

One

Paris



I

Paris, 1750

Madeleine

Today was the day Maman priced up the girls. Best on such days to slip away. That was why Madeleine now walked past the slaughterhouse, where the blood had congealed into a dark gash across the snow and where carcasses hung from hooks, pale arses to the morning sky. In the glassy air her ungloved hands smarted, the skin of her knuckles cracked and raw. Not much of a day to be out for a walk, but damned if she was staying home to listen. Besides, there was something she needed; something that couldn't wait.

Madeleine turned off the Rue Pavée to enter the labyrinth of the Quartier Montorgueil, the alleys too narrow, the houses too high, so that the sun was kept out and the stench kept in, the streets dark and rank as the devil's *connard*. Ancient buildings leaned into one another like crowded teeth, their crumbling brickwork patched together, their windows stuffed with rags. Now and again a face emerged from the shadows: a child, like as not, with the tell-tale features of hunger, generations deep. Better here, though, among the lowest of the low – *le bas peuple*, as they called them; the slum-dwellers and doorway-lurkers, the homeless and the shoeless – than at

Maman's so-called 'Academie', where the monthly inventory would be in full swing.

It was a crying shame, her mother always said, and truly she took no pleasure in it, but she was running a business and human flesh was a damned changeable thing: breasts ripened or withered, diseases took root, skin stretched or pitted, sores filled and burst. Babes – despite a barrage of precautions – were wont to begin and wretched difficult to get out. And once in a while something would happen, just as it had happened to Madeleine, to halve a girl's value in the space of one day. There'd always be at least one girl – knocked up or knocked down – who would, in Maman's phrasing, be put out to pasture. Only there was no pasture in the backstreets of Paris. There was a black river of refuse, broken bottles, fish heads. Right now in January there was sleet and snow, blunt figures huddled together in doorways, and the occasional stiffened corpse.

Reaching the Pointe Saint Eustache, Madeleine emerged into the powdery winter sunshine, the air dulled by smoke and ash. She'd left the environs of the poorest of the poor and reached the purlieu of the merely wretched. She skirted the rowdy market of Les Halles and walked south towards the Pont Neuf, sedan chairs keeping the bejewelled and furred bobbing above the thinly-clad poor. As she crossed the Rue Saint-Honoré, a gilded carriage flashed past her, striking sparks from the paving stones, a glimpse of a satin-swathed woman behind the glass. Might be an aristo, might be a *femme entretenue* in the carriage of her keeper – the only way for a girl to grow rich in Paris was lying on her back.

Finally she was at the river, from where she could see the spires of the Cathédrale Notre-Dame reaching into the winter skies, the single iron spike of the Sainte-Chapelle. Looking only at the skyline, you could imagine that Paris was a rich

place, a beautiful place, a city of learning and piety. No doubt it was in part, but not the parts Madeleine knew, for they were the bits Paris kept buttoned. She walked on, along the banks of the dirt-grey Seine, until she reached the *apothicaire*'s shop, where bottles gleamed in the window like jewels. She hesitated a moment, steeling herself, then pushed at the oaken door.

Inside, the air was spice-scented and warm, though the reception she received was cool. Two women were at the counter, talking intently, glancing at Madeleine and dismissing her as *tat* without even drawing breath. The apothecary himself was weighing a blue-coloured powder on his great brass scales and took no notice of her at all. As she waited, toes thawing painfully in her boots, Madeleine stared up at the rows and rows of glass jars and porcelain chevrettes lining the shelves. Some of the names were familiar to her: cloves, borage, comfrey, angelica. Some meant little: jalap root, cinchona, sarsaparilla; a box labelled Campeche amber.

'And she never arrived, would you believe it?' one of the women was saying to the other. She was, Madeleine thought, one of those sharp-edged women who'll find the worst in everyone.

'What happened to her?'

'Well, no one knows for sure. But there was that travelling fair that upped and moved on the very next day. Makes you wonder, doesn't it? I wouldn't be letting my daughter out on her own at that age, of course.'

The apothecary looked up, his eyes resting on Madeleine for a moment like black flies, then darting away. He wrapped the women's purchases, took payment and stretched his thin lips into a smile. As soon as Madeleine walked forward to the counter, the smile vanished.

'No improvement?'

'Very little.'

‘You did as I advised?’

‘I did.’ She paused. ‘Is there something else that might help?’

The man considered her. ‘Possibly, but it’ll cost you.’

Didn’t it always? For an instant she considered pleading with him, telling him of their circumstances, but she knew there was little point. No one gave anything in Paris for free, certainly not to a girl like her.

