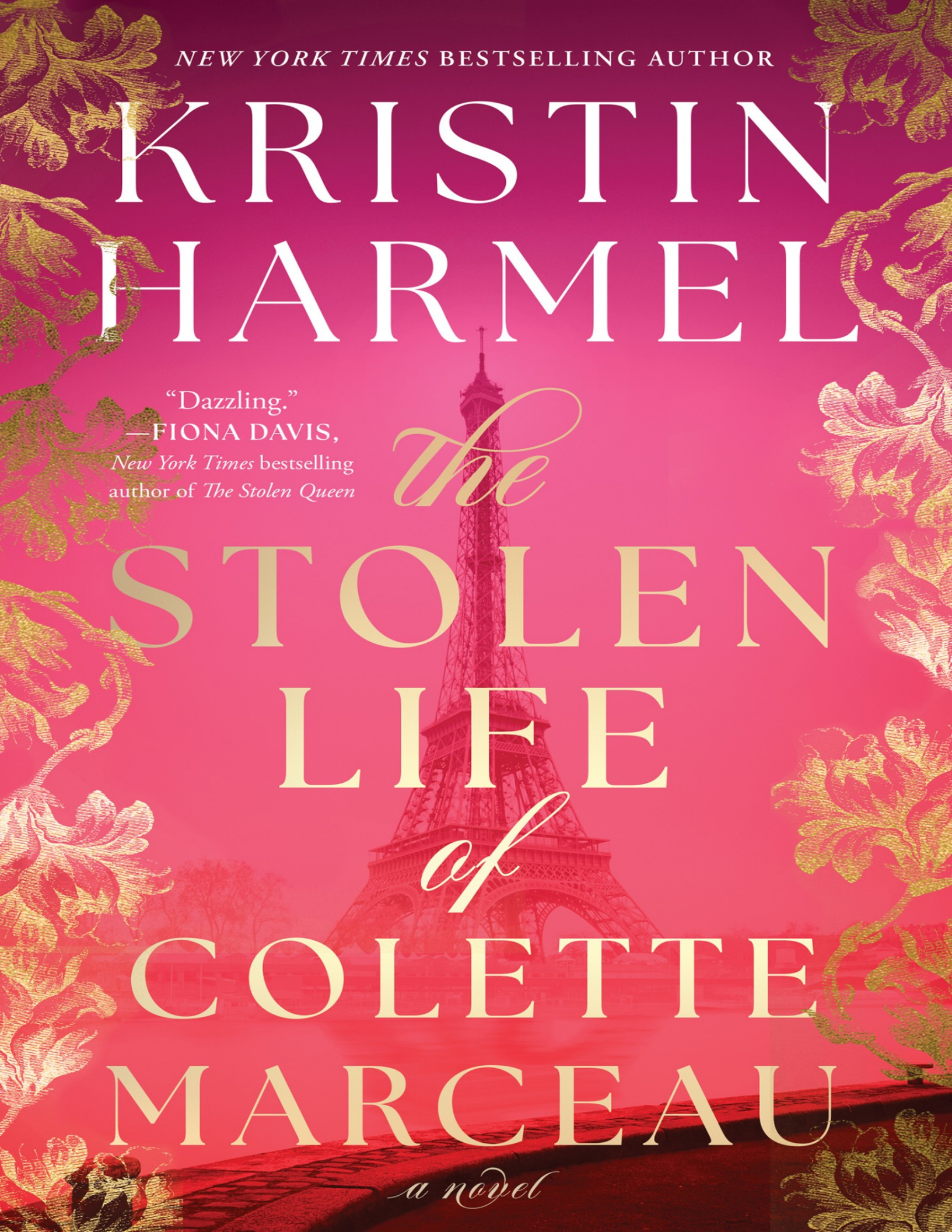
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
KRISTIN HARMEL
"Dazzling."
—FIONA DAVIS,
New York Times bestselling
author of The Stolen Queen
the STOLEN LIFE of COLETTE MARCEAU
a novel

the STOLEN LIFE of COLETTE MARCEAU

KRISTIN HARMEL

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To my incredible cancer-fighting team at AdventHealth, Florida Cancer Specialists, and Winter Park Concierge Care—especially Dr. Anu Saigal, Dr. Sonalee Shroff, Dr. Afshin Forouzannia, Rochelle Drayton, Tara Thomas, Dr. Clark Rogers, and Dr. Neha Doshi.

To the thousands of readers who sent cards, emails, messages, and gifts to lift me up through some of the darkest days of my breast cancer battle in 2022–23.

And to all those who are overdue for a mammogram, breast exam, or other recommended cancer screening: Please call to schedule yours today. It could save your life.

