The Nightingale

Also by Kristin Hannah

Fly Away

Home Front

Night Road

Winter Garden

True Colors

Firefly Lane

Magic Hour

Comfort & Joy

The Things We Do for Love

Between Sisters

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Angel Falls

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Waiting for the Moon

When Lightning Strikes

If You Believe

Once in Every Life

The Enchantment

A Handful of Heaven

The Nightingale

Kristin Hannah

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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.

The Nightingale

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.

"Who is Juliette Gervaise?" Julien says and it shocks me a little to hear that name from him.

I close my eyes and in the darkness that smells of mildew and bygone lives, my mind casts back, a line thrown across years and continents. Against my will—or maybe in tandem with it, who knows anymore?—I remember.

TWO

The lights are going out all over Europe;
We shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.
—Sir Edward Grey, on World War I

August 1939
France

Vianne Mauriac left the cool, stucco-walled kitchen and stepped out into her front yard. On this beautiful summer morning in the Loire Valley, everything was in bloom. White sheets flapped in the breeze and roses tumbled like laughter along the ancient stone wall that hid her property from the road. A pair of industrious bees buzzed among the blooms; from far away, she heard the chugging purr of a train and then the sweet sound of a little girl's laughter.

Sophie.

Vianne smiled. Her eight-year-old daughter was probably running through the house, making her father dance attendance on her as they readied for their Saturday picnic.

"Your daughter is a tyrant," Antoine said, appearing in the doorway.

He walked toward her, his pomaded hair glinting black in the sunlight. He'd been working on his furniture this morning—sanding a chair that was already as soft as satin—and a fine layer of wood dust peppered his

face and shoulders. He was a big man, tall and broad shouldered, with a rough face and a dark stubble that took constant effort to keep from becoming a beard.

He slipped an arm around her and pulled her close. "I love you, V."

"I love you, too."

It was the truest fact of her world. She loved everything about this man, his smile, the way he mumbled in his sleep and laughed after a sneeze and sang opera in the shower.

She'd fallen in love with him fifteen years ago, on the school play yard, before she'd even known what love was. He was her first everything—first kiss, first love, first lover. Before him, she'd been a skinny, awkward, anxious girl given to stuttering when she got scared, which was often.

A motherless girl.

You will be the adult now, her father had said to Vianne as they walked up to this very house for the first time. She'd been fourteen years old, her eyes swollen from crying, her grief unbearable. In an instant, this house had gone from being the family's summer house to a prison of sorts. Maman had been dead less than two weeks when Papa gave up on being a father. Upon their arrival here, he'd not held her hand or rested a hand on her shoulder or even offered her a handkerchief to dry her tears.

B-but I'm just a girl, she'd said.

Not anymore.

She'd looked down at her younger sister, Isabelle, who still sucked her thumb at four and had no idea what was going on. Isabelle kept asking when Maman was coming home.

When the door opened, a tall, thin woman with a nose like a water spigot and eyes as small and dark as raisins appeared.

These are the girls? the woman had said.

Papa nodded.

They will be no trouble.

It had happened so fast. Vianne hadn't really understood. Papa dropped off his daughters like soiled laundry and left them with a stranger. The girls were so far apart in age it was as if they were from different families. Vianne had wanted to comfort Isabelle—meant to—but Vianne had been in so much pain it was impossible to think of anyone else, especially a

child as willful and impatient and loud as Isabelle. Vianne still remembered those first days here: Isabelle shrieking and Madame spanking her. Vianne had pleaded with her sister, saying, again and again, *Mon Dieu, Isabelle, quit screeching. Just do as she bids,* but even at four, Isabelle had been unmanageable.

Vianne had been undone by all of it—the grief for her dead mother, the pain of her father's abandonment, the sudden change in their circumstances, and Isabelle's cloying, needy loneliness.

It was Antoine who'd saved Vianne. That first summer after Maman's death, the two of them had become inseparable. With him, Vianne had found an escape. By the time she was sixteen, she was pregnant; at seventeen, she was married and the mistress of Le Jardin. Two months later, she had a miscarriage and she lost herself for a while. There was no other way to put it. She'd crawled into her grief and cocooned it around her, unable to care about anyone or anything—certainly not a needy, wailing sister.

But that was old news. Not the sort of memory she wanted on a beautiful day like today.

She leaned against her husband as their daughter ran up to them, announcing, "I'm ready. Let's go."

"Well," Antoine said, grinning. "The princess is ready and so we must move."

