

From the  
bestselling author  
of *Josephine's Garden*  
and *Into the World*

# The Freedom of Birds

STEPHANIE  
PARKYN

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Freedom  
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## Rémi

I traced my finger over the letters of my name, printed in glossy black on the playbill. Rémi Victoire. To see it printed so boldly there was astounding. It made me feel real. A family name was important to us children of the Comédie-Italienne. My friend Pascal was simply known as Pascal and it meant he belonged to the theatre with all the other orphans. But to know your family name made you special, it tied you to someone. Everything changed for me from the moment my mother returned. I was no longer just Rémi, I was Rémi Victoire, the orphan whose mother came back.

The playbill announced the opening night of our production and a thrill ran through me to see it. Tonight, I was to play Arlequin in the famous *Arlequin poli par l'amour* by Marivaux. The lead role, no less! I had longed for this chance since I was old enough to watch the actors take their bows before an enraptured audience. I was the first of the orphans of the Comédie-Italienne in Paris ever to take the stage. In a real play, before a real audience. My heart was singing.

Rogério, our lead actor, had disappeared a week ago. Some said he gambled too much and had had to flee his debtors. Some thought he had been taken by the conscriptors. Others pointed out that he was a carouser who drank to excess and had likely ended his days in the Seine. Whatever the cause, the director was frantic—it was only a week till opening night. I was sad for Rogério, but I was hopeful too as I begged Gianni for the part.

‘You are too young,’ he declared.

‘I am almost sixteen!’ It was true I was small for my age, but I had grown this past summer and I was still growing. ‘I could wear heeled shoes.’

‘There’s not enough time for you to learn the part.’ He walked away from me.

Gianni had taught us orphans all the stock characters, reliving the days of his travelling troupes of old, when he was the great Gianni Costantini, famed throughout Italy for his Arlecchino. It was a game for us at first. We orphans would dress up in masks and costumes and play the parts. I always wanted to be the Arlequin in his costume of colourful diamond patches. For weeks, I had watched Rogério rehearse. I knew I could play the part as well as him.

I jogged after Gianni. ‘I can learn all the lines. Pascal will help me.’ My friend Pascal knew how I had longed for this chance.

Gianni stopped and turned to me. ‘At your age, what do you know of love?’

I couldn’t answer that. All I knew of love came from stories.

But out of desperation Gianni had relented, and I was determined to prove to him that I could play the romantic lead. When he saw how I dazzled the audience, he would declare me a prodigy. He would take me under his wing and train me fully in the theatre arts.

Gianni was a master of the *commedia dell'arte*. I would become a member of the company not as an orphan, but as an actor. A life on the stage was all I had ever dreamed of.

I put the playbill down as Pascal burst into the dressing room. At the sight of me, he doubled over in laughter. I had slathered thick white paint all over my face and eyebrows.

'I am no good with paint,' I complained. 'Can you help me?'

'I'll need a trowel to take this off.' He spat on a cloth and wiped my eyebrows and lips.

Pascal had been with me from the first. My memories began in the theatre and Pascal was always there; playing, chasing, laughing. Pascal had the best laugh, it would make him floppy as a lamb. Once, I made Pascal laugh so hard he rolled off the stage into the orchestra pit. All it took was a well-pulled face.

We orphans of the *Comédie-Italienne* mobbed together like gulls. We hunted, we fought, we cawed at one another over our possessions. The theatre was our playground, our schoolhouse, our home. In the beginning, we had all been the same, all loved by Gianni, all our parents were dead or vanished. But that changed the day my mother returned and I became different. The golden child. The lucky one.

'Why are you wearing your costume already?' Pascal asked. It was hours before the curtain was to rise.

I shrugged, reluctant to answer. 'I just wanted to.'

I couldn't really explain why I loved to become a character. It felt good to put on those clothes, to become someone else. In the theatre I could be a soldier, a rich merchant, a lover, a spy. I could be anyone. I liked the feel of the smooth velvet as I slid on the tunic with its coloured diamond patches, I liked the weight of

the cloak over my shoulders with its bright red lining. None of us had clothes of our own as fine as this, but we had something better: we had costumes.

‘I came to tell you your mother wants to see you.’

‘Where is she?’

‘In the theatre.’

‘What does she want?’

He shrugged.

I left the dressing room and went to find my mother. Perhaps she wanted to wish me luck. I wondered if she would come to my performance. I knew how she disliked theatre crowds, but perhaps she would make an exception just this once.