PROLOGUE

The twin bracelets were born on a Monday in May 1927, conceived by a jeweler in Paris for one of his best clients, Salomon Rosman, whose family had dealt in diamonds for generations.

The jeweler was a man named Max Besner, and his passion was creating pieces he hoped would outlive him by hundreds of years. If one poured his heart and craftmanship into his work, if one used only the finest gemstones and metals, one's creations would be passed from generation to generation for a long time to come.

Besner loved a challenge, and what Salomon Rosman was asking of him made him glow with pride.

"You are the only one in France who can do it, my friend," Rosman said as he handed over a small bag of diamonds. "I want Hélène to know how much I love her, and how much I love our children, too."

"Twins, my friend," Besner replied, beaming. "A blessing."

Rosman's wife had given birth the day before to two healthy babies, a son they named Daniel, and a daughter they named Ruth. "A blessing indeed," Rosman agreed, his voice thick with emotion. "I want them to inherit the jewels one day. But since there are two of them..."

"I must make two pieces," Besner concluded.

"But my wife must be able to wear them as one," Rosman said. "Beautiful on their own, but stronger together."

"Just like your children, who will always be able to rely on each other," Besner said with a smile. He pulled a velvet-lined tray from beneath the counter and raised a brow at Rosman, who nodded his permission. Besner poured Rosman's jewels out, resisting the urge to gasp at the sheer number of them, the

dazzling beauty, a constellation of tiny, perfect stars. "There are hundreds," he managed to say. He hoped his eyes were not bulging; what if Rosman saw how impressed he was and decided that he was not the man for the job?

"What good are jewels if they sit in a drawer collecting dust?" Rosman said. "No, they must be brought to life. I've been saving these over the past few years."

With his forceps, Besner picked carefully through the small fortune before him, turning over stones here and there, counting, assessing. As he watched them catch the light, his mind was spinning, imagining the ways he could put them together to make something extraordinary, something the world had never seen before. Already, he was picturing a celestial design, moon and skies and heavens.

"I think I will make—" he began, but before the words were out of his mouth, something strange happened. Through the open window high above his workbench, a butterfly flitted into the room, the first one Besner had seen all spring, and the only one he had ever seen within these walls. His shop was on the rue Choron, quite near the Grande Synagogue de la Victoire, but not particularly close to any of Paris's sprawling parks. The world outside his doors was cement and brick, not a welcoming place for such creatures.

This one didn't seem lost, though. In fact, it seemed to know exactly where it was going. It fluttered casually down and landed gently on the rim of the velvet tray of gems, as if it, too, was waiting to hear what the jeweler had in mind.

But Besner was no longer thinking of night skies. He was staring at the butterfly, a striking creature with snow-white wings with edges that looked like they'd been dipped in ink.

"A *Pieris brassicae*," Rosman noted with a smile. "My wife's favorite. She says they mean good luck and balance in the world."

Besner stared at the butterfly on the table. As if showing off, the creature slowly lifted and lowered its magnificent wings. They caught the light in a way that seemed as magical and improbable as the sparkling of the diamonds spread before the two men, and at once, Besner had his answer. He looked up at Rosman. "Then she shall have bracelets modeled after one."

"Modeled after a butterfly?" Rosman sounded dubious.

The jeweler bent to get a better glimpse of the creature's wings. "Twin bracelets," he said slowly, the diamonds already arranging themselves in his mind, pieces of a puzzle only he could see. "Apart, they will look like lilies of peace. Together, a beautiful butterfly."

Rosman looked first at the gems, then at the butterfly before them. The creature itself seemed to be considering the proposal. And then, as if it knew its job was done, it lifted off. It hung suspended in the air between the two men for a few seconds before it rose and fluttered back toward the window, leaving the way it had come in.

Rosman turned his attention back to Besner. "It's perfect," he said. "Hélène and I will give our children wings, and they will soar."

The jeweler felt a tingle of excitement, the kind that came when he knew he was on the cusp of something great. "As you wish, my friend," Besner said. "I will call upon you later this week with some sketches."

Three months later, the bracelets were complete, and Rosman was able to present them as a surprise to Hélène. He couldn't have imagined, when he was a younger man, how full his heart would feel when he looked upon his children and their beautiful, raven-haired mother; he sometimes felt as if he might burst with love, though he found it hard to say such things aloud. The bracelets, however, told the story that his words could not. They symbolized his devotion to Hélène, and his hope for the future of Ruth and Daniel.

It was 1927. The world was his for the taking. Paris was alive with possibility and hope, with music and culture, with art and fashion.

Just thirteen years later, the light would go out in that very same city, plunging it into despair. Still, Salomon and Hélène had their two beautiful children, who were growing up bright and resilient, kind and strong. Together, they would survive. Together, they would weather the storm.

