

*The*  
WINTER  
ROSE

*a  
novel*

MELANIE  
DOBSON

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*The Winter Rose*

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## PLEA FROM GURS, FRANCE

*We, far from our native forest  
Lost in a foreign land  
Are tender young trees that a woodman  
Uprooted with violent hand.  
Surely there must be another;  
Somewhere on this earth  
To plant in a friendlier climate  
Our roots as they seek a new birth.*

*Alive are the delicate fibers  
In every tender shoot;  
Which need but the hand of a gardener  
To help them take new root.  
Richly would we reward him  
His toil and ardent care.  
Resplendent foliage render—  
In return for his being there.*

*In the spreading shade of our branches  
Would all mankind rejoice;  
And from our limbs heavy-laden  
Pluck fruits of the finest choice.  
Where are you, gentle gardener?  
From the north blows a wind of hate,  
Take us into your keeping  
Before it is too late.*

WRITTEN BY REFUGEE CHILDREN  
INTERNED DURING WORLD WAR II



# Chapter One

**SAINT-LIZIER, FRANCE**  
**SEPTEMBER 1943**

Sunlight broke through the mist like a spotlight in Hollywood, the crimson globe guiding Grace Tonquin and the twelve children in her care. It was only minutes now before they'd be tucked away in the cathedral of Saint-Lizier, hidden from the light.

*Red sky in the morning—*

Grace tried to shake off the sailor's warning as she led the children beside a moss-cloaked wall, the jagged stones along this passage blocking out the embers of dawn. The cobbles were slippery under her oxfords, her toes blistered, but she couldn't stop now. Americans had been recalled home, but she couldn't leave until all the Jewish children had been hidden or evacuated from France.

Élias, the oldest boy, carried a younger child named Louis in one arm even as he lifted his sister, Marguerite, over a puddle, the

smell of rain drifting across their shadowed path with the autumn leaves.

Grace had spent her childhood summers hiding from lights and the crowds that oohed and aahed as if she were a celebrity. But the crowds never really saw her. The daughter of Ruby Tonquin, that's who they saw, not a timid child who wanted to lock herself into a closet at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel. A strange girl who preferred exploring the beaches along Santa Monica rather than perusing the shops. The only person in California, it seemed, who didn't worship Ruby.

Marguerite turned around, and her eyes swelled like the sun. Grace leaned down, pressing her finger against her lips. The quiet, she'd explained to all the children, was their ally until they reached the cathedral. Silence, their shield.

The oldest girl in their group was fifteen, and she turned a corner ahead of them. All the children followed Suzel like ducklings in their drab winter coats, small knapsacks weighing down their hands, the padding of *espadrilles*—woven shoes—against stone. It was much too warm for the heavy coats, but they would need them soon when snow fell in the nearby mountains.

*"Muet comme une carpe,"* Grace whispered.

As mute as a carp.

Two of the kids bumped into each other, giggling in spite of her mandate in both French and English for silence. They didn't understand, couldn't possibly understand, what was at stake.

She couldn't even comprehend it all, but she'd heard rumors of what was happening outside Vichy France. That violence was bleeding over into the few zones still considered free for Jewish children. She had to get these children out of France, to a safe place, before the Nazis found them.

She'd also heard rumors of the Allies gaining ground in the war against Germany, heard reports from Charles de Gaulle, a French

general who had secured himself up in London, but all she saw on the ground were the French police and Nazi officers who seemed to hate anyone Jewish, no matter what age. When the war was finally over, she prayed the children would be safe, but until then, she and her coworkers who remained in France continued to help.

Ahead was the cathedral, its medieval bell tower crowning the sky, the stone walls a fortress. A place of great comfort, she thought. A sanctuary like the farmhouse where she and the children had stayed last, sleeping most of the day before resuming their night travels. These children had been walking for two nights now, relocating from the orphanage in a village called Aspet. The weariness had crept into their bones, sores pocking their feet, but they couldn't stop. Soon, Roland Mercier had said, they would hide together in a château until he secured passage for these kids over the Pyrénées mountains, into Spain and then Portugal.

The stillness of these morning hours was a blessing, but it was almost too quiet, she thought. No bark of a dog or rattle of the dairyman's wagon. Even the breeze that rustled up the alley felt like a desert wind, as if they were the only ones who dared enter this river town.

She shook her head, trying to shake off her premonition. The cathedral was the only safe place in this village to hide her wards. A few more steps, then they would hide until night fell.

A paper fluttered down the narrow street, dancing across the cobblestones until it landed at her feet. *Avis Aux Israelites*, it read. Another notice to the "undesirables," as they were called, asking them to present themselves to the authorities.

