

*New York Times* bestseller

“Harrowing . . . *Lilac* illuminates.” —*People*

# LILAC GIRLS



*A Novel*

MARTHA  
HALL KELLY





# Lilac Girls

---

A NOVEL

MARTHA HALL  
KELLY



BALLANTINE BOOKS

NEW YORK

*Lilac Girls* is a work of fiction. All incidents and dialogue, and all characters with the exception of some well-known historical figures, are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Where real-life historical figures appear, the situations, incidents, and dialogues concerning those persons are entirely fictional and are not intended to depict actual events or to change the entirely fictional nature of the work. In all other respects, any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2016 by Martha Hall Kelly

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

BALLANTINE and the HOUSE colophon are registered trademarks of Penguin Random House LLC.

ISBN 9781101883075

eBook ISBN 9781101883068

[randomhousebooks.com](http://randomhousebooks.com)

*Book design by Barbara M. Bachman, adapted for eBook*

*Cover design: Laura Klynstra*

*Cover images: © LAPI/The Image Works (women); © Pavel Gramatikov/Offset (lilacs)*

v4.1

ep

# Contents

*Cover*

*Title Page*

*Copyright*

## Part One

Chapter 1: Caroline

Chapter 2: Kasia

Chapter 3: Herta

Chapter 4: Caroline

Chapter 5: Kasia

Chapter 6: Herta

Chapter 7: Caroline

Chapter 8: Kasia

Chapter 9: Herta

Chapter 10: Caroline

Chapter 11: Kasia

Chapter 12: Caroline

Chapter 13: Kasia

Chapter 14: Herta

Chapter 15: Caroline

Chapter 16: Kasia

Chapter 17: Herta

Chapter 18: Caroline

Chapter 19: Kasia

Chapter 20: Herta

Chapter 21: Caroline

Chapter 22: Kasia

Chapter 23: Herta

Chapter 24: Caroline

Chapter 25: Kasia

Chapter 26: Herta

## Part Two

Chapter 27: Caroline

Chapter 28: Kasia

Chapter 29: Caroline

Chapter 30: Caroline

Chapter 31: Kasia

Chapter 32: Kasia

Chapter 33: Kasia

Chapter 34: Herta

Chapter 35: Kasia

Chapter 36: Caroline

## Part Three

Chapter 37: Kasia

Chapter 38: Caroline

Chapter 39: Caroline

Chapter 40: Kasia

Chapter 41: Kasia

Chapter 42: Kasia

Chapter 43: Kasia

Chapter 44: Kasia

Chapter 45: Kasia

Chapter 46: Caroline

## Chapter 47: Kasia

*Author's Note*

*Dedication*

*Acknowledgments*

*About the Author*



# Part One

---



## CHAPTER 1

# Caroline

SEPTEMBER 1939

If I'd known I was about to meet the man who'd shatter me like bone china on terra-cotta, I would have slept in. Instead, I roused our florist, Mr. Sitwell, from his bed to make a boutonnière. My first consulate gala was no time to stand on ceremony.

I joined the riptide of the great unwashed moving up Fifth Avenue. Men in gray-felted fedoras pushed by me, the morning papers in their attachés bearing the last benign headlines of the decade. There was no storm gathering in the east that day, no portent of things to come. The only ominous sign from the direction of Europe was the scent of slack water wafting off the East River.

As I neared our building at the corner of Fifth Avenue and Forty-ninth Street, I felt Roger watching from the window above. He'd fired people for a lot less than being twenty minutes late, but the one time of year the New York elite opened their wallets and pretended they cared about France was no time for skimpy boutonnières.

I turned at the corner, the morning sun alive in the gold-leaf letters chiseled in the cornerstone: LA MAISON FRANÇAISE. The French Building, home to the French Consulate, stood side by side with the British Empire Building, facing Fifth Avenue, part of Rockefeller Center, Junior Rockefeller's new complex of granite and limestone. Many foreign consulates kept offices there then, resulting in a great stew of international diplomacy.

“All the way to the back and face the front,” said Cuddy, our elevator operator.

Mr. Rockefeller handpicked the elevator boys, screening for manners and good looks. Cuddy was heavy on the looks, though his hair was already salt-and-peppered, his body in a hurry to age.

