

## Clarion

*Piper Anderson**Épernay, France 1940*

If someone flew above Épernay at just the right moment in the summer before the German occupation, they might have seen a large black piano moving through the narrow cobbled streets like a reluctant stone pushed by river currents. The piano rolled past boulangeries and patisseries that pumped out the smell of strong espresso and freshly baked croissants, their windows lined with fluffy orange *gallettes ardennaises* and delightfully flaky *pains au chocolat*. Champenois lounged uneasily in the warm weather outside brasseries, sipping cappuccinos or wine and picking at plates of cheese. Their conversations dwindled as the piano procession rolled by, heads cocked at the curious sight. “Henri, what’s happening?” they called, or “Elaina, what are you doing?” The sweaty movers shouted out distracted answers, and the loungers, desperate for distraction, payed for their meals and trailed behind the piano— a Bösendorfer. Pretty soon a procession of curious bystanders followed the piano to the champagne tunnel entrance, like pilgrims following a martyred saint to a shrine.

Henri Descoteaux had worked at Moët et Chandon for as long as he could remember. It is one of the famous champagne houses that make their home in Épernay— along with De Castellane, Mercier, Gosset, all gilded in prestige. These champagne houses operate out of gorgeous mansions on a boulevard rightfully named the Avenue de Champagne. Though Épernay is a quaint town tucked into the rolling green hills of northern France, its Avenue de Champagne is lavishly decadent. Many say it is the wealthiest street in Europe— not for what is

on the street, but for what is below: millions of bottles of champagne. The champagne is stored inside cool chalk tunnels that create an extensive underground labyrinth.

While one wouldn't normally describe Henri as a combative man, he loved Moët's champagne fiercely, and would defend its name like any good Champenois worth his or her salt. See, Épernay was filled with proud people who loved champagne. The French are a proud people in general, but in Épernay they were particularly pleased with themselves and their livelihood. As they should have been— they produced that fizzy golden liquid drunk by the finest people in the world. Kings and queens, presidents and singers, heiresses and actresses, they all sipped on the drink produced in the elite Champagne region. A bottle of vintage Dom Perignon might cost one thousand francs— a simple Bordeaux could hardly achieve that price point.

As a boy Henri ran through bright green hills, vines towering above him that reached for the sky. During harvest in August he plopped warm grapes in his mouth that tasted of sunshine, his fingers stained red from juice. Later he took on other jobs, spending one dizzy month at twenty-six tasting every single bottle of wine to make sure it was up to standard before going under second fermentation. Now he was on the Board of the champagne house. From time to time, though, he still liked to pour yeast and sugar into the wine, cork the liquid, rotate the bottles every few weeks until the sediment collected and made the light shine cloudy through the glass. It was hardly chemistry that turned grape juice into a thousand bubbles popping delicately on one's tongue— no, that was the realm of magic.

See, Henri was appreciative of magic. He saw it in things other more logically-minded people might dismiss as simply the result of sophisticated scientific processes. But for Henri, magic was in grapes yawning toward the soft morning light, the first time he saw his daughter Elaina smile, the music created by his wife Jolie.

It was this latter magic he missed most of all. Jolie had passed away several years ago, and he missed her so much his chest ached constantly. They were married for fifty-two years and he never tired of her laugh, her sparkling eyes, her long graceful fingers. He'd look at his own large hands and marvel at how Jolie's swept across the piano like light dancing on a river.

Henri was a tall, big-boned man, and he'd always felt self-conscious about his size. When he was a boy he never stopped growing, and his mom would sew spare bits of fabric on the hem of his trousers so that the bottoms of his pant-legs were striped with browns, charcoals, creams.

But one weekend trip to Paris he saw Jolie for the first time, playing at a concert in the Opéra; he walked her home late that night, and she wrapped her arm around his and said *you're like a gentle giant, you sure make a lady feel safe*, and he felt comfortable with his large clumsiness for the first time. He had a purpose, a purpose of protection. Stability. Jolie always said he was as steady as a mountain. But she was effervescent. Always the center of attention, vivacious and charming, and Henri was happy to watch the trails of fire she left in a room, listen to the buttery music she coaxed from the piano. He was never quite sure how she loved a man as quiet as himself, but he thought it had something to do with how a firecracker needs a sturdy surface to land on.

