

CHAPTER ONE

On the Train

13 April 1942

The rhythmic chugging of the steam engines had signaled the start of summer for as long as she could remember. Three whole months planning hilarious pranks on her best friend Hazeema's annoying twin brother Elias, making up fun new ways to get dirty just to vex her grandmother—or *Grandmère*, as she insisted she be called in French—and best of all, tinkering in the workshop with Grandfather.

Now though, the constant tick of the tires only succeeded in making her think of Dad and that unassuming telegram that turned her world upside down. No matter what she did, those three little words played over and over in her mind.

Pressing her forehead against the window, she tried to silence the endless, dizzying cycle of thoughts. She traced the shape of a large, majestic oak tree in the cool glass, still misty from last night's rain.

It had happened so many times since the start of the war. To friends, neighbors, even the grocer who lived down the block. But in all of her thirteen years, she never thought it would happen to her.

“Penelope?” Grandfather's soft touch as he rested a hand on her arm knocked her from her thoughts. Blinking back the sting of tears blurring her vision, she let out a long breath and turned to face him.

“Are you all right, chérie?”

She fought the urge to curl into herself as his gentle, calloused hands brushed a lone auburn curl from where it stuck to her cheek. She brought her left hand up to rub the other one, and her brows furrowed when it came away wet and trembling. When had she started crying?

He sighed heavily, the sound echoing in her ears. She caught her lip between her teeth as he pulled her arm into his lap before leaning over to press a soft, reassuring kiss to her forehead. She snuggled into his side as he stroked her hair.

“Where are you?” he murmured. “You look a bit lost.”

She let her gaze drift to her lap instead. Her free hand wandered to the pocket of her dress—a frilly pink thing with white polka dots, complete with a bow around the waist tied tight enough to cut off her circulation and a collar so roused it might as well be put in a lipstick tube. Mum insisted she wear it, if only to appease Grandmère. The one redeeming quality lay in the fact that Hazeema’s mum had altered the skirt to include a hidden array of pockets.

“So, you never lose those gadgets and thingamabobs you’re always toying with,” Ms, Calari had said with a laugh.

Penelope pressed her lips together, but the moment her fingers brushed against the carefully folded creases of the parchment in the front most one—Dad’s last letter from the base before her mother received the telegram—a hot lump rose in her throat. Her hand shook as she pulled it out and passed it to Grandfather, looking up at him with wide eyes. “Dad said he wanted me to give this to you. I meant to send it when I wrote before, but...”

The confusion vanished from his features, replaced with a sympathetic gaze and a tight, sad smile. Grandfather was silent for a beat before the paper crunched in his hand as he tucked it in the lapel of his jacket. “I’ll read it when we get home.”

“Do you think he’ll ever come back?” The question came out hoarse, closer to the frequency of a whistle than an audible whisper.

The lines around his mouth twitched and he patted his pocket twice before wrapping his arm around her shoulder and pulling her in for a side hug. “Your father is a smart man, *ma chér*. I’m sure wherever he is, he’s working as hard as he can to get back to you and your mother.”

She sighed and laid her head against his chest, fingering the fabric of his leather jacket. “And you, Grandfather? Your comrades are working hard to find him too, right?” Her words held a whining edge that she desperately tried not to let squeak through, but as his kind hazel eyes met hers, she couldn’t help it. Short of going off in search of Dad herself—impossible, given where he was—or, maybe wasn’t, by now, she had to put her hope in Grandfather’s old platoon.

He laughed lightly and smoothed her long auburn corkscrew curls. “Of course, Poppy. We may not always see eye to eye, but Adrian is my son. I will do everything I can to find him. I’ve sent word to my contacts in the ranks; they all said they would reply as soon as anyone had information on his whereabouts.”

Penelope huffed and slammed her hand against the armrest, yanking her free arm from his grip and crossing them over her chest. “But it’s already been nearly a month since we received the telegram! What if—” Grandfather put a finger to her lips and raised an eyebrow, narrowing his gaze. Penelope gulped and slunk down in her seat. Her shoulders slumped and she toyed with a stray thread on the skirt of her dress.

“I’m sorry. It’s just...”

He simply exhaled and patted her hand. “I know, *ma petite*. Believe me, I’m worried too. You must be patient. These things take time.”

She let her eyes drop to her lap again. “I know...” Looking up, she took his hand, which rested on the armrest of the seat to her right. “It’s just so hard. First Dad, and then I had to leave Mum behind, too. I mean, what if...”

Grandfather shushed her again. “Your mother’s safe in Cambridge caring for your Aunt Sara—”

“But—”

“And we mustn’t assume the worst for your father, or the wait will seem even longer.”