Out of habit, I rubbed at the mark on my wrist. When I was little—before she came back—Gianni told me that my mother was a sea sprite who had left this mark on me when she kissed me farewell. It was a promise that she would return for me. I knew it was only a story, but I liked the idea that my mother was a mystical being; that she hadn’t wanted to leave me, but the sea had taken her back. Secretly, I’d dreamed of the day we would be reunited.

The day my mother came back I was six years old. She rushed in with her long, blonde hair flying wild like I imagined a sprite’s would, and I wondered if Gianni’s story was true. She was furious; she screamed at Gianni, accused him of stealing children. She brandished her arm, revealing her burn mark. When she turned my arm and saw the same mark, she gasped like the breath had been kicked from her, and she folded me into her embrace. *You are my son*, she repeated over and over again.

She wanted to take me with her, but I did not want to go. I howled when I realised she meant to take me from Gianni. I held

out my hand to him and did not understand why he would not take it, why he was letting her drag me away.

‘Stay here,’ Gianni pleaded with her. ‘What life is there for you out there? Stay with us. We are his family.’

She growled then, deep and menacing. I thought her part animal and part sprite. My mother was a demon. Gianni could not let her take me.

I broke away from her and threw myself at Gianni. She raged at him like thunder and lightning, and I cowered safe in Gianni’s arms until the storm passed and silence fell. I twisted my head to see. The pale-haired demon was breathing hard, her nostrils flaring, but as I watched, her shoulders shuddered and she slumped, her skirt billowing out like a dust cloud as she fell. Gianni had defeated her.

I thought she would go, I thought Gianni would drive her out the doors of our theatre, but he whispered in my ear. ‘Rémi, this is your mother; we must be kind to her. She will stay with us now.’

My mother’s name is Marie-Louise Victoire. She told me I didn’t need to be an orphan anymore. I could be Rémi Victoire.

I was afraid of her at first. I hated that we were made to share a room when all the other orphans could sleep together. Sometimes, when she was asleep, I would creep out and run back to Pascal. I shoved him over on his mattress, and he would make room for me, sometimes without even waking. In the morning, I would open my eyes and find myself back in my mother’s small room; she had come for me in the night and carried me back to my own cot. When Pascal came to spend his nights on the floor beside me, she let him stay. My mother was kind to Pascal, and it was because of this that I found my love for her.

My mother was sitting in the stalls near the back of the empty theatre. I walked out onto the stage in front of the draped curtains and bowed to her. She laughed and clapped her hands in delight. 'Bravo!' she called, and blew me kisses. I grinned at her. I loved this place. I loved the bright red fabric of the seats, the glittering gold around the boxes rising three tiers above, and the ornate ceiling rose with its painted phoenix in the sky. I loved the smell of oiled boards and smoky candles. Tonight, when the curtains were drawn back, I would stand in a magical forest and gaze out to the expectant faces of the audience, all waiting to be enchanted. I looked out at my mother alone in the stalls and felt pleased to have something none of the orphans at the Comédie-Italienne had: a mother to watch me; a mother to be proud of me. We all had Gianni, but no one else had a mother who was all his own. We two were branded with our special mark, the sign that showed we belonged to one another. I truly felt like I was the chosen one.

I stepped off the stage and walked down the aisle between the rows of seats. When I reached my mother, she had tears in her eyes.

'You look very fine,' she said, with a twist of a smile.

I felt a little foolish then for having dressed so early in my costume. I tried to act nonchalant, like Rogerio would have done, as if taking the stage and performing in front of an audience was no difficult thing.

'Are you nervous?' she asked as I sat beside her.

I shook my curls back over my shoulder. 'No.' But my knee jiggled in the seat and as I stared at those closed stage curtains, I realised that I couldn't remember my first line. It panicked me.

'Have you heard there is to be war in Poland now?'

I shrugged, still trying to remember my first line. I did not pay much attention to Napoleon and his battles. There had been wars all my life; why should this one be any different?

‘I am afraid.’ She took my hand. ‘There’s something I need to do. It means we will not see each other for some time.’

I swung around to face her. ‘Are you going away?’ My first thought was that she would miss seeing me on the stage. ‘Will you be here tonight, for the play?’

‘Yes, I will be here for the performance.’

