

(Late Fall 1873 France)

"*Madam Melanie, Madam Melanie,*" Melanie Corbisier lowered her basket to the ground, stooped, and held out her arms to the excited child darting in her direction.

"Yvette, you precious child." The five-year-girl flung herself forward for a hug and bumped her forehead against Melanie's chin. Melanie braced herself and smiled as she gritted her teeth.

"*Yvette, fille coquine!*" Yvette's mother called from the open window of their house next door. "You promised to stay on the front porch." Adele shook her head in exasperation. "Be careful with *Madam Melanie*, remember..."

Melanie raised a hand to greet her neighbor and gingerly stood up. She rubbed her chin as the pain started to ebb. "No worries, Adele. She lifts my spirits."

"Melanie, you have time to stop in for a visit?"

Melanie rubbed her forehead and let her shoulders droop. Her hand rested on Yvette's hair, fingers twining with the tight curls. The little girl's voice rose and fell on a constant cadence with the childish rhythm and lack of volume control common to the age.

"Shhh, Yvette, *Maman* won't be able to hear me," she chided the excited little girl. "I'm exhausted, Adele, please excuse me this time." She rubbed her stomach nervously and glanced at the blank windows next door. Adele nodded sympathetically.

"Yvette, come inside." Yvette hung her head in disappointment and trudged toward her front door.

"Yes, *Maman*."

"Melanie, try to get some rest." Adele disappeared back inside the window, swallowed by the billowing curtains. Yvette disappeared behind the click of the front door. Melanie gathered herself and turned to face the empty house ahead of her. Night after night, home alone with Aimee; Henri always gone. She patted her swollen abdomen and straightened her spine.

"We'll be just fine, *bebe*."

.....

Melanie picked her basket up resolutely as her thoughts flashed over the previous nine months. Her heart twisted with thoughts of Augustin. It was difficult to believe that the fragile cargo nurtured by her body was the product of the one night she'd spent wrapped in his arms claiming her independence and opposition of the arranged marriage to Henri. The anguish of that night flooded back through her like the months had never been. She shook her head to ward off her own words of bitterness as she'd begged her father to call off the arrangements. Her pleas had fallen on deaf ears. Her father had never approved of Augustin and thought him an unhealthy influence over his beautiful daughter. She'd raced to Augustin as soon as she

could slip away from the watchful eye of her *maman* and *grand-mere*. Praying that he would be able to offer her some solace in her panic.

.....

Melanie walked past the open doorway of the cooper shop. She could hear the ring of hammer on wood and metal as they fashioned their wares. She'd paused at the corner of the street and turned around to head back by the door for a second time. This was the way that Melanie showed Augustin that she needed to see him. Since her father would not permit them to be open about their budding relationship, Melanie and Augustin stole what moments they could in the dark recesses of the allies and streets. Melanie had felt the thrill of fear and independence when Augustin had first suggested she slip into the dark shadows with him. He always braced her against the wall and sheltered her body from view should anyone venture close enough to see who they were as they basked in each other's softly spoken words of love. Melanie allowed a few more privileges to Augustin than her *maman* would approve of and yet, Augustin encouraged her to stand strong against, what he called, parental tyranny over her life.

It only took a few minutes before Augustin joined her at the edge of the street away from the watchful eyes of his employer. "*Cherie?*" his face registered his surprise at seeing her in broad daylight. Noting her frantic expression, he took her arm with a firm hand and led her into the side street away from public curiosity.

Melanie clung to his arm. "Augustin, *Pere* has promised me to your cousin, Henri." A sob escaped as she shook her head in denial of the looming plan.

"Henri!" Augustin exclaimed. "It's not been a year since he lost Esme."

"He spoke to *Pere* yesterday." Melanie hugged her arms around her waist in an effort to calm her world. "He needs a *maman* for little Aimee." She buried her face in her hands to block out the world. "How can *Pere* do this to me!" She sobbed out her plea, "Augustin, please talk to *Pere* about us."

Augustin stepped back allowing coolness to spread between them. Melanie raised her eyes to him, beseeching him to help her. "*Cherie*, it probably wouldn't do any good to talk to your *pere*. You know that he doesn't approve of me." Melanie fought the feelings of abandonment as they washed over her. She stepped further away before turning hurt eyes in his direction. Augustin shuffled his feet uncomfortably and then leaned into her. His hands clutched her upper arms as his eyes bore into hers. "Melanie, if you don't want to marry Henri and raise Aimee, then consider taking your future into your own hands." Melanie frowned dubiously at him. He shook her, "You are no longer a child. Don't let them push you into this charade they are calling marriage."

