

THE  
*Paris*  
DRESSMAKER



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

KRISTY CAMBRON



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

*The Paris Dressmaker*

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*For Jeremy—  
Je t'aime, mon cœur.*

*And for Sandy Jean—  
Our elegant grand-mère.*



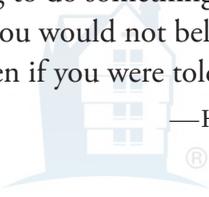
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Be pretty if you can, be witty if you must,  
but be gracious if it kills you.

—ELSIE DE WOLFE

Look at the nations and watch—  
and be utterly amazed.  
For I am going to do something in your days  
that you would not believe,  
even if you were told.

—HABAKKUK 1:5 NIV



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

## CHAPTER 1



31 DECEMBER 1943  
FORÊT DE MEUDON  
MEUDON, FRANCE

If Lila de Laurent were discovered in the forest, she was dead. Orphaned snowflakes drifted down, making the depths of the woods seem far more threatening in their desolation than the streets of Paris ever could. Floodlights grasped behind her, searching through the trees with skeletal shadows as she swept through undergrowth that frayed the hem of her ivory gown into damp strips. The sounds of patrol dogs barking in the distance echoed loudly, competing with her own drumming heartbeat as she ran through the snow.

If the Vichy police caught up to her, they wouldn't need an excuse to turn Lila over to the SS. And the Nazis would show no mercy. They wouldn't inquire why a *Vogue* fashion plate was trekking through the Forêt de Meudon on New Year's Eve. A bullet hole through her side and a pistol in her pocket would tell them all they needed to know about who Lila de Laurent had become.

The gloved hand she kept pressed to her side warned of urgency, blood seeping through the thin gabardine plaits of her ivory opera

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coat—a stain she couldn't hope to hide and an impediment she could not ignore.

*“Il faut que je file!”* Run! Lila gave herself the order through gritted teeth.

Even if it hurt to breathe, or move, or even think from one moment to the next, she had to keep going. The Boche were as thick as the trees within the Forêt borders and the Maquis had a system of guerrilla fighters positioned in all directions spanning from Paris. It meant they couldn't account for one combatant's safety—even from their own guns—making the escape through the forest a foolhardy one if she was discovered and disbelieved by either side.

Her comrade, Violette, had repeated the warning with a firm grip to her arm seconds before Lila fled the Hôtel Ritz that evening:

“To go through the Meudon is your only way out now. But be careful; it is overrun. Change your clothes. And cut your hair. If they learn of this, the SS will circulate a photo of you as the fashion princess with the trademark marron locks spilling down her back. You must not look like her. If you are to live, then that girl must first die.”

With no time to shed the silk gown she wore or to see to the fallen chignon that now tangled in long ropes over her shoulders, Lila had already failed that instruction. So she avoided the cleared paths—which were likely host to buried mines at their borders—and kept to the camouflage of snowy places, following the trail set by Nazi-protected rail lines stretching through the trees.

A road curved round a bend and over a rise; château gates emerged.

Imposing towers of stone, twisted bramble, and ironwork stood as ghostly sentries guarding the thicket. Fresh tire tracks marred the road through. In the distance a golden halo cut through the trees from candlelight glowing in the windowsills of a grand château. Scores of

leaded-glass panes filled the front, beyond a lavish covered portico of burnished stone and the line of snowcapped autos that dotted the circular drive. Shadows moved across the windows as château guests passed by with champagne flutes and the blur of elegant, white-tie dress.

Lila melted into the trunk of a Scots pine to catch her breath, her slippers sinking against frozen pine needles at her feet.

A waning crescent moon hung overhead—near midnight.

An hour more trekking through the blistering cold wouldn't have tempted Lila to stop under normal circumstances, as the only châteaux left in the country still operating as manor houses were controlled by either the Nazi elite or *collaborateurs* in the Régime de Vichy. But peeling her hand from her middle was no longer possible—she'd be knees-in-the-snow from the pain and dead by dawn with or without the Nazis' help.

Her options were run and die, or stop, risk, and pray.

At a château of this size, there must be a service entrance round the back. Perhaps an outbuilding or, if fate smiled, a larder that may be stocked but not checked again until morning. A few hours' sleep . . . protection from the wind . . . even the hopeful promise of food—together they could prove the difference in survival versus not.

