MISS MORGAN'S BOOK BRIGADE

ALSO BY JANET SKESLIEN CHARLES

The Paris Library: A Novel
Moonlight in Odessa: A Novel

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A NOVEL

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To my husband, Eddy Charles

Never can I get the picture of those villages out of my mind.
The bravery of the people and the courage with which
they come back to begin in the middle of their ruins. . . .
Did you know that the Countess d'Evry lives in a cart
in her stable yard so that she can help the soldiers
work to clear the gardens of her people,
so that they may come back to their land?
Meanwhile, her château is in ruins on the hill.
The need is now.

—A letter from Anne Morgan to her mother

MISS MORGAN'S BOOK BRIGADE

PROLOGUE

You can learn a lot about a life by looking in someone's closet. I stand before mine, pondering which outfit to wear tonight, and thumb through fitted cardigans and slacks, remnants of a long career. Cramped to the side are relics of a past life: the witch's hat and smock that pupils begged me to wear each Halloween; a wedding gown that didn't quite make it to the altar; and the uniform of the American Committee for Devastated France—horizon blue, the same color that the French army wore. I can't help but touch the hem of the skirt. Seventy years old, and the wool blend, warm and light, still embodies the quality that Paris is famous for. The stories this cloth could tell . . . the fabric of life during the Great War. It had seen love and hate, sacrifice and stinginess, longing and hope, despair and courage. Always courage.

My fingers continue along the sleeve, to the rust-colored stain on the cuff. No matter how we washed it—dabbed with seltzer water, soaked in iodine, scrubbed with Marseille soap—his blood wouldn't come out. No matter. The material is nearly dark enough to conceal it, and the discoloration can be attributed to a splatter of ratatouille.

To free the uniform, I seize the shoulders and pull, allowing myself to cradle the jacket as if it were a woman I could embrace. Something digs into my chest. On the lapel, a medal hangs from a blue-and-white striped ribbon. The silver has tarnished, but I can make out the griffin, the symbol of the Cards. On the reverse is engraved DO RIGHT AND FEAR NO MAN.

If I don the uniform, would it fit? Only one way to find out. Yes, the jacket is elegant over my blouse. Encouraged, I shimmy out of my slacks, only to find that the skirt bites at the waist. Still, it feels right, as if the uniform wants to be worn. The final touch is the handkerchief, its cloth worn thin by time. I slide it into my pocket.

I glance at my watch. Nearly 7:00 p.m. The decision of what to wear has been made—if I don't leave now, I'll be late.

I rush from the apartment, up Fifth Avenue, to the New York Public Library. Shoulders squared, I march up the steps like I have thousands of times before. Upon my arrival in Manhattan, this was my school, my social life, my home.

In the hall, my fingertips trace scuff marks along the walls. Some may see imperfections, but I remember crates being delivered, a runaway book cart crashing down the staircase, and apprentices like me accidentally smudging the white paint with blotter ink that clung to our skin like perfume.

The past presses on me, memories fill the air. I clutch the handkerchief and know that now, finally, it's time.

CHAPTER 1

JESSIE CARSON
THE NORTH OF FRANCE, JANUARY 1918
FORTY MILES FROM THE FRONT

The narrow dirt road was pockmarked from shelling. Lewis, the chauffeur, advanced through shrapnel and around gaping potholes. In the passenger seat, I held tight to the door. The Ford hit a rut, and my head snapped back. I winced, not merely from the pain, but from the sight of fields stitched with barbed wire.

Destruction stretched to the horizon. There was not a single soul, nor a blade of grass, and the countryside blended with the gray clouds to form a colorless, hopeless terrain. Inhabitants had fled or been taken prisoner. The German army had obliterated homes and schools, churches and hospitals, libraries and lives. On farms, they bombed the rows of wheat that stood up to them. In orchards, they took axes to innocent apple trees. Branches lay on the ground, their dried-up leaves whispering in the wind.

At the checkpoint that would allow us to enter the war zone, we slowed to a stop behind five military trucks. Lewis cut the engine and lit a cigarette, which meant that we'd be here for a while. I pulled the collar of my woolen coat closer as the damp cold closed in. While Lewis sifted through the documents—passports, working papers, and authorizations stamped with blue ink, I squinted at the flakes of frost that clung to the corner of the windshield and discovered a kaleidoscope of designs. Silvery butterfly wings. A child's mitten. Yes, my father had been right: even in the grimmest places, beauty abounded, if only you knew how to look.