Cuddy fixed his gaze on the illuminated numbers above the doors. “You got a crowd up there today, Miss Ferriday. Pia said there’s two new boats in.”

“Delightful,” I said.

Cuddy brushed something off the sleeve of his navy-blue uniform jacket. “Another late one tonight?”

For the fastest elevators in the world, ours still took forever. “I’ll be gone by five. Gala tonight.”

I loved my job. Grandmother Woolsey had started the work tradition in our family, nursing soldiers on the battlefield at Gettysburg. But my volunteer post as head of family assistance for the French Consulate wasn’t work really. Loving all things French was simply genetic for me. My father may have been half-Irish, but his heart belonged to France. Plus, Mother had inherited an apartment in Paris, where we spent every August, so I felt at home there.

The elevator stopped. Even through the closed doors, we could hear a terrific din of raised voices. A shiver ran through me.

“Third floor,” Cuddy called out. “French Consulate. Watch your—”

Once the doors parted, the noise overpowered all polite speech. The hallway outside our reception area was packed so tightly with people one could scarcely step through. Both the *Normandie* and the *Ile de France*, two of France’s premier ocean liners, had landed that morning in New York Harbor, packed with wealthy passengers fleeing the uncertainty in France. Once the all-clear horn signaled and they were free to disembark, the ships’ elite streamed to the consulate to iron out visa problems and other sticky issues.

I squeezed into the smoky reception area, past ladies in Paris’s newest day dresses who stood gossiping in a lovely cloud of Arpège, the sea spray still in their hair. The people in this group were accustomed to being

shadowed by a butler with a crystal ashtray and a champagne flute. Bellboys in scarlet jackets from the *Normandie* went toe-to-toe with their black-jacketed counterparts from the *Ile de France*. I wedged one shoulder through the crowd, toward our secretary's desk at the back of the room, and my chiffon scarf snagged on the clasp of one ravishing creature's pearls. As I worked to extract it, the intercom buzzed unanswered.

Roger.

I pressed on through, felt a pat on my behind, and turned to see a midshipman flash a plaquey smile.

"*Gardons nos mains pour nous-mêmes,*" I said. Let's keep our hands to ourselves.

The boy raised his arm above the crowd and dangled his *Normandie* stateroom key. At least he wasn't the over-sixty type I usually attracted.

I made it to our secretary's desk, where she sat, head down, typing.

"*Bonjour, Pia.*"

Roger's cousin, a sloe-eyed boy of eighteen, was sitting on Pia's desk, legs crossed. He held his cigarette in the air as he picked through a box of chocolates, Pia's favorite breakfast. My inbox on her desk was already stacked with case folders.

"*Vraiment?* What is so good about it?" she said, not lifting her head.

Pia was much more than a secretary. We all wore many hats, and hers included signing in new clients and establishing a folder for each, typing up Roger's considerable correspondence, and deciphering the massive flood of daily Morse-code pulses that was the lifeblood of our office.

"Why is it so hot in here?" I said. "The phone is ringing, Pia."

She plucked a chocolate from the box. "It keeps doing that."

Pia attracted beaux as if she emitted a frequency only males could detect. She was attractive in a feral way, but I suspected her popularity was due in part to her tight sweaters.

"Can you take some of my cases today, Pia?"

"Roger says I can't leave this chair." She broke the shell of the chocolate's underside with her manicured thumb, stalking the strawberry crèmes. "He also wants to see you right away, but I think the woman on the

sofa slept in the hallway last night.” Pia flapped one half of a one-hundred-dollar bill at me. “And the fatty with the dogs says he’ll give you the other half if you take him first.” She nodded toward the well-fed older couple near my office door, each holding a brace of gray-muzzled dachshunds.

Like Pia’s, my job description was wide-ranging. It included attending to the needs of French citizens here in New York—often families fallen on hard times—and overseeing my French Families Fund, a charity effort through which I sent comfort boxes to French orphans overseas. I’d just retired from an almost two-decade-long stint on Broadway, and this felt easy by comparison. It certainly involved less unpacking of trunks.

My boss, Roger Fortier, appeared in his office doorway.

“Caroline, I need you *now*. Bonnet’s canceled.”

“You can’t be serious, Roger.” The news came like a punch. I’d secured the French foreign minister as our gala keynote speaker months before.