With careful steps to avoid the light, Lila followed the tree line around the back, watching for guard patrols that could appear, guns drawn, at any time. A cobblestone path led to the château and she stopped shy of it, behind a wagonette hoisted up by its broken wheel upon a pile of stacked bricks.

Snow fell, silent but drifting beyond a pitched-wood awning and heathered oak door that was warmed by the glow of an outdoor sconce. A beryl-and-rust-patched Renault idled in the alcove, its back doors ajar and motor spitting exhaust like cigarette smoke rising at a society party. The white text of its business name had faded on the placard, but enough remained that Lila could read upon its side:

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### BOULANGERIE 29 Boulevard Rouget de Lisle Montreuil, Versailles

*“Merci, God. Merci.”* Lila closed her eyes, her forehead pressed up against the rough wood of the wagonette for support as she drank in deep, steady breaths. “Montreuil—only two kilometers away.”

She could make it to Versailles from there. Meet her contact. Make the handoff. And then from Versailles . . . she didn’t yet know.

*“Allons-y!”* A man’s shout cut through the sputter of the engine, causing her to jump and look out once again.

Wearing wool trousers, an unbuttoned vest, and a white uniform shirt with cuffs rolled at the forearms, the man hopped down from the back of the bread truck and peered through the service entrance. He seemed to give little care for the bitter cold. Instead he focused on muscling crates in the back, then stormed through the door with such ferocity he nearly took the oak from its hinges. It swung wide in a ferocious clap against the château’s burnished stone and bounced against the wall with a sluggish tremble afterward.

*“Allons-y!”*

The man disappeared through the glow of the servants’ entrance, his calls of “Let’s go!” dying away with him.

Lila scanned the scene. No movement in the front of the truck meant no extra workers to worry after. And she could just see crates and interior shelving in the back—enough cover to remain hidden. Fighting to stay alert through the ride into the commune of Montreuil, how she’d make it out of the truck unnoticed once there and whether the deliveryman might be friend or foe—those were the worries she’d confront as she came to them.

*Each worry in its time.*

Hoping the mass of snowy footprints around the entrance would conceal the addition of hers, Lila sprinted to the shadows beyond the

Renault's back doors and climbed inside. She pressed her back up against the cold metal cage and slid to the floor like melting snow, landing against a wooden crate of baguettes and rustic sourdough boules. The only savior left was the tiny pistol in her coat pocket. Lila peeled her glove off and, in a last defense, curled her bloodied palm around the grip, holding the weapon tight against her lapel.

"Always putting us off schedule." The man didn't shout this time but grumbled a frustrated rebuke barely audible over the Renault's engine. He returned alone, muscling two empty crates stacked one on top of the other, and seemingly without the companion he'd sought.

In the light she could see he was of medium build, tall, and with soft brown hair that looked as though it had been parted and combed once but had been mussed by the dance of wind. The man lifted crates over the tailgate and slid them across the truck's metal floor. He braced hands on the doors to secure them . . . but paused.

Lila held her breath.

She could only pray the ivory satin of her gown hadn't shimmered in the shadows. But the action, however well meaning to save her, proved the opposite. The man surveyed the crates, then lifted a cautious boot to the tailgate.

With agility that surprised even her, Lila thrust the pistol up to shoulder height—hand only exposed—and extended it point-blank to his chest. "*Arrêtez!*"

Though Lila issued the order to halt with all the confidence she could muster, her bloodied fist trembled as pain pulsed through her. She anchored her arm tighter at the waist and firmed her grip, repeating, "*Arrêtez,*" not a shout this time, but with what she hoped was an iron tone.

The man raised his palms and exhaled a fog of breath in the cold as he lowered his boot to the ground.

"*D'accord.* Easy . . . I'll not hurt you."

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An ironic promise given she held the gun. But backing down was a good sign.

“What is it you want, mademoiselle?”

Perhaps it was the shock at being on the run for hours through the streets of Paris and a forest teeming with dogs and Nazi guns, but Lila couldn’t answer. No wonder her mind had chosen that moment to play its ill-fated tricks, telling her the deep voice that was so deceptively soft as it raked over gravel was one she’d heard before.

Many times.