How she hated these notices. The constant reminder that the government—a body of men who'd sworn to protect—was after her children.

She kicked the paper toward the gutter. They had to find refuge for these kids in Spain before the French police or the winter storms found them.

Marguerite reached for her hand, and Grace paused, bending down again to look into her eyes. “What is it?”

“I have to use the toilet,” Marguerite whispered.

“We’re almost there.” Less than a block now.

“I can’t wait.” The threat of tears, the enemy from within, capped the urgency in Marguerite’s voice. Clothing was something they could clean, but on these quiet streets, tears from a nine-year-old could be the death of them.

A prayer, as natural as the breath on her lips, slipped out, and she listened for any sound. All was quiet except the sway of branches in the breeze.

She must stop for Marguerite. To protect every child in her care.

Élias handed the boy to Suzel and moved back toward his sister, both hands secured casually in his pocket. A tourist, it seemed, on a stroll through this ancient town. His tan overcoat, the relaxed posture, all of it was inspired by his favorite cartoon character, the Belgian reporter and adventurer named Tintin. While he might have seemed indifferent, Élias’s brown eyes were as fierce as a lion’s. He was ready to pounce if necessary, protect those he loved.

At thirteen, Élias could be hotheaded, but he was always reliable. She could trust him to help Suzel escort the other kids into the cathedral.

“Snowy,” he whispered to his sister, the nickname he’d swiped from Tintin. “Are you hurt?”

“She needs the toilet,” Grace said.

“Blistering barnacles.” Élias, it seemed, had memorized everything from the comic including the many gibes of Captain Haddock, Tintin’s best friend.

“Get the others to the church while I help her.”

Élias hesitated, his face turning toward the convent. “I will keep watch for you.”



“No,” Grace said, urging him forward so he and the others would be safe. “Tell the sisters we will be there soon.”

Élias kissed Marguerite’s cheek before stepping back in place as the rear guard. A home—that’s what she wanted for all these children. But not today. Right now, they needed only the basics—food, water, and a few hours of sleep.

Sunlight sparked across the sky, the fiery red fading away.

“We must hurry,” she whispered to Marguerite as they ducked under an archway, rushing back to a courtyard behind a row of shops, a place away from the wind. Grace wanted to plug her nose at the stench from those who’d already used the grass as a latrine, but she clutched her rucksack to the side instead as she helped Marguerite remove her heavy coat, counting as the girl relieved herself in a corner.

Each second marked another step as her wards shuffled away. Another breath of life as they swam along, quiet as fish.

Marguerite, like all the others, had much practice in caring for herself. More than a year ago she’d fled with her mother and brother from their home near Paris, ultimately relocating to an internment camp called Gurs, located west of here. Grace only knew a bit of her and Élias’s story, but it was enough to know they could persevere. Resiliency, that’s what this war, the animosity around them, had given these children. Each one had endured more than any adult Grace had known in America. They’d already seen much in their escape from the Nazis, and now they were running again.

When would they finally be free from the fear that someone might steal them away? She prayed the running would end when the children crossed over the jagged mountains that fortified Southern France, into the somewhat-neutral country of Spain. Once she met up with Roland, her coworker who would lead them partway up the mountains, she’d return to Camp de Gurs to help any other kids who needed to leave France.

More light flickered across the sky, making it impossible for their convoy to hide. Daylight was as dangerous as the noise.

“Come along.” Grace’s finger shook as she pointed toward the exit. They had to rush into the cathedral before the sisters locked the gate.

Marguerite pulled up her tights, slipped her arms into her coat, not bothering to button it before she retrieved her knapsack. They hurried back through the narrow corridor, but before they stepped into the street, Marguerite threw her hand in front of Grace, stopping her.

“*La cigarette,*” she whispered.

Another gust of wind, and Grace smelled the acrid smoke. Only a whiff, but it burned her nose, her throat. Cigarettes meant someone other than the nuns was near.

They must reach the cathedral before the town awakened. Before whoever was smoking the cigarette knew an American Quaker woman and a French Jewish girl had stumbled into their world.

She must move now for the sake of Marguerite and all the children.

“One,” Grace whispered, the count of English numbers familiar to her ward. “Two.”

But three seconds didn’t seem nearly long enough. Not when they didn’t know who was outside.

Her heels planted in the cobblestones, her legs paralyzed in full rebellion as the numbers extended in her head. Six, seven, then eight, piling up like the beans she’d used to teach the children arithmetic.

When she finally tugged on Marguerite’s hand, a pair of strong arms wrapped themselves around her waist, pulling her back from the street.

She swallowed her screams lest they shatter the silence, struggling instead against the hold.