And then, one night in July 1942, there was a banging on the Rosmans' door and the world changed forever. Three Germans loomed at the threshold, there to take the family away.

"These arrests are usually the work of the French police," said an officer named Möckel as he stepped into the opulent parlor of their apartment. He looked around, sniffing like a dog picking up a scent. "But I heard that you have

beautiful things. I knew I needed to see for myself." His gaze lingered on Hélène. "I see the rumors are correct."

"We are French citizens," Rosman said stiffly. "We have committed no crime."

The German sniffed again. "Ah, but you're Jews," he said simply, as if that explained everything. "Go now, children, get your things ready. You won't be returning."

"Papa?" Ruth said softly, glancing at her father.

He could hardly meet his daughter's eye, for he understood now exactly what was happening. "We are going on a trip, children," he said, trying to keep his tone light. He looked into his wife's eyes and could see there that she, too, understood the truth, and knew, as did he, that their children must be shielded from it as long as possible. They were fifteen, nearly adults, but he would protect them as long as he could. "Take your warmest coats. Hurry, my dears."

Ruth and Daniel exchanged worried looks but did as they were told. While they hastily packed, Möckel cheerfully relieved Hélène of all the jewels she was wearing, from her diamond engagement ring to the interlocking butterfly bracelets on her wrist, which she had worn every day since her husband had given them to her a decade and a half before. "Designed by Max Besner, if I'm not mistaken?" Möckel asked.

In the years since Rosman had ordered the bracelets, Besner had become a bit of a celebrity in the jewelry industry, but still, Rosman was startled to realize that his friend's reputation had reached the Germans. "Yes, that's correct," he said stiffly.

"They're extraordinary," Möckel said, holding them up to the light. They twinkled and danced, as if showing off for the German. "The way they link together, there's nothing like them."

"Please, when will I get them back?" Hélène asked in a small voice, though certainly she had to have known the answer.

Möckel just laughed and directed his men to go through all the drawers in the house to uncover whatever other treasures the Rosmans might be hiding.

Salomon Rosman would not survive the year, nor would his wife Hélène. Never again would the apartment in the eleventh arrondissement belong to their

family; never would the children smell the sweet smoke of their father's pipe or hear the timbre of his laughter. Never would they taste the challah their mother labored over each week or hear the soothing sound of her voice as she sang softly to herself in the kitchen.

But just as the jeweler had promised, the bracelets would live on. Diamonds always do.

CHAPTER ONE

2018

As the canary diamond across the room caught the light, Colette Marceau's fingertips itched, just as they always did before a score. *Patience*, she reminded herself. *Steady, girl*. She was nearly ninety, for goodness' sake, too old for this, too wise. But age brought with it some advantages. Yes, it would be harder to make a fast getaway with a bad back, and the arthritis that had begun to stiffen her fingers as the decades passed made it more difficult to undo complicated clasps. But should she ever be caught, claiming senility would be an easy defense. After all, perhaps she hadn't known what she was doing when she slipped a Rolex from a man's wrist or relieved a woman of her diamond studs.

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention?" The voice of the evening's host, Massachusetts state senator John Nierling, boomed out from the speakers at the front of the elegant Cherry Blossom Ballroom. Overhead, crystal chandeliers twinkled and threw the light, but they couldn't compete with the piece Colette was here for, a cushion-cut 8.07-carat yellow diamond ring worth $90,000. "I'd like to introduce my longtime friend and colleague," Nierling continued as the chatter in the room began to subside and heads turned toward the podium. "Please welcome Linda Clyborn, the president of the Boston Orchestral Education Consortium."

There was a smattering of applause from the hundred or so attendees, all orchestra donors dressed to the nines, most clutching wineglasses that made it difficult to clap. As a result, Linda Clyborn's walk to the podium felt oddly subdued. She teetered a bit on heels too narrow to balance her wide hips, and her hair was an unflattering shade of blond, though she surely had access to the best

colorists in Boston. These were things Colette noticed without trying to, the way that even the wealthiest people often didn't quite fit into the social circles they aspired to. Those who came from old money were born into the ways of moving and dressing and speaking that came with family inheritance. Those who had worked hard and found success were often quiet and humble. But those who had clambered their way into wealth often lacked polish, the way an uncut diamond lacked shine.

"Thank you, my friends," Linda said, slurring the *s* ever so slightly. Colette could feel the corners of her lips twitching. The more the woman drank, the easier it would be to slip the pale yellow diamond from her finger.