The voice belonged to a dead man.

“*Bien*. Take it.” He tipped his head to the thieves’ hoard of bread in the crates, enough that the light caught his face. “Whatever you wish is yours. Just take it and go. I want no trouble here.”

Lila stared back into his eyes, their unmistakable clear blue triggering long-buried memories. Though a few years older and thinned down, with an unshaven jaw, in caterer’s livery rather than the posh tuxedos of her mind’s eye, and standing at the tailgate of a broken-down bread truck in the Forêt de Meudon of all times and places in their busted-up world—nothing could mistake who stood before her.

“You . . .” Lila exhaled, a breath clouding on air as she held firm on her knees.

René Touliard flinched in a reflexive double take when she edged forward and the sconce light cast its glow upon her. If he was startled to see her, he kept hold of his composure—shoulders squared, eyes in constant communion with hers, his hands stilled on air as snowflakes drifted in a lazy waltz between them.

“Yes—*me*.”

“I thought . . . you were dead.”

“Obviously not. Very much alive.” His manner shifted after he inspected the gun, a furrow marring his brow at Lila’s crimson-stained palm and the traces of blood caked under her fingernails. “How’d you

get your hands on that type of pistol? A Liberator. Thought only *La Résistance* traveled with those.”

“They do.” It was an offhanded remark born of pain and haste—one René wasn’t supposed to read.

“Oh no . . . Lila. What have you gotten yourself into?”

Lila shook her head. “There’s no time. Can you drive?”

“I might. If you lower that. Out of courtesy to an old friend? I’m afraid I don’t trust you not to kill me.”

“An old friend. Is that what I am?” She lifted her chin a notch and kept the Liberator frozen in place as her heart processed the implication that the only man she’d ever loved had downgraded her to a mere friend in his remembrance.

“You were once.”

“Then I wouldn’t trust a friend not to turn this around and . . . use it on me. Not even you.”

Lila’s words tripped over pain, shock, or cold. Any one of them could have their fancy at the moment. She couldn’t tell for certain she wasn’t passed out in a Paris gutter somewhere and these might be her last terrible moments alive before her body gave her over to the grave—to see René in both her dreams and nightmares now too.

Footsteps scuffled behind them.

René darted his glance to the depths of the truck and back again. Lila nodded and descended into the shadows, their back-and-forth forgotten as she eased behind the crates. A younger man invaded the alcove in the next breath, he too dressed in caterer’s livery but arms void of crates.

“Alright. Here I am—Duckworth at your service.”

“*En français, s’il te plaît!*” René snapped, the calm and cool serrated out of his tone. “And don’t use that name out here. You know better.”

“*Oui, votre Majesté!* Even if no one’s about.” The young man agreed, though with a ghostly bow and a little cheek about his air

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thereafter. “Listen, you’re mad as a hatter to ask me to leave now. You cannot think to blame me for wanting to stay, not when the invitation to snoop on a New Year’s party for the Nazis’ top brass is so thoroughly . . . *je ne sais quoi*.”

“*Non*. But I do expect you to remember who you are before you get someone killed. If it turns out to be me, I’ll be very displeased and will feel no guilt at taking it out on your arrogant hide.” René clicked one of the doors closed so Lila was lost to the shadows behind him. “You wish to remain in your merriment, so stay. I have deliveries to make before dawn.”

“And by then I should have all the information I need, as per usual.”

“I’ll return to fetch you in the morning,” René said matter-of-factly, and slammed the other door closed.

The sealed doors muffled their conversation so Lila couldn’t make out the rest. But whatever René had said was convincing enough that he opened the truck door and climbed into the worn leather driver’s seat alone.

“What did you tell him?”

René sat, staring straight ahead into the darkness of the path that disappeared through the pines as if he, too, were trying to catch his breath.

“Nothing of consequence. Just to have a care until morning. The last thing I need is two problems to contend with tonight.”

Was that what she was? *A problem?* Seemed like the bigger problem in France was uniformed in Nazi gray and pointing loaded weapons in their general direction.

“Why . . . ?”

*Why are you here? Why are you alive? Why did you leave all those years ago?*

Pain seared again, recoiling through Lila’s middle so her words

died on her tongue. Of all the questions in the world she could have asked him now, she landed on the most hapless.

