

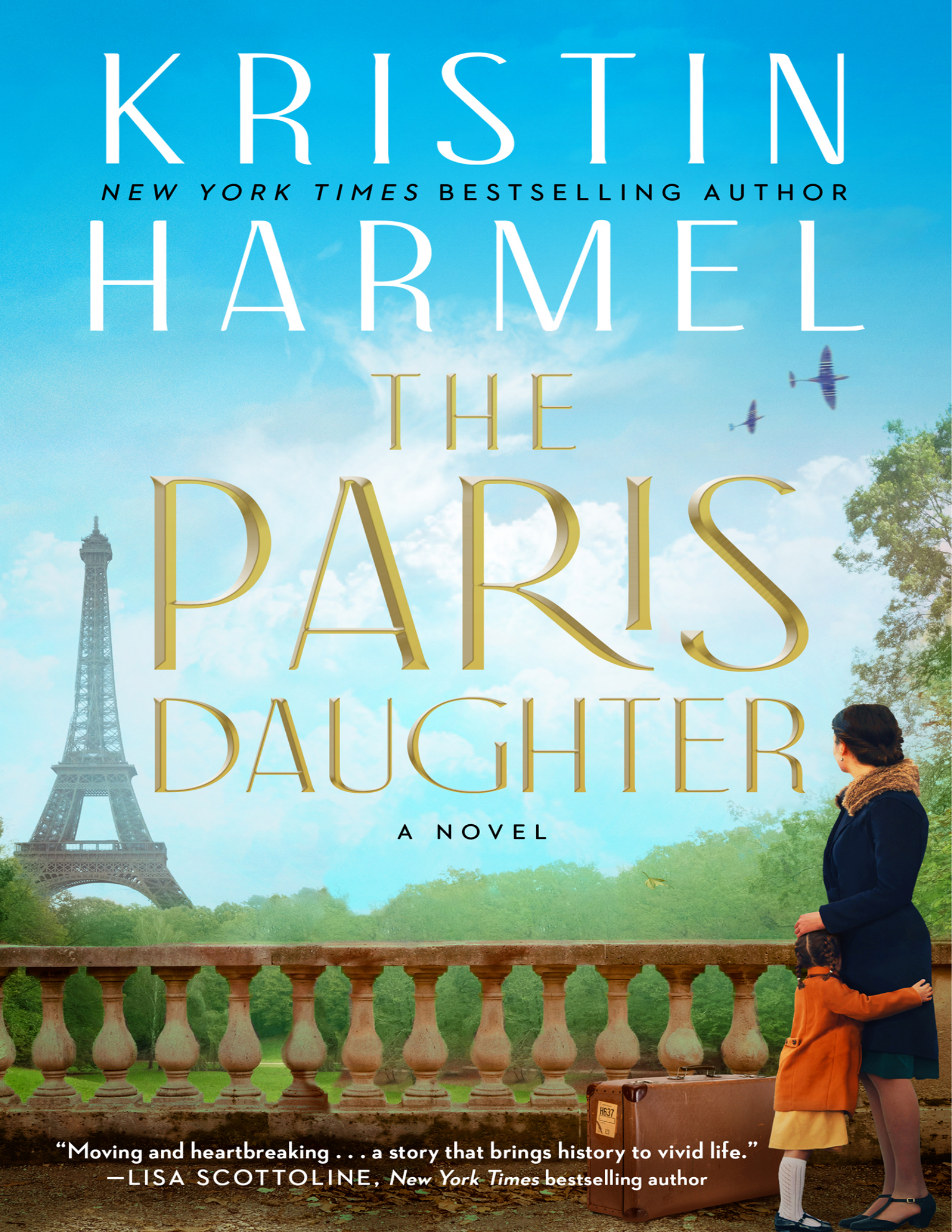
# KRISTIN HARMIEL

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# THE PARIS DAUGHTER

A NOVEL

“Moving and heartbreaking . . . a story that brings history to vivid life.”  
—LISA SCOTTOLINE, *New York Times* bestselling author