‘More than last time?’ she asked.

‘I’d say so, yes. The stuff is expensive, brought over from the Americas.’

Madeleine raised her eyebrows. ‘Exotic. I see.’

She watched in silence as he pounded the ingredients in a pestle and mortar, crushing the seeds to dust. A powerful aroma filled the air, nutmeg mixed with something burning and bitter. The apothecary transferred the medicine to a green glass vial and set it down on the counter before her. ‘Two louis, it’s worth.’

Madeleine’s eyes were on his veined white hands. ‘Very well.’ She looked back at the door. No other customer had entered.

The apothecary walked over and turned the sign, indicating the shop was shut.

Madeleine walked back home slowly, her cloak wrapped tightly about her, passing women in great fur mufflers walking tiny dogs on leashes, and servants out on errands, raw-faced in the cold. She made her way up the Rue de la Monnoye, looking into the windows of milliners’ shops filled with feathered hats, like a flock of exotic birds. Is this how her father’s parrots had ended up, she wondered – made into bonnets for the *gens de qualité*? He’d been a *oiseleur*, her papa, selling birds and other small animals, from a shop on the Quai de la Mégisserie. After his death, Maman had sold his stock to another trader

– cockatoos, finches, white mice and squirrels, all boxed up and passed on quicker than you could say jackanapes. The rent on the shop being long overdue, they'd cleared out quick from the house she'd grown up in and set up in the Rue Thévenot, selling a different kind of bird.

She walked on, past jewellers' shops glimmering with sapphires and rubies, or paste that looked very much like them. That was the thing with Paris, you had to learn the trick of telling what was real and what was false. Gems, hair, cleavages, characters – all could be easily faked. *Smallpox taken your eyebrows, Madame? Buy this pair of finest mouse fur. Lost your teeth in a brawl, Monsieur? Have a set drawn from another's grave.* Madeleine could see her breath, a puff of white in the icy air, and her hands were now almost numb. Still she didn't hurry, for she doubted her mother would be done. Genevieve Chastel – 'Maman' to the girls – was nothing if not rigorous.

Some of the ones her mother put out would survive, at least for a time, on the backstreets as *filles publiques*, the lowest in the pecking order of the many who sold sex in the demi-monde, running from the *femmes de terrain* in the public gardens to the bejewelled mistresses of Versailles. Some of Maman's girls would die nearby in the filth of the Hôtel Dieu, the hospital God had abandoned long ago. Some would be swept by the police into the countryside. There was little point in thinking of it. If she did, she'd only be reminded of how chancy her own state was, how close she was to the brink. She'd no money of her own, no property, no references. If Maman put her out, she'd be on the streets like the rest of them, more mutton for the Paris pot. That was why it was best never to get too close to the other girls. She tended to them as required – brushing and plaiting their hair, pinning them into their dresses, changing their spunk-stained sheets. But there was no value in trying

to help them. She had to focus on saving herself and, more importantly, Émile.

‘Aren’t you a cold one?’ her elder sister, Coraline, had said earlier as she headed for the door. Rich, of course, coming from her.

Well, better to be hardened to a chip of jade than crushed, like the others, to dust.

It was past ten o’clock by the time Madeleine turned into the Rue Thévenot, her home since the tender age of twelve. (Tender, in fact, as a prime cut of beef, and sold for not much more.) The narrow street had been swallowed in shadow, all the better to hide the flaking house-fronts and rubbish-strewn ground. As she passed the vinegar-maker’s, the tang of fermenting wine in the air, her eyes sought out the hunched figure of the girl who’d been living in a doorway these past few weeks. Sure enough, there she was, a man’s coat tied about her with string, a coat that’d been perhaps her father’s or brother’s. Madeleine hadn’t asked, had barely spoken to her. The girl’s story would be much the same as all the other orphans and outcasts living in the city’s stinking streets – disease, debts, liquor, death – and Madeleine had no wish to hear it.

‘Demoiselle?’ the girl stretched out her grubby hand.

Giving a tight nod, Madeleine reached into her pocket and took out the last few sous she had. Not enough for much, but maybe enough for some soup.

‘Thank you. You’re very kind.’

Very stupid, more like. Madeleine thought to herself as she continued up the road. The girl wouldn’t survive a winter like this, so why prolong her suffering? She stopped. An icy breath seemed to touch the back of her neck. But when Madeleine turned she saw only a thin black cat, its eyes glinting in the shadows.