“Why are you delivering for a boulangerie?”

René glanced over his shoulder to her form doubled over in the shadows. Softness greeted her in the attention from his eyes, and heaven help her, from somewhere deep inside, Lila could still read that look and she knew what it meant. He was calculating—thinking a thousand things he wouldn’t say.

“You’re hurt?”

“Oui. I’m afraid I am.”

“Here.” He tossed a coat to the floor that grazed her knees in thick wool. “Stay warm, *Luciole*. I’ll get you out of here.” He kicked the truck into gear and it lumbered toward the forest’s vast darkness as she pulled the coat over her shoulders like a blanket.

*Luciole.*

Lila wished she hadn’t heard the nickname again.

It had been ages, not since they’d once seen the anomaly of fireflies dotting a summer sky over the gardens of Versailles. And she thought she’d never hear that voice again or never see those eyes glance her way. Yet here he was—*her* René. Back from the dead just as he pleased. Like it was that easy to do. And casting a quick wave to the uniformed soldiers at the guard shack as they allowed the truck to pass through the château gates to be swallowed up by the ink of night.

Once through, the Liberator no longer seemed needed.

Lila allowed the pistol to sag and she went down with it, the cool metal floor welcoming as it met her cheek. She lay perfumed by the random scents of yeast, balsam, and him—from the collar of the coat—drifting as the pain finally came out of dormancy to its full fervor. She twisted her fingertips into a fist against the wool lapel and squeezed her eyes shut.

“Lila?” A pause, and then a shout. “Lila—*réveille-toi!* Do you hear me? Wake up.”

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“I’m awake . . .”

Yet she drifted off, the crags and crevices in the forest road causing the truck tires to bump along, jostling her toward sleep like an odd sort of Pied Piper’s lullaby.

“I can’t drive and see to you at the same time. You must stay with me. Keep talking. Tell me, what in heaven’s name are you doing in the middle of the Meudon? Do you have any idea how dangerous it is out here?”

“I think I’ve got a pulse on that.”

“Might we table your wit for just one moment? How did you get here?”

*No. We won’t talk of yesterdays that led to today. Not now.*

Best to keep focused on the task at hand. “I can’t even say. But on foot through the forest as far as I could manage.”

“From where?” He glanced back over his shoulder, then back to the road, hitting her with glances that said he wanted an answer. “How did you venture this far south?”

“I’m bound for the village of Versailles. Château side. Surely you remember it.”

“Versailles is swarming with military police.”

*Of course I know it is. I’m no ingénue now.*

She exhaled, losing herself in the pain. “I know.”

“Then you must also know there is no way for a rogue bird to fly over without the say-so of the Boche, let alone a bread truck to roll through the front gates of Versailles with a stowaway in tow. It’d be a death wish to try—yours and mine.”

“I must . . . get there.”

Lila breathed deep though the pain sliced her in two. She’d heard it from her father’s experience in the Great War that men withered after taking a bullet—they fell down, bathed in blood, and remained silent, or gritted their teeth like they were chewing iron. Now she knew

why. Either scenario seemed more favorable than the fire coursing through her at the moment.

Tears gathered in her eyes and she turned her forehead to the damp, rusted floorboards, refusing even then that he'd see her cry.

*"C'est pas possible!"* he muttered as he shouldered them around a tight turn against a snowbank.

"You . . . believed in the impossible once, didn't you?" Only the chugging engine answered back, and she knew she'd hit a nerve. "Tell me! Didn't you?"

"But we do not live in that world now, Luciole."

Lila slid her palm along the hem of the opera coat, searching for the lump sewn into its lining. She found the treasure safe. And for the moment so was she. That alone meant Providence still watched over them. Lila had made it out of the Hôtel Ritz. Out of Paris. And now it seemed she'd landed in the hands of the one person on earth she could trust to take her the rest of the way to Versailles.

"Perhaps not. But even if this is the end, we still have to try."

"The end of what?"

"My nightmare in Paris since the day you left."

The last thought that penetrated Lila's mind before she tumbled into oblivion was that even in the midst of their war-torn world, impossible might never be fully out of reach. After all, René Touliard had returned from the grave and that could mean everything. Lila could only pray she wouldn't find herself there in his stead.

"Happy New Year, René," she whispered, and let go.