"Augustin, I have nowhere to go. I have no money."

"I have a plan if you are brave enough to do it." He took Melanie in his arms, gentling his hands and words. She felt his breath on her neck, a moment before he whispered in her ear.

“Fool them all and be with me,” Melanie gasped in shock. “If they won’t listen to what you want, then show them that you are serious. Henri won’t want the marriage once you are with me.”

Melanie shrank away from him shaking her head. “Yes, it would solve the problem of marriage with Henri but Pere would never accept those actions.”

Augustin drew Melanie to his chest. “*Je t’aime, Cherie.*” His words soothed her. Augustin had been insistent on his love for her over the past few months. She allowed herself to be drawn back into his pretty words. “Be with me, tonight, before they force you to their will.” Uncertainty masked her face and he brought his lips to hers in one last persuasive gesture. Melanie melted against him and surrendered. “Meet me here at dark.” She nodded through her hazy smile. “Now, *ma Cherie*, as much as I would like to stay with you, I must get back to work before they come looking for me and ruin our beautiful plans.”

.....

Melanie lay on her bed and sobbed in anguish, her *maman* cradled her face in her lap. “Come, come, Melanie! All this fuss because of a good marriage proposal? Henri is an honorable man and he was a good husband to Esme. Think about little Aimee,” her *maman* chided her stricken daughter. Melanie’s heart collapsed as she hugged her secret burden close. Panic bade her confide to her *maman’s* loving touch. She gasped for breath but couldn’t control the fear that clamped down on all reason. Confiding to her *maman* would only lead straight to her *pere’s* fierce sense of judgement and justice. She shivered and pulled out of her *maman’s* arms. The last month had been a nightmare beginning with her rebellion over the thought of an arranged marriage when she’d already given her heart to Augustin. Augustin, Melanie’s heart caught in disbelief, Augustin had fueled her wild thoughts of independence and met with her one beautiful night. Her heart had sung with such joy to be loved so freely. Weeks later, terrified that she carried his child, she’d run to him with the confession desperately believing that he would be able to make her world right again. The conversation played back over her and her heart further crumpled in pain to relive the emotional assault.

.....

“Melanie?” Augustin stepped from the shadows of the shop and slowly pulled her into the alley away from the busy main street. “It isn’t wise to meet me here in the day time,” he chided her with concern. She had shared that her wedding to Henri was going forth soon.

“Augustin,” she pleaded with her brimming eyes, “please help me. I’m pregnant.” Coldness crept into his eyes and she felt the coolness of rejection as he stepped back from her,

no more the tender lover professing undying affection. Her hand fell to his sleeve in panic and he glanced down with distaste at her touch.

“Melanie, what has this to do with you and me?” Her eyes searched his as her mind tried to grasp his words.

“What?” Her barely audible voice whispered to his deaf ears. Her heart squeezed tight and she clutched a hand to her chest.

“As you mentioned a few weeks ago, your marriage to Henri is going forth. I’ve helped you all that I can. If your family is determined to see you married to him, then you and your child will be cared for if you are smart about it.”

“But you said you cared for me and didn’t want to see me married to Henri.” Melanie tried to conjure up the full scope of Augustin’s past argument as he had supported her rebellion to marrying Henri. Her mind floundered to connect ideas that had seemed reasonable a few weeks ago. “Don’t you see that this is our chance to be a family? They can’t object to us being together now with a baby coming.”

Augustin stepped back further and raised both hands in the air, gesturing for her to be reasonable. “Melanie, I am not in a position to support a family. I’m sorry if you misunderstood but that was never my intention.” He avoided her eyes as he rubbed his boot through the alley dirt. “I think it would be best if you went home and kept this to yourself until after you are married. Let Henri think it’s his child.” Melanie’s shoulders slumped forward and she wrapped her arms around her middle trying to keep herself from coming apart. She barely heard his whispered, “*Adieu, Melanie.*” She squeezed her eyes closed as his footsteps receded.

.....

“*Maman, I’ll never love Henri.*” Her lip quivered uncontrollably. She pushed her hair back from her face and noted compassion but also firmness in her mother’s eyes.

“*Vous allez apprendre a aimer, Henri.*” Melanie stood and shook her skirt out. Learn to love Henri? Never! She’d rather hate him for forcing her into this marriage. She stepped around her mother and pulled back the curtains. The sun fell on her face as she rested her fingers on the window. Her independence danced beyond her reach on the other side of the glass pane. A sorrowful scream fought for release from the depths of her soul. She denied its right to birth and quelled a sob before straightening her shoulders with the sting of defeat piercing her heart.