

# ***Sarah's Key***

**A novel**

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Paris, July 1942

*The girl was the first to hear the loud pounding on the door. Her room was closest to the entrance of the apartment. At first, dazed with sleep, she thought it was her father, coming up from his hiding place in the cellar. He'd forgotten his keys, and was impatient because nobody had heard his first, timid knock. But then came the voices, strong and brutal in the silence of the night. Nothing to do with her father. "Police! Open up ! Now !" The pounding took up again, louder. It echoed to the marrow of her bones. Her younger brother, asleep in the next bed, stirred. "Police ! Open up ! Open up !" What time was it ? She peered through the curtains. It was still dark outside.*

*She was afraid. She remembered the recent, hushed conversations she had overheard, late at night, when her parents thought she was asleep. She had crept up to the living room door and she had listened and watched from a little crack through the panel. Her*

*father's nervous voice. Her mother's anxious face. They spoke their native tongue, which the girl understood, although she was not as fluent as them. Her father had whispered that times ahead would be difficult. That they would have to be brave and very careful. He pronounced strange, unknown words : 'camps', 'roundup, a big roundup', 'early morning arrests', and the girl wondered what all of it meant. Her father had murmured that only the men were in danger, not the women, not the children, and that he would hide in the cellar every night.*

*He had explained to the girl in the morning that it would be safer if he slept downstairs, for a little while. Till "things got safe". What "things", exactly, thought the girl. What was "safe" ? When would things be "safe" again ? She wanted to find out what he had meant by 'camp' and 'roundup', but she worried about admitting she had eavesdropped on her parents, several times. So she had not dared ask him.*

*"Open up ! Police !"*

*Had the police found Papa in the cellar, she asked herself, was that why they were here, had the police come to take Papa to the places he had mentioned during those hushed midnight talks : the 'camps', far away, out of the city ?*

*The girl padded fast on silent feet to her mother's room, down the corridor. Her mother awoke the minute she felt a hand on her shoulder.*

*"It's the police, Maman, " the girl whispered, "they're banging on the door."*

*Her mother swept her legs from under the sheets, brushed her hair out of her eyes. The girl thought she looked tired, old, much older than her thirty years.*

*“Have they come to take Papa away ?” pleaded the girl, her hands on her mother’s arms, “have they come for him ?”*

*The mother did not answer. Again the loud voices down the hallway. The mother swiftly put a dressing gown over her night dress, then she took the girl by the hand and went to the door. Her hand was hot and clammy, like a child’s, the girl thought.*

*“Yes ?” the mother said timidly, without opening the latch.*

*A man’s voice. He shouted her name.*

*“Yes, Monsieur, that is me,” she answered. Her accent came out strongly, almost harsh.*

*“Open up. Immediately. Police.”*

*The mother put a hand to her throat and the girl noticed how pale she was. She seemed drained, frozen. As if she could no longer move. The girl had never seen such fear on her mother’s face. She felt her mouth go dry with anguish.*

*The men banged again. The mother opened the door with clumsy, trembling fingers. The girl winced, expecting to see green-grey suits.*

*Two men stood there. One was a policeman, wearing his dark blue knee length cape and high, round cap. The other man wore a beige raincoat. He had a list in his hand. Once again, he said the woman’s name. And the father’s name. He spoke perfect French. Then we are safe, thought the girl. If they are French, and not German, we are not in danger. If they are French, they will not harm us.*

*The mother pulled her daughter close to her. The girl could feel the woman’s heart beating through her dressing gown. She wanted to push her mother away, she wanted her mother to stand up straight and look at the men boldly, to stop cowering, to prevent her heart from*

*beating like that, like a frightened animal's. She wanted her mother to be brave.*

*"My husband is...not here," stuttered the mother. " I don't know where he is. I don't know."*

*The man with the beige raincoat shoved his way into the apartment.*

*"Hurry up, Madame. You have ten minutes. Pack some clothes. Enough for a couple of days."*

*The mother did not move. She stared at the policeman. He was standing on the landing, his back to the door. He seemed indifferent, bored. She put a hand on his navy sleeve.*

*"Monsieur, please-" she began.*

*The policeman turned, brushing her hand away. A hard, blank expression in his eyes.*

*"You heard me. You are coming with us. Your daughter too. Just do as you are told."*

Paris, May 2002

Bertrand was late, as usual. I tried not to mind, but I did. Zoë lolled back against the wall, bored. She looked so much like her father, it sometimes made me smile. But not today. I glanced up at the ancient, tall building. Mamé's place. Bertrand's grandmother's old apartment. And we were going to live there. We were going to leave the boulevard du Montparnasse, its noisy traffic, incessant ambulances due to three neighboring hospitals, its *cafés* and restaurants, for this quiet, narrow street on the right bank of the Seine.