"What a stiffrump!" Lewis gestured to a French military policeman who seemed to scrutinize each syllable of a truck driver's paperwork. "At this rate, we'll never get through."

As we waited, scenes of my journey flitted through my mind, flapping like pages of a book caught in the wind. The ocean passage, in which my cabin-mate, a Red Cross volunteer, wore her life jacket the entire three weeks. Though afraid our ship would be torpedoed like the *Lusitania,* she sailed anyway. What courage! On our arrival in Bordeaux, my shipmates and I tasted real French wine and glimpsed angels and gargoyles in the architecture. Motoring to Paris, our Peugeot putted past lines of poplars that shaded the road. In the capital, Lewis helped me obtain authorizations to enter the war zone. We queued for hours at the police station to receive a stamped paper before dashing across the cobblestones to the Ministry of War, only to stand in line again. A three-day, herky-jerky, foreign-language obstacle course. I'd been in France for ten days, long enough to marvel at two elements—the awe-inspiring architecture and the mind-numbing administration.

Finally, the truck in front of us, which transported crates of cabbage alongside kegs of gunpowder, advanced. It was our turn. As he examined the papers, the MP frowned.

Seeing me tug nervously at my handkerchief, Lewis said, "You needn't fret."

The MP pointed to a line at the bottom of a document. Lewis flipped the page and pointed to the prefect's scrawl. "We've done our bit. Now do yours and let us through."

He gestured to me. "But it says that she's a li—"

"We're with the Morgan Brigade," Lewis informed him in crisp, I'm-nearing-the-end-of-my-patience French.

The MP went slack-jawed. "Merci." He waved us through.

I asked why he'd thanked us. Lewis responded that Anne Morgan's efforts were known in these parts. And not just here. Miss Morgan was the reason I'd come. She'd commissioned a photographer and a filmmaker to record the effects of war. Back home, in a cinema around the

corner from the New York Public Library, the audience had gaped at the images of a wan, white-haired farm couple dressed head to toe in black. Their craggy faces conveyed that they'd toiled under an unforgiving sun their entire lives. The Germans had slaughtered their goat and gelding, set their seeds on fire, and reduced their farmhouse to rubble. Arms limp at their sides, the couple lingered in front of their bombed-out barn, ghosts left with nothing to haunt. After the viewing, I couldn't just sit home and pray.

Lewis and I were to drive straight from Paris to CARD Headquarters in the village of Blérancourt, where I'd report for duty as the newest recruit of the American Committee for Devastated France, *Le Comité américain pour les régions dévastées* (CARD). We passed through what used to be a village—cottages blown open, their shutters charred. On the outskirts, a roadside grave—at the head, a helmet on a cross, and standing upright at the base, a rusty bayonet. We inched by so slowly that I had time to read "Unknown soldier, August 1914."

The scene, so forlorn, called out to me.

"Lewis," I said, "please pull over."

In CARD, we called each other by our surnames. When I'd first heard that someone named Lewis was going to be my chauffeur, I pictured a bald man with a monocle, not a sunny brunette Vassar girl. She and I were both in uniform, a horizon-blue jacket and skirt.

Lewis turned the wide steering wheel and maneuvered past debris to a clear patch on the side of the road. At the makeshift grave, we bowed our heads. In New York, street hawkers shouted until they were hoarse; horses nickered as they clopped down Fifth Avenue, milk wagons groaned under the weight of the cream; plump pigeons cooed the conditional language of love; from time to time, a lonely crow cawed. Here there was only an eerie silence.

Stiff from hours in the Ford, Lewis and I ambled toward rows of homes that had been reduced to mounds of stones that barely reached my waist. In the garden, there were ruins of rabbit hutches, the wood torn and twisted. Hand grenades and unexploded shells lay in the soil. Inside, where a dining room used to be, we could make out splintered

table and chairs, a bassinet whose lace had been torn and dotted with dirt.

I could hardly believe I was finally here, in the midst of this mute, desolate madness. I remembered my boss's riposte upon learning that I'd enlisted: "What the hell is a librarian going to do in the middle of a war zone?"

"Whatever I can to help."