## CHAPTER 2



1 JANUARY 1944  
12 RUE FRANÇOIS MILLET  
PARIS, FRANCE

**N**on. You cannot come in today.”  
Monsieur Mullins blocked Sandrine Paquet’s entrance into his shop, his form anchored just behind the door, preventing her and Henri from stepping inside the boulangerie where they’d bought their bread for the past four years.

She stopped short so that her little son almost crashed into the back of her and her oxford heel teetered against the uneven spot where the tile met the front stoop. Her reflection in the shop window of Le Fournier Boulangerie must have shown astonishment. Surely he was not turning them away. And without explanation.

“We can’t come in? Whyever not?”

The old man’s gaze flitted to the waspish-gray uniforms peppering the sidewalks and he shook his head—a tiny flinch side to side and a furrowed brow that said their safe association was no longer assured. “They are watching.”

His whisper was so slight he might have only mouthed the

words and Sandrine imagined the rest. Yet the terror in his eyes was real enough to send a chill over her that had little to do with the cold.

“You must leave, Mrs. Paquet. Immediately.”

“Oui. Of course.” Sandrine nodded. Fumbled. Swept a gloved palm over the front of her coat to smooth imaginary wrinkles and then gripped Henri’s little hand tighter as she stepped back, and Monsieur Mullins hurried to close the door. The bolt locked hard into place, and the shade was drawn down tight over the glass of the shop door but a breath later.

“*Salope!*” A woman spat on the ground at their feet the instant Sandrine stepped down from the front stoop, the insult of being labeled a prostitute sending them from one shock right into the next. Spittle shone on the corner sidewalk in front of Sandrine’s oxford heels, and she looked from the ground up to the pinched face of an old woman, who had narrowed her eyes to accusing slits.

Then the woman turned to stare at Henri—a mistake.

Through maternal instinct, the hair on the back of Sandrine’s neck stood on end, and she curled her wrist around her six-year-old son to nudge him behind her skirt.

The woman pointed, waving a bony finger at her. “No wonder they refuse you service here. I have seen you with them, collaborateurs! *Allemands! Les cochons Vichy . . .*”

Collaborators. Germans . . . Vichy pigs.

“That is quite enough, madame. *Pardon.*” Sandrine sidestepped the woman as she secured the ration tickets back in her oxblood leather satchel, then led Henri down the sidewalk in the opposite direction.

“What did she say, *Maman?*”

“Who?”

“*Cette femme.*” Henri turned, looking back to the face of their accuser, the woman’s nose and eyes still scrunched with fury under a faded navy day cap as she blasted insults.

“Put that finger away,” Sandrine cautioned, though she kept her

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voice cheery. “Someone might think we carry tales as we cross the street. We wouldn’t want that now, would we?”

Her son did as he was told, but that little brow that wrinkled in the same manner as his father’s always had said Henri’s curiosity would not die with a single sidewalk encounter. On the contrary, that encounter would only add to the many before it and cause his questions to grow. Where his coloring made him a caramel towhead with soft fawn eyes just like her, he was the mirror image of Christian Paquet in careful manner, reasoning, and deep thought.

Answering his questions could only be put off for so long.

“Where are we going, Maman?”

“We should find a boulangerie open today, mustn’t we? For our New Year’s tea. Paris has enough bakeries and they all accept ration tickets. We shall simply register at a new one.” Sandrine straightened the satchel hooked over her elbow as they came to the street corner—more out of principle than actual need.

Henri was old enough now to have seen and done far more adult things than a child ever should in his first years. But there had to be some measure of normalcy, even in their world. They’d survived under the Régime de Vichy for nearly four years. Regardless of the growing sentiment of hatred against Marshal Pétain and his faction of appeasing collaboration, she and Henri were not ill-fated puppets who would slink about in the shadows created by her employers.

Paris was their home—they wouldn’t be cast out, no matter the rumors circulating about them.

“But . . .” Henri slowed up enough that she had to stop or tug him along with her. “We’ve gone to Le Fournier since Pa-pa left us. Have we offended Monsieur Mullins in some way, that he should not allow us in his shop?”

Offend Monsieur Mullins?

Sandrine couldn’t think about that now. Not when she wagered

whatever had gone wrong went far beyond a mere offense. The terror aflame in the man's eyes explained more than anything else could.