★

The *Academie*, as Maman called it, comprised the middle two floors of a tall, soot-stained building at the end of the street, bowed and blackened like a filthy finger, beckoning customers to the door. There was a staircase at the back by which the punters could enter and, though there was no sign marking the brothel, the place could be recognised at ten paces by its customers' distinctive stink. The men marked their territory like tomcats and the steps reeked with accumulated piss. Breathing only through her mouth, Madeleine entered the house, shut the door quietly, took off her muddy boots, and crept up the carpeted stairs. Behind a closed door she could hear a girl weeping and she walked quickly and noiselessly past.

'Where've you been?' A small figure jumped up as she reached the landing: her nephew Émile, face unwashed, hair unbrushed. 'You've been hours and I'm hungry.'

Madeleine stared at his grimy face with a mixture of love and annoyance. 'Did no one think to give you breakfast? No, of course they didn't. Why feed an eight-year-old boy? Go clean your face and hands, you little horror, and I'll get us both something to eat.'

The house was quiet, she noticed, as she warmed milk in a pan and sliced a loaf of bread; a strained sort of silence, of held-in anger and whispers behind bolted doors.

They made faces at each other as they sat at their breakfast, Émile snorting milk back into his bowl at Madeleine's impression of Grandmaman. After a minute, however, he grew serious. 'There's two girls gone this time. Odile and Lisette.'

'That so?' No surprises there. Odile hadn't had her courses these past two months and Lisette had for days been wearing lace gloves to hide the familiar rash of the pox. Madeleine stared at her own hands, the nails broken, the knuckles red, and tried not to think of their faces.

Émile's body was for several seconds wracked with coughing. She rubbed his back; thought of the medicine bottle, the man's cold, insistent fingers.

'Will she get rid of me, Madou?' he said, wiping his mouth. 'Will she make me go one day too?' It was a question he asked Madeleine often, and her answers were always the same.

'No, of course not, *mon petit*. You're her grandson.' Not that that meant much to her mother who, above all things, was a cold and clear-eyed businesswoman. 'And you're a useful little machine, aren't you? Always running errands and helping out.'

Mostly Émile was tasked with trailing punters back to their homes. There were plenty of slippery coves who gave a false name and false address, and it was in Maman's interests to follow them to their lairs. If a cull didn't pay, or if a cull caused problems, she needed to know where to find him. It was dangerous work for a boy like Émile, though. Dangerous, in truth, for anyone.

'And she won't turn you out, will she, Madou? She won't ever make you leave?'

Madeleine tensed and smiled to conceal it. 'Like I always say, Émile: I don't think so. I have my uses too.' Skivvy, teacher, voyeur, whore. But with Maman, there were no guarantees.

Footsteps in the hallway and then the door opened a crack, Coraline's painted face appearing from behind it. 'There you are, Madou. Maman wants you in the parlour. Now.'

Madeleine's heart plunged. 'Why?'

'Just come, will you? Quick.'

Madeleine felt Émile's eyes on her face, felt his fear in her own chest, and winked at him. 'Don't worry, *mon petit*. You know what she's like – probably wants me to massage her gnarly old feet. You finish eating your breakfast.'

But as she walked down the corridor, smoothing down her skirts, fear corkscrewed up through her chest; perhaps the

inventory wasn't finished at all and she was the next to be priced.

As soon as she entered the faded parlour, she saw that her mother was dressed for company, the ceruse laid thick on her flaccid cheeks, her smile a slash of vermillion on white. Madeleine felt a queasy uneasiness as she saw that seated across from Maman, on the worn ottoman, was Camille Dacier, the man who'd been Suzette's least favourite client – a remarkable achievement in a rich and diverse field. It wasn't that he was ugly either. He had a sharp, roguish sort of face and unnerving eyes of different colours: one brown, one pale blue. Eyes that he now turned on her.

'Ah, the report writer.' He exuded an air of assumed authority, of contempt. When she'd first met him, Madeleine had known him at once for what he was: the worst kind of policeman.

'Go get the chocolate now, Coraline,' her mother said, patting her sister's hand. 'It'll be good to drink chocolate together.' In her taupe gown Maman looked like an oyster, fleshy and sickly pale. A pause and then Coraline moved towards the door, her skirts rustling in the silence.

'I must say you're looking well, Monsieur,' Maman said, turning to Camille. 'You're in good health?'

He didn't look healthy to Madeleine. His skin had the greyish tinge of a man who slept too little and drank too much. She recognised it from her father.

'I am, Madame. I've no complaints in that regard. Your girls are good and clean.'

Madeleine's throat felt dry, her palms slippery. Why had they brought her here?