"How will you get to Europe?" she'd demanded with a smirk.

We both knew the ocean crossing cost more than I earned in a year.

I recalled the sheer satisfaction at disclosing that Miss Morgan had paid for my passage. Well, Miss Morgan's brigade. For once, my boss, Winnifred Smythe—the brightest, oldest star in the constellation of the NYPL's children section—had been speechless.

Never had I enjoyed a silence more.

"How does she know you?" she finally demanded. "You're a nobody."

It was unlikely that a librarian and the heiress to the largest U.S. banking fortune would cross paths. I replied that Miss Morgan might have heard of my efforts for the National League for Woman's Service, which was founded so that we could contribute to the war effort. Naturally, Miss Morgan was treasurer. One of 250,000 volunteers, I headed the business unit. According to the secretary of the NYPL director, Miss Morgan had requested me by name.

"Why would she want you?" my boss muttered. "Why you and not me?"

My mother maintained that the "seek and ye shall find" passage of Matthew 7:7 referred to reading, that most answers could be found in books. I recalled the League's 1917 manifesto: *Resolved, that this National League for Woman's Service shall be the consecration of Woman's Power; that it shall be kept free from self-seeking and from politics . . .*

No self-seeking or politics. That was why.

Lewis and I wandered along the cobblestone street. In front of a well, she paused to pick up a sooty rag doll. "I've made this trip ten times now." She wiped its face clean. "But I never become inured to these remnants of families driven from their homes."

We passed vestiges of what had been. In what used to be a cottage, a smashed curio cabinet, a sodden divan. In what used to be a backyard, Lewis positioned the doll on a chair whose legs had been hacked away. On the outskirts, I moseyed over the soft soil of farmland. No rebel wildflowers were tempted to put down roots here. No field mice scurried at the sound of my footsteps. No sparrows greeted us with wary chirps. Would the birds ever return?

The landscape reminded me of Willa Cather's depiction of the Great Plains. Suddenly, I left this parcel for the library of my mind. It was two stories high, with a rolling ladder to access tomes on the top shelves. With its plump pillows and downy quilt, the window seat beckoned, and I often curled up with a book and gazed out at the secret garden, lush with roses and lavender. Now, I quickly crossed the creaking parquet to fetch *My Ántonia*. *I wanted to walk straight on through the red grass and over the edge of the world, which could not be very far away.*

"Carson!" I heard Lewis shout.

I returned from my cozy library to the present, where I'd managed to maroon myself in the middle of a muddy field.

"It's full of land mines," she said. "Find your exact footprints and walk back to me. Slowly."

I turned my head. The grayish brown path stretched before me, an eternity to Lewis. I looked for my tracks—What was a rut? Where was the curve of my heel? My whole body shook, in part because of the cold, but mostly because I'd never been so frightened. On my first day in the war zone, I'd done what my boss had foretold—gotten myself in trouble. Actually, she'd predicted that I'd get myself killed. She lamented that I lived in my head, not in the real world. She was against my coming here. She was against me, period. I would prove her wrong.

I peered at the lumpy mud—had that puddle been there, or was that where I'd stepped? My heart thumped loud and hard. I was freezing, yet sweat dripped from my forehead. I wiped my brow with my father's handkerchief and took my first step. I didn't want to die. I didn't want my boss to be right. Right, left. Right, left.

At the car, my whole body pulsed with panic, and I could barely catch my breath. I expected Lewis to lay into me, but all she said was "What a curfuggle!" The word meant "mess," but was she referring to the situation or to me?

I sank into the passenger seat. Instead of slamming the door as I deserved, Lewis closed it gently and said, "Poor dear, you're pale as snow." The blanket of her concern warmed me, and the fear finally passed.

As she maneuvered onto the road, Lewis explained that we'd arrived in the Red Zone, where German soldiers had sown explosives the same way they used to plant potatoes. I recalled the description from the CARD report: *Completely devastated. Damage to properties: 100%. Damage to Agriculture: 100%. Impossible to clean. Human life impossible.*

Thus far, she had chatted away, glancing at me as much as at the road. Last Thursday, she'd turned twenty-five, which made her fifteen years younger than me. I remembered the constant inquiries that came with this delicate age. *Do you have a beau? What does he do for a living? Has he proposed? How many children does he want?* It was a relief that the questions had mostly stopped, though Mother occasionally whispered a wistful *There's still time*.