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THE  
PARIS  
DAUGHTER



KRISTIN HARMEL



GALLERY BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

*To my mom, Carol, and my son, Noah, from whom I learned the exquisite and endless joy of the bond between a mother and her child—the most complex and, at the same time, somehow the simplest love in the world.*



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# PART I

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*Motherhood: All love begins and ends there.*  
—ROBERT BROWNING

## ❖ CHAPTER ONE ❖

*September 1939*

The summer was lingering, but the air was crisp at the edges that morning, autumn already tapping at the door, as Elise LeClair hurried toward the western edge of Paris. She usually loved the summer, wanted it to last forever, but this year was different, for in just four months the baby would be here, and everything would change. It had to, didn't it? She cradled her belly as she slipped into the embrace of the shady Bois de Boulogne.

Overhead, chestnuts, oaks, and cedars arched into a canopy, gradually blotting out the sun as she took first one winding trail and then another, moving deeper into the park. The same sky stretched over all of Paris, but here, beneath it, Elise was simply herself, not a woman defined by her neighborhood, her station, her husband.

When she married Olivier four years earlier, she hadn't realized that the longer she stood by his side, the more invisible she would become. They'd met in New York in early 1935, and she had been awed by his raw talent—he did things with brushstrokes that most artists only dreamed of. He'd been twenty-nine to her twenty-three, and it was the year he'd first been splashed across the magazines. *Art Digest* had called him “the next great artist hailing from Europe”; *Collier's* described him as having “the brush of Picasso with the looks of Clark Gable”; and even the *New York Times* had declared him “a Monet for a new day,” which wasn't quite right because his style didn't resemble the French master's, but the point was clear. He was the toast of the art world, and when he turned his gaze on Elise, she couldn't look away.

She was an artist, too, or rather, she wanted to be. She loved to sketch, she loved to paint, but her real medium was sculpture. Her parents had died when she was nineteen, leaving her lost and adrift, and Olivier had offered her a raft to a different life. He had been the first one, in fact, to introduce her to wood as an alternative to clay. With a mallet and a chisel she could work out her grief, he'd told her, and he'd been right. When he proposed to her two months later, her reaction had been one of gratitude and disbelief—Olivier LeClair wanted to marry *her*?

Only in the years since had she realized marriage was supposed to be a partnership, not a practice in idolatry, and as she gradually got to know the Olivier the world didn't—the one who snored in his sleep, who drank too much whiskey, who slashed canvases in a rage when the images in his head didn't match the ones he'd painted—he had begun to slip off his pedestal. But in time, she had come to love him for the darkness as much as for the light that sometimes spilled out from him, eclipsing everything else in his orbit.

The problem was that Olivier didn't seem to want a partner. She'd thought he'd seen in her a raw talent, an artistic eye. But now, with the clarity of hindsight, it seemed that he'd only wanted a qualified acolyte. And so life in their apartment had grown tenser, his criticisms of her carvings more frequent, his frowns at her work more obvious. Even now, with his baby growing in her belly, changing the shape of her from the inside out, she felt corseted by her marriage to him, choked by the lack of oxygen left over for her in their large sixth-floor apartment in Paris's tony *seizième arrondissement*.

It was why she had to come, as she often did, to the sprawling park that spilled over into Paris's western suburbs. Here, where no one knew her as the wife of Olivier LeClair, she could feel the corset strings gradually loosening. She could feel her fingertips twitching, ready to carve again. Only once she walked through their apartment door would the tingling stop, the creative spirit in her retreating.

But the baby. The baby would change everything. The pregnancy hadn't been intended, but Olivier had embraced the news with a fervor Elise hadn't expected. "Oh, Elise, he will be perfect," he had said when she delivered the

news, his eyes shining with tears. “The best parts of you and me. Someone to carry on our legacy.”