“It’s not easy being the French foreign minister right now,” he called over his shoulder as he went back inside.

I stepped into my office and flipped through the Wheeldex on my desk. Was Mother’s Buddhist-monk friend Ajahn Chah free that night?

“*Caroline*—” Roger called. I grabbed my Wheeldex and hurried to his office, avoiding the couple with the dachshunds, who were trying their best to look tragic.

“Why were you late this morning?” Roger asked. “Pia’s been here for two hours already.”

As consul general, Roger Fortier ruled from the corner suite with its commanding view of Rockefeller Plaza and the Promenade Cafe. Normally the famous skating rink occupied that sunken spot, but the rink was closed for the summer, the space now filled with café tables and tuxedoed waiters rushing about with aprons to their ankles. Beyond, Paul Manship’s massive golden Prometheus fell to earth, holding his stolen fire aloft. Behind it, the RCA Building shot up seventy floors into the sapphire sky. Roger had a lot in common with the imposing male figure of Wisdom chiseled above the building’s entrance. The furrowed brow. The beard. The angry eyes.

“I stopped for Bonnet’s boutonnière—”

“Oh, that’s worth keeping half of France waiting.” Roger bit into a doughnut, and powdered sugar cascaded down his beard. Despite what might kindly be called a husky figure, he was never at a loss for female companions.

His desk was heaped with folders, security documents, and dossiers on missing French citizens. According to the *French Consulate Handbook*, his job was “to assist French nationals in New York, in the event of theft, serious illness, or arrest and with issues related to birth certificates, adoption, and lost or stolen documents; to plan visits of French officials and fellow diplomats; and to assist with political difficulties and natural disasters.” The troubles in Europe provided plenty of work for us in all those categories, if you counted Hitler as a natural disaster.

“I have cases to get back to, Roger—”

He sent a manila folder skidding across the polished conference table. “Not only do we have no speaker; I was up half the night rewriting Bonnet’s speech. Had to sidestep Roosevelt letting France buy American planes.”

“France should be able to buy all the planes they want.”

“We’re raising money here, Caroline. It’s not the time to annoy the isolationists. Especially the rich ones.”

“They don’t support France anyway.”

“We don’t need any more bad press. Is the U.S. too cozy with France? Will that push Germany and Russia closer? I can barely finish a third course without being interrupted by a reporter. And we can’t mention the Rockefellers...Don’t want another call from Junior. Guess that’ll happen anyway now that Bonnet canceled.”

“It’s a disaster, Roger.”

“May need to scrap the whole thing.” Roger raked his long fingers through his hair, digging fresh trenches through the Brylcreem.

“Refund forty thousand dollars? What about the French Families Fund? I’m already operating on fumes. Plus, we’ve paid for ten pounds of Waldorf salad—”

“They call that salad?” Roger flipped through his contact cards, half of them illegible and littered with cross-outs. “It’s *pathétique*...just chopped

apples and celery. And those soggy *walnuts*...

I scoured my Wheeldex in search of celebrity candidates. Mother and I knew Julia Marlowe, the famous actress, but she was touring Europe. "How about Peter Patout? Mother's people have used him."

"The architect?"

"Of the whole World's Fair. They have that seven-foot robot."

"Boring," he said, slapping his silver letter opener against his palm.

I flipped to the *L*'s. "How about Captain Lehude?"

"Of the *Normandie*? Are you serious? He's paid to be dull."

"You can't just discount every suggestion out of hand, Roger. How about Paul Rodierre? Betty says everyone's talking about him."

Roger pursed his lips, always a good sign. "The actor? I saw his show. He's good. Tall and attractive, if you go for that look. Fast metabolism, of course."

"At least we know he can memorize a script."

"He's a bit of a loose cannon. And married too, so don't get any ideas."

"I'm through with men, Roger," I said. At thirty-seven, I'd resigned myself to singledom.

"Not sure Rodierre'll do it. See who you can get, but make sure they stick to the script. No Roosevelt—"

"No Rockefellers," I finished.

Between cases, I called around to various last-minute possibilities, ending up with one option, Paul Rodierre. He was in New York appearing in an American musical revue at the Broadhurst Theatre, *The Streets of Paris*, Carmen Miranda's cyclonic Broadway debut.