“Grace—” The man’s voice was low, strong, like the breaking of this new day.

It took a moment before she realized he knew her name.

Marguerite recognized him first, releasing Grace's hand to cling to his trouser leg, and her fear began to subside, the struggle draining away, the man still holding her waist. His face was obscured by the shadows, but when he said her name again, she knew Roland had found them.

"You are safe now." He relaxed his hold to pick up Marguerite. "But you have to leave Saint-Lizier."

"We've just arrived—"

"*Vite*," he said. "There's no time to spare."

She moved toward the street. "I have to round up the children."

"Oh, Colibri . . ."

Hummingbird. A name he'd chosen when they first started working together in the labor camps. For all of her fluttering, she supposed.

Why was he holding her back now when they should run?

An automobile rumbled over the cobblestones, then she saw two men with royal-blue uniforms and shiny black boots march into the street, their brass buttons glimmering in the morning light.

"We're too late," Roland said.

Each policeman held a gun as if her children might fight back, and she stepped into the street, crisp leaves stirring over her shoes. A war was being fought across Europe—why must the police focus on hunting down the country's children? They hadn't committed a crime. Not like the Nazis who'd taken over Northern France.

She'd talk to the French officers like she'd done a few months ago on the train, tell them that these children were under the protection of the Vichy government. They couldn't take her children away.

"Grace." Roland jerked her into the alley. "You can't help them right now."

"I will speak to the police!"

"And they will shoot you. What would that do to the children?"

"They won't—"

“They will,” he insisted. “You and Marguerite must run the opposite direction. Follow the river south.”

But she wouldn’t cower. She would fight with her words instead of guns, no matter how terrified she was.

Grace shook off his arm, the wind whipping hair into her face, ready to face the police, but then she heard another rumble, this one like thunder. A canvas-covered truck pulled in front of the children, a half-dozen soldiers piling out, red armbands stretched around their brown uniform sleeves.

When had the Nazis arrived in Saint-Lizier?

“Dear God—” The plea fell from her lips, begging for mercy for them all.

The men began pushing her children into the truck, silence replaced with sobbing, and she wanted to scream. Stop all this madness with rational words.

She turned to Roland. “I can’t just stand here.”

“If you leave in that truck—” he nodded at Marguerite—“the Nazis will surely find her.”

Grace sank against the wall of cold stones. “Take her to a safe place. Please . . .”

Back in Aspet, Roland had mapped this route through the hills for her and the children since they could no longer travel by train. He could find someone to care for Marguerite until Grace returned.

“I must go.” He rattled off directions to a church outside town where they could hide. “Wait for me there.”

“I can’t do this.”

He tilted her chin up in the cup of his hand. “You must fly, Grace. For one more day.”

One more day. That was the mantra she’d lived by for months now. She could endure, with God’s help, for twenty-four hours, no matter how each minute broke her heart.

“God be with you,” he said, kissing her cheek.

Then he was gone. Off to help someone else in these morning hours.

Marguerite buried her head in the folds of Grace's wool skirt so she didn't have to watch her brother being taken away. How could she leave this girl behind to rescue the others?

Almost everything in France felt impossible.

The soldiers took the tallest child first—Suzel—forcing her into the truck. Grace wanted to bury her head as well, the scene too much to bear, but looking away, ignoring their pain—she must watch, even in their pain, *especially* in their pain, lest she abandon them again.

She couldn't see their faces from this place, only a shadow of their forms, but she prayed for each child as they were pushed inside.

"Protect them," she whispered. "Help them know Your love."

Grace brushed back Marguerite's hair, the girl's tears soaking her coat. "I'm sorry."

Marguerite glanced up before burying her head again. "The colors hurt my eyes."

Grace saw no color now except the daffodil petals of dawn, defying the sorrow in her heart. If only she could paint the sky black again, wash the light away. Instead she watched these men from the shadows round up her children. And she could do nothing to stop them.

One of the sisters was taken from the cathedral. And then the remaining children were loaded into the truck. Ten she counted before a German closed the gate. Not eleven.

Had she miscounted?

She scanned the plaza but didn't see anyone else.

As the trucks rolled away, Grace closed her eyes, leaning her head against the stone wall. The children she was supposed to care for, fight for, were gone. She'd failed those entrusted to her.

Marguerite strung the rucksack straps over her shoulders, ready to move.

## THE WINTER ROSE

She had one girl left beside her. One who needed a place to hide. She wouldn't fail this time.

Grace checked the area again, searching for the eleventh child, but the stony passage and plaza had been scared into silence.

As she and Marguerite rushed out of Saint-Lizier, toward the covering of pine hills in the distance, the question haunted her.

How would she ever be able to free these children now?

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