She sat heavily on a bench beside one of the walking paths. Her joints ached more than usual today; the baby had shifted and was sitting low, pressing into her pelvic bone. She bent to pull her sketch pad and a Conté crayon from her handbag, and as she straightened back up, she felt a sharp stab of pain in her right side, below her rib cage, but just as quickly, it was gone. She took a deep breath and began to sketch the robin on a branch above her, busy building its nest as it paid her no mind.

Her sketches always looked a bit mad, even to her, for she wasn't trying to commit precise images to paper, not exactly. Instead, the sketches were to capture the complexities of angles, of curves, of movement, so that she could find those same shapes in the wood later. As she quickly roughed out the right wing of the robin, she was already imagining the way the thin ribbons of wood would peel away beneath her fingers. The bird turned, laying some sticks at a different angle, and at once, Elise's hand was tracing its neck, the sharp, jerky movements as it shortened and elongated.

As the day grew brighter, she lost track of time, sketching the bird's beak, its inquisitive eyes. And when it flew away, as she knew would eventually happen, she found another robin and flipped the page, once again tackling the delicate perch of its wings, the way they were folded just so against its wiry body. And then, suddenly, that bird, too, lifted off, glancing at her before it soared away, and she looked down at her pad expectantly. Surely she had enough to work with.

But instead of the crisp avian sketches she expected to see, her page was filled with an angry tangle of lines and curves. She stared at it in disbelief for a second before ripping it from the pad, balling it up, and crumpling it with a little scream of frustration. She leaned forward, pressing her forehead against fisted palms. How was it that everything she did seemed to turn out wrong these days?

She stood abruptly, her pulse racing. She couldn't keep doing this: going for long walks that led nowhere, returning home with her thoughts still tangled, her hands still idle. She took a step away from the bench, and suddenly the pain in her midsection was back, more acute this time, sharp enough to make her gasp



and stumble as she doubled over. She reached for the bench to steady herself, but she missed, her hand slicing uselessly through the air as she fell to her knees.

“Madame?” There was a voice, a female voice, coming from somewhere nearby, but Elise could hardly hear it over the ringing in her ears.

“The baby,” Elise managed to say, and then there was a woman standing by her side, grasping her elbow, helping her up, and the world swam back into focus.

“Madame?” the woman was asking with concern. “Are you all right?”

Elise blinked a few times and tried to smile politely, already embarrassed. “Oh, I’m fine, I’m fine,” she replied. “Just a little dizzy.”

The woman was still holding her arm, and Elise focused on her for the first time. They were about the same age, and the woman’s face, though creased in concern, was beautiful, with the kinds of sharp, narrow lines Olivier loved to paint, her lips small and bowed, her eyes the slate gray of the Seine before a storm.

“*Maman?*” The voice came from behind the woman, and Elise peered around her to see a little boy of about four with chestnut curls standing there in blue shorts and a crisp cotton shirt, his hand clutching the handle of a carriage that held a smaller boy with matching clothes and identical ringlets.

“Oh dear,” Elise said with a laugh, pulling away from the woman though she still felt unsteady. “I’ve frightened your children. I’m terribly sorry.”

“There’s nothing to apologize for, madame,” the woman said, flashing a small smile before she turned to her sons. “Everything is all right, my dears.”

“But who is the lady?” the older boy asked, looking at Elise with concern.

“My name is Madame LeClair,” Elise replied with a smile she hoped would reassure the child. Then she glanced at the mother and added, “Elise LeClair. And truly, I’m perfectly fine.”

“Juliette Foulon,” the woman replied, but she didn’t look convinced. “Now, shall we go, Madame LeClair?”

“Go?”

“To see a doctor, of course, Madame LeClair.”

“Oh.” Olivier would be worried if she didn’t return to the apartment soon. She had already stayed out longer than she’d intended. “That’s very kind but no,

thank you. I need to get home, you see.”