I phoned the William Morris Agency and was told they'd check and call me back. Ten minutes later, M. Rodierre's agent told me the theater was dark that night and that, though his client did not own evening clothes, he was deeply honored by our request to host the gala that evening. He'd meet me at the Waldorf to discuss details. Our apartment on East Fiftieth Street was a stone's throw from the Waldorf, so I rushed there to change into Mother's black Chanel dress.

I found M. Rodierre seated at a café table in the Waldorf's Peacock Alley bar adjacent to the lobby as the two-ton bronze clock sounded its lovely Westminster Cathedral chime on the half hour. Gala guests in their finest filtered in, headed for the Grand Ballroom upstairs.

"M. Rodierre?" I said.

Roger was right about the attractive part. The first thing a person noticed about Paul Rodierre, after the initial jolt of his physical beauty, was the remarkable smile.

"How can I thank you for doing this so last minute, Monsieur?"

He unfolded himself from his chair, presenting a build better suited to rowing crew on the Charles than playing Broadway. He attempted to kiss my cheek, but I extended my hand to him, and he shook it. It was nice to meet a man my height.

"My pleasure," he said.

His attire was the issue: green trousers, an aubergine velvet sports jacket, brown suede shoes, and worst of all, a black shirt. Only priests and fascists wore black shirts. And gangsters, of course.

"Do you want to change?" I resisted the urge to tidy his hair, which was long enough to pull back with a rubber band. "Shave perhaps?" According to his agent, M. Rodierre was a guest at the hotel, so his razor sat just a few stories overhead.

"This is what I wear," he said with a shrug. Typical actor. Why hadn't I known better? The parade of guests en route to the ballroom was growing, the women stunning in their finery, every man in tails and patent leather oxfords or calf opera pumps.

"This is my first gala," I said. "The consulate's one night to raise money. It's white tie." Would he fit into Father's old tux? The inseam would be right, but it would be much too tight in the shoulders.

"Are you always this, well, energized, Miss Ferriday?"

"Well, here in New York, individuality is not always appreciated." I handed him the stapled sheets. "I'm sure you're eager to see the script."

He handed it back. "No, *merci*."

I pushed it back into his hands. "But the consul general himself wrote it."

“Tell me again why I’m doing this?”

“It’s to benefit displaced French citizens all year and my French Families Fund. We help orphans back in France whose parents have been lost for any number of reasons. With all the uncertainty abroad, we’re one reliable source of clothes and food. Plus, the Rockefellers will be there tonight.”

He paged through the speech. “They could write a check and avoid this whole thing.”

“They’re among our kindest donors, but please don’t refer to them. Or President Roosevelt. Or the planes the U.S. sold France. Some of our guests tonight love France, of course, but would rather stay out of a war for now. Roger wants to avoid controversy.”

“Dancing around things never feels authentic. The audience feels that.”

“Can you just stick to the script, Monsieur?”

“Worrying can lead to heart failure, Miss Ferriday.”

I pulled the pin from the lily of the valley. “Here—a boutonnière for the guest of honor.”

“*Muguet?*” M. Rodierre said. “Where did you find that this time of year?”

“You can get anything in New York. Our florist forces it from pips.”

I rested my palm against his lapel and dug the pin deep into the French velvet. Was that lovely fragrance from him or the flowers? Why didn’t American men smell like this, of tuberose and wood musk and—

“You know lily of the valley is poisonous, right?” M. Rodierre said.

“So don’t eat it. At least not until you’ve finished speaking. Or if the crowd turns on you.”

He laughed, causing me to step back. Such a genuine laugh, something rarely found in polite society, especially where *my* jokes were concerned.

I escorted M. Rodierre backstage and stood awed by the enormity of the stage, twice the size of any I’d stood upon on Broadway. We looked out over the ballroom to the sea of tables lit by candlelight, like flowery ships in the darkness. Though dimmed, the Waterford crystal chandelier and its six satellites shimmered.

“This stage is enormous,” I said. “Can you carry it?”



M. Rodierre turned to me. “I do this for a living, Miss Ferriday.”

Fearing I’d only antagonize him further, I left M. Rodierre and the script backstage, trying to dismiss my brown-suede-shoe fixation. I hurried to the ballroom to see if Pia had executed my seating chart, more detailed and dangerous than a Luftwaffe flight plan. I saw she’d simply tossed several cards onto the six Rockefeller tables, so I rearranged them and took my place close to the stage between the kitchen and the head table. Three stories of red-draped boxes rose up around the vast room, each with its own dinner table. All seventeen hundred seats would be filled, a lot of unhappy people if all didn’t go well.