Since she had passed, eyes turned to him now, and he found social events like dinner parties rather tiring. Things had changed. He lived alone. France was in chaos. What would happen to the country his wife so fiercely loved? What would happen to him? He had taken to sitting for long periods in silence, the pages of the newspaper drooping over his lap.

Today's newspaper in particular had sunk a cold weight into his belly. The Germans were just two days away. He had been preparing for occupation for a while now and had months of provisions hidden away, but it wasn't so much the heightened price of bread he was worried

about. No, it was the Bösendorfer, Jolie's exquisite piano. It was carved from rich, gleaming wood that resonated sound purer than an angel's laugh, and so heavy it took a team of five men to get it into the house.

Although acquiring a Bösendorfer was a lifelong dream for many people, Jolie's charm and talent and timely appearance in Salzburg during a twelve-city concert tour led to the graceful behemoth being deposited in their home thirty years ago. It wasn't new when Jolie got her hands on it— even she could hardly have managed a custom-made one— so she liked to joke this was one of the Bösendorfers made for an Austrian emperor in the 1800s and stolen away decades later from some aristocrat. Henri couldn't imagine being able to steal such a thing, but he did find it ironic that his most treasured possession was made by a German speaker.

And now it would certainly be taken away by one. The moment the Nazi's arrived at his doorstep their icy blue eyes would latch onto the piano, and from that moment on it would be lost to Henri forever, taken by some insufferable creature named Ralf eager to receive praise for best appropriated item.

Henri sighed and took out his tobacco box, rolled himself a cigarette. He took a long pull and regarded the Bösendorfer on his exhale, fidgeting with the burnt match. He missed the beautiful music that used to radiate from the piano, Jolie's smile as she turned to him after playing, the way she bit her lip during particularly complex crescendos and smoothed honey over her mouth afterwards. She tasted so sweet. But nowadays the piano had a sad hunch to its frame, lonely and mourning the loss of its player. In a way, its silent desperation would make its loss harder on Henri rather than easier. Jolie would have hated to see it go like that.

A knock on his door sent a jolt of fear through his belly for just a moment— *were they earlier than the papers said?*— but he relaxed at the soft "*Salut Grandpère!*"

His seven-year-old granddaughter. He wasn't expecting her today, but he was glad for her company.

"*Bonjour, ma chérie,*" he said as Adalene threw her arms around his big torso. She pressed her face into his shirt fabric and inhaled deeply.

"You smell like Papa! All smoky," she said. "We got a letter from him today. Well, it was dated from weeks ago, but *Maman* said it only just got here because the postal system has gotten all messed up."

She was bouncing with excitement, and he guided her to the kitchen and opened the ice box. "Is that so? What did it say?"

"Papa said sometimes him and his friends use cigarettes like francs, and he trades them for chocolate! And he said the ocean is really pretty, and he met some English guys and they weren't even that bad, and he gets so much butter with his bread that he might have to stay a little longer since *Maman* won't let him eat like that at home!"

He chuckled with his cigarette between his lips and continued slicing the goat cheese. Adalene gasped and came closer, folding her elbows on the counter and staring as he got out the honey. "Is that *buche de chèvre*?" she said, smiling up at him.

"Of course, *ma chérie.*" It was their little treat they had together, just the two of them: soft goat cheese spread on a slice of baguette and drizzled with warm honey and nuts. Lately he couldn't always get a hold of all the ingredients, but this was a good week— the last good one they would have in a while, probably. He poured honey into a saucepan.

"*Grandpère,* why did you crumple that newspaper? I thought you loved reading them."

He glanced over at the corner she was pointing at and took one last drag.

"Because, I didn't like what it said."

“Oh. What did it say?”

“Just boring war news.”

“Oh... Are the Germans gonna hurt us when they come?”

“No, not unless they think you’re a spy or member of the resistance.” He made a show of looking her up and down. “I think a seven-year-old should escape their suspicions though.”

“Will they really live beside us, but like... as our bosses?”

“I’m afraid so. But it won’t last long, *ma chérie*, and you can still play with your friends.”

