



## *Three*

**L**ucas rode away from the canal and up the road toward the hills above Lamorlaye. The place he'd been planning to go to after his deliveries, an empty stable he had discovered a couple of years before, would be a good place to hide the kittens. The stable had been abandoned, like hundreds of others in the forests of Chantilly and Lamorlaye, when wealthy thoroughbred owners pulled their horses out so the Germans couldn't steal them. He kept a fishing pole in this one, since it was near a string of ponds.

The road turned to dirt. It grew hard to pedal, and branches slapped him. It felt like a penance he deserved.

Over and over, he replayed his feeble actions at the canal. Why hadn't he tried something, anything—raised a fist to those boys, picked up a rock himself? Why had he merely *asked* to have those kittens?

Lucas knew why. His knuckles whitened around the handlebars. *Petit Éclair*. The nickname fit.

He'd been ten when he'd gotten it. After only six weeks of fighting, France had just surrendered to Germany. In the village, all the boys suddenly wanted to play at war. Every stick was a gun, every stone a grenade.

But the idea sickened Lucas. A month before, on his birthday, he had been with a few kids kicking a ball against a brick wall when a squadron of German bombers had buzzed overhead. The kids had piled themselves at the base of the wall. The bomb fell on the wall with a thudding shock.

The kids had stumbled around for a while in the rubble and smoke, their ears ringing, before one of them yelled, "Elise's arm! Her arm's gone!"

That day, Lucas had learned that you could be kicking a ball one minute and stemming the blood from your playmate's arm the next. And when the boys on the play yard rounded up for war games, Lucas just couldn't stomach the idea. So instead, he began spending his free time learning chess with his friend Colette and a few other girls. This had enraged the boys. They'd circle the chess table, chanting "*Petit Éclair*, *Petit Éclair*."

At first, Lucas tried to act tougher. But even Colette

had rolled her eyes at his pitiful impression of a bully. For a while, he comforted himself with the thought that *éclair* also meant flash of light, or lightning bolt. The pastry was named for it. Maybe he'd be seen as quick and bright. Pretty soon, though, he came to accept that the boys were right: There was something wrong with him. He was too soft. A tender pastry.

Soon enough, most of the other boys stopped teasing him about his soft heart. Only Marcel and Claude continued to torment him.

This afternoon, at the canal, Marcel had also called him a coward. Well, he'd been scared, so that was fair, too.

"I'll change," he murmured aloud now. "I'll be braver. I'll show everyone someday."

Lucas rode past the Nazi maternity home near the top of the hill and hoped no one in the guard house saw him. Right about now he should be delivering their order, and he hadn't even been to the greengrocers' to pack it up.

He turned off the road onto a horse trail. The kittens started mewing their displeasure at the jouncing, so Lucas dropped his bike and ran the rest of the way, cradling the muddy sack. When he reached the stable, he shoved its door open just enough to squeeze through.

In the half dark, he dropped to his knees and opened the sack. Five pairs of eyes, green and amber and blue, looked up from a mat of dark wet fur. He reached in, then stopped as he realized how threatening he must to seem. “This is my secret place. You’ll be safe here,” he told them. Then he got up to let them find their way out on their own.

As he took a step back, a nearby whinny startled him.

Lucas spun around. In one of the two stalls at the back, a tall mahogany-colored horse with an ebony mane and a white blaze was watching him with an intelligent curiosity. Before he could recover, the back door to the stable bumped open and a teenage girl staggered in, her arms loaded with hay.



## *Four*

The girl was wearing farmer's coveralls—a girl wearing coveralls!—rolled up over tall boots that although scuffed had the gleam of real leather. She kicked the door shut behind her and lifted her gaze. When she caught sight of Lucas, she gasped.

He held up his hands to show he wasn't a threat.

The girl dropped the hay. She planted her fists on her hips and leaned back to peer down her nose at him.

That was all Lucas needed to know about her. "What are you doing here?" he asked; a stupid question, he realized instantly, since the answer was obvious.

The girl shot an eyebrow up, returning his question.

"I . . ." Lucas gestured behind him. The five kittens were out now, staggering around the wood-plank floor. "Some boys were going to drown them in the canal. I took them . . ."

The girl looked to the muddy kittens and visibly softened. “Oh, poor things.” Her French was smooth, but accented. She was British. She stiffened again. “But you can’t be here.”

“I thought this place was abandoned. It *was* abandoned.”

“Well, I’m using it now. So you have to leave.”

“No. I need to hide them. You don’t understand, if they—”

“Hide them somewhere else.”