The guests assembled and took their seats, an ocean of white ties, old mine diamonds, and enough rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré gowns to clean out most of Paris’s best shops. The girdles alone would ensure both Bergdorf and Goodman reached their third-quarter sales goals.

A row of journalists collected alongside me, pulling their pencils out from behind their ears. The headwaiter stood poised at my elbow, awaiting the cue to serve. Elsa Maxwell entered the room—gossipmonger, professional party hostess, and self-promoter *ne plus ultra*. Would she remove her gloves to write terrible things about this night in her column or just memorize the horror of it all?

The tables were almost full when Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt, known to Roger as “Her Grace,” arrived, her four-story Cartier diamond necklace ablaze at her chest. I gave the signal to serve as Mrs. Vanderbilt’s bottom made contact with her seat cushion, her white fox stole, complete with head and feet, draped over her chair back. The lights dimmed, and Roger lumbered to the spotlighted podium to heartfelt applause. I’d never been this nervous when I was the one onstage.

“*Mesdames et Messieurs*, Foreign Minister Bonnet sends his sincerest apologies, but he cannot be here tonight.” The crowd buzzed, not sure how to react to disappointment. Did one ask for one’s money refunded by mail? Call Washington?

Roger held up one hand. “But we have convinced another Frenchman to speak tonight. Though not appointed to a government role, he is a man cast in one of the best roles on Broadway.”

The guests whispered to one another. There is nothing like a surprise, provided it's a good one.

"Please allow me to welcome M. Paul Rodierre."

M. Rodierre bypassed the podium and headed for center stage. What was he doing? The spotlight cast around the stage for a few moments, trying to locate him. Roger took his seat at the head table, next to Mrs. Vanderbilt. I stood nearby, but outside of strangling range.

"It's my great pleasure to be here tonight," M. Rodierre said, once the spotlight found him. "I am terribly sorry M. Bonnet could not make it."

Even sans microphone, M. Rodierre's voice filled the room. He practically glowed in the spotlight.

"I am a poor replacement for such a distinguished guest. I hope it wasn't trouble with his plane. I'm sure President Roosevelt will be happy to send him a new one if it was."

A swell of nervous laughter rolled around the room. I didn't have to look at the journalists to know they were scribbling. Roger, skilled in the art of the tête-à-tête, managed to speak with Mrs. Vanderbilt and send daggers my way at the same time.

"True, I cannot talk to you about politics," M. Rodierre continued.

"Thank God!" someone shouted from a back table. The crowd laughed again, louder this time.

"But I can talk to you about the America I know, a place that surprises me every day. A place where open-minded people embrace not only French theater and books and cinema and fashion but French people as well, despite our faults."

"Shit," said the reporter next to me to his broken pencil. I handed him mine.

"Every day I see people help others. Americans inspired by Mrs. Roosevelt, who reaches her hand across the Atlantic to help French children. Americans like Miss Caroline Ferriday, who works every day to help French families here in America and keeps French orphans clothed."

Roger and Mrs. Vanderbilt looked my way. The spotlight found me, standing at the wall, and the familiar light blinded me. Her Grace clapped, and the crowd followed. I waved until the light, mercifully quickly,

whipped back to the stage, leaving me in cool darkness. I didn't miss the Broadway stage really, but it was good to feel the warmth of the spotlight on my skin again.

“This is an America not afraid to sell planes to the people who stood beside them in the trenches of the Great War. An America not afraid to help keep Hitler from the streets of Paris. An America not afraid of standing shoulder to shoulder again with us if that terrible time does come...”

I watched, only able to look away for a few peeks at the crowd. They were engrossed and certainly not focused on his shoes. Half an hour passed in an instant, and I held my breath as M. Rodierre took his bow. The applause started small but rose in waves like a tremendous rainstorm pelting the roof. A teary-eyed Elsa Maxwell used a hotel napkin to dry her eyes, and by the time the audience rose to their feet and belted out “La Marseillaise,” I was glad Bonnet didn't have to follow that performance. Even the staff sang, hands over their hearts.

