

PROLOGUE

August 1944

COUSTAUSSA
19 AUGUST 1944

She sees the bodies first. On the outskirts of the village, a pair of man's boots and a woman's bare feet, the toes pointing down to the ground like a dancer. The corpses twist slowly round and around in the fierce August sun. The soles of the woman's feet are black, from dirt or swollen in the heat, it's hard to tell at this distance. Around them, flies cluster and swarm, argue, feed.

The woman known as Sophie swallows hard, but she does not flinch and she does not look away, returning to them a kind of dignity stolen by the manner of their death. She can't risk going closer – it might be a trap, it looks like a trap – but from her hiding place in the undergrowth that marks the junction with the old road to Cassaignes, Sophie can see the victims' arms are tied behind their backs with rough farm rope. The man's hands are balled into fists, as if he died fighting. He has blue canvas trousers – a farmer or a refugee, not a partisan. The skirt of the woman's dress lifts lightly in the breeze, a repeat pattern of lilac cornflowers on a pale yellow background. Sophie shields her eyes and follows the line of the rope, up through the dark green leaves of the old holm oak, to the branch that serves as the gibbet. Both victims are hooded, coarse brown hessian sacking, jerked tight by the noose and the drop.

She does not think she knows them, but she says a prayer all the same, to mark the moment of their passing. For the ritual of it, not out of faith. The myth of Christianity means nothing to her. She has witnessed too much to believe in such a God, such beautiful stories.

Every death remembered.

Sophie takes a deep breath, pushing away the thought that she's too late, that the killing has already started. Crouched, she half runs, half crawls, hidden by the low, long wall that runs along the track down towards the village. She knows there's a gap of fifteen feet, maybe twenty, between the end of the wall and the first outbuildings of the old Andrieu farm. No cover, no shade. If they are waiting, watching from the blackened windows of the house beside the abandoned cemetery, this exposed patch of land is where the bullet will find her.

But there's no sniper, no one. She reaches the last of the *capitelles*, the ancient stone shelters that cluster in the hills to the north of Coustaussa, and slips inside. For some time, they used them to store weapons. Empty now.

From here, Sophie has a clear view of the village below, the magnificent ruins of the castle to the west. She can see that there's blood on the whitewashed wall of the Andrieu house, a starburst of red, like paint splattered from a brush. Two distinct centres, blurred together at the edges, already turning to rust in the fierce afternoon sun. Sophie stiffens, though part of her hopes this means the man and woman were shot first. Hanging is the cruellest death, a slow way to die, degrading, and she's seen this double execution before, once in Quillan, once in Mosset. Punishment and warning, the corpses left to the crows as on a medieval gallows.

Then she notices smudged tracks in the dirt at the base of the wall where bodies were dragged, and tyre marks that head down towards the village, not towards the holm oak, and fears this means two more victims.

At least four dead.

She suspects everyone has been taken to the Place de la Mairie while the soldiers search the farms and houses. Brown shirts or black, their methods are the same. Looking for deserters, for maquisards, for weapons.

For her.

Sophie scans the ground, looking for the glint of metal. If she can identify the casings, she can identify the gun and it might tell her who fired the shots. Gestapo or Milice, even one of her own. But she's too far away and it looks as if the killers have been careful to leave no evidence.

For a moment she allows herself to sit back on her heels in the welcome shade, propped against the *capitelle*. Her heart is turning over, over in her chest, like the engine of an old car reluctant to start. Her arms are a patchwork of scratches and cuts from the gorse and hawthorn of the woods, dry and spiteful sharp after weeks of no rain, and her shirt is torn, revealing suntanned skin and the distinctive scar on her shoulder. The shape of the Cross of Lorraine, Raoul said. She keeps it covered. That mark alone is enough to identify her.

Sophie has cut her hair, taken to wearing slacks but, thin as she is, she still looks like a woman. She glances down at the boots on her feet, men's boots held together with string and stuffed at the heel with newspaper for a less awkward fit, and remembers the cherry-red shoes with the little black heels she wore when she and Raoul danced at Païchérrou. She wonders what's happened to them, if they're still in the wardrobe in the house in the rue du Palais or if someone has taken them. Not that it matters. She has no use for such luxuries now.

She doesn't want to remember, but an image slips into her mind, of her own upturned face on the corner of the rue Mazagran, two years ago, looking up into the eyes of a boy she knew would love her. Then

later that same summer, in her father's study here in Coustaussa, and being told the truth of things.