She nodded, her big eyes slightly less worried. Henri made sure to give her an extra big slice of bread. They would have left for the south like other families in the area, but they didn’t have any relatives or friends outside of the north, and other parts of the country were already flooded with too many refugees. At least here, he knew they would have food and shelter.

“Okay Adalene, it’s ready.” She hopped into her chair and he flourished the plate before her, pausing just before he set it on the table. “But first, tell me what champagne pairs best with this cheese.”

“Oh, I know this! It’s... it’s... it’s our Grand Vintage Rosé!” By “our” she meant Moët et Chandon’s. Henri beamed at her.

“And why?”

“Because its berry notes go well with the exquisite flavors in the cheese,” she recited.

“Very good! Also, it is a strong champagne, so it accents the fresh, tangy quality of the *buche de chèvre*. Now for a little taste.” He uncorked last night’s bottle and poured a splash for Adalene, just enough so she could get a sip. He poured a decidedly bigger glass for himself.

“I love how it’s pink,” she said, examining the bubbles rushing up toward the surface of the vintage. They clinked glasses and sipped, and he laughed at his granddaughter’s crinkled face.

“It’s always so fizzy! It tickles my nose.”

“That’s how you know it’s good.” He drank in the scent of the champagne and let it linger in his mouth like a delicate, creamy mousse. For a moment he was taken back to one of his first dates with Jolie, educating her on the finer points of champagne snobbery. She sipped the bubbly rosé, closed her eyes, and said *I feel like love*.

“What are you thinking about?”

A few bubbles from that first sip still popped on his tongue. “Your *grandmère*.”

“I miss her.”

“Me too.”

“*Maman* talks about her a lot, and she’ll start laughing about something funny *grandmère* did but then she’ll normally end up all teary.”

“Well, that’s normal.”

“Even though *Maman* teaches me the piano now, it’s not the same.”

He laughed. “Your mother plays well, but I’m not sure anyone could play as well as her mother did.”

“Yeah, she was really good. Can I practice what I learned last time?” she asked, licking her fork.

“Go ahead.”

He washed the dishes and heard what he thought might be the garbled beginning notes of *Claire de Lune*. When he turned around he had to steady himself on the table. With her perfectly

straight back, fingers poised on the keys, biting her lip in concentration, she looked like a young Jolie. The afternoon light spread a golden haze over the Bösendorfer, highlighting Adalene and making the wood on the piano glow. It was June, and soft wind blew in through the windows smelling of earth and grapes and something like magic.

Suddenly, Henri was struck with the intense conviction that he absolutely could not let the Germans take this piano away. He would have this small victory. He knew what he must do—and though it was outlandish, he marveled at why he hadn't considered it before.

Adalene cocked her head from the piano as she watched *Grandpère* put on his hat and fumble with his shoes. He looked funny. All... excited or something. Which was strange, because she hadn't seen any adults look that way for weeks. Things had been different lately. School was out of session. A few houses sat vacant on every street, their owners having left for long holidays in the south. Her papa was gone, off fighting in the war with all the other kids' papas. Thankfully her *grandpère* was still here, though—he said he was too old to fight, so they let him stay here to look after Adalene and her *maman*. She wasn't sure who "they" were, but she assumed he talked to Charles de Gaulle or someone similar.

Anyway, *Grandpère* had told her all about the Germans. He said they came twenty-some years ago and blew Épernay up. Blew it up, her own town she lived in! She hated them for that, and how they were shooting at her papa, and how *Grandpère's* eyes grew sad when he talked about them. He said they stole almost all the champagne when they came in 1914, and so this time around "we'll be ready when they come."

He and some of the other older men who didn't get drafted built fake walls around big sections of the champagne stores. "So when the Nazis go into the tunnels, they'll think they've



just hit dead ends in some parts.” Adalene hoped he was right. After all, she couldn’t brag to her cousins in Paris that she lived in the Champagne Capital of the world if there was no champagne to back up the title. “Of course, we can’t hide all the champagne,” *Grandpère* said. “Or else the Germans will get suspicious. But we hid what we could get away with.”

*Grandpère* now led Adalene out the door, walking at an unusually fast pace. She hurried alongside him to keep up, scanning the ground for spiders out of habit.

