

Chapter One

The early morning air was still. The birds chirped in the trees above, and the thyme-rosemary scent of the maquis, the rich vegetation that covered the entire island, was strong. The boy heard the clopping of the horse's hooves first. Then, he waited, hidden in the dense underbrush, watching as a lone horseman slowly climbed the serpentine path to the top of the steep terrain. He barely breathed as the horse and rider came closer. Just within his view, the mare stopped, then reared its head and snorted. A massive fallen tree trunk lay across the path. As the man pondered the situation, the boy raised his rifle. Hearing a rustle in the underbrush, the man looked up. Their eyes met. A loud pop echoed across the hills, and birds flew out of the trees. The frightened horse reared its front legs, flinging the man violently from his saddle. The boy waited, his ice-cold black eyes watching from his hiding place. The steed ran away.

After a few minutes, the boy stood and walked over to where the man lay motionless on the ground. Burning with hatred, he saw that the man's head had been dashed against a large boulder. The eyes were open and lifeless. The boy knelt down, listened for breathing, felt for a pulse. Assured that the man was dead, he rose and made his way down the steep hillside to the village below.

Chapter Two

The concrete-and-stone house stood at the edge of the village. Perched on the steep hillside at an altitude of over seven hundred meters above sea level, the medieval village had not grown in decades. In fact, it had diminished in population. At this hour of the morning, the streets were thankfully deserted.

The boy moved quietly. Though he often went out hunting wild boar early in the morning, on this day he didn't want to be discovered by his half brother André. He stowed his rifle in its usual spot in the barn, then opened the heavy door to the house and slipped in as quietly as he could.

"Is that you, Diamanté?" his ever-alert mother called from the kitchen. "Your breakfast is ready."

"I'm not hungry, *Maman*."

He went immediately to his small garret room on the upper floor. Sparsely decorated, it had been his boyhood refuge from the household violence. When his stepfather beat his mother, which happened often, he clamped a pillow tightly over his ears and cried.

He sat down on the lumpy single bed and stared at the half-packed tattered valise next to him. Then, he got up, went over to the small wooden chest, and pulled out the bottom drawer, dumping its contents into the suitcase.

His mother stood in the doorway watching him. Her middle son was a handsome boy, rail thin, dark piercing eyes, a head of curly black hair. She sighed. "*Enfin*, I wish you wouldn't leave." He heard a small sob. "What will I do, without you and Ferdinand?"

"It will be all right now, *Maman*. Don't worry."

He closed the valise and went to her. “It will be all right,” he repeated, looking her directly in the eyes. “*Je t’assure.*”

She hugged him tightly. “Embrace your brother for me.”

He left her standing there, in the hallway outside his bedroom, sobbing.

Maman will be all right now, Diamanté Loupré thought as he flung open the front door and walked away from the house. *The abuse is over.*

Chapter Three

Marseilles, France
The Last Week of August 1939

From the ferry, Diamanté spotted his brother standing on the landing, smiling and slowly waving a cap high in the air above his head. Diamanté had not seen him for several months, and he had missed him. Ferdinand was just two years older than he, and they had been inseparable growing up.

When the boat docked, the Loupré brothers ran to each other and embraced.

“I received your letter,” Ferdinand said with a big smile. “I’m happy to see you.”

“I couldn’t stand it any longer.” Diamanté spat. “After you left, it got worse.”

“André?”

Diamanté nodded and lowered his eyes as he recalled the misery their half brother had inflicted on him after Ferdinand left home. “He’s pure evil. I hate him.”

“What about *Maman*? She must have been angry at you for leaving.”

“She was upset. She cried.” Diamanté hesitated, then shrugged his shoulders. “She’ll be all right, now.”

Ferdinand furrowed his brows and gave his younger brother a strange look.

“She’ll be free to leave.” Diamanté looked down at the ground and kicked a rock.

“Maybe she will return to Speloncato, where she was born.”

Ferdinand scratched his head, pondering what his brother hadn’t said. It was not the Corsican way to ask questions, so he didn’t. He just shrugged, then put his arm around Diamanté’s shoulders. “Come on. I’ll show you where we live.”

The streets of the old port were damp from a recent rain. The smell of fresh fish in the harbor mingled with the heavy aroma of spices, cumin especially, and grilled lamb coming from an Algerian restaurant on the corner. They crossed the main thoroughfare, la Canebière, and followed the small curvy and windy streets that made up the surrounding neighborhood.

“*Le voilà*,” Ferdinand said, pointing to a run-down apartment building. He opened a weather-beaten wooden door. “*En effet*, this is home.”

Ferdinand’s apartment was a one-room flat on the third floor. There was barely enough space for the bed, a table and two chairs, a small cook stove, and a chest of drawers.

“The communal WC is down the hall at the end of the corridor,” he said. “You’ve got to get up early to avoid having to wait in line.”

Diamanté threw his valise on the bed, then sat down beside it.

Ferdinand pointed to the chest. “I cleaned out the lower drawer for you.” He pulled out one of the chairs from the table, turned it around, then straddled his legs over the seat. He rested his forearms on the chair back, clasped his hands, and leaned forward. “Do you have any money?”

“Some. From *Maman*. She gave me a franc occasionally when she could, when *he* wasn’t watching. He would have beat her if he’d known.” Diamanté’s stomach growled, reminding him that he hadn’t had anything to eat all day. “I managed to pay for the ferry and there’s a little left.”

Ferdinand nodded his head in understanding. “I think I’ve got you a job where I work. You’ll have to lie about your age. Tell them you’re eighteen. They’ll believe it if I vouch for you. It’ll be hard labor, but they need workers just now with the war coming. The pay is, well, not too good, but I’m saving a little so I can move to Paris and start a business someday.”

Diamanté looked at his brother with curiosity. “What kind of business?”

Ferdinand's soft brown eyes lit up. "I'm going to buy a boat," he said resolutely.

Diamanté seemed confused. "In Paris?"

"*Mais oui*. A tourist boat. On the Seine."

Diamanté clicked his tongue and smiled.

"And then I'm going to find a girl and marry her."

"And what if the war comes?"

"I'll probably sign up," Ferdinand said with a sigh. "*Vive la France!*" He stood up and rubbed his belly. "You hungry?"

Diamanté nodded enthusiastically.

"*Eh bien, alors*, let's go get something to eat. I know a cheap place on the quay that's good." Ferdinand slapped his brother on the shoulder. "Let's have a beer, too, *mon frère*. We celebrate tonight. We're together again. Just like old times, *hein?*" He patted his shirt pocket. "And, I'm paying."