Madame Foulon took a step back, and it was only then that Elise noticed the bulge in the other woman’s belly, slightly bigger than her own. She was expecting a child, too. “We can call you a car after we’ve called a doctor,” she said calmly. “But...” Something flickered in the woman’s eyes. “Well, I couldn’t live with myself if I let something happen to you. When is your baby due to arrive?”

Elise hesitated. “January, the doctor says. Yours?”

Madame Foulon’s eyes lit up. “January, as well! I think it will be a girl this time; I can feel it. Who knows, perhaps they will even be friends, your child and mine. Come now, my shop is very near the park. You can lean on the carriage if you need support.” She was already herding Elise away from the bench, and to her surprise, Elise found she was relieved to be led.

“If you’re certain,” Elise said. “I don’t want to be an inconvenience.”

“No inconvenience at all. In fact, I insist. Now come, boys,” Madame Foulon said to her children. The older one trotted after his mother; the younger one craned his neck to look back at Elise from his carriage, his eyes daring her to disobey. “We’re taking Madame LeClair home with us.”

## ❖ CHAPTER TWO ❖

Juliette could tell, even before the woman collapsed, that something was wrong. Juliette's pregnancies had come in rapid succession, enough to make her an expert in such things. Claude, who was now four, had arrived first, followed quickly by Antoinette, who had died just thirteen days later and who now lay beneath the cold dirt of a cemetery just south of the park. Alphonse, who was two now, had arrived next, a surprise borne of grief, and now Juliette was pregnant once again with a child she knew was a girl, a child she was terrified of losing just as she'd lost Antoinette. She couldn't bear that kind of pain again, and so she prayed each night for the gaping hole in her heart to one day be filled.

The other woman—Elise LeClair—had reminded Juliette of a nervous colt, her motions jerky, her muscles tensed to run. But Juliette had plenty of practice in coaxing Claude and Alphonse to do what she needed them to, so it was not difficult to cheerfully nudge the woman toward the path that led to the southern edge of the park while keeping up a steady stream of chatter.

Madame LeClair had likely thought it was merely an expression when Juliette had said she wouldn't be able to live with herself if she let something bad happen. But it was quite true. Even before she'd had children of her own, Juliette had always been drawn to lost children, maimed birds, stray cats, anyone who might need her help. It was one of the things her husband, Paul, said he loved about her. In fact, they had first met in this very park, the sprawling Bois de Boulogne, five years earlier when Juliette was spending the summer with her elderly *grand-tante* Marie, her mother's aunt, who lived in the seizième, just east of the park. She'd been strolling down a wooded path that day when she'd come across a tiny, injured sparrow. She'd scooped it up with tears in her eyes and

looked around quickly for help, her gaze landing on a tall, broad-shouldered man walking toward her. His hair was sandy with flecks of gray.

“Excuse me,” she’d said in her very best French. Her mother, who had died a few years earlier, had insisted she learn the language of her ancestors, though her family had been in the States for two generations. “Do you know whether there might be someone who could help me save this bird?”

The man had stopped and stared at her before breaking into a kind smile. “*Américaine?*”

Evidently her French hadn’t been as flawless as she’d hoped. “*Oui, monsieur.* I am just visiting, but this poor bird...”

“Come with me,” the man had answered, his English slow and deliberate. “I will take you and your bird to Docteur Babin.”

Docteur Babin, it had turned out, was not a veterinarian, but rather a general physician and a frequent customer of the small bookshop the handsome man—who introduced himself as Paul Foulon—had taken over just the year before, following the death of his parents. Juliette’s parents had died, too, she told him, and he’d given her a tender smile before saying, “I’m sorry,” in English, and, gesturing back and forth between the two of them, “*Deux orphelins.*” Two orphans. In French, it didn’t sound quite as pitiful.