When she didn't answer, Henri added, "He is a friend of Pa-pa's, Maman."

*But your pa-pa is not here.*

"Why not have an adventure and find a new haunt? I hear tell there is a *pâtisserie* in Montmartre that had croissants last month. Can you imagine? Would it not be like old times to have a croissant at our tea?"

Would Henri even remember the beautiful days of one's paltry concerns, like buttery croissants and teatimes? They were so long ago. Ordinary was a lost dream now.

"But I do not want a new haunt."

"You might not now, but once we find your favorite—"

*Mais non.* I do not want to go anywhere except where my pa-pa will know to find us. When he comes back, won't he look for us at Le Fournier? And what if we should miss him? What if he . . . never returns and it is our fault?"

The question of a child's bleeding heart had the power to stop time around them.

The wind kicked up, toying with the sun in Henri's hair as he waited for her answer. Cathedral bells chimed somewhere in the distance. And the ever-present Nazi hornets swarmed the street corners with gray, watching Parisians like hawk-eyed beasts even though the street traffic was oddly silent on this day.

Sandrine eyed them as she reached out and squeezed Henri's little hand. "Nothing could be your fault. Not ever. And your pa-pa will return. You just wait and see."

Kneeling before him eye to eye on the sidewalk, Sandrine readjusted the blue-striped tucker around his neck. She smiled and dotted a gloved index finger to the tip of his nose, the merlot leather warm against his cherry cheeks and splash of freckles.

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“Perhaps we will wait to go back when Pa-pa returns home. Hmm? As a celebration. But in the meantime, we shall buy our bread from another shop—perhaps one closer to Maman’s work. It is quite a walk from Le Fournier to the Tuileries Garden and to the schoolhouse. Non? And I would not mind fewer blocks to travel when it rains. My favorite chapeau is looking quite sad these days because of it.”

Henri missed every bit of an argument that was meant to convince him yet had zero merit with which to accomplish it. The corner boasting Le Fournier was on their way, of course. The blocks it took to traverse from their flat to the 1st Arrondissement would not have saved a scrap of time. Still, he seemed to accept her word on it and looked up at her once-prized violet cloche, the faux flowers faded and the style from too many seasons ago to count.

“Your chapeau is not sad,” Henri whispered, his toothless smile offering a haven of innocence even in their war-torn world. “You said Pa-pa bought it for you.”

Tears on the street corner would never do.

Emotion would have tumbled out had Sandrine not bitten her bottom lip in time. She must always appear gratified for the occupation in front of the Nazis. On the outside she must be muted and fashioned of stone, no matter the tender condition of the heart beating beneath the layers.

“That’s right. Your pa-pa did purchase this chapeau. And I shall wear it proudly, *mon trésor*, until he might buy me a new one. But right now we’d best be off or we’ll lose all of our festiveness for the holiday. You know *Mémé* will be waiting for our return back to the flat. The last thing we’d want to do is let your grandmother spend the holiday alone.”

And she? Sandrine wanted nothing more than a good cry once they’d returned home—bread in their arms or not—and for a few precious hours, she could shut the door on the rest of the world.

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1 JANUARY 1944  
16TH ARRONDISSEMENT  
PARIS, FRANCE

Regardless of its pleasant chime, the echo of the doorbell through the flat caused them both to start. Sandrine looked across the room to her mother-in-law, her eyes flashing with immediate concern from her place by the hearth.

“I’ll see to it.” Sandrine smiled at Marguerite and placed her Bible on an upturned produce crate between them. “Not to worry. Probably a delivery come to the wrong door.”

Sandrine rose and hurried off, heels clicking on the marble floor in echoes made sharper by near-empty rooms.

Once a beautiful flat her in-laws had owned in the fashionable 16th Arrondissement, it too had endured the ravages of war. Sandrine crossed through a library that had once boasted parties for the family’s literary circle at Paquet Publishing, with glittering names like Hemingway and Joyce and Sylvia Beach on the guest list. Years later it housed only ghosts of yesterday with empty bookshelves, sparse rooms, and drapes drawn down tight at all times.