The Marais was not an *arrondissement* I was familiar with, although I did admire its ancient, crumbling beauty. Was I happy about the move? I wasn't sure. Bertrand hadn't really asked my advice. We hadn't discussed it much at all, in fact. With his usual gusto, he had gone ahead with the whole affair. Without me.

"There he is," said Zoë. "Only half an hour late."

We watched Bertrand saunter up the street with his particular, sensual strut. Slim, dark, oozing sex appeal, the archetypal Frenchman. He was on the phone, as usual. Tailing behind him was his business

associate, the bearded and pink-faced Antoine. Their offices were on the rue de l'Arcade, just behind the Madeleine. Bertrand had been part of an architect firm for a long time, since before our marriage, but he had started out on his own, with Antoine, five years ago.

Bertrand waved to us, then pointed to the phone, lowering his eyebrows and scowling.

“Like he can't get that person off the phone,” scoffed Zoë. “ Sure.”

Zoë was only eleven, but it sometimes felt like she was already a teenager. First, her height, which dwarfed all her girlfriends, --as well as her feet, she would add grimly--, and then a precocious lucidity that often made me catch my breath. There was something adult about her solemn, hazel gaze, the reflective way she lifted her chin. She had always been like that, even as a little child. Calm, mature, sometimes too mature for her age.

Antoine came to greet us while Bertrand went on with his conversation, just about loud enough for the entire street to hear, waving his hands in the air, making more faces, turning around from time to time to make sure we were hanging on to every word.

“A problem with another architect,” explained Antoine with a discreet smile.

“A rival ?” said Zoë.

“Yes, a rival,” replied Antoine.

Zoë sighed.

“Which means we could be here all day.”

I had an idea.

“Antoine, do you by any chance have the key to Madame Tézac's apartment ?”

“I do have it, Julia, ” he said, beaming. Antoine always spoke English to my French. I suppose he did it to be friendly, but it secretly

annoyed me. I felt like my French still wasn't any good, after living here all these years.

Antoine flourished the key. We decided to go up, the three of us. Zoë punched out the *digicode* at the door with deft fingers. We walked through the leafy, cool courtyard to the elevator.

"I hate that elevator," said Zoë. "Papa should do something about it."

"Honey, he's only redoing your great-grandmother's place," I pointed out. "Not the whole building."

"Well, he should," she said.

As we waited for the elevator, my mobile phone chirped out the Darth Vader theme. I peered at the number flashing on my screen. It was Joshua, my boss.

I answered : "Yup ?"

Joshua was to the point. As usual.

"Need you back by three. Closing July issues. Over and out."

"Gee whiz," I said pertly. I heard a chuckle on the other end of the line, before he hung up. Joshua always seemed to like it when I said *gee whiz*. Maybe it reminded him of his youth. Antoine seemed amused by my old-fashioned Americanisms. I imagined him hoarding them up, then trying them out with his French accent.

The elevator was one of those inimitable Parisian contraptions with a diminutive cabin, hand-manuevered iron screen and double wooden doors that inevitably swung in your face. Squashed between Zoë and Antoine –a trifle heavy-handed with his *Vétiver* scent--, I caught a glimpse of my face in the mirror as we glided up. I looked as eroded as the groaning lift. What had happened to the fresh-faced belle from Boston, Mass. ? The woman who stared back at me was at that dreaded

age between forty-five and fifty, that no-man's land of sag, oncoming wrinkle and stealthy approach of menopause.

“I hate this elevator too,” I said grimly.

Zoë grinned and pinched my cheek.

“Mom, even Gwyneth Paltrow would look like hell in that mirror.”

I had to smile. That was such a Zoë-like remark.