As the lights came up, Roger looked relieved and greeted the crush of well-wishers that lingered near the head table. When the evening wound down, he left for the Rainbow Room with a gaggle of our best donors and a few Rockettes, the only women in New York who made me look short.

M. Rodierre touched my shoulder as we left the dining room. “I know a place over on the Hudson with great wine.”

“I need to get home,” I said, though I hadn't eaten a thing. Warm bread and buttery escargot came to mind, but it was never smart to be seen out alone with a married man. “Not tonight, Monsieur, but thank you.” I could be home in minutes, to a cold apartment and the leftover Waldorf salad.

“You'll make me eat alone after our triumph?” M. Rodierre said.

Why not go? My set ate at only certain restaurants, which you could count on one hand, all within a four-block radius of the Waldorf, nowhere near the Hudson. What harm could one dinner do?

We took a cab to Le Grenier, a lovely bistro on the West Side. The French ocean liners sailed up the Hudson River and docked at Fifty-first Street, so some of New York's best little places popped up near there, like chanterelles after a good rain. Le Grenier lived in the shadow of the SS *Normandie*, in the attic of a former harbormaster's building. When we

exited the cab, the great ship rose high above us, deck bright with spotlights, four floors of portholes aglow. A welder at her bow sent apricot sparks into the night sky as deckhands lowered a spotlight down her side to painters on a scaffold. She made me feel small standing there, below that great, black prow, her three red smokestacks, each bigger than any of the warehouse buildings that extended down the pier. Salt hung in the end-of-summer air as Atlantic seawater met Hudson River fresh.

The tables at Le Grenier were packed with a nice enough looking crowd, mostly middle-class types, including a reporter from the gala and what looked like ocean-liner passengers happy to be on terra firma. We chose a tight, shellacked wooden booth, built like something from the inside of a ship, where every inch counts. Le Grenier's maître d', M. Bernard, fawned over M. Rodierre, told him he'd seen *The Streets of Paris* three times, and shared in great detail the specifics of his own Hoboken Community Theater career.

M. Bernard turned to me. "And you, Mademoiselle. Haven't I seen you on the stage with Miss Helen Hayes?"

"An actress?" M. Rodierre said with a smile.

At close range, that smile was unsafe. I had to keep my wits about me, since Frenchmen were my Achilles' heel. In fact, if Achilles had been French, I probably would have carried him around until his tendon healed.

M. Bernard continued. "I thought the reviews were unfair—"

"We'll order," I said.

"One used the word 'stiffish,' I believe—"

"We'll have the escargot, Monsieur. Light on the cream, please—"

"And what was it the *Times* said about *Twelfth Night*? 'Miss Ferriday sufficed as Olivia'? Harsh, I thought—"

"—And no garlic. Undercook them, please, so they are not too tough."

"Would you like them to crawl to the table, Mademoiselle?" M. Bernard scratched down our order and headed for the kitchen.

M. Rodierre studied the champagne list, lingering over the details. "An actress, eh? I'd never have guessed." There was something appealing about his unkempt look, like a *potager* in need of weeding.

“The consulate suits me better. Mother’s known Roger for years, and when he suggested I help him, I couldn’t resist.”

M. Bernard placed a basket of bread on our table, lingering a moment to gaze at M. Rodierre, as if memorizing him.

“Hope I’m not running off a boyfriend tonight,” Paul said. He reached for the breadbasket as I did, and my hand brushed his, warm and soft. I darted my hand back to my lap.

“I’m too busy for all that. You know New York—parties and all. Exhausting, really.”

“Never see you at Sardi’s.” He pulled apart the loaf, steam rising to the light.

“Oh, I work a lot.”

“I have a feeling you don’t work for the money.”

“It’s an unsalaried position, if that’s what you mean, but that’s not a question asked in polite society, Monsieur.”

“Can we dispense with the ‘Monsieur’? Makes me feel ancient.”

“First names? We’ve only just met.”

“It’s 1939.”

“Manhattan society is like a solar system with its own order. A single woman dining with a married man is enough to throw planets out of alignment.”

“No one will see us here,” Paul said, pointing out a champagne on the list to M. Bernard.

“Tell that to Miss Evelyn Shimmerhorn over there in the back booth.”