A few days ago, when the Germans were just a week away, the children of the town searched for spiders. They crawled around gardens on knees that sunk into loamy soil, brushing aside fallen leaves and poking between slats in the fence. They’d rise victorious, cupping a spasmodic spider in their hands, and make their way into the champagne cellars, where they’d gently set the spiders loose on newly finished walls holding freshly stoppered champagne. They must have found hundreds of spiders, and they crooned at them, coaxed them to spin fabulously large webs across smooth walls.

When the Nazis stepped foot in the city later that week, they had no idea that underneath their feet were spiders very tired from making very large webs. And that these webs coated new sections of the cellars bursting with booze, making them look old and abandoned for all the cobwebs on the outside.

Adalene didn’t particularly like spiders, but she liked feeling helpful. And she liked the distraction. Even though her and the other children were scared about the Germans coming, they were pleased about the spider webs. Because most of the things their parents whispered about were hard to comprehend, but there was one thing they could do something about— preventing the Germans from stealing the champagne.

And they did. Or at least, thought they did.

As Henri and Adalene were walking, they passed Raphaëlle Chanson and Camille Laduré. They were at Raphaëlle's mailbox, and Raphaëlle was sobbing, clutching a telegram in her hand. She leaned into Camille, staining her friend's nice silk blouse with tears. Camille didn't seem to notice. She had a vacant look on her face, and pet Raphaëlle's hair absentmindedly.

Henri slowed his steps. "Camille? Raphaëlle? What happened?"

Camille's eyes refocused, and as she stared at the two. Adalene thought she looked a lot older from last time she saw her.

"Raphaëlle just got a telegram from Tristan's regiment. He... his plane was shot down. He didn't make it."

"Oh my god. My deepest condolences, Raphaëlle," Henri said, but the new widow didn't seem to hear him. "Is there anything I can do?"

"I think it would be best if it's just the two of us right now, until she can process this better."

"Yes, of course. I'll come by in a few days."

"She'll like that."

As Henri walked away, the spring in his step was gone. Now he lumbered slowly. Adalene looked up at him. She was terribly frightened but didn't really know why.

"Her husband died? In the war?" She asked.

"Yes, Adalene."

"But... but that won't happen to Papa, right?"

Henri felt a deep ache inside of him, but he knelt down in front of Adalene. Even crouched he was taller than she was. He put his hands on her shoulders.

“Of course not, *ma chérie*. He’ll be just fine.”

Adalene nodded, considerably relieved. However, for the rest of the walk Henri felt a deep sense of dread. He couldn’t help but think that he shouldn’t have reassured her like that. He didn’t know if her papa would be okay. He didn’t know anything at all, anymore.

Elaina was rereading the letter from her husband, Jacques, for the seventh time that day when her daughter and father came in. She greeted them with the *bisous*, kissing them on both cheeks.

“I didn’t know you were with *Grandpère*. Remember Adalene, when you’re done playing with friends come back and tell me where you’re going next so I don’t worry.”

“Sorry *Maman*.”

“Now go change out of those dirty clothes. They’re covered in mud,” she turned to Henri. “How are you Papa?”

“I’m all right Elaina. A little shaken up though. I passed Raphaëlle on the way over here—Tristan was killed in combat.”

Elaina gasped. Tears came to her eyes, but with a guilty start she realized they weren’t for Tristan. They were from her own concern for Jacques. Something chaotic and messy and frightened reared up into her chest like a violent wave.

“How?” She whispered.

“His plane was shot down.”

That calmed her a little. Jacques wasn’t a pilot.

“That’s so sad.” And then a few moments later: “I’m worried about Jacques. We should have gotten more letters from him than just one, posted six weeks ago.”

“Maybe they’re just lost in the mail.”

“I don’t know, Papa. I read the papers and—” she wiped at her eyes, looking towards Adalene’s door. Lowering her voice, she continued: “— and they’re getting obliterated. All our men, they’re dying. It’s like the Lost Generation all over again.”

Elaina started sobbing, and Henri folded her in his arms, making soothing sounds. She could be holding it together, relatively fine, but then whenever she spoke to her father it was like she was a blubbering little girl again.