Penelope bit her lip. “I’ll try.” She smiled wanly when he pulled her close again.

“That’s my girl.”

They settled into a peaceful silence until Grandfather nudged her shoulder. “Will you go and get me some water? Car five is the restaurant car, I think.” He smirked as he rolled up his pant leg to reveal the plastic and metal of his left calf. “I would do it myself, but even with this new leg design, these train tracks don’t seem to know how to work with an old man’s rickety balance.” He winked and Penelope stifled a giggle before unbuckling her belt and climbing out of the seat. Grandfather had had his leg amputated after fighting in the First World War and been issued a prosthetic by the government, but since then had used more and more of his own tinkering skills to modify it rather than pay for a new one.

“Sure, I’ll be right back.”

Only when she reached the bar at the back of the restaurant car did she realize she had nothing on hand to give the bar tender.

She fished around in her pockets for some spare change, but only came up with a farthing.

Great. The five cents bought her a drink, but she would have to come back to pay for Grandfather's. The passengers grumbled and groaned as she weaved her way through, but eventually, she found their car again.

As she shuffled up the aisle, a strange flash of color caught her eye. On instinct, she flinched. Though not nearly as bright, every muscle in her body urged her to make a dash for the tube station to avoid the impending strike of a bomb on the already rubble-covered streets. Taking a deep, shaky breath, she looked around again for the source of the light, A chilling sense of dread replaced the sudden warm buzz of adrenaline. She froze and craned her neck over the top of the empty chair that she had slid behind to avoid being trampled by a wave of passengers returning to their seats.

A projection flashed just over her grandfather's head. It looked like a newsreel at first, except in color. But they were on a train, so that wasn't possible. She inched a row forward, her water sloshing in the glass as she leaned over and squinted at the images. A gasp shot out of her chest when it zoomed in on a close up of a man's face.

"D... Daddy?"

The metallic taste of copper crept up her throat as she watched her father's plane, embroidered with the Royal Naval Air Force emblem, coast over the open air with nothing but starry skies and crystal water shimmering clearly in the moonlight. She swore, even with the static of the mysterious projections, she saw the bottom of the sea-bed. She wouldn't have recognized the vessel as his except for his cheery blue eyes twinkling back at her with such joking reassurance that Penelope could almost swear he stood right next to her. For an instant, she smiled.

She knew from the stories in his letters that during those times, the peaceful nights free of wind or clouds as he glided along with the currents, that her father could almost forget about the biggest war ever to be documented by modern historians.

Penelope saw the letters RNAF shimmer cobalt in the moonshine. A stark contrast to the golden ring that surrounded them. Penelope knew he wore both badges with great pride and honor, but she also felt their tremendous weight. She wouldn't want him to trade becoming a Flight Lieutenant in the Royal Naval Air Force for anything—flying was his passion and he was the best in his squad, but sometimes... Sometimes she just wished he would stay on the ground. With her.

Tuning back into the images flickering above Grandfather's head, a bout of turbulence made Da' fight to keep control of the plane. Static crackled in her ears and her fingers tightened around the water glass as her father raised a hand to his headphones.

Penelope strained her ears as Henry, the wing commander and her father's best friend, radioed in with a gruff, stern manner.

“Everything okay there, Lieutenant Durand?”

“Ay, Sergeant Tyrone.”

Wait, I can hear him, too? She held her breath as he swerved again. The projection narrowed in on the fuel indicator, and Penelope's stomach dipped when she realized how rapidly it had dropped. She crossed her fingers behind her back and gulped, startling as her father's voice crackled over the headset.

“But I think my aircraft is almost out of juice, I may need to ditch in the drink if we don't see land soon.”

“We're about twenty minutes out, Lieutenant. Can she hold 'til then?”

The fuel indicator dove again, along with Penelope's gut.

Her father's brows creased. "It'll be close, but—"

"Well then, cut your finger and stop bugging off. I'll radio you when I see land."

"Ay, Sergeant." First static, and then nothing except for the whirl of the engine.

Penelope sucked in her breath. The air was too quiet. Too still. Not even waves rolled in the water below. That meant something was coming. Something was always coming in a war like this.

She watched her father glide along, The knot in her belly wound tighter. She fisted her free hand as her knuckles whitened with her grip on the glass.

Suddenly, the nose of the plane dipped toward the sea. Her father pulled up, eyes cutting to the fuel meter. It teetered on empty now, but Penelope knew if he was careful, he could still make a clear landing.