"The girls managed to find some champagne," Lewis had recounted. "My birthday party was a corking time! We Cards work like nailers, but know how to have fun, too. You'll see." She'd been here six months and was in charge of maintaining vehicles. Back home, she'd had her own car and chauffeur—now she repaired punctured tires, fixed engines, and scraped muck from the undercarriages.

"In the motor service," she said, "we call ourselves *les chauffeuses*."

Lewis loved to watch Frenchmen as she passed in the Ford. "They've never seen a woman drive—they don't think it's natural. Eyes bulging! Jaws dropped! It's too killing!" she said, and we laughed. "Between the greasy spark plugs and the lack of hot water, my fingernails are black. Dear Mama—Philadelphia's premier hostess—would be appalled!"

Lewis held up her hands, encased in expensive kidskin gloves. Instinctively, I covered a worn spot on my woolen ones. Most Cards were

like Lewis, wealthy volunteers who paid their own expenses, whereas I drew a salary and had my costs, such as lessons to brush up my French and the ocean passage, covered. A uniform couldn't erase the difference between us.

I told her that because I was a children's librarian, my hands were either pink from paper cuts or blue from the ink blotter used to stamp books.

"How thrilling to share your knowledge with little ones," she replied. I feared she was mocking me until she added, "Growing up, I had French and Latin tutors. After college, my father refused to permit me to seek employment."

Suddenly, I felt sorry for an heiress. "What about translation work?" I asked. It could be done at home.

"Father said my knowledge is for my future husband. He expected me to select one of his employees—fine young stockbrokers—to marry."

"My mother did the same. At Mass, there was a steady parade of suitors in our pew."

"It's enough to make a girl an atheist!"

I chuckled. "I never blamed God. And I never found out how Mother managed to unearth so many bachelors."

The truth was, I wanted to support myself and was content in my career. However, I was ready for a challenge and longed to see new faces. And there were things I was ready to leave behind. Lewis and I had different upbringings, but here we were on the same scarred road, a pair of Cards with the goal of helping French villagers.

The sorrow of the land seeped into us. The rest of the journey felt like a funeral; we remained silent in order to pay our respects to the dead. She kept her eyes on the ruts as we drove through an hour of nothingness.

When it began to rain, Lewis said, "I trust you brought galoshes. This drizzle has been a near constant, and mud has taken over."

As she stepped on the clutch to gear down, I ogled her suede button boots, which fit like a second skin, clearly crafted especially for her.

I wore boxy work boots—the only kind I could afford. Was I exchanging a difficult boss for spoiled socialites?

"Are the other Cards easy to get along with?" I asked.

"For the most part, the girls are kind and hard workers. Miss Morgan and Dr. M.D.—that's what we call CARD president Dr. Anne Murray Dike—run a tight unit. When a debutante hurkle-durkled in bed until 10:00 a.m., Dr. M.D. shipped her back to Boston."

Unease gripped me at the thought of being discarded like a defective lamp. My boss would cackle, *I told you so*.

"Then there's the girl who couldn't cope," Lewis continued. "After two weeks, she fled to Le Ritz."

I wondered why she'd given up. Was she not entirely fluent in French? Or had homesickness overwhelmed her? I'd signed a contract—two years without seeing my sister and mother. What had I been thinking? I'd so looked forward to being in France that I hadn't considered that the job meant leaving behind family.

"Here we are," Lewis said.

We entered the war-torn village of Blérancourt at dusk. The fading light did not cloak the ruins of a stone cottage. Under what was left of the roof, a pug-nosed teen with pigtails perched on a pile of rubble, hunched over a book. She was so taken by the story that the beams of our headlamps did not register.

"That's Marcelle Moreau," Lewis said. "In what's left of her house. Now they live in a quarry. Her father died on the battlefield. While her mother works as a laundress and seamstress, Marcelle looks after three rambunctious brothers. Madame Moreau doesn't give her a moment of peace."

"Books can be that moment." Helping children like her was why I'd come. I needed to put aside my fears over being inadequate. "Will you introduce us?"

"I can try." Lewis slowed the car. "She usually runs off."