By the time Grand-tante Marie died of pneumonia two months later, Paul, fifteen years Juliette’s senior, had already proposed, and by the end of 1934, they were married and Juliette had reorganized the bookshop into one that carried both French books and English-language classics, a destination for local residents of Boulogne-Billancourt and western Paris’s thriving expatriate community.

Later, Docteur Babin had delivered her two boys—Claude in 1935 and Alphonse in 1937, but between their two births had been the tragedy of Antoinette, who had simply ceased breathing in her sleep. Juliette had never forgiven herself, although Docteur Babin had assured her it wasn’t her fault. “Sometimes, Madame Foulon, these things simply happen,” he had said, but she had known the words were a lie. Juliette was Antoinette’s mother, and she had failed to keep her child alive.

So no, she could not bear the thought of leaving another pregnant woman alone if her baby was in peril. What if something went wrong? Perhaps this was a test from God. She would not fail, not this time.

“Come, then,” she said, slowing slightly so that Madame LeClair, who had paused with a gasp to clutch her belly again, could keep up. “We’re nearly there, and I’ll send my husband to fetch Docteur Babin right away. Hurry along now, Claude!”

Claude looked up at her, his big gray eyes, which matched hers exactly, wide with concern. “Is the lady going to be okay?” he asked in a loud whisper.

“She’ll be just fine, dear,” she reassured him cheerfully, glancing over his head at Elise. “Nearly to the shop!”

“What kind of shop?” Madame LeClair asked, putting a hand on the carriage to steady herself as she kept pace.

“It’s a bookshop!” Juliette kept her voice deliberately bright, for she had always felt that sunny chatter had the power to distract. It was what she employed each time one of the boys came to her with a skinned knee or a bruise. She simply pretended until things were all right. “It belonged to my husband’s parents, and we’ve worked so hard to make something of it. We’ve even put in a children’s section, because children need to fall in love with words, don’t they? If you give a person a book, you give him the world. And children deserve the world, don’t you think?”

Madame LeClair was staring at her, and Juliette wondered if her attempts at sunny chatter had instead made her sound like a raving lunatic.

“I must apologize,” Juliette said. “I tend to warble on sometimes.”

“No, it’s not that. It is just—am I mistaken?—your accent sounds American.”

Juliette groaned. “Is it that obvious?”

“No.” Madame LeClair smiled and switched to English. “It is just that I am American, too.”

“Well, what are the odds?” Actually, come to think of it, the chances were decent. Juliette had read in the newspaper that there were now nearly thirty thousand Americans living in or near Paris. It was why it had seemed so important to include English-language books; for Americans and Brits on the



western side of Paris, it was more convenient to come to her store than to trek to the more well-known Shakespeare and Company on rue de l'Odéon near the Jardin du Luxembourg, more than an hour's walk away.

They emerged from the edge of the park near the Stade Roland Garros and hurried down the avenue Jean-Baptiste-Clément. "Almost there!" Juliette declared brightly, hurrying Claude along. "La Librairie des Rêves, here we come!"

"La Librairie des Rêves?" Madame LeClair repeated, panting.

"Oh yes. The Bookshop of Dreams. It was my idea; we renamed the store the year after we married, when we were living the kind of life we always imagined. I've always believed that books are simply dreams on paper, taking us where we most need to go."

They turned left on the small rue Goblet, and the bookshop loomed ahead of them on the left. Juliette breathed a sigh of relief. "Here we are!" She pushed the carriage through the door and held it open for Claude, and then for Madame LeClair, who entered tentatively. Madame LeClair stared around, taking it in, and Juliette wondered what the other woman was seeing. She knew the store was a tangle of shelves, but she loved them all deeply; they carried new books and used books alike, for the age of a book was of no importance; all that mattered was that stories could belong to each of us in individual ways. Still, some might call it cluttered or chaotic. She hoped Madame LeClair was not that sort of a person.

"I love it," the other woman said in a whisper, gazing around, and Juliette felt her own shoulders sag in relief.