Caution was paramount. After more than four years of war, one never opened a door without being absolutely certain who stood on the other side. When Sandrine reached the door, she lifted the gold plate over the peephole, then dropped it just as quickly—catching her breath with palms pressed against the door.

Always, she must be the portrait of put-together before *him*.

Sandrine fiddled with the belt on her navy suit dress and straightened her shoulders, then unlatched the gold chain on the door. The hinges cried out as she opened it.

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The captain stood in the hall, his six-foot-two-inch height in a uniform impeccably pressed as if ready for a normal workweek, instead of staring down the evening hours on a holiday. He tipped his blond brow in a nod and held out a bakery box—blush pink with a bow of ivory twine and the artful logo of the pâtisserie’s name, Les Petits Galettes, curling over the top in rich gold-foil script.

“Captain von Hiller . . .”

“Josef—please. *Bonne Année*, Mrs. Paquet.” He offered a faint smile along with the New Year’s greeting.

She stared at the box. “What can we do for you?”

“I understand you had an unfortunate incident this morning.”

“Oh?” Playing innocent seemed the card to lay down. Sandrine couldn’t begin to guess how he’d known what occurred at the corner boulangerie unless he had spies skulking in all directions—which was possibly true.

“The boulangerie turned you away.” His manner was always sharp, direct, and his words without mince.

“Closed for the holiday. Or perhaps they’ve a shortage of bread. The lines for food grow longer each day all across the city, as you know. I’m certain there was no ill will intended.”

“You are too chaste not to come to me. That sort of unpleasantness will not occur again, I assure you. I’ve taken care of it personally. But as I know Henri enjoys them—here. A gift. Croissants, honey, and fig jam.” He looked past her into their private world, scanning the shadows in the entry. “Is he about?”

Sandrine pressed her finger to her lips and edged the door closed, reinforcing the line drawn between their work association and the confines of her family. “Sleeping. I’m afraid the day has proved too much already.”

“I see. Another time perhaps.”

Those viridian eyes—knowing and so direct—stayed in candid communion with hers for two long, dreadful seconds before he

shimmied the outstretched box for her to take possession. Sandrine reached for it, feeling a surge of warning when his fingertips brushed hers in the exchange.

“I’ve come to fetch you to the *galerie*.”

Her breath locked in her chest at what that might mean.

In their haunted world of occupation, Sandrine envisioned the worst with every connection to the outside world, especially that which would summon her to the Jeu de Paume storehouse on a holiday. Every telegram could bring news of a dead husband. Every public radio broadcast spouted propaganda of another Allied defeat and imminent Third Reich victory . . . Every shipment they took in uncrated fresh risks for them all. Her worst nightmares could be confirmed in any manner of savage ways. Being summoned to the Jeu de Paume Galerie in this way—it was highly irregular.

And irregular was never comforting.

Sandrine eased into the hall, then clicked the door closed behind her.

*Thank heaven—deserted.*

She inspected the lavish rail of wrought iron along circular stairs that curled up and down, finding not a soul about to witness their exchange. No nosy neighbors to make their assumptions and toss evil glances her way. Sandrine breathed a sigh of relief and hugged the box in front of her, anchoring the cardboard as a shield between them. “What is it?”

“A shipment of degenerate cargo has been confused with art acquired from private collections in the city. The Rothschilds—a very important find of their vast collection. We are tasked to sort it out immediately.” The captain remained glacial with the answer, which was characteristic for his apathetic opinion of art dubbed objectionable by the Third Reich.

“We were told the shipment would not be expected until after the new year. But it’s here already?”

## THE PARIS DRESSMAKER

*Ja.* Two vaults were discovered here in Paris and opened yesterday—one unknown until now. Trucks bearing crates of the valuables arrived with the others just this afternoon. The degenerates must now be cataloged and separated from the rest of the legitimate art. It is a matter of great importance to the Führer. He has assigned Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring to personally oversee the selection of pieces for the new Führermuseum collection in Linz. And today Baron von Behr has entrusted the honor of the day-to-day preparations of this request to me—or, to us.”

The field director of the Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg himself was involved, and one of the highest-ranking officials under direction of their Führer in Reichsmarschall Göring? It must be quite important to have such a rank and file of names that went straight to the top of the hill.

“I see. But what cannot wait on this evening?”

“There’s an oddity in one of the crates and our curator has requested your presence to sort it out.”