'Oh, all my fillies are good girls, Monsieur, in their different ways. Madeleine here has always been the cleverest. The

most noticing sort. Always knows what's o'clock, eh, Madou? Almost makes up for the scar.'

Maman didn't think that, of course. '*Une fichaise*,' her mother often called her: a thing not worth a curse.

Maman talked on for some minutes about the other girls she'd taken under her wing, to save them all from penury. Madeleine kept her expression as blank as a button. Listening to Maman talk, you'd think she was running a sanctuary for provincial girls, not a buttocking shop for whoremongers. 'The Academie', indeed. The only things she'd learnt here were the arts of dissembling, deceit, dulling your feelings and giving the perfect *pipe*.

Maman returned her gaze to Madeleine. 'Monsieur Dacier has an offer to make you, Madeleine. It's a good offer.' The smile was still fixed on her face as if applied there like her rouge.

'The reports you write for us,' Camille said, 'the tales you tell. They're very ... helpful.'

Madeleine gave a nod of acknowledgement. Her father had taught all three of them to read and write, after a fashion, and this was the use it was put to. For over a year now she'd been sending reports to Inspector Meunier, patron saint of brothels, protector of morals: the man who happily turned a blind eye to the selling of twelve-year-olds, the spread of venereal disease by *dames entretenues*, the frauds committed by *macquerelles*, but who was oh so very eager to know about the predilections, perversions and wheedled-out confidences of the culls who came to the Rue Thévenot. Most aristos went to the more genteel *sérails* in the Rue Denis or kept a mistress or two, but there were some who liked to slum it, and when they did, Madeleine noted it all down. Politicians who liked nothing better than for a girl to piss in their face; clergymen partial to a 'virgin' child. They should know better, for the state was

always watching – Paris was criss-crossed with a network of *mouches* – and every institution had its spies.

‘Well,’ Camille said, ‘now it’s time for me to tell you a story, Miss Chastel.’ He leant forward and lowered his voice, fixing her with his unnerving eyes. ‘In a tall house on the Place Dauphine lives a Swiss clockmaker by the name of Maximilian Reinhart. Doctor Reinhart is said to be one of the finest clockmakers in all of Paris. An exceptionally gifted man. He seems respectable. He makes toys for the rich and gives alms to the poor. But some say he does strange things; that he’s not what he seems.’ He leant back. ‘His maid has given notice to quit.’

A silence. Madeleine could hear high false laughter from the room above, the slamming of a bedstead against the next wall. Coraline came back into the room carrying a tray on which cups of chocolate clinked. She set it down on the table, then sat next to Madeleine, so close that she could smell the rosewater and sweat on her cleavage, the caramel on her breath. ‘You’ve told her, then?’

‘We’re getting there, my love.’

‘You wish to set me up as a spy,’ Madeleine said.

‘We need you to find out what he’s up to,’ Camille Dacier said. ‘Establish what kind of man he is.’

Coraline put a cup of chocolate into Madeleine’s hand. She hadn’t whipped it properly. The cocoa had settled on the top.

‘What kind of man d’you think he is, Monsieur?’

‘I think him a very clever man, but an odd one. There are risks that must be checked.’ He and Maman exchanged a look. ‘There are rumours.’

‘What do they say, these rumours?’

‘That he engages in strange practices – that he carries out certain unnatural experiments.’

‘What experiments?’

‘That’s for you to establish. But it’s whispered he takes his

work too far. That he'll do anything to achieve his aims. We need you to find out if that's true.'

Experiments, clockmakers, toys for the rich. What did she know of these things? 'Why d'you need to find out?'

'As you're aware, I work for Inspector Meunier. But it's not only him that I work for. A man must have several masters to survive in this city. In this case I answer to a very powerful person. A person who wishes to be sure of Reinhart's character and references before offering him an important role.'

Madeleine kept her gaze on her chocolate. 'What role would that be, then?'

He didn't answer that. 'We all like to check a person's references before inviting them to live in our house, don't we?'

She didn't reply.

'Not yours, though. No one will be checking your references in this case because I'll make sure you're recommended, your name whispered into his ear.' He leant forward again. 'Won't get another chance like this one, will you, a girl with your particular history?'

Madeleine looked at him, into his strangely coloured eyes. He was right, of course. She was damaged goods; a scarred, sullied *cocotte*. Twenty-three years old and still beholden to the bitch who'd given her birth; tied not by love nor duty, but a belief that – if turned out into it – the cauldron of Paris would swallow her up. For Paris only kept alive those who paid, and Madeleine, as she'd been told many times, had precious little to offer.

