook her head emphatically. Her voice rose. “Why would you say that? He’ll be here in two weeks. He’s taking me to the world’s fair. We’re going to see all the exhibits—”

“Gigi. Listen to me.” I took her cheeks in my palms and looked into her big blue eyes, so like Mama’s. “Papa’s not coming to Paris. He can’t. He’s dead.”

Another silence, then, “No!” she screamed, pushing my hands away. “No! Amelie, it’s not true. Papa promised he would *never* leave me.” But she knew I was telling the truth. She burst into tears and crumpled to the floor.

I knelt and enfolded her in my arms. “He didn’t want to Gigi. I don’t know what happened. Maybe an accident. Eva sent a telegram.”

We rocked back and forth, clinging to each other, and cried until we had no more tears.

It was late by the time I left the apartment. Gigi was curled up with Tante Madeleine on the sofa in the drawing room.

“You off to see Heinz?” my aunt asked gently.

I nodded. Was it only this morning that Heinz and I had made a date to meet? It seemed like an eon ago.

“Don’t stay out too long. Tomorrow will be a long day.”

I nodded, although I was pretty sure sleep would be elusive.

Heinz was sitting at a table under the awning at our neighbourhood café. As I approached, I was relieved to see that none of our friends were there. He was alone, drinking an espresso and reading *Le Figaro*. My heart swelled. He was my best friend—had been since I’d come to Paris—and the person I wanted to be with the most right then.

Sensing my presence, he glanced up, his face breaking into a smile. It faded as quickly as it came. “What’s wrong?” he asked, putting the newspaper down. He stood and kissed me on both cheeks before pulling out the chair beside him. I sank into it.

“Papa’s dead.”

“What?” He looked incredulous. “What happened?”

“I don’t know. That’s all Eva said in the telegram. There’s to be a reading of the will and then a funeral. The day after next. We’re taking the train to Berlin tomorrow.”

“So soon?”

I sighed. “That’s Eva.”

“Oh, Amelie. I’m so sorry.” He shook his head in disbelief and ran his fingers through his unruly brown hair.

I choked back a sob. “I can’t believe it. I’ve been angry with him for so long and now—”

Heinz took my hand and squeezed it. “Stop. He knew how much you loved him. That’s all that matters.”

“You’re right, but—” Suddenly, I didn’t want to think about it anymore. I’d been worrying it over in my mind ever since I learned the news. I took a sip of Heinz’s coffee. The bitter taste was comforting. “I don’t want to see Eva. I hoped I’d never lay eyes on her again. But there’s no way around it.” Heinz had never met my stepmother, but he knew all about her. And how she’d tried to turn Gigi and me into the Gestapo when Papa was away on business. With Heinz’s help, we’d managed to escape, but it meant moving to Paris. To be with a family we’d never met. And leaving everything we knew behind. Including Papa. I would never forgive her for that.

“I’m owed some time off,” Heinz said slowly. He was an architect, apprenticing in one of Paris’ top firms, a coup for a twenty-year-old. “Do you want me to come with you?” I smiled sadly. I loved that he’d offered, but, close as we were, this was something I had to do on my own. With Gigi.

“Thanks, but I’ll be back by the weekend. There’s no reason to stay in Berlin.”