"Thank you. Now sit, sit. I'll send my husband out to retrieve Docteur Babin, and in the meantime, Claude will fetch you some water." Her older son raced off immediately toward the door in the back, the one that led to the family's apartment behind the store. A split second later, Paul emerged from the same door, glancing first at Madame LeClair, and then at Juliette.

"What's all this, my love?" he asked, approaching and kissing her, a full second longer than what might be considered obligatory. She loved that whenever she was gone, even for an hour or two, he always greeted her return

with the same relief and happiness. She loved him more each day, and he her; she could feel it in the heat of his gaze, the way he touched her, the way he kissed her.

“This is my new friend Madame LeClair,” Juliette said brightly, nodding at the other woman, who looked embarrassed. “I was hoping you might go fetch Docteur Babin, my dear. Madame LeClair is just fine, I think, but she was feeling a bit unwell, and it’s better to be cautious.”

“Yes, of course. A pleasure to meet you, Madame LeClair. I’ll be back as soon as I can.” He cast a worried look at Juliette, who nodded her encouragement. He hurried out the front door of the shop just as Claude emerged from the door that led to their apartment, carrying a glass of water he’d filled to the top. He handed it to Elise carefully, spilling a few drops on her dress, but she didn’t seem to mind.

“*Merci beaucoup*,” she said, smiling kindly at him, but a few seconds later, it was clear that another wave of pain was traveling through her body; she set the water down and clenched her teeth, looking away.

Her concern growing, Juliette lifted Alphonse from his carriage, ruffled his curls, and asked Claude to take him to the children’s section to play. Claude headed off, clutching Alphonse’s hand as he pulled the unsteady toddler behind him. “Will this be your first?” Juliette asked.

The other woman smiled shakily. “Yes. And I’m certain he’ll be all right. I think I was just winded.”

Juliette accepted this with a nod, though they both knew one didn’t get winded simply from sitting on a park bench. “You think he’s a boy, then? Your child?”

“My husband is certain of it.”

“And what do you think?”

“I think—I don’t know yet.” She hesitated. “I’m afraid a daughter would disappoint him.”

“Nonsense.” Juliette reached over and squeezed Madame LeClair’s hand, which was cold and trembling. “Fathers fall immediately in love with their little girls.” She had to blink back tears for a second as she thought of Paul’s face when he first saw Antoinette, tiny and quiet. Claude, their firstborn, had come out

screaming; Antoinette had emerged like a startled butterfly not yet ready to leave the cocoon.

Madame LeClair gazed around the store, and then another wave of pain seemed to hit her. Her face went white, as she bent to cradle her belly once more.

“They’re getting worse, aren’t they?” Juliette asked as calmly as she could, looking toward the front window, praying that Paul would return with the doctor soon.

“I’ll manage,” Madame LeClair rasped, straightening back up again.

“Well, of course you will. But you’re about to be a mother, and soon, you’ll realize that mothers need all the help they can get.” Juliette took Madame LeClair’s hand again. “Being a mother is well worth it, of course, but it can be difficult,” she added, glancing toward the children’s section, where Claude was playing quietly with Alphonse, their heads bent conspiratorially together. She felt guilty saying the words aloud, for her children were a great blessing, and she knew she’d found her place in the world, but in becoming a mother, she’d lost so much of herself, too.

“More difficult than being a wife?” Madame LeClair gave her a wan smile, and Juliette swallowed a lump of unease in her throat. Juliette couldn’t imagine thinking that being a wife was difficult, but she also understood that not everyone had what she and Paul had. That kind of love came along but once in a lifetime.

“I think that love is always difficult, because it requires us to lose a bit of ourselves to gain so much more,” Juliette said at last. “But I believe that whatever we give up is worth it in the end, if we give those pieces to someone who loves us back just as fiercely.” She meant the words as a comfort, but they seemed to trouble Madame LeClair, who looked quickly away.