I was relieved to have that assurance, but still her words unsettled me. I didn’t want her to go away again. What if it was years before she returned? I was gripped by a sudden irrational panic that she would leave me like she had before. That I was not special, I would not have a mother, I would just be one of the orphans again. Like Pascal, who did not know his mother or father. Like little Bonbon, who we found wandering the streets.

‘When will I see you again?’ I asked.

‘It will just be for a few weeks, that’s all.’ She picked up my hand and kissed it. ‘I love you, Rémi—you are everything to me.’

‘Then why are you leaving?’ My voice cracked like a child’s and it embarrassed me.

‘I have to do what is best for you.’

I was confused. It was best for her to stay with me. But I was growing into a man and I didn’t want to seem like a frightened boy, clinging to his mother’s skirts. ‘Fine. I don’t need you.’

‘Don’t say that, Rémi. I will return, I promise.’

‘Are you going to sea again, like the last time?’ Gianni’s story of the sea sprite had turned out to be half true; she had gone away to sea after leaving me with Gianni. She hardly ever spoke of that time,

though, or of any of her life before coming to the theatre. I feared that if she did go to sea, I might not see her again.

She shook her head. 'No, it's not that.'

'Then where are you going?' I demanded.

'I . . .' She would not meet my eye. 'It's your father, Rémi—he has come back.'

My father! I reeled at this. She had never spoken of my father, and grew angry whenever I questioned her about him. In the end, I had to ask Gianni and he told me my father was a pirate.

'Your father was a good man who found himself trapped by debts and circumstance,' he had said. Debts I understood, circumstance I did not, but from this I gleaned that circumstance could turn you into a pirate. 'He only steals from those who can afford it: the wealthy merchant ships carrying trunks of silver coins and wine.'

'Will he come to find me? Will he make me be a pirate too?' I was half hopeful, half afraid.

Gianni had kissed the top of my head. 'He sails the Mediterranean Sea endlessly, as he has an affliction he cannot soothe. He has wanderlust.'

Wanderlust. I liked the sound of it. A pirate's son. A wanderer.

But now he was here—in Paris. 'I want to meet him!' I said. My heart was pounding. I could have a mother *and* a father.

'If you want to see him, it has to be today. He is in hiding. It has to be now.'

'Now? But the performance is tonight—I can't leave!'

'It is only a few blocks from here. We will not be far away.'

I was excited but my stomach was churning. It didn't feel right to leave the theatre on the day I was meant to take the stage for the first time. And what if we were late? Gianni would be frantic.

The director had been like a father to me, to all of us, I didn't want to worry him—but the chance to meet my own father, to see if he longed for a son as much as I longed for a father . . . I couldn't let this chance slip away.

'Are you going away with him? Is that why you are leaving?'

She swallowed hard. 'No, that's not why we have to part.' She hung her head and I saw a tear slip down her face. 'After you have met your father, I will explain everything,' she said.

I looked around me. The stalls were empty, the orchestra pit deserted. Everything was ready and waiting for tonight. In that moment, I wanted Gianni to come and tell me everything would be all right. Gianni with his singsong voice and reassuring smile. I wanted to hear him give me leave to meet my father for the first time.

'We have to go.' My mother stood and I did too. I noticed how small and slight she seemed beside me.

'Can Pascal come?'

Pascal made everything better. We had always been together, Pascal and I.

'Yes, Pascal, of course—he will be perfect. He will help you.' She was guiding me out of the row, her hands firm on my shoulders.

We found Pascal lingering by the costumerie, all gangly arms and legs, the lute Gianni had given him slung over his back. He loved the last-minute mayhem before a show; the torn seams that needed restitching, the popped buttons, the final touches to each costume. He was learning to tailor costumes from the best in the business, but now I needed him with me.

'My mother says she will take me to my father!' I said urgently, pulling him away.

He gaped at me. 'Your father?'

‘We have to go straightaway—will you come with me?’

‘On opening night?’

‘It has to be now. He is in hiding.’ Some part of me was enjoying the drama of this moment. Perhaps my father was a pirate after all. He was wanted for his piracy and he had risked coming ashore just this once for the chance to meet me.

Pascal was still staring at me, mouth open, eyes blinking.

‘Come,’ my mother said, and opened the side door of the theatre.

‘Pascal, where are you going?’ a woman’s voice called after us. I turned to see Margot, dressed as a fairy for the play. Flighty Margot, needy Margot.

‘I’ll be back soon,’ Pascal called.