I dug into my purse and pulled out *Anne of Green Gables,* a comfort read that I was attempting in French. Anne *always remembered the silvery, peaceful beauty and fragrant calm of that night. It was the last night*

before sorrow touched her life; and no life is ever quite the same again when once that cold, sanctifying touch has been laid upon it. I had a feeling that the girl would understand. From the window of the Ford, I proffered the novel, not unlike a carrot for Black Beauty. She snatched it.

"Would you like a few more?" I asked in French.

"Ma told me not to talk to devil-women!"

Diablesses. I suppressed a laugh. I was flattered—no one had ever considered me a bad influence. "I love reading, just like you. I'm the new librarian."

She cocked her head. "Liar! Everyone knows that librarians are men."

"Times are changing," I told her.

"Not here." Marcelle sized up Lewis. "Ma says that only harlots smoke or bob their hair."

"Yet it's acceptable for men to smoke and frequent the barber?" I asked.

Contemplating my words, Marcelle gnawed on the tip of her pigtail.

"You reflect on that double standard," I added.

"Come find me when you realize it's unfair," Lewis said. "I'll teach you to 'chauff.'"

Books and driving—who could resist the tantalizing offer? Marcelle stepped toward us.

"I sent you to the well to fill our pails," we heard a woman holler. "How many times have I told you not to pester *les dames*?"

Eyes wide, the teen scampered off.

"Shouldn't we go after her?" I asked Lewis.

"Nothing doing. Even I'm intimidated by Marcelle's mom."

As the Ford bounced over the cobblestones, Lewis pointed out the town hall, a two-story building that housed the municipal library. Miraculously, all four walls were intact. Instinctively, I patted my satchel, where I kept my blueprint for the children's library. I couldn't wait to share it with Miss Morgan. First impressions were lasting impressions, my father had believed. I'd prove that she'd made the right choice in employing me.

Our Headquarters—a demolished castle—came into view. Only a section of it remained intact. The golden glow from its ground-floor windows beckoned. We crossed over the stone bridge and dried-up moat, past a copse of spindly spruces. I was never so happy to see trees. As Willa Cather wrote, *Trees were so rare in that country, and they had to make such a hard fight to grow, that we used to feel anxious about them, and visit them as if they were persons*. We continued through the arch of the grand sandstone gate to a hamlet of prefabricated wooden barracks topped with tin roofs. Lewis pointed out the garage, the mercantile where villagers purchased items at reduced prices, and a clinic. Six of the barracks were bedrooms; the seventh, called le club-house, was a community center where meals were served. She parked in front of the sliver of château still standing. In the moonlight, the tall sandstone castle resembled a satin wedding dress; the ruins of rubble stretched beside it brought to mind a lace train.

When we alighted from the Ford, a terrier swirled around my skirt. "Hello, boy," I said.

Lewis explained that during bombardments, pets had become separated from their owners and now roamed the *rues* in search of food and affection.

"We all have dogs, and we all have fleas," she added cheerfully.

As we stroked his head, Lewis stiffened like a soldier waiting to be told, *At ease*.

"It's the two Annes," she whispered.

I watched the duo exiting the imposing oak door of the château and recognized Anne Morgan from newspaper photos. With her wealth, one might have expected to read about her in the society pages—where she wintered and which duke asked for her hand in marriage. Instead, front-page profile pieces described her advocacy for working women—pushing for better salaries, safer conditions in factories, and paid vacation. She and her high-society friends picketed the streets of Manhattan with impoverished garment workers, knowing that where the well-heeled went, newspapermen with cameras would follow.

These days, articles underscored her efforts in France. When war

broke out in 1914, Anne Morgan opened her villa in Versailles to convalescing soldiers. By 1916, she served as the treasurer of the American Fund for the French Wounded. In 1917, she and nine other women were given permission by Général Pétain to settle in Blérancourt in order to help civilians.

Tonight, Miss Morgan's graying curls escaped from underneath her CARD hat, which tilted to the side. She wore a starched white shirt and a black tie with her uniform. Her eyes were fiercely intelligent, and her chin was slightly raised, as though she was accustomed to doing battle. At her side was Dr. Anne Murray Dike.

According to Lewis, the Scot was a force of nature, too. After studying medicine in Canada, Dr. M.D. had wed a Boston professor. They later parted ways; some blamed the divorce on Miss Morgan. The two Annes were inseparable.