He leveled the plane. In the left corner of the projection, streaks of green and grey light radiated across the sky. They danced like the Northern Lights, but instead of finding them mesmerizing, her father's features twisted with alarm at the sight.

Oh no!

When he turned though, they were gone. Only to reappear an instant later. He shook his head and rubbed his fists over his eyes.

Penelope's heart drummed against her chest as she watched. She'd never seen anything like—There! The lights dashed across the front of his plane, flashing their tales once before disappearing completely. Almost as if they were taunting him. Almost as if they knew he was following them.

What are those things?

The sky darkened and the waters below began to churn. Bile scuttled up her throat.

“Ah!” Her father’s hands briefly let go of the controls to press against his forehead. The nose of the aircraft dipped toward the water once again. What started out as a strange wave pattern had morphed into a raging whirlpool of angry violet.

“Look—” Penelope forced the scream back down when a few passengers turned to face her. Her cheeks burned as she sipped from her cup. She looked back in the direction of the projection again and spotted the same streaks of light zipping through the swirl below.

No. No, no, no!

Her father wrenched his hands away from his head, grinding his teeth against the pounding in his skull as he forced the controls upwards. The fuel tank emptied tick by tick. No matter how high he climbed, the whirlpool only seemed to rise higher with the nose of the plane, as if trying to tame a stubborn dog pulling on his leash.

Just when it looked like he had a firm grip on the steering, a striking burst lit up the sky. Penelope’s heart crawled into her throat as he shielded his eyes with the back of his right arm and swerved out of the way as the whoosh of a projectile missile, aimed straight at his right wing, shot through the air. It landed in the water below with a deafening splash and Henry’s voice barked in over the chaos.

“Lieutenant, report! What’s going on up there?”

“I’m not sure, sir.”

Penelope’s legs shook along with her father’s voice.

“Cricke—” His words were swallowed by a wall of fire. The aircraft plummeted toward the swirling vortex of violet light, the tail ablaze with flames.

“We got a flamer!” a piolet shouted, “Get him outta there!”

“Crickets!” barked another.

“Watch your backs!”

“Daddy! No!” An earsplitting crash tethered Penelope’s conscious back to her body. She gasped as a frigid burst of water splattered over her dress. A strangled yelp broke free from her throat and her eyes darted to her hand, now shredded open with splinters of glass puncturing gleaming red cuts. The tumbler lay in shards at her feet.

“Poppy?” Grandfather whipped to face her and sprang from his seat. He snapped a golden pocket watch shut, his usually nimble fingers fumbling with the clasp as he raced to her side. As soon as the clock face disappeared beneath the lid, the projection above his head rippled and vanished. “Are you alright?” he asked, kneeling down in front of her to inspect her hand. “What happened? What did you see?”

Penelope flexed her fingers. She winced as pain shot up her arm, but at least she could still move them.

“Cherie... Are you with me?”

She opened her mouth, then closed it again. Her ears rang. Her vision narrowed.

“Penelope? Answer me! Are you hurt anywhere else?”

What? Oh, right.

Shaking her head, she swallowed in spite of her tongue sticking firmly to the roof of her mouth. She cleared her throat and fought to steady her words. “I... um... I’m fine. I just...” Her lip trembled as she let out a long sigh and blurted, “What was that?”

“What was what?”

“Do you know where Dad is?”

Grandfather startled and sat back on his heels, giving her a stern scowl. “Poppy, we just talked about this.”

She bit her lip and flinched as a retired army nurse at the beginning of the ride came over and wrapped her palm in gauze. “I know, but... I came back to get money, and there were pictures of a man floating above your head, but they disappeared when you closed your watch. It looked like... It looked like Dad.”

An emotion she couldn't quite read—Fear? Shock? Anger?—clouded Grandfather's features. Penelope fought the urge to scramble back. Then it cleared and he reached over to twine the fingers of her uninjured hand with his own. “You've been reading too many stories, mon amour. I just checked the time to see how much longer we had on our journey.”

“But, I saw—” A squeeze of her hand cut her off.

“Do you trust me?”

She nodded, a small smile twitching at the corner of her lips. “Oui, Grandfather. More than anyone. But what was—” She made a grab for the watch clutched in his right hand.

He slipped it in the lower pocket of his coat before taking her by the shoulders and forcing their gazes to lock. “I promise, you will know everything I hear, the moment I hear it.”

She sighed, but leaned in when he wrapped her arms around her waist and pulled her forward.

“Je t'aime, ma petite elfe. I will do everything I can to bring your father back to us.”

“I love you too, Grandfather,” she mumbled into his shoulder. “I know you'll bring him home.”

And if I can find out where those projections came from, maybe I can help, too.