Bonbon launched himself at us from one of the dressing rooms, eager to be part of whatever adventure we were setting out on.

‘Not today, Bonbon,’ my mother said. ‘Stay here.’

My mother closed the door behind us.

The house she took us to was on Boulevard Montmartre, a short walk from the theatre. I was jittery. Everything felt unreal to me: the sky too blue, the noise of every horse and cart too loud. My senses were heightened by anticipation. I was glad Pascal was beside me. ‘Can you believe this?’ I whispered to him, looping my arm through his, holding him close.

At my mother’s knock, the door was opened by a man. I studied his face, searching for a resemblance, but I saw no sign of myself in his grey-stubbled visage. When he turned, I noticed one sleeve was tied up where his arm should have been. My mother nodded her thanks to him and we followed as the one-armed man led us through the wood-panelled hall. My heart was hammering. I glanced

at Pascal. Neither one of us had been inside a normal home before. Our whole lives had been lived in the theatre.

In the kitchen, the one-armed man dragged the table aside and threw open a hatch in the floor. This must be where my father was hiding.

My mother pointed to a stepladder leading down into the hole. 'Your father is down there,' she said, her voice gruff with emotion.

I gazed into the darkness, never doubting for a moment that what she said was true. Trusting her, Pascal and I climbed down into that hole.

The room beneath the floorboards was so small, we had to bend our heads, not able to stand straight. In the light cast from the open hatch, I saw men's eyes watching me. I smelled the stench of their close-packed bodies, reeking of old sweat. My mouth dry, I peered about in the dim light, wondering which one of the men was my father.

Then the hatch was being lowered and I heard my mother's voice, already distant. 'I will return for you.'

My heart pounded like a thumping fist as I realised she had deceived me. I roared and lunged for the light but was shoved down to the dirt, a man's hand pressed hard over my nose and mouth. 'Shut your worthless gob,' the man hissed. 'Do you want us caught?'

No, no, no. What was happening? I struggled beneath the man's weight. I couldn't breathe. I writhed and struck out. The man only released me when I went slack.

Pascal and I were pushed back to the wall, made to sit beside the stinking privy bucket. We were trapped with these hiding men, imprisoned. I realised I would miss my chance to take the stage and it caused me physical pain; I gasped for breath. Gianni might never give me another chance. I imagined him searching all over

the theatre, cursing me. I was letting him down. When my mother said we would be parted, I realised she hadn't meant she was leaving me; she had meant she was abandoning me to this wretched prison. Why would she do this to me, on the very day my dream of taking the stage was about to come true? I burned with hatred. I would never forgive her this betrayal. I bitterly wished she had never found me. I wished I was not the golden child whose mother came back.

## Pascal

When Rémi said he was about to meet his father, Pascal was silenced by a white-hot flare of pure, crystalline jealousy. It wasn't fair. Rémi already had a mother, someone special for him alone; why did he need to find his father too? The injustice burned. His friend would have a mother and a father, while he had no one.

Rémi the lucky one. Rémi the golden boy. It had been no surprise when Gianni picked Rémi, out of all of the orphans, for this chance on the stage. He had something special, they could all feel it; something none of the other orphans had. For Rémi was the orphan whose mother had come back. And now it seemed his father had come back too.

But seeing his friend's excitement, Pascal felt ashamed of his envy. He understood Rémi could not miss this chance—and of course Pascal would go if Rémi needed him. It had always been the two of them together, inseparable; he would not abandon his friend now. Rémi and Pascal. Pascal and Rémi. One of his earliest memories

was of Rémi climbing a rope above the stage, looking back at Pascal with mischief in his eyes. The unruly curls, the open smile, a face that always lit up the darkness. Pascal could never resist the dare in that sunlight smile. Rémi had dangled high above the stage, stretched out like a monkey, reaching for the next rope. Pascal's chest was tight. He had felt the joy and terror of friendship in that moment; he had felt the exquisite torture of loving someone so much that the thought of their loss was already hurting his heart. 'Come with me, Pascal!' Rémi had called from high above. Pascal had been afraid, but he had climbed the rope after Rémi. And when the one-armed man pointed to the trapdoor in the floor in that house on Boulevard Montmartre, Pascal did not hesitate to follow Rémi down into the dark.

The men startled him. He was slow to understand that it was a trick. Rémi's father was not among these men; it had all been a ruse.