Where Miss Morgan was robust, Dr. M.D. was tall and svelte. Waves of strawberry blond hair framed her oval face. She fixed me with a pensive regard.

"Welcome, Carson." Miss Morgan's voice was low and authoritative. "We kept one eye on our work, the other on the window. We wanted to be the first to greet you. How was the trip?"

I looked askance at Lewis, fully expecting her to recount my misstep in the field.

"Uneventful," she replied airily.

"How are you holding up?" Miss Morgan asked me. "I remember the first time we drove through the devastation. It quite does something to you."

This was where I should have said something. *Those miles were a heart-rending sight? Nice to meet you? I'd love to show you my blueprints?* Unable to decide, I realized I'd created a clumsy silence only when Miss Morgan said, "I propose a restorative drink."

Unsure if the invitation was a form of politeness, I turned to Lewis, who grinned. "Let's!"

The terrier and I followed the Cards into the château, eager for the next chapter to begin.

CHAPTER 2

JESSIE CARSON
BLÉRANCOURT, JANUARY 1918

A castle in ruins. A glowing hearth. A gilded French desk. *When I used to read fairy tales, I fancied that kind of thing never happened, and now here I am in the middle of one!* I felt like Alice in Wonderland, albeit with a gray terrier instead of a white rabbit. Gauging the Turkish rug and antique furniture, I worried the delicate legs of the chairs would make excellent chew toys. "Shall I take the dog outside?"

"Whatever for?" Miss Morgan replied.

Lewis and I moved to the velvet divan, and the terrier settled at my feet. Dr. Murray Dike sat primly on the Louis XIV chair, near Miss Morgan, who perched on her desk. A serving girl poured ratafia, and Dr. M.D. raised her glass. "To Carson's safe arrival."

The others partook, but I froze, my arm still raised. I gawked at Miss Morgan, a woman who not only defied polite society but reshaped it.

Surely accustomed to people being in awe of her, she whispered, "Take a taste," and I sipped the sweet wine. She then tendered her mother-of-pearl cigarette case. I declined, but Lewis lit up and inhaled deeply. Miss Morgan puffed on her cigarette as if it were a pipe. After hours in the car, I sighed and reveled in the soft, immobile cushions. Lewis debriefed the two Annes on a meeting at the CARD depot in Paris, where Cards tracked down the seeds that farmers requested, as well as chalk and slates for pupils.

Lewis stubbed out her cigarette. "I've got to make sure Bessie's in fine form for tomorrow's treks."

"Bessie?" I asked.

"The Ford." Lewis bid me goodbye with a reassuring squeeze to my shoulder.

"I'm sure you've kept au courant about the war," Miss Morgan told me, "however, because this region was behind enemy lines, the newspapers weren't able to convey what happened."

She explained that in the autumn of 1914, fields and towns in northeastern France became battlefields. During the retreat of Allied forces, inhabitants—mainly women and children, since Frenchmen served in the army—either fled or stood their ground. A brutal occupation by German soldiers began. Some Frenchwomen were arrested and sent to the Fatherland, where they were brutalized as prisoners of war. Those who remained were forced to do backbreaking work. With no livestock or tractors, women replaced the oxen that helped sow the wheat. Children as young as four harvested potatoes for twelve hours each day, and now suffered from malnutrition, skin diseases, and curvature of the spine. One boy witnessed his mother killed before his eyes by a bomb dropped from an enemy plane.

"There are wee ones we've never seen smile," Dr. M.D. added. "With everything they've been through, I'm not sure they know how."

"Oh." The desolate sound escaped my lips. Words were my life, but now I had none. My heart ached for the families and all they'd endured. I didn't realize that I'd balled up my father's handkerchief in my fist until the terrier's nose brushed my knuckles. Dogs always seemed to know when solace was needed.

After three years of warfare, the Allies had regained this territory; however, the retreating German army destroyed buildings and booby-trapped fields in their wake. The church, schoolhouse, and homes were in ruins. No one had a complete roof over their heads. Every sort of paper—plain, tarred, oiled—was used to fill in holes made by machine guns. Rebuilding houses and clearing agricultural land remained CARD's priorities. If families couldn't make a living, they wouldn't return.

