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Stolen Skies

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Introduction

Europe, 1943. Hope is a brittle thing—fragile as glass, too easily shattered beneath the iron boot of occupation. Cities smolder, families vanish into the night, and every hour new rumors churn through the black market alleys: of lost armies, of secret weapons, of impossible dreams. On the battered streets of Lyon, survival is the only currency left, and even that is running thin.

Lucien Marchand, once the ace of the French skies, is now grounded—his reputation in tatters, his country in chains. He scrapes by on wits and charm, thieving from collaborators, double-dealing to keep bread on the table and old ghosts at bay. The war, for Lucien, is fought in stolen moments, not dogfights—a war without glory, full of regret. But fate, indifferent to the weary, has other plans.

When a covert Allied cell corners him in a shadowy cellar, Lucien is given a choice: a prison cell, or a suicidal theft. The target is a German prototype—an aircraft so advanced it could turn the tide. The mission is madness; the reward, a chance at redemption. And so, with every bridge behind him burning, Lucien is forced back into a cockpit—not for country, not for vengeance, but simply to survive.

His handler is Anya Vogel, a brilliant and enigmatic cryptanalyst desperate to free her family from the Nazi stranglehold. She trusts few and likes fewer, but war forges strange alliances. Together, they assemble a ragtag team: forgers, saboteurs, exiles—all clutching secrets as tightly as their forged papers. Loyalties fracture under the weight of necessity, and each city, each checkpoint, becomes a crucible of risk.

Across occupied France, through shattered Poland, to the heart of the Reich itself, their odyssey will test the limits of courage and conscience. The dangers are as much from within as without: betrayal, moral compromise, and the haunting shadow of a cause that may demand everything they have left. The prototype they pursue is more than metal and fuel—it is a symbol of hope, and of the perilous cost demanded by hope in a world at war.

Stolen Skies is their story: a journey through darkness towards a horizon stained by fire, where redemption is measured in stolen minutes and daring choices. This is a time when nothing is certain but the reach of the enemy—and the sky, increasingly, belongs to those bold enough to steal it.

CHAPTER ONE: Wings Clipped

The scent of stale wine and desperation clung to Lucien Marchand like a second skin, a perfume acquired through long nights in the back alleys of Lyon. He moved with the easy grace of a predator, though these days his prey consisted mostly of bored German officers and greedy French collaborators. Tonight's target: a briefcase, rumored to contain illicit ration books and a particularly potent brand of schnapps, tucked beneath the table of a portly supply sergeant named Klaus.

Lucien leaned against a crumbling stone wall, the collar of his threadbare coat pulled high against the sharp autumn wind. The Café des Artisans, usually a vibrant hub of bohemians and gossips, was now a hushed, furtive place, its windows taped against the blast of unseen bombs. Inside, muted laughter and the clink of glasses were punctuated by the guttural cadence of German commands. Lucien watched Klaus through the grimy window, a man so oblivious to his surroundings he practically radiated an invitation to be robbed. Easy pickings.

A flicker of movement caught his eye—a shadow detaching itself from the deeper gloom across the street. Not a German patrol, the gait was too fluid, too deliberate. Lucien's instincts, honed by years of flying and a more recent education in street-level survival, screamed caution. He adjusted his stance, subtly positioning himself for a quick escape, his hand brushing the worn leather of the small, concealed knife in his inner pocket. He preferred charm and misdirection, but some evenings, a little persuasion was necessary.

The shadow resolved itself into two figures: one tall and broad, moving with the disciplined stride of a soldier, the other smaller, cloaked, and oddly still. They weren't looking at Klaus. They were looking at *him*. Lucien felt a prickle of unease that had nothing to do with the chill. He'd made enemies, certainly, but these felt... different. Too quiet. Too purposeful.

He decided against the direct approach to Klaus's table. Instead, Lucien slipped into the café through a service entrance, navigating the cramped kitchen with the familiarity of a ghost. The air was thick with the smell of simmering stew and fear. A scullery maid, her face pale and drawn, jumped as he passed, dropping a stack of plates with a clatter that drew a sharp reprimand from the cook. Lucien offered a brief, apologetic smile that faded as he rounded the corner into the main dining area.

Klaus was still there, oblivious. His briefcase, a rather worn leather affair, rested precisely where Lucien had anticipated. The tall figure from outside, now visible, stood by the entrance, his eyes scanning the room with an unnerving intensity that

bypassed the German officers and settled, almost imperceptibly, on Lucien. The smaller, cloaked figure had disappeared.

Lucien cursed under his breath. He was being watched. Not by the Germans, but by something else entirely. He knew a trap when he saw one, and this had the hallmarks of a master craftsman. He considered abandoning the theft, but the rumbling in his stomach and the threadbare state of his boots argued against it. He needed the ration books, or the cash they'd bring.

He moved towards Klaus, affecting an air of drunken bonhomie, swaying slightly as he navigated between tables. "*Verdammt*," he mumbled loudly in German, slurring his words. "Another bottle, I beg you!" He stumbled, his hand outstretched, seemingly to steady himself on the back of Klaus's chair. His fingers, however, found the briefcase handle. A practiced tug, barely perceptible, and the case was free.