Vianne smiled as she went back into the house and retrieved her hat from the hook by the door. A strawberry blonde, with porcelain-thin skin and sea-blue eyes, she always protected herself from the sun. By the time she'd settled the wide-brimmed straw hat in place and collected her lacy gloves and picnic basket, Sophie and Antoine were already outside the gate.

Vianne joined them on the dirt road in front of their home. It was barely wide enough for an automobile. Beyond it stretched acres of hayfields, the green here and there studded with red poppies and blue cornflowers. Forests grew in patches. In this corner of the Loire Valley, fields were more likely to be growing hay than grapes. Although less than two hours from Paris by train, it felt like a different world altogether. Few tourists visited, even in the summer.

Now and then an automobile rumbled past, or a bicyclist, or an ox-driven cart, but for the most part, they were alone on the road. They lived nearly a mile from Carriveau, a town of less than a thousand souls that was known mostly as a stopping point on the pilgrimage of Ste. Jeanne d'Arc. There was no industry in town and few jobs—except for those at the airfield that was the pride of Carriveau. The only one of its kind for miles.

In town, narrow cobblestoned streets wound through ancient limestone buildings that leaned clumsily against one another. Mortar crumbled from stone walls, ivy hid the decay that lay beneath, unseen but always felt. The village had been cobbled together piecemeal—crooked streets, uneven steps, blind alleys—over hundreds of years. Colors enlivened the stone buildings: red awnings ribbed in black metal, ironwork balconies decorated with geraniums in terra-cotta planters. Everywhere there was something to tempt the eye: a display case of pastel macarons, rough willow baskets filled with cheese and ham and *saucisson*, crates of colorful tomatoes and aubergines and cucumbers. The cafés were full on this sunny day. Men sat around metal tables, drinking coffee and smoking hand-rolled brown cigarettes and arguing loudly.

A typical day in Carriveau. Monsieur LaChoa was sweeping the street in front of his *saladerie*, and Madame Clonet was washing the window of her hat shop, and a pack of adolescent boys was strolling through town, shoulder to shoulder, kicking bits of trash and passing a cigarette back and forth.

At the end of town, they turned toward the river. At a flat, grassy spot along the shore, Vianne set down her basket and spread out a blanket in the shade of a chestnut tree. From the picnic basket, she withdrew a crusty baguette, a wedge of rich, double-cream cheese, two apples, some slices of paper-thin Bayonne ham, and a bottle of Bollinger '36. She poured her husband a glass of champagne and sat down beside him as Sophie ran toward the riverbank.

The day passed in a haze of sunshine-warmed contentment. They talked and laughed and shared their picnic. It wasn't until late in the day, when Sophie was off with her fishing pole and Antoine was making their daughter a crown of daisies, that he said, "Hitler will suck us all into his war soon."

War.

It was all anyone could talk about these days, and Vianne didn't want to hear it. Especially not on this lovely summer day.

She tented a hand across her eyes and stared at her daughter. Beyond the river, the green Loire Valley lay cultivated with care and precision. There were no fences, no boundaries, just miles of rolling green fields and patches of trees and the occasional stone house or barn. Tiny white blossoms floated like bits of cotton in the air.

She got to her feet and clapped her hands. "Come, Sophie. It's time to go home."

"You can't ignore this, Vianne."

"Should I look for trouble? Why? You are here to protect us."

Smiling (too brightly, perhaps), she packed up the picnic and gathered her family and led them back to the dirt road.

In less than thirty minutes, they were at the sturdy wooden gate of Le Jardin, the stone country house that had been in her family for three hundred years. Aged to a dozen shades of gray, it was a two-story house with blue-shuttered windows that overlooked the orchard. Ivy climbed up the two chimneys and covered the bricks beneath. Only seven acres of the original parcel were left. The other two hundred had been sold off over the course of two centuries as her family's fortune dwindled. Seven acres was plenty for Vianne. She couldn't imagine needing more.

Vianne closed the door behind them. In the kitchen, copper and cast-iron pots and pans hung from an iron rack above the stove. Lavender and rosemary and thyme hung in drying bunches from the exposed timber beams of the ceiling. A copper sink, green with age, was big enough to bathe a small dog in.

The plaster on the interior walls was peeling here and there to reveal paint from years gone by. The living room was an eclectic mix of furniture and fabrics—tapestried settee, Aubusson rugs, antique Chinese porcelain, chintz and toile. Some of the paintings on the wall were excellent—perhaps important—and some were amateurish. It had the jumbled, cobbled-together look of lost money and bygone taste—a little shabby, but comfortable.