Even as enemy bombs continued to fall forty miles away, the land was being cleared of barbed wire and unexploded shells, trenches filled

in, carcasses of animals removed, the remains of fallen soldiers and civilians transferred to burial grounds. Villagers resided in quarries, stables, sod houses, or in the debris of their own homes. I couldn't imagine having to unearth bodies, couldn't imagine facing the danger of being blown up in order to plant the fields, couldn't imagine losing my home, though I knew what it felt like to start over again.

I swigged the ratafia as I absorbed the harsh realities that the French faced. What did this mean for the library I was hired to create?

"Forgive us, Carson," Dr. M.D. said apologetically. "We do tend to go on."

"There is good news," Miss Morgan said. "Last autumn, CARD hired teachers. After three endless years of the occupation, children are back in school."

I nodded, reassured that children had returned to their routine.

"School and reading are important," Dr. M.D. said, "however, the library work might have to wait."

"What?" I asked.

A Card rushed in and came to a stop in front of Miss Morgan. A long strand of pearls brushed against the lapels of her uniform. "Where is she? Lewis said she's here."

"Yes, Breckie, Carson has finally arrived." Miss Morgan beamed.

"You're just in time—our bookshelves are positively bare," Breckie told me. Silvery strands from her bob brushed her plump cheeks. She was my age, yet had the same spritely energy as Lewis. "Tell me you've brought the latest novels!"

"As many as I could fit into my trunk." Her request made me like her immediately. I always had friends in fellow readers.

"I'm one of the nurses. My name is Mary Breckinridge, but Anne"—she gestured to Miss Morgan—"says my surname is a mouthful for the French, so everyone calls me Breckie."

"Our new arrival is looking peaked," Dr. M.D. said to her. "Why don't you help her settle in?"

"But what did you mean about postponing library work?" I asked.

"We'll discuss it later," Miss Morgan assured as she ushered me out.

The terrier and I trailed Breckie to a barrack where I was to have one of the four rooms. Inside, I found a single bed; a dressing table with a pitcher of water and a basin, since there was no running water; and a bouquet of dried flowers in the copper shell of a bomb. Noting my surprise, Breckie said, "Nothing goes to waste here."

"Well, if you can transform deadly weapons into floral arrangements, I feel I'm in good hands."

"You are."

As we spoke, the terrier swiveled his head between Breckie and me, following the conversation.

"It appears this discerning dog has adopted you," she said. "What will you name him?"

I contemplated his wise eyes and bushy whiskers. "Max," I said, and he waggled his tail.

Just then, Lewis dragged in my battered trunk. "What do you have in here? Rocks?"

"Books," I replied.

"Same thing," she said with a playful wink.

"We'll let you rest," Breckie said. "Cookie rings the dinner bell at seven."

Max watched as I tucked my flannel nightgowns in the drawer and hung my dresses in the wardrobe. *Armoire,* in French. French. Good Lord in heaven, *le bon Dieu au paradis,* I was in France. *En France*.

"Can you believe it?" I asked him.

He licked my fingers in response.

I set *My Ántonia, The Count of Monte Cristo,* and *Anne of Avonlea* on the nightstand. I kept my favorite people close—impossible to sleep without them.

Restless, I picked up a pen, intending to write to my sister. With the time change, I imagined Mabel on her lunch break, away from her

desk and the beady eyes of her boss. I pictured her in the house with Mother, heating the stew on the stove, hiding the carrots and leeks in the thick broth so that Mother would eat them. On the porch, in the early morning, a week before my departure, I'd fretted to Mabel. My fingers entwined like guilt and love, like fear and hope, like Mabel and me. *You think of everyone but yourself,* she insisted. *You said this is your calling. You must go.* How I missed her.

I dipped my pen in the inkwell. *Dear Mabel, I'm here! Unpacking makes it official. For the next two years, I'll be the librarian of No Man's Land . . .*

I lost track of time, startling when the dinner bell clanged. In le club-house, a fire beckoned in the hearth. Cards gathered at four round tables, each with five place settings of earthenware. Several were youthful like Lewis, one studied her reflection in the back of her spoon, another applied a coat of lipstick. Others were closer to my age. Were they all wealthy, or did a few draw a salary like me? I waited for an opening, but deep in conversation, no one noticed me. I felt like an outsider, like I was peering over an oversize book that separated me from them.