The horse whinnied and kicked at its stall. Lucas backed away. He didn’t like horses, always felt anxious around them.

The girl reached over the gate and stroked its withers. Without turning, she said, “Look, I do understand. I’m hiding my horse, too. *Here*. So go find another place.”

“You’re hiding your horse? Why?”

“Same reason as you.”

“Come on. Someone wants to kill your horse?”

The girl turned to him then. One look at her face and Lucas regretted his mocking tone.

“The Germans issued orders,” she said, sounding as if she were spitting out each word. “All healthy horses are to be seized for the war effort.’ They don’t mean the racing horses still here—the Germans love their horse racing too much. But Bia doesn’t race, so they would take her. They would probably use her to move artillery in Poland where the roads are gone,

until she was wounded or dropped dead of exhaustion. Then the soldiers would *eat* her. So yes, my horse would probably be killed, one way or the other.”

“Sorry, I didn’t—” Lucas began.

The girl held up a silencing finger. “If Bia *did* manage to live, they’d use her as a broodmare, to turn out more war horses. Kind of like what they’re doing at that maternity home around here.”

That surprised him. *Bois Larris*, the big manor near the top of the hill, was highly secretive, tightly guarded, a complete mystery to nearly everyone in town. As a delivery boy, Lucas was one of the few villagers allowed inside, but he’d been severely warned not to speak of anything he saw in there. As far as he knew, the greengrocers were the only local people besides himself who knew it was being used as a maternity home. “You know about that place?”

“It’s a Lebensborn. They’re breeding a new crop of blond soldiers, I know that much, and that’s enough,” she muttered. “But I don’t care about that. I care about what the Germans are doing to horses and I’m not going to let them do it to mine. I won’t let them find her.”

“Pretty hard to hide a horse,” Lucas couldn’t help noting.

“We’ve been doing just fine until you showed up. And it’s only for four more weeks. But we can’t have you coming and going, calling attention to—”

“What happens in four weeks?”

She took a sharp breath, then shook her head. “Nothing,” she said, eyes narrowed. “Nothing happens in four weeks.” She waved a hand toward the kittens, clumped together now and mewing. “Take them away now,” she said in a voice clearly used to delivering orders.

Lucas was used to obeying orders. But not this time. “I’ll go. But I’m not taking them with me. They’d be killed.”

The girl tossed her palms up. “All right, leave them. But you get out. And don’t come back.” She turned away, walked into the stall, picked up a brush and began currying her horse, dismissing Lucas for a second time this afternoon.

He didn’t argue anymore; he had to get back into town and start his deliveries anyway. But first, he went over to a trough feeder, brushed out the debris, then knocked off its legs and set it on the floor. Into it, he dumped an armload of hay.

He took off his shirt, then his undershirt, keeping his bony-ribbed chest turned from the girl, and then buttoned his shirt back up. He tucked the worn undershirt over the hay.

One by one, he wiped the kittens clean of mud with a clump of hay, then settled them in the trough. Then he brought over a board and roofed one end to make a cave.

The girl came to stand beside him. Lucas smelled lavender, not the harsh lye soap everyone had to use these days. She

was rich. "It gets cold in here at night," she said. "You really should bring them back to their mother. They look about a month old, but they still need her. They could die without her."

Lucas glanced down at the sack, empty except for one dead body. "I can't take them back. I'll bring the mother to them." He wiped at his throbbing lip and felt it split open again.

"No. I told you, don't come here again." The girl stopped, studying Lucas's face. Her expression changed. She tapped her lip, then pointed to his. "Did you get that rescuing them?"

Lucas flushed with shame at the word *rescue*. The five kittens were alive only because Claude hadn't thrown the sack far enough. "It's nothing," he mumbled.

"What's your name?"

Lucas told her.

"I'm Alice." She sighed. "All right, Lucas. Bring the mother tomorrow. But make sure no one sees you coming here."

"I'll be careful." He picked up the sack and held it to his chest. "I'll bring her in the morning."

She sighed again. "Morning is a long time away." She went back to the hay bale and lifted a leather pouch from behind it. From it, she withdrew a waxed cloth packet. She walked back to the trough and unwrapped the packet. Inside was a wedge of cheese. She crumbled the cheese in front of the kittens.

The kittens tumbled over each other to investigate. When they began to lick at the cheese, Lucas felt his whole body relax. "Thank you," he said.

Beside him, the girl nodded sharply. "Just make *sure* you're not followed. Leave the mother and after that, don't ever come back here again."