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The Nightingale

A Novel



The Nightingale



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To Matthew Shear. Friend. Mentor. Champion. You are missed.

And to Kaylee Nova Hannah, the newest star in our world:

Welcome, baby girl.

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ONE

April 9, 1995
The Oregon Coast

If I have learned anything in this long life of mine, it is this: In love we find out who we want to be; in war we find out who we are. Today's young people want to know everything about everyone. They think talking about a problem will solve it. I come from a quieter generation. We understand the value of forgetting, the lure of reinvention.

Lately, though, I find myself thinking about the war and my past, about the people I lost.

Lost.

It makes it sound as if I misplaced my loved ones; perhaps I left them where they don't belong and then turned away, too confused to retrace my steps.

They are not lost. Nor are they in a better place. They are gone. As I approach the end of my years, I know that grief, like regret, settles into our DNA and remains forever a part of us.

I have aged in the months since my husband's death and my diagnosis. My skin has the crinkled appearance of wax paper that someone has tried to flatten and reuse. My eyes fail me often—in the darkness, when headlights flash, when rain falls. It is unnerving, this new unreliability in my vision. Perhaps that's why I find myself looking backward. The past has a clarity I can no longer see in the present.

I want to imagine there will be peace when I am gone, that I will see all of the people I have loved and lost. At least that I will be forgiven.

I know better, though, don't I?

* * *

My house, named The Peaks by the lumber baron who built it more than a hundred years ago, is for sale, and I am preparing to move because my son thinks I should.

He is trying to take care of me, to show how much he loves me in this most difficult of times, and so I put up with his controlling ways. What do I care where I die? That is the point, really. It no longer matters where I live. I am boxing up the Oregon beachside life I settled into nearly fifty years ago. There is not much I want to take with me. But there is one thing.

I reach for the hanging handle that controls the attic steps. The stairs unfold from the ceiling like a gentleman extending his hand.

The flimsy stairs wobble beneath my feet as I climb into the attic, which smells of must and mold. A single, hanging lightbulb swings overhead. I pull the cord.

It is like being in the hold of an old steamship. Wide wooden planks panel the walls; cobwebs turn the creases silver and hang in skeins from the indentations between the planks. The ceiling is so steeply pitched that I can stand upright only in the center of the room.

I see the rocking chair I used when my grandchildren were young, then an old crib and a ratty-looking rocking horse set on rusty springs, and the chair my daughter was refinishing when she got sick. Boxes are tucked along the wall, marked "Xmas," "Thanksgiving," "Easter," "Halloween," "Serveware," "Sports." In those boxes are the things I don't use much anymore but can't bear to part with. For me, admitting that I won't decorate a tree for Christmas is giving up, and I've never been good at letting go.

Tucked in the corner is what I am looking for: an ancient steamer trunk covered in travel stickers.

With effort, I drag the heavy trunk to the center of the attic, directly beneath the hanging light. I kneel beside it, but the pain in my knees is piercing, so I slide onto my backside.

For the first time in thirty years, I lift the trunk's lid. The top tray is full of baby memorabilia. Tiny shoes, ceramic hand molds, crayon drawings populated by stick figures and smiling suns, report cards, dance recital pictures.

I lift the tray from the trunk and set it aside.

The mementos in the bottom of the trunk are in a messy pile: several faded leather-bound journals; a packet of aged postcards tied together with a blue satin ribbon; a cardboard box bent in one corner; a set of slim books of poetry by Julien Rossignol; and a shoebox that holds hundreds of black-and-white photographs.

On top is a yellowed, faded piece of paper.

My hands are shaking as I pick it up. It is a *carte d'identité*, an identity card, from the war. I see the small, passport-sized photo of a young woman. *Juliette Gervaise*.

"Mom?"

I hear my son on the creaking wooden steps, footsteps that match my heartbeats. Has he called out to me before?

"Mom? You shouldn't be up here. Shit. The steps are unsteady." He comes to stand beside me. "One fall and—"

I touch his pant leg, shake my head softly. I can't look up. "Don't" is all I can say.

He kneels, then sits. I can smell his aftershave, something subtle and spicy, and also a hint of smoke. He has sneaked a cigarette outside, a habit he gave up decades ago and took up again at my recent diagnosis. There is no reason to voice my disapproval: He is a doctor. He knows better.

My instinct is to toss the card into the trunk and slam the lid down, hiding it again. It's what I have done all my life.

Now I am dying. Not quickly, perhaps, but not slowly, either, and I feel compelled to look back on my life.

"Mom, you're crying."

"Am I?"

I want to tell him the truth, but I can't. It embarrasses and shames me, this failure. At my age, I should not be afraid of anything—certainly not my own past.

I say only, "I want to take this trunk."

"It's too big. I'll repack the things you want into a smaller box."

I smile at his attempt to control me. "I love you and I am sick again. For these reasons, I have let you push me around, but I am not dead yet. I want this trunk with me."

"What can you possibly need in it? It's just our artwork and other junk."

If I had told him the truth long ago, or had danced and drunk and sung more, maybe he would have seen *me* instead of a dependable, ordinary mother. He loves a version of me that is incomplete. I always thought it was what I wanted: to be loved and admired. Now I think perhaps I'd like to be known.

"Think of this as my last request."

I can see that he wants to tell me not to talk that way, but he's afraid his voice will catch. He clears his throat. "You've beaten it twice before. You'll beat it again."

We both know this isn't true. I am unsteady and weak. I can neither sleep nor eat without the help of medical science. "Of course I will."

"I just want to keep you safe."

I smile. Americans can be so naïve.

Once I shared his optimism. I thought the world was safe. But that was a long time ago.