'And there shall come forth the armies of the air, the spirits of the air.'

Sophie blinks the memories away. She risks another look, peering out from the cover of the *capitelle* down to the cluster of houses and then up to the Camp Grand and the garrigue to the north. Having warned the villagers of the imminent attack, Marianne and Lucie have taken up position to the west, while Suzanne and Liesl will launch the main assault from the ruins of the castle. There's no sign of anyone yet. As for the others promised, she does not know if they will come.

'And the number was ten thousand times ten thousand.'

The beating silence hangs heavy over the waiting land. The air itself seems to vibrate and shimmer and pulse. The heat, the cicadas, the sway of the wild lavender and shock-yellow genet among the thistles, the whispering wind of the Tramontana in the garrigue.

For a moment, Sophie imagines herself back in the safe past. Before she was Sophie. She wraps her arms around her knees, acknowledging how appropriate it is that things should end here, back where it all began. That the girl she was, and the woman she has become, should make their final stand here together, shoulder to shoulder. The story has come full circle.

For it was here, in the narrow streets between the houses and the church and the ruins of the castle, she played *trapette* with the children of the Spanish refugees. It was here, in a green dusk heady with the scent of thyme and purple rosemary, she first kissed a boy. One of the Rousset brothers, fidgety in case his gran'mère should look out the window and catch him. An awkward meeting of teeth is what Sophie remembers. That, and the sense of doing something dark and illicit and adult. She closes her eyes. Yves Rousset, or was it Pierre? She supposes it doesn't matter now. But it is Raoul's face she sees in her mind's eye, not the blunt features of a boy long dead.

Everything is so still, so quiet. Today, the swifts do not swoop and mass and spiral in the endless blue sky. The linnets do not sing. They know what is to come, they sense it too, in the same way, this past week, each of the women has felt the tension in the tips of her fingers, crawling over the surface of her skin.

Eloise was the first to be caught, five days ago, at the Hôtel Moderne et Pigeon in Limoux. Four days later, Geneviève was arrested in Couiza. The details of the *boite aux lettres*, the fact that Sous-chef Schiffner was there himself, in person, left Sophie in no doubt the network had been betrayed. From that moment, she knew it was only a matter of hours, days at most. The spider's web of connections that led south from Carcassonne to these hills, this river valley of the Salz, these ruins.

She tries not to think about her friends incarcerated in the Caserne Laperrine on the boulevard Barbès, or within the grey walls of the Gestapo headquarters on the route de Toulouse, fearing what they will suffer. She knows how long the nights can be in those dark, confined cells, dreading the pale light of dawn, the rattle of the key in the opening door. She's drowned in choking, black water, submitted to the violent touch of hands on her throat, between her thighs. She's heard the seductive whisper of surrender and knows how hard it is to resist.

Sophie rests her head on her arms. She's so tired, so sick of it. And though she fears what is to come, more than anything now she wants it to be over.

'Come forth the armies of the air.'

A burst of machine-gun fire from the hills, and the answering staccato chatter of an automatic weapon closer to hand. Sophie's thoughts shatter, like fragments of bright glass. Already she's up on her feet, pulling her Walther P38 from her belt, greasy with goose fat to stop the springs jamming. The weight of it in her hand is reassuring, familiar.

Breaking cover, she runs, low and fast, until she's reached the edge of the Sauzède property. Once there were chickens and geese, but the animals are long gone and the door to the enclosure hangs open on a broken hinge.

Sophie vaults the low wall, landing on the remains of straw and uneven earth, then on to the next garden, zigzagging from one square of land to the next. She enters the village from the east, slipping through the unkempt cemetery, its gravestones like rotten teeth loose in the dry land. Crossing the rue de la Condamine, she darts into the tiny alleyway that runs narrow and steep and sheer along the side of the round tower and down, until she has a clear view of the Place de la Mairie.

As she'd suspected, the whole village has been brought there, beneath the burning sun. There is a Feldgendarmerie truck at right angles across the rue de la Mairie and a black Citroën Traction Avant, a Gestapo car, blocking the rue de l'Empereur, penning the villagers in. Women and children are lined up on the west side by the war memorial, the old men to the south of the small square. Sophie allows herself a grim smile. The configuration suggests they expect the attack to come from the hills, which is good. Then she sees a ribbon of red blood and the body of a young man lying on his back on the dusty ground, and her expression hardens. His right hand twitches and jerks, like a marionette on a frayed string, then falls back to his side.