Breckie, the nurse, waved me over and patted the empty chair next to her. As I waded through the sea of horizon blue to join her, Lewis, and the two Annes, I heard a Card grumble, "Why does *she* get to sit at the head table?"

Even in war, in a relief organization, one could not escape life's hierarchy. Manhattan's social scene was chock-full of heiresses and millionaires' wives. A librarian would never be invited.

In the din, Dr. M.D. clapped thrice like a headmistress calling pupils to attention. The chatter stopped. She asked me to introduce myself, and twenty Cards regarded me expectantly. My mouth went dry, as did my brain. What could I say? That I spoke of characters in books as if they were friends? That though my boss refused to allow *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* on the library shelf, the setting I longed to explore was Emerald City? That my favorite writer was Willa Cather, because like her, I understood the beauty of the plains, the beauty of the plain?

"I'm a graduate of the Carnegie Library School. I worked in Pittsburgh for seven years; in Tacoma, Washington, as the director of the children's department for seven more; then in New York." I wasn't ready to talk about that tenure just yet.

"Gollywhoppers!" Lewis said. "You've worked on both coasts. Until I came here, my parents barely let me go anywhere. You're very brave."

"No braver than you all," I said.

"An explorer!" Breckie said. "Like the frontiersman Kit Carson, hero of my favorite dime novels."

"Shall we call you Kit?" Lewis asked.

I'd never had a nickname, and Kit sounded friendlier than Carson. Feeling shy about being the center of attention, I could only nod my assent.

Miss Morgan drew a silver brooch from her pocket. I now noticed that the others wore the same. "It's a griffin," she said, "our emblem."

The mythical beast—half lion, half eagle; a symbol of wisdom and courage—suited the group. As Miss Morgan pinned it to my lapel, I straightened. Of all the library candidates, she'd chosen me. Somehow, I would find a way to make a difference. *Books are bridges,* my father had said to me when I was a child. *They show how we're connected*. I clutched his handkerchief in my pocket, tracing the stitching of his initials. *SC* for Samuel Carson.

"To our Library Card!" Miss Morgan said.

Everyone raised their glasses.

"To Kit!" Lewis said.

"You're one of us," Breckie added.

I knew I was blushing. Aside from story hour, when children's eyes were upon me, I was used to being invisible.

Squeaking hinges heralded dinner. Since she held silver platters in both hands, the cook opened the swinging door with her derriere. Her apron was fastened loosely around her wasp waist. How odd to receive a first impression from a person's backside. (The only other such occasion for me had been a late arrival to the symphony, where the conductor was in full swing.) She pivoted and gestured for two ap-

prentices to set platters of deviled eggs, cauliflower baked in béchamel sauce, and wilted greens on each table. The creamy aroma made my mouth water.

The cook regarded me. "A new girl?"

"Jessie Carson, an NYPL librarian on loan," I responded.

"On loan like a book?"

"Yes, though for two years rather than two weeks."

"I'm a fellow New Yorker. Marie Jones. Everyone calls me Cookie. Welcome," she said before moving to the next table.

As Miss Morgan heaped cauliflower onto her plate, she recounted her last trip to Manhattan, where she'd lured Cookie away from the household of her dearest enemy.

"The coup is one of your greatest accomplishments," Breckie said.

"Join us, Cookie," Miss Morgan entreated. "I hired you to oversee the kitchen, not wash every blasted pan yourself."

The cook wiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand, leaving a smear of flour. "Too much to do," she declared. The apprentices followed her to the kitchen, trailing like ladies-in-waiting.

So someone *could* say no to the formidable Miss Morgan.

I helped myself to the cauliflower. The buttery spoonful melted in my mouth. Heaven.

"You'll accompany a few of the Cards through a day's work to get a better understanding of the place and of our role here," Dr. M.D. said. "A home visit with Breckie and the mercantile with Lewis."

"What sorts of things do you sell?" I asked.

"Everything from beets to eggs to garden rakes to artificial limbs," Lewis replied.

There was an uneasy lull. One moment, Cards chin-wagged like we were back home, and the next, we retreated into silence. In the distance, I could hear the din of shelling. I gulped. Glancing around, I wondered if the others were scared, or at least nervous, but they kept eating.

"Currently," Miss Morgan said, "we're 'chickenizing' this region. Ordering enough hens so that people have eggs and settling disputes as