*Mademoiselle Valland is there too?*

That certainly put a different color on it for their curator to ask for her by name. When Sandrine didn’t move, he cleared his throat. “I’ll wait.”

“Oh, oui. Of course. I’ll just . . .” Sandrine nodded and fiddled with the string on the pastry box so she could grasp it one-handed and turn the doorknob behind her.

Before she closed the door on him—intent upon grabbing her hat and bag and writing a hastily scrawled note to poor Henri should he wake without his maman at home—Sandrine turned, catching the captain’s eye.

“What is it exactly, this ‘oddity’? Forgive me, sir. I’m certain Baron von Behr would have already shared this information with you. But it will help me to be prepared once we are there, to work as efficiently as possible.”

"I'm told it is a dress."

"A . . . dress."

"Ja." He cleared his throat. Frustration or impatience—or who knew what was ticking through that mind of his—seemed to be irritating enough that he gave a curt nod and readjusted his hat, like he was done waiting and ready to be on the way. "I reminded Valland that the *Sonderstab Bildende Kunst* does not deal with textiles—we are only responsible for pictorial art. But I'm afraid she insisted in this case."

"She did. Very well. I won't be a moment then." Sandrine nodded and closed the door, leaving the captain—as she still refused the familiarity of addressing him as "Josef," as he was so forthright in suggesting—alone in the hall.

A dress?

A complication, more like it.

Sandrine hadn't any expertise in textiles. The paper and bindings of books she could manage without question. Even oil paint on canvas and wood she'd become a confident assayer of under Mademoiselle Valland's tutelage. But a dress meant she should expect this request to have more to do with summoning courage than assessing reams of satin or lace.

The floor creaked at the end of the hall. Her mother-in-law stood in the glow of light cast in the kitchen doorway, the once neat and refined woman of means pushing back stray wisps of gray at her temple as she fiddled with a leather shank button on the front of her paisley dress.

"What does that devil want with you?"

"Nothing, Maman. It is for work and that is all. I already said you needn't worry," Sandrine whispered, patting Marguerite's fidgeting hand as she walked by.

"Not worry? This is how it started before—they show up and demand deference as you do their bidding. Then they take people away. You more than anyone should know that one day, they don't

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come back. My husband and son are evidence of that, and now we are widows.”

“I am no widow.”

“You haven’t an idea what you are anymore, do you?” Marguerite stared back, ice in her eyes. Sandrine couldn’t decide if the statement was made for her benefit out of concern or to justify a forthcoming accusation. Perhaps both.

“Mademoiselle Valland is at the galerie and has requested my assistance. I must go.”

“But you’re going with *him*.”

“I haven’t a choice in the matter. You know this.”

Marguerite’s eyes narrowed, hatred burning in their depths. “Do you know what kind of game you’re playing? What he will require of you? In the end he won’t ask nicely. You know as well as I that they demand. And then they take.”

Sandrine breezed by her and pressed the pastry box down as far as it could go in the rubbish bin, then covered it with the holiday treat of orange rinds and yesterday’s newspapers. Even then the headlines cried death.

“Kiss Henri for me. I will return soon.”

Pinning her navy hat over the blonde barrel rolls at her nape, Sandrine stared at her reflection in the entryway mirror. Tears tried to break free for the wreck of a woman who looked back from the glass. She forced them away.

This was no game, and she couldn’t hide what was happening like tossing croissants in the bin. Marguerite did speak some version of the truth, as their neighbors would see.

The watchmen would part their drapes and eye Sandrine from all floors up, seeing the Nazi officer’s car door open upon the curb—a car in a city of only run-down bicycles and worn walking shoes. They’d watch. Scowl. And judge as he held out his hand and Sandrine must accept it.

KRISTY CAMBRON

She'd climb inside. For Henri. For her accusing mother-in-law. For her dead father-in-law and absent husband, and for every single moment they'd been forced to survive Paris without them.

War didn't offer choices. And it sure didn't leave room for negotiation where the game was concerned. You walked a thin line between life and death, praying you knew which side was which when the game was over.

Sandrine may have shuttered her tears, but her heart bled as she stepped through the front door into the bleak Paris streets beyond and the waiting Nazi officer's car.

*Christian . . . Where are you?*



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*