“Are you ruined?” he said with a certain type of kindness seldom found in achingly beautiful men. Maybe the black shirt was a good choice for him after all.

“Evelyn won’t talk. She’s having a child, poorly timed, dear thing.”

“Children. They complicate everything, don’t they? No place for that in an actor’s life.”

Another selfish actor.

“How does your father earn your place in this solar system?”

Paul was asking a lot of questions for a new acquaintance.

*“Earned, actually. He was in dry goods.”*

*“Where?”*

M. Bernard slid a silver bucket with handles like gypsy’s earrings onto the table, the emerald-green throat of the champagne bottle lounging against one side.

*“Partnered with James Harper Poor.”*

*“Of Poor Brothers? Been to his house in East Hampton. He’s not exactly poor. Do you visit France often?”*

*“Paris every year. Mother inherited an apartment...on rue Chauveau Lagarde.”*

M. Bernard eased the cork from the champagne with a satisfying sound, more thud than pop. He tipped the golden liquid into my glass, and the bubbles rose to the rim, almost overflowed, then settled at the perfect level. An expert pour.

*“My wife, Rena, has a little shop near there called Les Jolies Choses. Have you seen it?”*

I sipped my champagne, the bubbles teasing my lips.

Paul slid her picture from his wallet. Rena was younger than I had imagined and wore her dark hair in a china doll haircut. She was smiling, eyes open wide, as if sharing some delicious little secret. Rena was precious and perhaps my complete opposite. I imagined Rena’s to be the type of chic little place that helped women put themselves together in that famous French way—nothing too coordinated, with just the right amount of wrong.

*“No, I don’t know it,”* I said. I handed the picture back. *“She’s lovely, though.”*

I finished the champagne in my glass.

Paul shrugged. *“Too young for me, of course, but—”* He looked at the photo a few moments as if seeing it for the first time, head tilted to one side, before slipping it back into his wallet. *“We don’t see much of each other.”*

I fluttered at the thought and then settled, weighted by the realization that even if Paul were available my forceful nature would root out and extinguish any spark of romance.

The radio in the kitchen blared scratchy Edith Piaf.

Paul lifted the bottle from the bucket and tipped more champagne into my glass. It effervesced, riotous bubbles tumbling over the glass's edge. I glanced at him. We both knew what that meant, of course. The tradition. Anyone who's spent any time at all in France knows it. Had he overpoured on purpose?

Without hesitation, Paul tapped his finger to the spilled champagne along the base of my glass, reached across to me, and dabbed the cool liquid behind my left ear. I almost jumped at his touch, then waited as he brushed my hair aside and touched behind my right ear, his finger lingering there a moment. He then anointed himself behind each ear, smiling.

Why did I suddenly feel warm all over?

"Does Rena ever visit?" I asked. I tried to rub a tea stain off my hand only to find it was an age spot. Delightful.

"Not yet. She has no interest in theater. Hasn't even come over here to see *The Streets of Paris* yet, but I don't know if I can stay. Hitler has everyone on edge back home."

Somewhere in the kitchen, two men argued. Where was our escargot? Had they sent to Perpignan for the snails?

"At least France has the Maginot Line," I said.

"The Maginot Line? Please. A concrete wall and some observation posts? That's only a gauntlet slap to Hitler."

"It's fifteen miles wide."

"Nothing will deter Hitler if he wants something," Paul said.

There was a full-blown ruckus in the kitchen. No wonder our entrée had not arrived. The cook, mercurial artiste no doubt, was having a fit about something.

M. Bernard emerged from the kitchen. The portholed kitchen door swung closed behind him, flapped open and shut a few times, and then stood still. He walked to the center of the dining room. Had he been crying?

"*Excusez-moi*, ladies and gentlemen."

Someone tapped a glass with a spoon, and the room quieted.

“I have just heard from a reliable source...” M. Bernard took a breath, his chest expanding like leather fireplace bellows. “We have it on good authority that...”

He paused, overcome for a moment, then went on.

“Adolf Hitler has invaded Poland.”

“My God,” Paul said.

We stared at each other as the room erupted with excited exchanges, a racket of speculation and dread. The reporter from the gala stood, tossed some crumpled dollars on the table, grabbed his fedora, and bounded out.

In the hubbub that followed his announcement, M. Bernard’s final words were almost lost.

“May God help us all.”