Five dead.

Sophie can't see who's in charge – the line of grey jackets and black boots, the field greens of the ordinary soldiers, blocks her view – but she hears the order, given in French, that nobody else should move.

Equipment is scarce, but these men are well armed, unusually so. Grenades at the waist, bandoliers slung over shoulders, glinting in the sun like chain mail, some with M40 sub-machine guns, the majority with Kar-98 semi-automatic rifles.

The hostages are caught between courage and common sense. They want to resist, to act, to do something, anything. But they've been told not to jeopardise the mission, and besides, they're paralysed by the reality of the murdered boy on the ground in front of them. Someone – his mother, his sister – is sobbing.

'C'est fini?'

Sophie can't breathe. She is seeing everything, hearing everything, but can no longer take it in.

That voice.

The one person she'd hoped never to see again. The one voice she'd prayed never to hear again.

But you knew he would come. It's what you wanted.

The rattle of a machine gun fired from the ruins of the castle snaps Sophie back to the present. Taken by surprise, one of the soldiers jerks round and returns random fire. He's no more than a boy either. A woman screams and pulls her children to her, trying to shield them. Jacques Cassou, a Pétainist, though a good man at heart, breaks away from the group. Sophie can see what's going to happen, but she's powerless to stop it. She wills him to wait just a moment more, not to draw attention to himself, but panic has taken hold. He tries to run to the safety of the rue de la Condamine, forcing his tired, swollen legs to carry him away from the horror, but he's an easy target. Sophie can only watch as the Schmeissers tear into the old man, the force of the assault spinning him round. His daughter Ernestine, a lumpen, bitter woman, runs forward and tries to catch him. But she is too slow, he is too heavy. Jacques staggers, drops to his knees. The soldiers keep firing. This second hail of bullets brings them both down.

Six dead. Seven.

The world breaks apart. The signal has not been given, but, hearing the guns, Marianne and Lucie launch the first of the smoke-signal canisters from the Camp Grand. It soars over the houses and lands at the edge of the square by the truck, disgorging a stream of green smoke. Another canister pops, then another and another, releasing plumes of blue and pink and orange and yellow into the stifling air. The soldiers are disorientated, cross-firing into one another's positions. They, too, are on edge, Sophie realises. Whatever they've been told about this operation, they know something doesn't add up. It is no ordinary raid.

'Halten Sie! Halten!'

The Kommandant shouts the order to hold fire, then repeats it again

in French. Discipline is restored immediately, but the hiatus is long enough for the hostages to scatter, as Marianne had told them to do, heading for refuge in the church, in the shaded undergrowth below the chemin de la Fontaine, the cellars of the presbytery.

Sophie does not move.

Now that the square is clear of civilians, Suzanne and Liesl launch the main assault from the ruins of the castle and the deep undergrowth that lines the rue de la Mairie. Bullets rake the ground. A grenade explodes instantly on impact with the war memorial.

Another order from the Kommandant, and the Gestapo unit divides into two. Some target the contingent in the hills, firing indiscriminately as they storm along the rue de la Condamine and out into the garrigue. The remainder turn towards the castle. Through the coloured smoke and the dust, Sophie glimpses the blue berets of the French Milice vanishing into the rue de la Peur and realises, with a sickened heart, that they do not mean to leave any witnesses alive.

She knows that she is outnumbered, at least seven to one, but she has no choice now but to show herself. Besides, she can see him, in plain clothes, standing with his right hand resting on the black bonnet of the car and his Mauser hanging loose in his left. He looks calm, disengaged, as the firefight rages around him.

Sophie drops the hammer on her pistol and steps out into the light. 'Let them go.'

Does she say the words out loud or only in her head? Her voice seems to be coming from a long way away, distorted, a whispering beneath stormy waters.

'It's me you want, not them. Let them go.'

It's not possible that he should hear her, and yet, despite the noise and the shouting and the ack-ack of the machine guns, he does. He hears her and he turns, looking straight to the north-east corner of the Place de la Mairie where she has positioned herself. Those eyes. Is he smiling, she wonders, or does it pain him that it should be ending like this? She can't tell.

Then he says her name. Her real name. The soft music of it hangs suspended in the air between them. Threat or entreaty, she doesn't know, but she feels her resolve weaken.

He says it again and, this time, it sounds bitter, false in his mouth. A betrayal. The spell is broken.

The woman known as Sophie lifts her arm. And shoots.