Klaus grumbled, oblivious, taking a large swallow of beer. Lucien muttered another apology, already turning, the briefcase now clutched against his side, hidden by the folds of his coat. He made for the main door, hoping to melt into the anonymity of the darkened streets.

But the tall man was waiting. He stepped forward, blocking Lucien's path. Not overtly hostile, merely... present. "Monsieur Marchand?" he asked, his French surprisingly good, devoid of a German accent.

Lucien's heart gave a jolt. They knew his name. "I believe you have the wrong man," he said, his voice flat, betraying none of the sudden spike of adrenaline. "I am merely a humble... wine connoisseur."

The man smiled, a humorless stretch of lips. "Oh, I assure you, Monsieur Marchand, we have precisely the right man." He gestured subtly with his chin towards a shadowed corner of the café. "My associate would like a word."

Lucien glanced over. The smaller, cloaked figure was now seated at a secluded table, half-hidden by a heavy velvet curtain. A woman. Her face was obscured by shadow, but he could feel the weight of her gaze, cold and direct. He weighed his options: flee, fight, or listen. Fleeing through a café full of German officers with a stolen briefcase was a fool's errand. Fighting the tall, imposing figure was equally unappealing.

"Very well," Lucien said, a sigh escaping him. He hated being cornered. He walked towards the woman's table, the briefcase still clutched tight. As he approached, she lifted her head, and the dim light from a nearby lamp caught her features. She was younger than he expected, with sharp, intelligent eyes that missed nothing. Her expression was unreadable, a cool mask of competence.

"Monsieur Marchand," she said, her voice quiet but firm, with a subtle Eastern European lilt he couldn't quite place. "My name is Anya Vogel."

Lucien felt a jolt. This wasn't some petty shakedown. This was serious. He'd heard rumors of Allied agents, whispered tales of a shadowy resistance network operating even in Lyon. But he'd never imagined they'd come for *him*. His reputation as a pilot might be in tatters, but it seemed some people still remembered.

"Ms. Vogel," he replied, a sardonic edge to his voice. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this... clandestine meeting?" He slid into the chair opposite her, placing the stolen briefcase on the floor beside him, a small act of defiance.

Anya Vogel's eyes flickered to the briefcase, then back to his face. A faint, almost imperceptible twitch at the corner of her lips suggested amusement. "We understand you have a certain... talent for acquisition, Monsieur Marchand. And for discretion."

"I manage," Lucien said, shrugging. "It keeps me in cigarettes."

"And out of prison, apparently," she countered, her gaze unwavering. "A feat that will become significantly more challenging for you, I'm afraid."

Lucien stiffened. "Are you threatening me, Ms. Vogel?"

"Consider it a statement of fact," she replied calmly. "The gentleman who just greeted you at the door, for example, is British Intelligence. He has a rather detailed dossier on your... activities. Everything from your charming little scams with forged papers to that rather impressive jewel heist in Marseilles last spring. Not to mention your rather public history with the *Armée de l'Air*."

Lucien's jaw tightened. They knew everything. His past, a carefully buried weight, felt suddenly exposed. "What do you want?" he asked, cutting to the chase. The games were over.

Anya leaned forward slightly, her voice dropping to a near whisper. "We need a pilot, Monsieur Marchand. A pilot with a very specific set of skills. And a complete disregard for rules, regulations, and self-preservation."

"There are plenty of pilots," Lucien scoffed, though a part of him felt a flicker of something long dormant. The sky. He hadn't thought about it like that in years.

"None like you," Anya said, her eyes boring into him. "We know about your record, Lucien. Not just the official one. The unofficial one. The stunts, the impossible maneuvers, the way you could make a plane sing. Even after... after everything, that

raw talent hasn't vanished." Her words landed with the precision of a scalpel, peeling back layers he thought he'd sealed away. The mention of "everything" hung in the air, a silent acknowledgment of the court-martial, the disgrace, the reasons he now haunted back alleys instead of cloud-dappled skies.

"What about 'everything'?" Lucien asked, his voice low. "My flight wings were clipped a long time ago, Ms. Vogel."

"We're offering you a chance to earn them back," she said, a faint glimmer in her cool eyes. "Or, more accurately, to earn your freedom. Our friend from British Intelligence is quite keen on seeing you behind bars, or worse. The Gestapo, for their part, would be even less forgiving if they knew of your... entrepreneurial spirit. But we can make that disappear. All of it."

Lucien studied her, a wary fascination blooming within him. Blackmail. Of course. It was always blackmail with these people. "And what would I have to do for this... freedom?"

Anya picked up a sugar cube from the table, turning it idly between her fingers. "There's a German prototype. An aircraft. It's highly classified, incredibly advanced. We need you to steal it."

Lucien stared at her. His first instinct was to laugh. Steal a German prototype? From under the Reich's nose? It was lunacy. "You're mad," he said, shaking his head. "Do you know what you're asking? That's not a simple acquisition, Ms. Vogel. That's a suicide mission."

"Perhaps," she conceded, her gaze steady. "But it could change the course of this war. And you, Monsieur Marchand, are uniquely qualified for suicide missions." She paused, then added, almost as an afterthought, "We're calling it Project Nightingale."

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