She paused in the salon, glancing through the glass-paned doors that

led to the backyard, where Antoine was pushing Sophie on the swing he'd made for her.

Vianne hung her hat gently on the hook by the door and retrieved her apron, tying it in place. While Sophie and Antoine played outside, Vianne cooked supper. She wrapped a pink pork tenderloin in thick-cut bacon, tied it in twine, and browned it in hot oil. While the pork roasted in the oven, she made the rest of the meal. At eight o'clock—right on time—she called everyone to supper and couldn't help smiling at the thundering of feet and the chatter of conversation and the squealing of chair legs scraping across the floor as they sat down.

Sophie sat at the head of the table, wearing the crown of daisies Antoine had made for her at the riverbank.

Vianne set down the platter. A delicious fragrance wafted upward—roasted pork and crispy bacon and apples glazed in a rich wine sauce, resting on a bed of browned potatoes. Beside it was a bowl of fresh peas, swimming in butter seasoned with tarragon from the garden. And of course there was the baguette Vianne had made yesterday morning.

As always, Sophie talked all through supper. She was like her Tante Isabelle in that way—a girl who couldn't hold her tongue.

When at last they came to dessert—*ile flottante*, islands of toasted meringue floating in a rich crème anglaise—there was a satisfied silence around the table.

"Well," Vianne said at last, pushing her half-empty dessert plate away, "it's time to do the dishes."

"Ahh, Maman," Sophie whined.

"No whining," Antoine said. "Not at your age."

Vianne and Sophie went into the kitchen, as they did each night, to their stations—Vianne at the deep copper sink, Sophie at the stone counter—and began washing and drying the dishes. Vianne could smell the sweet, sharp scent of Antoine's after-supper cigarette wafting through the house.

"Papa didn't laugh at a single one of my stories today," Sophie said as Vianne placed the dishes back in the rough wooden rack that hung on the wall. "Something is wrong with him."

"No laughter? Well, certainly that *is* cause for alarm."

"He's worried about the war."

The war. Again.

Vianne shooed her daughter out of the kitchen. Upstairs, in Sophie's bedroom, Vianne sat on the double bed, listening to her daughter chatter as she put on her pajamas and brushed her teeth and got into bed.

Vianne leaned down to kiss her good night.

"I'm scared," Sophie said. "Is war coming?"

"Don't be afraid," Vianne said. "Papa will protect us." But even as she said it, she remembered another time, when her maman had said to her, *Don't be afraid.*

It was when her own father had gone off to war.

Sophie looked unconvinced. "But—"

"But nothing. There is nothing to worry about. Now go to sleep."

She kissed her daughter again, letting her lips linger on the little girl's cheek.

Vianne went down the stairs and headed for the backyard. Outside, the night was sultry; the air smelled of jasmine. She found Antoine sitting in one of the iron café chairs out on the grass, his legs stretched out, his body slumped uncomfortably to one side.

She came up beside him, put a hand on his shoulder. He exhaled smoke and took another long drag on the cigarette. Then he looked up at her. In the moonlight, his face appeared pale and shadowed. Almost unfamiliar. He reached into the pocket of his vest and pulled out a piece of paper. "I have been mobilized, Vianne. Along with most men between eighteen and thirty-five."

"Mobilized? But . . . we are not at war. I don't—"

"I am to report for duty on Tuesday."

"But . . . but . . . you're a postman."

He held her gaze and suddenly she couldn't breathe. "I am a soldier now, it seems."

THREE

Vianne knew something of war. Not its clash and clatter and smoke and blood, perhaps, but the aftermath. Though she had been born in peacetime, her earliest memories were of the war. She remembered watching her maman cry as she said good-bye to Papa. She remembered being hungry and always being cold. But most of all, she remembered how different her father was when he came home, how he limped and sighed and was silent. That was when he began drinking and keeping to himself and ignoring his family. After that, she remembered doors slamming shut, arguments erupting and disappearing into clumsy silences, and her parents sleeping in different rooms.

The father who went off to war was not the one who came home. She had tried to be loved by him; more important, she had tried to keep loving him, but in the end, one was as impossible as the other. In the years since he'd shipped her off to Carriveau, Vianne had made her own life. She sent her father Christmas and birthday cards, but she'd never received one in return, and they rarely spoke. What was there left to say? Unlike Isabelle, who seemed incapable of letting go, Vianne understood—and accepted—that when Maman had died, their family had been irreparably broken. He was a man who simply refused to be a father to his children.

"I know how war scares you," Antoine said.