'We owe it to Monsieur Dacier to be accommodating,' Maman said, falsely sweet. 'He's been very good to us. Looked after us.' She stared at Madeleine, a smile warming her lips, but her eyes cold and grey as the Seine. 'You'll accept the position, my dear.'

Camille was watching this exchange with a faintly amused

look on his face. He was, Madeleine understood, a little man who enjoyed what power he had.

‘What exactly would I be required to do, Monsieur?’

‘You’ll be a *chambrière*, a maid of all work, much as you are now. You’ll also be *femme de chambre* to Reinhart’s daughter, Véronique, just as you are to the other girls here. Only your mistress will be rather less ... worldly.’ He curled his lips at Coraline. ‘You’ll note who visits the house. You’ll listen in whenever you can. You’ll record any unusual activity, any interesting conversations. You’ll read any letters, journals or diaries that you can get your hands on. And, every week you’ll report back to me.’

‘On Doctor Reinhart.’

‘On anything you see in that house. You’ll have thirty days to complete your task, to determine what these experiments are that he is carrying out, and to establish whether he’s a man to be trusted.’

A month away from Émile. She didn’t like the thought of leaving him alone here, and she knew full well that he’d hate it.

‘Won’t the clockmaker know me, though, for a girl of low birth and upbringing? I’ve only ever worked here – I’m hardly a lady’s maid. Why not ask someone who really is?’

‘We’ll train you up a little over the next fortnight – polish your accent, get a real *femme de chambre* to show you how it’s done – but I suspect Reinhart will barely notice you. The rich don’t generally consider their servants to be real people. And the daughter’s as fresh as a daisy. She won’t know any better.’

‘How old is the daughter?’

‘Seventeen years.’

Madeleine shifted in her seat. Not much older than Suzette when she died. ‘What’s she like, then?’

Camille picked at his teeth. ‘Green, childish, just returned from the convent school she’s been locked in for ten years. I

doubt you'll get anything of interest out of her, but it's a good route in, you see?'

She pondered this. An undemanding mistress, clean sheets, a warm house. A way out. Yet it was still there, that nagging feeling that the whole enterprise was a snare.

'What would I be paid?'

'I've dealt with that,' Maman said, quick as lightning.

Of course she had. Just as she dealt with what her girls received for their services, what went to her for their 'upkeep'. Well, Madeleine wasn't having that. Not if she was putting herself in danger, which she must be if they were willing to pay. She looked squarely at Camille. 'If I'm to do it, the money must come to me directly.' She could see Maman's face darkening, the fury rising off her like smoke. 'Then we divide it up.'

Camille laughed. 'Ah, she's her mother's daughter.' A pause as he assessed her. 'Very well. Five hundred livres direct to you once the job is complete. How you share it with your mother is your business.'

Five hundred livres! Maman had negotiated well. But this was too easy, too slick. 'And after I've completed this task, what do you intend for me then, Monsieur?'

'Why, then you'll rise in the ranks, Demoiselle Chastel. If you succeed, you'll be given further opportunities, more responsibility, more money.'

If she succeeded. What if she didn't? What if they found her out? Police *mouches* were hated, detested. Those who were outed were stoned in the streets and those who lived became outcasts. But then, really, what was she now? And what other opportunity would she have, a marked maid from a brothel? She'd live out her days here, watching as wave after wave of girls became riddled with pox; watching as Émile was corrupted or killed, by a cove or by his own weak health. She ran her tongue over her teeth.

‘But if they do work out what I am – or if I can’t find what you need – what happens to me then?’

He didn’t answer that. ‘If you’re good enough,’ Camille said, ‘if you’re as clever as Madame here has claimed, then you won’t be discovered, and you’ll find what I’ve asked.’ He tilted his head to one side. ‘D’you think you’re smart enough, demoiselle, to fool an entire household? To steal their secrets and bring them back to me?’

Madeleine held his gaze. She’d been dissembling almost her whole life, one way or another. She could deal with a clock-maker, couldn’t she?

Maman leant forward and put one of her hot hands on Madeleine’s. ‘This is it, *ma petite*. This is your opportunity to shine. Do this for us, will you, now? Make your old mother proud?’

Madeleine paused for a moment, her eyes on Maman’s stretched smile, on her teeth, blackened by rot, by years of bonbons and sweetmeats. ‘Yes, all right. I’ll do it, since that’s what you want. I’ll do the best I can.’

But of course she wasn’t doing it for her mother, nor Coraline. She was doing it for the money, for Émile: she was gambling it all for the chance that they might be able to escape.