Rings were tricky. In fact, though Colette had been relieving unpleasant people of their jewels since she was ten years old, she hadn't become truly comfortable with rings until she was nearly thirty. Bracelets were easy; she could unhook a clasp with a firm but gentle lift of her thumb as she brushed against an unsuspecting donor. Necklaces, too, often fell easily with a graceful move Colette had come to think of as a syncopated chassé; she could unfasten the most complicated closures with a flick of her right wrist just as she turned and brushed against the person, apologizing with her eyes downcast in feigned embarrassment as she let the jewels tumble into her left hand. Men's watches were the easiest of all; the fold-over clasp of a Patek Philippe was no more challenging than the ardillon buckle of a Piaget, though it had taken her countless hours of training to release both without directly touching the wrist of the wearer.

Rings, however, were a different story. It was feasible to steal them only when they were visibly loose, which eliminated a fair number of potential scores. It was also impossible to steal a ring without a fair amount of physical contact. The key, therefore, was distraction. Her favorite move for a female mark was to wait until there was a visibly inebriated man, or at the very least a visibly pompous one, in the vicinity. Colette would reach out and give the mark a sharp pinch in the side with her right hand while grabbing the mark's hand with her left, pretending to help steady her while expressing indignation. In the millisecond during which their hands were touching and the mark was distracted, she would reach over with her right hand and slide the ring off, something that had taken

Colette years of practice to perfect. The woman would always be so incensed by the pinch, and so intent on finding the offender, that she wouldn't feel the ring being slipped off. Later, when she reported the loss of the jewelry to the police, she would almost inevitably mention the pinch, but never the small-framed woman who had come to her aid before melting back into the crowd. Most of the time, the marks never saw Colette's face at all.

Up at the podium, Linda was thanking a laundry list of fellow millionaires for their support. No one ever thanked the underpaid assistant who kept things running behind the scenes or the third-grade teacher who'd once told them they could be anything they wanted to be. No one thanked the second-chair bassoonist or the play's understudy, the stagehands or the ushers. If a mark ever broke protocol and, for instance, addressed a member of the catering staff with genuine respect, or held a door for a hotel housekeeper, Colette would abort her mission and assume she'd gotten things wrong.

That had never happened, though, because Colette never chose her targets carelessly. No decent person deserved to have their possessions taken. It would go against the code Colette had sworn allegiance to as a little girl.

She had lived her life by that code. Her own mother had died by it.

And now, Linda Clyborn's number was up. Not only had she maneuvered to block her husband's three daughters from inheriting anything from his estate after his untimely—and some said suspicious—death at the age of sixty, but she had also been linked definitively to a neo-Nazi group, which she was helping to fund using the proceeds from her late husband's substantial estate.

Colette had experienced enough Nazis to last a lifetime, thank you very much. Having lived in Occupied France seven and a half decades earlier, she simply had no room for them here in Boston in the year 2018.

"And finally," Linda Clyborn was saying as Colette continued to slip unnoticed through the crowd, "I'd like to thank all of you here tonight. Your support has made it possible for the Boston Orchestral Education Consortium to continue providing programs for both our valuable professional musicians and for the children who might one day wish to pursue careers in the arts. Enjoy the evening, and don't forget to bid on the silent auction items."

She waved to the crowd and descended from the stage to another underwhelming round of applause. She greeted the oily Senator Nierling, whom Colette planned to relieve of his own Rolex at some point in the future. But not tonight.

Linda Clyborn teetered through the crowd, shaking hands and kissing cheeks, and when the deejay started playing hits from the 1980s and the crowd began gyrating awkwardly, Colette straightened her wig—an unassuming gray bob with curtain bangs—and commenced her approach.

She glided through the throng until she was a foot away from her target. A trio of fortysomething men approached from the opposite direction, one of them visibly drunk, sloshing beer from a pint glass as he walked. Just then, Linda glanced in Colette's direction, and Colette froze. If Linda noticed her, she would need to abort the mission for the evening. But Linda looked right through her, in search of someone more important than a small, modestly dressed octogenarian. Colette rolled her eyes. To people like Linda Clyborn, the elderly were invisible. Really, it made scores like this almost too easy.

As Linda shook hands with another woman and set off through the crowd again, Colette made her move. Just as the trio of men passed, Colette reached out and pinched Linda, simultaneously grasping the woman's hand, feigning aid while sliding the ring smoothly from the woman's left middle finger. She felt it slip into her own palm with a satisfying plunk, all eight-plus carats now liberated.

She quickly closed her hand around the prize and slid it into her pocket as Linda Clyborn whipped around, focusing her rage on the drunkest of the three men, who was stammering a confused apology, unsure what he was being accused of. As the pitch of the woman's voice rose, Colette melted backward into the crowd.

Later, when Linda Clyborn discovered that her ring was gone, no one would remember a small, gray-haired woman in a nondescript black cocktail dress, making her way casually toward the exit as her mark's aggrieved shrieks rose from the dance floor.