“What if he doesn’t come home, Papa? I don’t think I could handle it. I don’t think I could.” She inhaled shakily, twisting the fabric of his shirt in her fingers.

Henri took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped her tears. “There, there, *ma chérie*. Your mother and I raised you to be strong. And you are strong. You’ll get through whatever comes your way. It might be hard, but you’ll get through it. For Adalene, if nothing else.”

Elaina nodded her head and blew into the handkerchief.

“Okay, Papa.”

“And you’ll have me, too.”

“Yes, of course.” Elaina tried to smile to make Henri feel better, but she couldn’t. The past couple days, she’s had an awful feeling about Jacques. She woke up to a bitter taste on her tongue this morning, a coldness stabbing at her lungs. No amount of peppermint tea soothed her queasy stomach or subdued the feeling that she would hyperventilate at any moment. Getting that letter from him today seemed like an omen. Like she was reading the last words she ever would of his. But she tried to shake the feeling off, dismissing her anxieties as simple worrying and not some sort of marital sixth sense.

To make matters worse, Jacque's letter was obviously meant to placate Adalene, which was sweet but frustrating for Elaina, who could only guess at what he was really going through.

"I know something that might distract you. Maybe help you feel better," Henri said.

"What is it?"

"You can help me with my new project. It's time-sensitive. I'm going to hide the Bösendorfer in the champagne cellars."

"Papa, that's insane. That piano must be a thousand pounds."

Maybe it was, but Henri could already see her tears drying.

"Which is why I need your help to move it correctly! You know it better than I do. You've played on it since you were little, and you were always crawling under it and inspecting it and helping your mother care for it. You can help direct all the movers—"

"Papa—"

"—which is another thing I need. A list of all the strong men in the town. I've jotted down a few names but I'm sure you can think of more."

Elaina sighed. She'd been thinking about the piano lately as well. Not only did it remind her of her mother, but she'd grown up with it. She knew the smooth texture of the keys as well as her own skin. She heard the clarion sound resonating from it in her dreams. But hiding it in the cellars? They'd have to get it out of the house, through a mile of streets, into the Mötet et Chandon house, down the cellar stairs— all without breaking it or killing some helpful mover in the process. And how would they even move the piano in the first place? It certainly couldn't be lifted. She told Henri as much.

"No, but here's the thing, *ma fille*. We wouldn't have to take it all the way to the champagne house. That wouldn't be wise regardless, because that's where the Germans will

enter the tunnels from— it would be hidden too close. And there are stairs. But Moët et Chandon has twenty-eight kilometers of champagne tunnels, and I've been there so long I know all of them. There's an unassuming entry point a half mile from my house, through the town in the other direction. It has a huge door and is equipped to move heavy things. We take the piano there and hide it in one of the old, unused storage pockets. Cover it."

"But how do we get it there?"

"With a dolly I have from when I used to move crates at Moët. We would have four or five men help us."

"I see." Elaina closed her eyes. "Let me think about it. Do you want coffee?"

"Sure."

A little while later, they sat in silence, half-sipped cups on the table. When Elaina thought about the Bösendorfer she felt exhausted in a way that not even espresso could fix. She was too tired to fight this. She missed Jacques, and worried for him. She worried for Épernay, for the whole goddamn country. She didn't want to worry about the piano, too. Her mind drifted to the damp cellars, to the piano left un-tuned for months, but she cast those thoughts from her mind. Better damaged than in the hands of a Nazi, right?

Besides, Adalene shouldn't have to live in a world where beautiful things get taken.

"Okay, Papa. I'll help."

"*Merci*, Elaina." He let out a breath of relief. "*Merci beaucoup*."

"Yes, yes. What time do you want to move it?"

"Eleven o'clock. Before it gets too hot."

Something stirred in Elaina's blood for the first time since before Jacques received the draft notice. Something akin to agency, or excitement, or power. Something like rebellion.

“I’ll go now and round up the men still here who I think will be good movers, and tell them to be at your house tomorrow morning. Later tonight I’ll think of how best to move the Bösendorfer. You make sure the dolly is still sturdy.”

Henri smiled. “You’re just like your mother sometimes.”

She blinked away the wetness threatening to dampen her eyelashes. “I know.”