Pascal froze when the man leaped on Rémi, pinning him down. He could not move to help his friend and it shamed him. The boys were silenced, made to sit against a wall. One of the men appeared to be a leader of sorts, threatening anyone who made a sound. He had a fearsome look with a torn and healed lip that exposed his gums and canine tooth. 'I've seen war in Prussia,' he hissed at them, 'and I've no intention of going back.'

So that was why the men were hiding here, Pascal realised: they were avoiding conscription.

Pascal shook with fear, but he tried to console Rémi. 'It will be just a few days,' he whispered when the leader wasn't watching. 'You will see.' Rémi squirmed and fidgeted, gouging the earth with his fingers. He raged against his confinement, knowing that he was missing his chance at a life he craved. Pascal understood. When the

two boys were young, they would sit together beneath the creaking boards of the stage and listen to the actors bellow out their lines, hear the crowd roar in laughter or gasp in dismay. Rémi would be jiggling, knee twitching. Not for him the dark spaces beneath the stage—he had always hungered for the light. ‘One day I will be the one up there,’ he told Pascal. ‘I will make them laugh and cry, I will make them love me.’ Pascal had never doubted that he would.

‘She has taken this away from me.’ Rémi stared at him in bewilderment.

Pascal reached across to grip Rémi’s hand as he took in their pitiful surroundings. Grey light filtered in from a small grate in the wall to the street.

He counted five men, all of them unshaven, raw-faced. Their bodies were lean, almost skeletal, and they stank. How long had they been here?

The silence was oppressive. He cradled his lute in his lap, longing to pluck its strings, to bring himself some comfort, but he dared not risk the ire of the leader. Hours passed and when he caught the glint of eyes upon him, he ducked his gaze away. All night, Pascal watched the dark shapes of the men and did not sleep.

When the trapdoor was opened suddenly the next morning, Rémi scrambled towards the opening, only to have the men claw him back down and sit on him. ‘You will betray us, you little shit. You’re here now—be thankful. Wait it out like the rest of us.’

Food was lowered down the hatch and the shit bucket lifted back out. The whole operation took only a few minutes. Pascal blinked, his eyes watering in the sudden light; he had barely adjusted to it before the trapdoor was slammed back down on them.

They ate in darkness; soup and bread and cold omelette. It was good. It distracted him, for a little while.

The day was long and miserable. Rémi fumed about his mother. 'I will never forgive her Pascal—never.' His mutterings earned him a clout from the brute who was their leader.

Pascal was homesick. He felt a twisting around his heart, an anxiousness in his chest. He wondered if they had been missed. Margot and Bonbon had seen them leave. Would Rémi's mother tell them what she had done? He had never spent a night away from the theatre.

The only home he had ever known was with the Comédie-Italienne. All his memories were of the theatre: red velvet drapes rising high above the stage, painted scenes of faraway worlds, dressing rooms lit with smoky candles and faces caked in lead white. Whirling dresses, costumes of bright satin, music, laughter, tears. His whole world was this adopted family of actors and singers. His real parents must be dead, or as good as, and he had no recollection of them. Gianni was enough of a father and mother for all of them. A fierce mothering lion or playful papa bear. All the orphans felt safe with Gianni.

He wondered if Margot would miss him. Margot, the dancer who flitted from love affair to love affair in quick succession. Pascal consoled her whenever another travelling player stole her heart and then moved on. Margot the fluttering bird; iridescent, shining Margot. He would brush her fine, silky hair before each performance. She was like a sister to him.

Little Bonbon would be scouring the theatre looking for him and Rémi. He followed the older boys around everywhere. They had found him as a four-year-old foraging from the scraps outside a

patisserie. He was named Bonbon because he liked to pick up sweets that had dropped in the stalls after each performance—the white balls of Anis de Flavigny that had escaped their tins, or sugared violets and candied stems of angélique that had fallen from ladies' laps. Bonbon would fall asleep curled up in the theatre seats, sucking on his sticky thumb, and Pascal would carry him back to a mattress alongside all the other orphans.

Pascal pressed his fingers into his eyelids, willing himself not to sob, not to show weakness before these men. They would soon return home, he tried to reassure himself; this separation from his theatre family was only temporary. Rémi's mother meant to save them from conscription. She had done this to them out of fear. When the threat was over, they would be released.

Pascal remembered her arguing with Gianni. She believed the rumours that Rogerio had been taken in the street by the conscriptors.

'Napoleon fights the Russians in Poland now,' she had said. 'He will seek more men.'