He kissed her and left, and she stood staring after him for a few minutes. She hadn’t seen him this lively since Jolie died. Just when his grief seemed to lessen a little, Germany started dominating the news and his fear joined the mourning. Not that Elaina hadn’t grieved too, but she had Jacques and Adalene and she needed to be strong for them. Only in moments when she was alone did she allow herself to buckle.

Now the same thing was happening again, but with Jacques’ absence. She was all smiles when Adalene was around, but when alone her thoughts focused incessantly on her husband.

Maybe moving the piano would help her regain some semblance of control. She’d take away a bit of power from the Nazis, and in turn preserve a bit of goodness.

Adalene sat on her *grandpère’s* couch and watched with curiosity as half a dozen people tried to move the piano. She thought adults were supposed to be more functional than this, but here they were, trying and failing and snapping at each other and arguing. It was quite a sight. She wished some of her friends were here, so they could see what was happening and talk about why it was okay for the adults to curse so much.

Eventually, though, they tipped the piano onto the dolly— not a doll, apparently, but thick wooden boards nailed together and propped up by four wheels. The Bösendorfer laid on its side and a little off center. Her mom had yelled at Pierre Rachardais when he tried to adjust it, saying

that the piano key side was much lighter than the heavy cast-iron harp inside the piano on the other side, so in reality its weight was actually centered and could he take his hand off the Bösendorfer *s'il vous plaît*.

Then *Maman* carefully unscrewed the legs, to make them less likely to break and also so that the piano could fit through the door, she said. It was weird to see the piano on its side like that— it made her world feel funky and off balance. All her life Adalene has always seen the Bösendorfer in the same spot. It had never budged so much as a hair's width. Even now she could see the marks the legs had left on the hardwood after decades of sitting in the same place.

*Maman*, *Grandpère*, Pierre, and the other three movers— the burly Bernard twins and the young but strong Paul Laurent— slowly started inching the Bösendorfer forward on the dolly. They had to rotate it several times before finding an angle that fit through the door, an agonizingly slow process that just about bored Adalene to tears. Finally, though, they made it out of the house, rolled the piano-bearing-dolly across the dirt path to the street, and then began the careful journey over the bumpy road. From her perch on the garden fence next to the street, Adalene swore she saw a snail move faster.

A bead of sweat trickled down Elaina's neck as she helped rolled the piano across the town, collecting a group of Champenois desperate for distraction in its wake. The dolly bumped over something she thought was a pebble, but all of a sudden Paul was screaming. He held his foot and hopped around, cursing extensively.

"*Merde*," Elaina said, and eased his shoe off after Pierre helped him to the ground. His big toe was already turning purple and swelling hideously. Alice, a pretty girl who went to school with Paul, came forward and said she would run and get her first aid kit. Elaina always



suspected she was sweet on Paul. A couple older men helped him to a nearby brasserie with shaded tables, and one of them went in for ice.

Elaina looked over to Henri, who looked forlorn. “It’s my fault. He would be fine if I hadn’t asked him to help with this.”

“It’s fine Papa. It’s just his toe, and he agreed to help. Maybe it will keep him from getting drafted when his birthday comes in a couple months.”

Henri relaxed at that. “Yes, that’s right. It’s just...” he lowered his voice. “This whole thing is starting to seem a little crazy.”

“It definitely is, but we’re in it this far. It’s too late to stop now, or when the Nazis come tomorrow they’ll be greeted with a massive piano in the street. It would make for a big fuss.”

Henri nodded gravely, and they continued on, with a volunteer from the crowd to replace Paul. They trudged past the train station with the little manicured park in front of it. Not far from it was the soaring Cathedral that twisted into the sky, carved angels and chimeras looking down at the parade. After ninety minutes of trudging through Épernay and accumulating a couple dozen townspeople, the Bersendörfer arrived at the designated door. Hidden in a patch of tangled greenery in front of a bank was a mossy stone slab containing what appeared to be a wooden trap door. People held the weeds and bushes aside as Henri inserted a key into the rusty lock and opened the door. Cool, earthy air drifted from the cellar. Animated murmurs rippled through the crowd. Even though everyone present had been in the champagne tunnels countless times, they had never entered under quite so exciting circumstances.