Gianni dismissed her concerns. 'The conscriptors will not target the theatres. People need entertainment to distract them from the horrors. The Emperor knows this. We are safe here.'

Pascal had thought Gianni was right. In the world of the theatre, he had felt safe. Now, out here in the real world, he was terrified.

Through the second night of their imprisonment he meant to keep his eyes open, he meant to let Rémi sleep first and keep watch, but his head lolled, his eyelids drooped and exhaustion overtook him. He woke to the touch of a hand on his thigh. He jerked upright.

A man's face rose above him. 'Lie still, lie still,' a voice soothed. 'I'll take your friend, not you. Just lie still.'

Pascal lay like a bird caught by a cat. His heart banged. The man shifted his weight and touched Rémi.

Pascal swung up his hand and caught the man below his chin. He squeezed. He saw the man's eyes bulge. He said nothing as the man struggled against his grip. Saliva frothed from his lips, but Pascal pressed his fingers up against his windpipe, as tenacious as a dog. He knew then, looking in that man's eyes as his fingers scrabbled against Pascal's grip, smelling the acrid scent of both their fear, that he had the capacity to kill another man. To protect Rémi, he would kill. The man choked, kicking out, and then suddenly he was lifted from Pascal, wrenched back, and the leader with the torn lip had him in a headlock. 'I've warned you before,' the leader said, gripping the man's chin and snapping his neck.

The body fell.

Rémi clutched Pascal's arm and the boys crawled back as far from the man's crumpled form as they could, drawing their feet underneath them, clinging to one another.

Everyone was awake. Everyone was silent.

Pascal heard his own teeth chattering.

'Leave the boys alone,' the leader growled, and took his place beneath the trapdoor.

Pascal trembled all over. A man was dead. The body lay in the middle of the cellar. He had almost killed a man. In the moment, he had only thought of saving Rémi. He bit his lip, determined not to whimper. They must get through this. They *would* get through this, together. They would go home. For the rest of the night, Pascal repeated this over and over to himself.

In the morning, the man's body was heaved out of the hatch with all the other waste.

'I hate her for putting us in this hell,' Rémi whispered to Pascal.

Pascal nodded. Rémi's mother might have thought she was saving them from war, but she had thrown them into a den of wolves.

Days passed and Rémi fell into a torpor. Pascal urged his friend to keep moving, to copy the other men when they exercised their muscles. But Rémi was belligerent, angry. He rolled over and faced the wall.

The name of their leader was Claude.

Claude made Rémi exercise when Pascal failed. He made him eat. As the days turned to weeks, Pascal's fear of the men lessened. He learned their names, communicating in whispers and hand gestures. Some days they played cards and risked speaking when the noise from the street above was busiest. Only one of the men had not already been to war; the others had all been maimed in some way, even if the scars were not visible.

Boredom became his greatest struggle. The anticipation of food was the highlight of each day. Day after monotonous day went by and Pascal despaired of ever leaving this cellar. *You have been forgotten*, his mind whispered to him. *No one cares for you*.

And then, suddenly, they were freed. The trapdoor was opened late one night and they were called up by urgent voices. Pascal was numb, staring at the opening above their heads.

'It's over,' Rémi whispered to him.

They clambered out of the hole, weak and wobbly on their feet. Shaking, they stood in the kitchen of the house on Boulevard Montmartre, holding each other up. Pascal felt Rémi grip his arms and squeeze.

They staggered like old men out into the silent street. The air was fresh and cold—a shock after the stale warmth of the cellar.

Pascal's eyes stung. He breathed deep, gasping with relief. He could go home.

The other men scattered, slinking away along the walls like sewer rats. After two months in that cellar, it was over.

Pascal saw her then. Rémi's mother. She was waiting for them across the street. Rémi's mother—the one who always came back for her son. The one who had tortured them both.

Pascal felt the heat building in his friend beside him, the tremble of suppressed rage. Rémi strode out into the middle of the road and, as his mother reached out her arms to him, Rémi spat upon the cobblestones. Then he spun on his heel, turning his back on her.

'Pascal! Come with me!'

Pascal knew what Rémi was meaning. Rémi was leaving. He would not go back to the theatre and his mother. Pascal could choose to go home to the Comédie-Italienne or he could go away with Rémi. He felt the tingle in his legs. It was time to run. It was time to fly.

He grasped Rémi's hand and they both fled into the night.