“Adalene, the light,” Henri said. He seemed subdued for the first time that day. Adalene gave him the lamp she’d been holding during the move, and it illuminated dusty darkness below. The distance from the ground to the cellar was shorter here than in the rest of the tunnels, as

someone could unfold a rope ladder tucked on the inside of the door and get to the cellar ground in just a few steps. The entrance had been constructed as an opening through which to lift large crates of champagne out of the tunnels, aided by an industrial-strength chain wound around a wheel attached to the cellar ceiling as part of a pulley system. It had been decades since Henri oversaw crate shifting, and he hoped he remembered the mechanisms right.

Himself, Elaina, and some physics-minded neighbors wrapped the piano in a series of ropes that they tied securely to a hook at the end of chain. The Bernard twins went down into the tunnels to operate the sister-wheel bolted to the ground that would feed length to the chain. Henri hoped the weight of the piano wouldn't tear the wheels from their stations. He wasn't sure if they had ever carried something quite so heavy.

The smell of nervous sweat hung in the air as, with tense shoulders and rapidly beating hearts, the Champenois watched the movers slowly guide the piano over the edge before forced to let go and trust the chain. For a breathless half second the piano free-fell before the very short chain caught it about three-quarters up from the ground. The wheel at the ceiling made a sickening groaning sound and the chain shuddered violently. Henri felt his stomach drop, and he heard a couple of nervous shrieks come from behind him. However, the mechanism held and the Bernard twins cranked the wheel and slowly lowered the piano to the cellar floor. When it touched ground, Henri let out a breath he'd been holding for some time. He felt light-headed. Cheers erupted all around, and a great sense of relief slowly built from his toes to his head.

Later that afternoon, Henri smoked a cigarette and took a nap. Today had been tiring on his old bones, but his whole body nevertheless hummed with a satisfied feeling. Saving the piano

didn't make the impending German invasion easier to stomach, but it did soothe a different sort of ache inside of him. Jolie would have been proud.

A kilometer away, Elaina was smoking her own cigarette— a habit she'd taken up in the last few months. The radio was on, and she listened to the crackly voice announce that the Germans had occupied Reims, a nearby town barely thirty minutes away by train. She blew smoke out the window, thinking. Although she was nervous about their arrival, she wasn't as scared as she used to be. Ever since they covered the piano in blankets and pushed it to the corner of a storage room, something had hardened in her belly. *Let them come*, she thought.

That night, there was a party in the area of the tunnels where the piano was stored. Half of Épernay went, bearing cakes and cheese and fruit and other delicacies they weren't sure they'd be able to enjoy in a week's time. Some brought instruments to accompany the pianists who took turns playing throughout the night. Others brought Italian paintings and Chinese vases and French furniture to hide with the piano. From time to time tipsy adults drifted a little way down the tunnel to the stores from the 1936 harvest, coming back with plenty of bubbly for refills. Occasionally a spider skittered across the floor, presumably from an ancient-looking wall down the corridor covered in webs.

Adalene watched all of this with delight as she played with the other children who'd come with their parents— mostly mothers, as their fathers were still away. The evening was a sugary blur of dessert and dancing and laughing, and she was starting to get sleepy. There was a strange feeling in the air. The adults and teenagers laughed louder, danced looser, drank heavier, eyes changing from desperate to merry to scared to defiant. A hint of deep fear marked their expressions, but they still smiled, if desperately. It was like they all knew this was their last

celebration for a long time. Not that Adalene knew exactly what was being celebrated, but she thought it had something to do with the piano and hidden artwork and food and good people.

At one point Adalene sat cross-legged on the cold cellar floor helping her friends build a house out of corks. She liked the tunnels. They were comforting— damp and earthy and always the same temperature, with soft chalk walls that left her fingertips feeling velvety when she smoothed over them. Her mom was at the piano playing one of *grandmère's* favorite songs.

*Grandpère's* large hands held a glass of pink champagne. He watched the dancers with a faraway look in his eyes, smile teasing his lips, foot tapping along to the beat. Adalene felt something bright and warm all around her, gold and fizzy like champagne, rising to meet the music swelling through the tunnels. A beautiful lightness shining steady in a deep swath of darkness.